



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Essential Skills and Adult Literacy and
Numeracy**

9 November 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

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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
Ms Michelle Gildernew
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr David McIlveen
Mrs Sandra Overend
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Ms Harriet Ferguson)	
Dr Mary McIvor)	Department for Employment and Learning
Ms Angela Whiteside)	
Mr Daryl Young)	

The Chairperson:

We have a full team today: Mary McIvor is the director of further education in the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL); Daryl Young is the deputy director of further education; Harriet Ferguson is the head of curriculum and essential skills policy branch; and Angela Whiteside is the quality improvement adviser. You are all very welcome. We look forward to hearing what you have to say.

Dr Mary McIvor (Department for Employment and Learning):

I understand that you would prefer more discussion and questions, so our presentation will be very brief. I will start and will then hand over to my colleagues, who will deal with slightly different areas of essential skills.

In 1996, one of the first surveys of adult literacy showed that 24% of the working population here — around 250,000 people — were at the lowest level of literacy. There were similar levels in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland. You will be aware from all the evidence that you have taken that that level of skills has a significant impact not only on the economy and society but on individuals and their families. Therefore, the Department introduced a comprehensive and focused essential skills strategy in 2002. The strategy is still alive today, and we want to tell you a little about its performance.

The strategy's focus was very much on getting leadership on what needed to be done and putting in place the necessary infrastructure. For example, many of the people whom we had been talking about had been failed by the education system. How would we devise a curriculum that suited them? We decided to introduce assessment, so that if people sought essential skills, they would be assessed in order to determine the level at which they would enter. There is entry level, and there is also a slightly higher level of essential skills. Those issues are important.

It was also important to ensure that there was enough provision. We have now spent much time on ensuring that there is a lot of community outreach in essential skills. Further education (FE) colleges are the main providers, and throughout Northern Ireland, there are over 300 locations at which people can choose to do essential skills.

Today, we hope to show you that although teachers, students and policies have achieved a lot, there is still much work to be done. The issue of literacy and numeracy is still with us. The Department has put a substantial budget behind the strategy, and between 2002 and the end of 2011, it will have spent £80 million, which is a substantial investment. On behalf of the Minister and the Department, the further education division, for which I am responsible, sets targets for colleges. Once a year, we bring colleges in and assess and challenge their performance: we look at essential skills and set targets. I can tell the Committee that we never refuse any bids for essential skills because it is an important area for the Department. Therefore, when a college asks

for X amount of money for essential skills, we will meet that bid.

I will ask Daryl and Harriet to discuss details of the strategy's performance. Angela, who is our quality adviser, will discuss quality, which is very important to us.

Mr Daryl Young (Department for Employment and Learning):

I want to highlight some key points about the strategy. Harriet will then discuss some areas in more detail.

In the past, we discussed mainstreaming essential skills into some of our programmes. By that, we mean the main further education programmes, Training for Success, ApprenticeshipsNI and, for adults, Steps to Work. We have, in a sense, a "captive audience", although I hesitate to use that term. One of the most difficult aspects of essential skills is getting people engaged. We want to make sure that when people come to us for some of those other programmes, they are immediately screened, and if essential skills needs are identified, they are met. Essential skills are required to be met by the individuals who attend those programmes. The only exception is Steps to Work, because the people involved are adults, and it is primarily an employment rather than a qualification-based programme, so we do not insist that those adults undertake essential skills. However, we identify their needs and encourage them to do essential skills

Given that most of the people participating in our programmes tend to be younger, a downside is that that skews some of the essential skills provision towards younger age groups. We have been conscious of that and have taken measures to rebalance it.

About 70% of all enrolment is from the 16- to 25-year-old age group. Interestingly, if that is carved up in a different way — the 16- to 20-year-old age group and the 20-plus age group — enrolments are split pretty much 50:50. To encourage adults, we have the learner access and engagement programme. Chair, I think that that is the programme to which you referred earlier.

The Chairperson:

It is.

Mr Young:

That got off to a fairly slow start, but it is now picking up a bit of momentum. It is designed to

focus on the adults who are furthest from the workforce and education — hard-to-reach adults — to try to get them back into college. Forty-five per cent of people coming into that programme are essential skills students, and the numbers have been increasing since the programme was introduced two or three years ago. For adults, we also put £400,000 a year into the union learning fund for employees, and some 600 learners a year come through that route.

Importantly, as Mary mentioned, we set targets for the colleges. Two or three years ago, we started to set separate targets for colleges for 16- to 19-year-olds and for 20-plus students, because colleges were going after the slightly easier targets of younger people. We set separate targets that were quite challenging, being around 50% of the split. Since we did that, the targets have been met and increased.

I now turn to deprived areas. Members have maps, one of which shows that we are largely focusing our essential skills provision in those areas of Northern Ireland in which the most deprived one fifth of the population lives, and that takes up 31% or 32% of essential skills provision. We have mapped our provision against places in which there is a high incidence of young people leaving school at the age of 16 without achieving grades A to C in GCSE English and mathematics. We are focusing on hard-to-reach areas.

Before I pass to Harriet, I want to mention that the Department has been very successful in meeting its essential skills public service agreement (PSA) targets. There have been three groups of PSA targets since the programme started. One target was from the start in 2002 to 2007, when the target was based on the number of individuals who were taking essential skills; we missed that target by 1,000 people. In the following year, to March 2008, we moved our target to qualifications; we had a target of 10,500, and we exceeded it, achieving 12,200. The final PSA target period was a three-year period, to March 2011. In that, we had a target of 42,000 learners to have achieved a qualification; we achieved that with 54,300 learners. So the PSA targets have been going up, and they have been increasingly achieved. We have quite a good story to tell there.

I will hand over to Harriet, who will give you a little more detail on some of those areas.

Ms Harriet Ferguson (Department for Employment and Learning):

I will go through some key statistics, after which you might have some questions.

Tables 1, 2 and 3 in our presentation refer to “qualifications, learners and individuals”. You have probably gathered from Daryl’s comments about PSA targets that the definition of what is being measured has changed. In case anybody does not understand the difference — I did not understand a week ago — an “individual” equates to a body, so that will be “me”, if you like. A “learner” equates to “me” if I do three areas — literacy, numeracy and ICT — so one “me” could be three learners. I could do two or three qualification levels within each of those areas. That should give you an idea of the difference between qualifications, learners and individuals.

I will outline some key statistics. Since the start of the strategy, there have been over 236,000 enrolments. That equates to 106,000 individuals or bodies on essential skills courses. The most recent data as at 10 June 2011 states that there have been over 57,000 enrolments in the current academic year, which is more than in any previous year. That equates to almost 21,500 bodies or individuals. The majority of the enrolments are in literacy courses, which make up 46%. However, the uptake of numeracy courses, at 41%, is comparatively higher than in the rest of the UK, which seems to struggle to get people enrolled in numeracy courses. ICT, which was introduced more recently, sits at 13%. We are pleased that although ICT sometimes acts as a hook to bring learners to us — the same stigma is not attached to not being IT literate as is attached to not being numerate or literate — it has not displaced the other learners, which is good.

As Daryl said, the majority — 71% — are in the 16- to 25-year-old age group, but if we consider the 20-plus age group, the figure drops substantially. Part-time employed people and unemployed people account for almost three quarters of enrolments. Fifty-one per cent of those who gained qualifications were part-time employed, compared with 23% of the population who are part-time employed. That is pretty good, because we are targeting those who are part-time employed. The gender breakdown is that 54% of those enrolling are males. Thirty-one per cent of all enrolments come from the most deprived areas. I will come back to that in a second.

I will talk about qualifications as opposed to enrolments. The awarding organisations have issued 128,000 qualifications. The figures to which I refer come from the awarding organisations themselves, so they are robust. Literacy qualifications account for almost half at 46%, numeracy accounts for 43%, and ICT accounts for 10%. The retention rate of those who complete is 86%, and the achievement rate is 60%. Thirty-one per cent are in wards 1 to 178 of the Northern Ireland multiple deprivation measure (NIMDM) super-output areas, which are the most deprived

wards. The percentage for the next super-output area for wards 179 to 356 is 23%, which shows that we are targeting the most deprived areas.

Ms Angela Whiteside (Department for Employment and Learning):

The Department puts quality at the heart of all of its programmes, but none more so than with essential skills. I work closely with the Education and Training Inspectorate, which monitors and reports to us on the quality of provision in our programmes. The Department makes a schedule with inspectors, organisations and providers to inspect on a three-year cycle. However, following the analysis of key performance indicators, we can prioritise. Daryl said that essential skills are now a fundamental part of all of our programmes in further education, Training for Success, ApprenticeshipsNI and Steps to Work. Essential skills are inspected and reported on as a component of each of those programmes. They will be inspected as a discrete provision by essential skills specialist inspectors but also evaluated within the vocational programmes by vocational specialists. We look at essential skills in the round because we do not want them to be developed in isolation. We want to make sure that individuals recognise the importance of good literacy, numeracy and ICT skills, and how they can enhance the quality of what they do in their vocational programmes. We encourage tutors to develop essential skills within a vocational context, or a relevant context for adults, perhaps social or work-related.

The inspectorate reports to us on how the delivery of essential skills, recruitment procedures, class sizes, timetabling and staff development are being managed. However, there is an emphasis on the quality of teaching because the Department recognises that that is a challenging task for essential skills lecturers and tutors. Very often they are dealing with young people who are disengaged and who had a bad English or maths experience, perhaps at school. With adults, that can be in the dim and distant past, with a lack of confidence now being entrenched. We recognise that that is a difficult problem, but we have high expectations.

The inspectorate reports to us on the quality of teaching, whether the strategies being used are appropriate to engage individual learners, whether there is good differentiation in the classes to make sure that the complex range of needs is being addressed appropriately, and on the technology being used. It also reports on the level of achievement and outcomes, the standards of work and progression opportunities.

The inspectorate reports back to us using a performance level on a six-point scale. We do not

just rest with a “satisfactory” rating. If something is satisfactory — in other words, at the midway point — we initiate a procedure whereby we ask an organisation to provide us with an improvement plan to show us how it intends to drive up the quality of its provision. Inspectors go back into an organisation and monitor how that improvement plan is being implemented and what progress is being made towards improvement. Within 12 to 18 months, an organisation will be re-inspected and regraded.

So far, our strategy has been successful. As a result of the last full-scale inspection of essential skills across all six further education colleges in 2009-2010, two colleges were evaluated as good, three as satisfactory and one as inadequate. We went through the improvements plans, the monitoring and the follow-up, and the four colleges evaluated as satisfactory or inadequate had improved, one doing so significantly. We continue to monitor.

In addition to inspections, all colleges and training organisations submit an annual self-evaluation report on the quality of their provision and identify what they need to do. We recognise that it is best if colleges and organisations take responsibility for their own quality improvement.

Approximately 90% of our training suppliers who provide Training for Success and ApprenticeshipsNI have evaluations of good or better. Some are outstanding. There is an improving trend. As the strategy rolled out, we were mostly dealing with good or satisfactory provision. Increasingly, however, organisations are hitting the high notes of outstanding or very good. Overall, retention is about 86%, and achievement is 60%. All our colleges and suppliers evaluate the quality of their own provision.

When we identify good practice, or when inspectors report good practice to us, the Department disseminates that to showcase good practice with individualised learning and planning for individuals to meet their barriers.

We recognise the difficulties and challenges, and we have high expectations of our tutors. Some of our colleagues talked to the Committee in September about our planned changes for teacher education, which are out to consultation. A number of reasons lie behind the changes. Primarily, we want to align the requirements to teach essential skills with those for other individuals teaching engineering, business or whatever in our further education colleges. We

want to ensure that sound pedagogical practices are developed at the start of teaching careers. In 2009, we carried out a survey among essential skills tutors that highlighted that too few of them get opportunities to undertake continuous professional development. Therefore, we want to front-load as much as we can in sound pedagogical practices at the start. Obviously, all that depends on the consultation, which is due to finish in December.

Mr Lyttle:

My initial question is fairly specific. Obviously, adult numeracy and literacy is essential to self-esteem, social inclusion and economic development. The learner access and engagement pilot, which is due to end in March 2012, tried to attract adult learners into the programmes. The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) report had some detailed findings and recommendations on the programme. The impression was that it was a potentially useful project, but the numbers involved were small compared with the overall target group. It was not clear how the programme was connecting with people who were homeless, had mental health issues or were not connected to community groups. What work is being done to review how a long-term strategy on learner access and engagement can be successfully taken forward?

Dr McIvor:

As you point out, it is a pilot programme, which ends in March. We noticed that it had a slow start, but it has now built up to quite a sizeable programme. As a result of all the issues that you mention, we are targeting hard-to-reach individuals, such as the unemployed, people with barriers and people who are in the category of having literacy and numeracy needs. PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) runs a long-term evaluation programme for us that tracks all the learners and providers for the period of the programme. We talked to individuals and their teachers and to voluntary and community groups whose job it is to access hard-to-reach individuals and get them into college and support them there. Therefore, we have very rich data about what has worked and what needs to be improved in the programme.

Mr Lyttle:

The PAC report expresses concern that further education colleges are not giving enough priority to the issue. Is that emerging from the PwC report about the connection between the community and voluntary groups that recruit learners and their relationship with further education colleges in the delivery of the programme?

Dr McIvor:

It is fair to say that there were a number of teething problems because the colleges contracted out to voluntary and community organisations, and sometimes that did not work. Everybody learned from that, and there are now good relationships with most of the providers, and the money for the programme goes to the voluntary and community sector. Those organisations are paid by the number of people who get into colleges, and colleges are paid through a different work stream.

Mr Lyttle:

Perhaps we could devote some time to the issue. In my constituency, many groups feel that the programme has significant potential, but there is concern about how they could feed in to trying to improve it.

The Chairperson:

That point is worth picking up. I feel that way, but I will let others have a say.

Ms Gildernew:

Thanks for the presentation. I am going to take the discussion in a slightly different direction. Angela, I thought that your comments about your work with school inspections were very interesting. In this Building a number of years ago, John Simpson said that there were children in the vicinity of the Building who were no longer suitable for an educational environment at the age of five and six, and I think that many of the problems that you face with adult literacy start in the home with babies and toddlers. I was at a presentation last week by Suzanne Zeedyk, which you would have found very useful, about the stimulation that a baby gets pre-birth and how that baby then has the tools to be a member of society with a contribution to make. John said that many children do not have proper behavioural skills and are therefore disruptive in school, so a teacher will try to impose discipline to maintain an orderly class. However, a parent who also has behavioural problems will then go up to the school, read the Riot Act to the teacher and tell him or her not to talk to their wee Johnny or whoever in that way. To me, there is a multigenerational element to the issue, and it would be interesting to know just how much of that came out in the pilot.

Has there been any interaction with Home-Start, Sure Start or the health service to ensure that children who go to school have the ability to learn from day one in primary 1 and that those children are not coming out at the other end of the education system without the necessary

literacy and numeracy skills? I am not just talking about hard-to-reach children and children in the care system. The elephant in the room is that we are sending children to school who have not been able to learn how to play and cannot therefore learn how to learn. To what extent is that a factor in your work now?

Ms Whiteside:

I am not aware of the lady whom you mention, but I would like to read about the case. I am aware of research that states that the problem does not start when children are 16 years of age but is created much earlier, even before, as you rightly say, they go to pre-school, school, and so on. The problem becomes increasingly difficult, especially if it is not dealt with until employment, which is the next hurdle to be faced.

The inspectors who look at essential skills for the Department are the same inspectors who inspect the schools, so they are well aware of the conditions that lead to the problem that we face when young people come onto our programme. The situation with those young people is urgent then because there is little time left to turn them around. That is why I keep saying that we are well aware of the difficulties that our essential skills tutors face. That is probably one of the most difficult things to address successfully in a short time. However, on the positive side, young people who have come onto our programme with low levels of literacy and numeracy have very often shown remarkable levels of progression and achievement when they start to work in a vocational area. They suddenly see the relevance and are keen to engage and make progress. So good essential skills provision can make a substantial contribution.

Mr Young:

One of the PAC recommendations was that there should be a more interdepartmental approach to the issue. I think that it is fair to say that the Department of Education (DE) is in the lead on that work, but I know that the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department for Social Development (DSD) play a part. It may be that that group's field of vision needs to be extended a little bit to pick up on some of the issues that you raise.

In DEL's work with the Department of Education, we start to pick up, through the entitlement framework, 14-year-olds who have been predicted to come out with poor GCSE results in English and maths when they are 16 in order to see what we can do to address that. In fact, we had a meeting about that with the Department of Education yesterday afternoon. Some of our essential

skills work is being carried out in schools. For example, in 2010-11, nearly 1,400 essential skills qualifications were pretty much split halfway between literacy and numeracy. So that is beginning to happen. However, we need to explore with the Department of Education some more innovative ways of trying to deal with the issue so that it can happen before pupils stall at 16 years of age.

Ms Ferguson:

You referred to very young children. We work with the Open College Network Northern Ireland and the education and library boards in the delivery of their family learning programmes. We have encouraged them to include literacy and numeracy in those programmes. In addition, we are on the DE partnership that looks at how we can build more essential skills literacy and numeracy into family support through the extended schools initiative.

Mr Buchanan:

It is important that those programmes are delivered to the highest standards. I note that some of the colleges fell down in their performances. Will you inform us of where and why those colleges fell down? What knock-on effect would that have had on those who went through the programme at that time?

Ms Whiteside:

The performance levels that are reported to us are based on how the provision is managed, on the quality of teaching and the achievements and outcomes. The overall performance will be a mixture of those areas. The levels of achievement at that particular college were very low at that time. I remember that case particularly well. Some of the issues behind that lay with data errors. After the data was cleansed, the picture improved, but there were also difficulties about the quality of teaching. We worked with that college and the other two on improvement plans and monitoring what they were doing to make sure that the quality of provision improved substantially at the time of the further inspection work.

Mr Young:

We should also point to quite good levels of achievement. Since the programme started, the overall retention has been 86%, and the overall achievement is 60%. In the current year, the retention rate is 90%. That is masked a little bit, because the figure for literacy is 62% achievement, and the figure for numeracy is 64% achievement. The overall figures are dragged

down a little bit by ICT. The feeling is that a lot of older people want to know how to use computers but do not necessarily want a qualification. Those figures stack up well in comparison with other mainstream FE provision. It is quite a reasonable level of achievement, bearing in mind that we are dealing with a particularly disadvantaged group of people.

Mr Douglas:

Thank you for the presentation. The briefing paper states:

“Northern Ireland is performing well on adult literacy and numeracy in comparison to counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales.”

That is very encouraging. Recently, I was at a public meeting with Diane Dodds MEP, who talked about European programmes and the potential for funding. She brought along a group from Ballybeen women’s centre, which is involved in a range of programmes. Nearly all its programmes include an adult literacy element. The briefing paper, however, states that that is not the case for all European programmes. Is that because of the nature of the programmes? Are there ways in which we can encourage organisations to include adult literacy in their programmes? What do you propose to do about the relationships with European programmes?

Dr McIvor:

The Department has match funding for a number of European programmes. Quite a lot of those programmes include essential skills, because they address particular needs in particular areas. Very often, it has been our experience that whoever runs the programme, whether it is a community or a voluntary group, or whatever its aim, tends to use the local further education college for the essential skills element, because that gives an assurance that there will be a qualified teacher and that the students will get through their exams. They tend to use the FE colleges anyway.

Mr Douglas:

Is there a potential for increasing those programmes? Will you be drawing down additional funding? I was quite surprised when, in her presentation, Diane Dodds asserted that there was a whole range of potential European programmes. It is obvious that not everyone in Northern Ireland is taking those up.

Mr Young:

Broadly, there are two matters to consider. We want to ensure, as far as possible, that we deliver

quality provision, as Angela said, by tutors who have gone through various educational processes. We try to use the voluntary and community sector, however that manifests itself, to attract people and then to direct and support them into mainstream FE or training provision. That is probably the direction in which we would prefer to see that going. We want the two respective sides to play to their strengths.

The Chairperson:

I have a few observations on that. I wanted to hear what my colleagues had to say before I came in. Mary, it is great to see all of your team here, and they all seem enthusiastic. However, we may be rushing to try to get too much information across in one go. I felt like saying to Harriet that I needed an NVQ in statistics that you were —

Ms Ferguson:

I am not a statistician. I am sorry.

The Chairperson:

You are certainly more advanced than I am.

People are very interested in the issue, and I understand that there have been some difficulties in the past and that people are sensitive and keen to get the results out — to go and do it. A problem shared is a problem halved, and you do not need to be quite so defensive in the way that you present statistics. All of us here live and work in the communities and know that there are difficulties that have to be picked up on. In the real world, it is, genuinely, quality that we are after. We are trying to consider the issue from the perspective of whether fixing 10 people properly is better than ticking a box for 100 people. The Committee will come back to this subject. I view today's session as a baseline presentation, because we wanted to get into the issue. I am pretty sure that we will want to come back to it.

You should not miss the vibes from Chris and other colleagues about our being a critical friend, which tells you that we are not collectively convinced that FE colleges are really focusing on essential skills. They have their own agendas. They are doing what they do well but not doing the bits that we may need, particularly in hard-to-reach areas. Daryl was right about the funding scheme that I was searching for. What is it called?

Dr McIvor:

The learner access and engagement pilot.

The Chairperson:

You tell us that that pilot, after a slow start, is improving. Might you tell us the details in writing rather than dealing with it now? The feedback that I get is that it is not drawn down by many colleges and that it is not being spent well. The colleges tend to find it too bureaucratic. I am also told that there were difficulties with the procurement exercises when we were looking for providers in the community. Therefore, we need to look at that. Will you consider those points and come back to the Committee? If a scheme is getting better, give us the details because we want to know about it. At some stage, we will come back and deal with the issue.

Michelle made the point that it is absolutely clear that a lot of damage has already been done by the time people come to you, and only certain people can be motivated. We would be interested in DEL's interaction with the Department of Education and the DHSSPS. Through interventions in nursery schools, children with socialisation problems, communication issues or whatever can be identified. There are cores there. Such children may go on to play truant. Educational underachievement in a particular ward tends to map truancy levels pretty significantly. That is because such children do not value education. You need to help us to take a more all-encompassing view on the matter. Rather than your being left to carry the can, this is a multidisciplinary, multi-departmental approach. I do not expect you to answer that now, but perhaps you would write to the Committee and tell us exactly how that is working in practice, and we will deal with that area.

Sammy touched on my final point. There is significant funding from the European social fund. All that seems to be lobbed into the mix. Considerable sums from Europe are supposed to be targeted on this area. We need to know more about how that money is spent and how it can be targeted.

Therefore, having given you a list of homework, I want to thank you all very much for your enthusiasm. If the four of you are talking, it is quite hard for members to engage all the time, which is why I waited until the end of the meeting to say my bit. You might consider the Committee as being a force for good as well as for holding people to account. In future, you might consider how we could target individual issues. We want to know how you deal with

certain issues. For example, motivation: how do you motivate someone of a certain age to achieve? What are the problems? If you explain the challenges that you face and how you deal with them — rather than your saying that you have many challenges, which we know — we will be able to understand better. That helps us to go out and argue a better case.

Dr McIvor:

Thank you very much.

The Chairperson:

The Hansard report will tell you what we have asked for, but we may drop you a reminder note. Thank you very much indeed.