



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**PUBLIC ACCOUNTS
COMMITTEE**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

**NIAO Report:
Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy**

10 February 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Maskey (Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr John Dallat
Mr William Irwin
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Mitchel McLaughlin
Ms Dawn Purvis

Witnesses:

Mrs Catherine Bell)
Dr Mary McIvor) Department for Employment and Learning
Mr Alan Shannon)

Also in Attendance:

Mr Kieran Donnelly) Comptroller and Auditor General
Mr Adrian Arbuthnot) Department of Finance and Personnel

The Chairperson (Mr P Maskey):

Mr Shannon, you are very welcome to the meeting; perhaps you will introduce your colleagues.

Mr Alan Shannon (Department for Employment and Learning):

With me are Mrs Catherine Bell, who is a deputy secretary in the Department, and Dr Mary McIvor, who is head of the further education division.

The Chairperson:

All three of you are very welcome. You know the procedure, having been here before. I will start by asking questions, and then members will follow suit.

The Committee recognises that the problems that face your Department in tackling the adult literacy and numeracy deficit are not entirely of its making. However, I will focus on the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) aspect today. The problems are a legacy of the school system over successive generations, but we are here to talk about DEL. Your Essential Skills programme has been in place for eight years now. How successful has it been?

Mr Shannon:

Thank you, Chairman. I will be brief, because I know that you want to get on. However, I will make four points. The first is that, 10 years ago, the Essential Skills programme did not exist. The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) came as a wake-up call to all four jurisdictions in these islands. We all thought that we had a pretty decent education system, so it came as a shock to be told not only that a substantial proportion of our population had problems in that area but that we were doing very poorly compared with other countries. Therefore, the programme was devised as a response to that wake-up call.

My second point is that the programme is a local product; it is different from what happens in Scotland, England and Wales and was one of the first original policies of the devolved Administration. My third point is that, in devising the policy, we deliberately looked for a long-term, measured approach; we concentrated on leadership and buy-in; we built capacity; we built in quality with curriculum, qualifications, accreditation and inspection; we have taken care that our lecturers are better qualified than those in other parts of these islands; and we concentrated heavily on awareness and publicity.

My final point is that, as the Audit Office report 'Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy' shows, the policy has certainly made an impact: there have been 177,000 enrolments, 96,000 qualifications, and 84,000 people involved. It is not just numbers; we target it at the most needy areas, and we operate out of 350 local centres. Thirty-one per cent of the clientele come from the

most disadvantaged areas, and 39% are either unemployed or economically inactive. We do it at unit costs that are better than those anywhere else, and we have created recognition for the qualifications among employers and universities.

To answer your question, a great deal has been achieved. However, it is one of the most important things the Department does, and there is still a great deal of work to be done.

The Chairperson:

Thank you. I wish to speak about the results of the 1996 International Audit Literacy Survey. I refer members to paragraph 2.6 of the revised Audit Office report, as some changes were made to it recently. Some people in your Department may need to look at their own numeracy skills because the report has been changed on several occasions and, even recently, drastic changes were made. That needs to be improved for the future.

Mr Shannon:

I offer a word of both apology and explanation. Some of the changes were simply a matter of updating; the report was done a couple of years ago. It would not be sensible for us to discuss out-of-date information when more up-to-date information is available. Those changes were made to be helpful.

We had to correct some of the figures, and that is the bit for which I owe you an apology. As I said earlier, we built the programme up carefully and deliberately and, I think, quite well. However, we could perhaps have done better by building in the statistical base right from the outset. In the early days, colleges' management information systems were not nearly as robust as they are now. About 18 months ago, we discovered that there were discrepancies in the returns that we got and what colleges held.

We get the information primarily from two sources: one is the suppliers of the courses; the other is the awarding bodies. In an ideal world, the information from those two sources would match; however, we found that it did not. It was partly due to weaknesses in the database and partly a consequence of industrial action taken in the colleges in 2007 and 2008, when information was available but not processed. We have put a full-time Northern Ireland Statistics

and Research Agency (NISRA) resource onto it, because we take it very seriously. The work was completed around Christmas, and we are much more confident about the figures now than we were. With apologies, I can say that we can rely on the figures that we have now to a very great extent and that it will continue to improve with the passage of time.

The Chairperson:

I am glad to hear that about the figures. Three drafts went back and forth between the Audit Office and the Department, and changes were made every time. The Audit Office then produced this report to which more drastic changes were made. Mistakes were made with the numbers even before the industrial action, so you cannot blame everything on it. The issue needs to be addressed, and I am glad to hear that you are taking steps to do so. It is important for the Public Accounts Committee, because we need accurate figures to produce our report. However, I take on board what you say.

Paragraph 2.7 states that the research showed that one in four adults here — some 250,000 people — had very poor literacy skills. It also found that a further 30% — another 300,000 people, if our numeracy skills are correct — could deal with simple material only. That means that your overall target population for essential skills training is well over 500,000. Is that figure correct?

Mr Shannon:

It is certainly a large number. We made the policy decision in the early days to concentrate our efforts on those who we thought needed them most.

Mr McLaughlin:

When does “early days” mean?

Mr Shannon:

It means 2002-03, when the strategy was first drawn up. The Committee that advised us at that time said that we should concentrate our efforts on the most needy. Many of those in the slightly higher category are picked up by college courses or by forms of education other than the Essential Skills programme. As you said, Chairman, we have regarded as our primary target the 250,000

people who appear to be struggling.

You may ask how long it will take. By building progressively, we have engaged 84,000 people in these courses so far; we now engage 20,000 a year. Another five years should make a significant difference to the size of the challenge. I accept, of course, that it may get increasingly difficult as we get towards the harder-to-reach groups. We are conscious of that and will try to adapt our strategy accordingly.

The Chairperson:

How many years will that be in total? I was trying to write the figures down. You say that it could be another five years before the target is reached. How many years ago was this set up?

Mr Shannon:

We have been going for eight years.

The Chairperson:

Therefore it will be a total of 13 years.

Mr Shannon:

Another five years should see a significant turnaround. We should have passed the tipping point by that stage.

The Chairperson:

You mentioned a figure of 84,000 for the past eight years, although I think that it may be closer to 83,000. Anyway, you have engaged 83,000 or 84,000 people in courses over the past eight years, yet you are supposed to engage 250,000 in the next five years. How does that balance? How will you engage a far greater number in the next five years than you did in past eight?

Mrs Catherine Bell (Department for Employment and Learning):

In the early days, we took a deliberate decision not to try to build capacity until we had developed a quality system; therefore it took time to develop the standards, because there had never been standards for literacy and numeracy. There was also the development of a curriculum and of

accepted, rigorous qualifications. The training of tutors was fundamental: we wanted to ensure that those who trained the learners were teachers who were trained in teaching the essential skills of literacy and numeracy. We did that differently from England's Skills for Life programme, which built in capacity immediately. We put in quality infrastructure, which paid off, and we have increased numbers substantially in recent years.

Dr Mary McIvor (Department for Employment and Learning):

As Catherine said, we have been building essential skills capacity up over the past eight years, and there is now capacity for about 20,000 people a year to take Essential Skills programmes in colleges.

The Chairperson:

Twenty thousand a year multiplied by five years is 100,000, which is still well off the 250,000 target.

Mr Shannon:

It would be another 100,000; therefore, we will have engaged 184,000 in another five years. No one ever said that this would be a quick fix; it is a long-term programme, and we should probably be looking at 10 —

The Chairperson:

Is the five-year figure merely aspirational? Will you reach it or not? You will have engaged 183,000, even though your overall target is 250,000.

Mr Shannon:

We would like to continue at the present 20,000 a year level for the next five years.

The Chairperson:

I am sorry to harp on about this, but I do not see how the figure of 20,000 can be met. If you cannot meet it, tell us so that we can include that in our report.

Mrs C Bell:

It is difficult for adults to admit that they have a weakness in literacy and numeracy, and if they have been living with such deficiencies for many years they will have developed coping skills. We have made essential skills mandatory in programmes where we can, and we have run promotional campaigns and have taken other measures to engage learners. However, one cannot force adults to engage in essential skills. Bearing in mind that many of the people in the cohort are in the older age group, we hope that we will both stem the flow and make significant inroads into addressing adults' weaknesses. The figure of 20,000 a year is not merely aspirational; we are doing it already.

The Chairperson:

Is the figure of 250,000 aspirational? That is what I was asking.

Mrs C Bell:

Based on a similar type of assessment to the International Adult Literacy Survey, we will know in 2013 whether we have addressed the 250,000 people with literacy and numeracy difficulties. Hopefully, we will have made significant inroads by then.

The Chairperson:

Other members may want to delve into that area in their own questions. Paragraph 3.9 says that, in 2002, the Department had:

“an overall aspirational target to reduce, by half, the number of adults with poor skills in literacy and numeracy by 2012.” However, paragraph 3.16 indicates that the two PSA targets since the launch of your strategy, combined, aimed for more than 60,000 to have attained a qualification by 2011. Was the figure diluted for any reason? Why have the aspirations that were set out not been reached or worked to? Why have the target figures been reduced?

Mrs C Bell:

When we started the strategy, we used the terms “people” and “learners” interchangeably; however, as time went on, we realised that we needed to be much more precise. I do not need to tell the Committee that a person is one, but a learner could have engaged in literacy, numeracy and ICT. It is not that we changed our targets or tried to make them easier. In fact, this strategy gets priority in the Department. When we talk about 84,000 “learners” in July 2010, we mean

people who have attained literacy and numeracy or literacy, numeracy and ICT. The difficulty was that our language was not precise at the outset. That has now changed, and we have made our terminology very precise.

The Chairperson:

Will the target figure of 125,000 by 2012 be met?

Mrs C Bell:

No. At present, we have 177,000 learners. However, if we are talking about “people”, we are sitting at a figure of 84,000. That is because people can do literacy, numeracy and ICT.

The Chairperson:

The target figure was halved to 125,000. I do not know whether the problem was unrealistic targets, but it reflects poorly on the Department that even the reduced targets have not been met. It sends out a bad signal.

Mrs C Bell:

When we started the Essential Skills programme, I do not think that anyone realised how difficult it would be to engage learners. We have just received information about our learner access and engagement programme, which works with the hardest to reach. PricewaterhouseCoopers did an evaluation and told us that the vast majority of people who engage in the learner access and engagement programme have not been in learning for the past 10 years. With literacy and numeracy skills, it is a case of use them or lose them. Many people did not have a positive experience of learning and so are averse to getting involved in it. Therefore, our aspiration at the early stage was probably overly optimistic. However, we now understand how difficult it is. We have done everything in our power to engage as many groups as we can.

Mr Shannon:

There was no scientific basis for target setting in the very early days of the programme. We had to judge how many people we could persuade to come forward; how many lecturers we could persuade to be trained; how much capacity we could build; and so on. We can set targets and see how close we get to meeting them. However, it is only with experience that target setting

becomes more informed and refined.

The Chairperson:

I appreciate that, and I am by no means saying that yours is an easy job. However, it is not a good idea to pull figures out of thin air and say that that is how many people you can put into training to enhance their skill levels. I do not think that that is right. Reducing the target figures is OK as long as it is done in an honest and frank manner and people are told that that is how things are going. However, even when the target was reduced by 50%, it was still not met. That tells me that it is still not working and that there may be a problem in the system.

Mr Dallat:

I do not doubt the sincerity of the witnesses; I have known them long enough. However, we are not here to judge the witnesses; we are here to judge the programmes. Alan, when did you stop believing that we had a pretty decent education system?

Mr Shannon:

That is a tricky question.

Mr Dallat:

I will make it easy for you. Every year, our education system produces 4,000 young people who have the lowest levels of literacy and numeracy. If you do not understand that, how on earth can you address the problems that you inherit from an education system that, each year, produces 4,000 16-year-olds who cannot put their name to an application form?

Mr Shannon:

That is the point that I made at the outset.

Mr Dallat:

I missed that.

Mr Shannon:

Generally speaking, many people thought that we had a pretty decent education system. The

1996 survey was a very unpleasant reminder that a big section of our student population is not doing well. I believe that in the education business that is called the long tail of underachievement. I am entirely aware of that situation.

We are trying to provide what is for many people a second chance; we are trying to tackle the 250,000 figure that the Chairperson talked about. As we do that, we are conscious that, as you rightly say, more people with the same problems come into the system every year. The figures may be even worse than you say, Mr Dallat. About 4,000 students a year do not achieve English and maths at GCSE. However, nearly 10,000 a year do not achieve an A-to-C grade, which is what many employers regard as a pass mark. I am glad to say that there are signs that those figures are improving. Nonetheless, the figures mean that the Department has a batch of new customers every year.

Mrs C Bell:

We have worked very hard with our Department of Education colleagues. The Department of Education developed a programme called Every School a Good School. That is similar to our quality improvement programme and focuses on literacy and numeracy. We, as a Department, have worked with our colleagues on the use of the Essential Skills programme in schools, and 66 schools have taken it up.

As Mr Shannon said, the numbers of young people coming out of school without literacy and numeracy skills have reduced and are reducing. The figure for those who leave school without an A*-to-C grade was 43%, and it is now 41%. An A*-to-G grade indicates some ability in literacy and numeracy. The figure for those who leave school without an A*-to-G grade is down to 12%. There has been quite a bit of progress in the education system. In addition, our Department of Education colleagues are working with their colleagues in the South on giving books to children. We hope that that will also make a significant difference. We will continue to work with our Department of Education colleagues to show the benefits of Essential Skills, so that they can use it in their GCSE programmes.

Mr Dallat:

When the Public Accounts Committee and the Assembly first discussed this problem 11 years

ago, we knew that the Department of Education was not checking its targets. The Department of Education was revising the targets and stretching the length of time over which they were to be achieved. It was dodging all over the place. We knew that the chief executives and chairpersons of the boards were not even meeting to discuss literacy and numeracy. A lot of the people who were 16 years old 11 years ago are in the chart. They are now aged 26 or 27. What has been done to help people who are outside the 16-to-25 age category?

People in the 16-to-25 age category would probably be in some kind of apprenticeships anyway, so what have you to show for the last 11 years? What have you to say to people aged between 26 and, say, 66, who were all equally entitled to have been equipped with a reasonable level of literacy and numeracy to get them through life? How many of the 16-year-olds that we talked about 11 years ago are now parents who are passing on the same problems to their families? We are supposed to be a regional Parliament that is enshrined in equality, and all sorts of promises were made in the Good Friday Agreement. What is in it for people outside the 16-to-25 age category?

Mr Shannon:

I will have a go at responding to that, and Catherine can supplement me. We have set the colleges specific targets to engage more people who are over the age of 20. The big cohort is the 16-to-19 age category. There is evidence that the colleges are responding to those targets. We have also funded the colleges to run the Learner Access and Engagement scheme, which I am sure that we will say more about later. That is about getting into disadvantaged areas and engaging more people. There is evidence that the colleges have been engaging more adults and economically inactive people through that process.

We have engaged heavily with employers, albeit that that is difficult in a small business economy, and we have heard quite a lot of encouraging stories from employers. We have funded the Union Learning Fund, which has been successful in connecting with people who otherwise would not have been prepared to return to education. We have made the provision much more flexible for employers. So, the colleges and other providers run programmes, sometimes back to back, out of hours and in strange places. That has worked well. We have incorporated ICT, which sometimes attracts a different group of people. We are broadening the provision. On the

Steps to Work programme, we are offering assessment and incentives —

Mr Dallat:

I do not wish to cut across Alan in any way. Those aspirations are fine, but let us try to get down to the facts. The last international literacy survey was carried out 15 years ago. Consultants aside — you mentioned consultants earlier, and we all have our own ideas on them — what facts, other than self-perception, are you basing anything on, 15 years on? You ask people basic little questions and they give you answers, but where are the facts?

Mr Shannon:

Other than self-perception?

Mr Dallat:

Yes.

Mr Shannon:

The omnibus survey, which is mentioned in the report, is a self-perception one. We have recently carried out the Oxford Economics survey, which is based on hard information about the qualifications that people are getting. The results from that survey are encouraging. It shows that, in recent years, the proportion of people in the population at level 1 has improved by about 3% in the three key literacy and numeracy areas. The proportion at level 1 has gone down, and the proportion at the higher levels 4 and 5 has gone up. So, there is some pretty hard information that we are heading in the right direction. The labour force survey, which also records qualifications, shows the same trends. Again, we are moving in the right direction. As you say, we will get harder information from the survey that is to be carried out this year.

Mr Dallat:

You agree that self-perception is hardly adequate as a basis for measuring success.

Mr Shannon:

It is not adequate by itself. I agree.

Mr Dallat:

In that case, will you tell us why you have decided to participate in the next survey, which, I understand, is in 2011?

Mr Shannon:

That is not self-perception.

Mr Dallat:

No.

Mr Shannon:

Are you asking why we are participating in the omnibus survey?

Mr Dallat:

Yes.

Mr Shannon:

It is a useful supplement. We are gathering information from a range of sources. Through the big international surveys, we are subjecting people to tests to give us some objective data, albeit based on a sample. Through the omnibus survey, we are asking people about their own perceptions. The census will pick up some information of that kind. We can measure the qualifications in the population by a range of different means, including the Department of Education's qualification results. In addition, we will do another international survey this year.

Mr Dallat:

From your introduction, I got the impression that literacy and numeracy is now concentrated virtually entirely in the colleges of further education.

Mr Shannon:

It is about 70% in the colleges.

Mr Dallat:

You also said at an early stage, and I am sure that you would accept, that those people who are successful are not in the hard-to-reach category. What investment is there in discovering people who are outside that first age group? For example, what is the role of the Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA) in this?

Mr Shannon:

Our primary comfort there is the fact that the colleges and their 300 outreach centres are spread very widely geographically. We have supplemented the colleges' normal outreach activities with a new fund, the Learner Access and Engagement fund. That is a pilot scheme that we have been running for the past three years to encourage the colleges to engage the voluntary and community sector and others, who may be better at outreach than the colleges by themselves can be, to carry out a lot of the functions around making connections, doing assessments, signposting and encouraging people. Sometimes, they provide the training themselves. There is a fair amount of activity in that area.

Mr Dallat:

How is that working out, given all the bad stories we hear about cutbacks in the colleges of further education resulting in courses being cancelled because of a lack of funding, people in retirement no longer having access to courses at all, and so on? This is, as you agreed, a fundamental right. Is it not now all in the melting pot with the cutbacks, pay-offs and everything else that is happening in what I would once have described as the flagship of education and learning? It has been mutilated and destroyed in recent years.

Mr Shannon:

No, I think it still is.

Mrs C Bell:

I will talk about the Learner Access and Engagement programme. Mr Dallat asked specifically about EGSA. At the outset, when we started the Essential Skills strategy, the Minister asked EGSA to set up a basic skills unit. It was asked to raise awareness; to provide advice and guidance; to signpost; to maintain a helpline; to produce case studies; and to analyse stats. It did

not deliver learning itself, but, at that stage, we asked it to manage the Peace money, and EGSA worked with about 108 community areas. Obviously, Proteus took over, and it did not concentrate as much on essential skills. However, we have moved into the European Social Fund (ESF) funding, and, under ESF, we have 73 projects that focus on essential skills. Under Learner Access and Engagement, the college, working with the community, is working in 305 centres. If you add in the other projects under ESF, they are in 350 centres in the community.

So, there is a much wider reach than there would have been in the past. EGSA did a good job at the time, but it is recognised that things have moved on. We no longer have a helpline, and we know that people engage through text messages. In fact, when we compared months with months using new technology and the EGSA helpline, we had about 360 hits compared with 240 hits with texts. NI Direct had about 5,600 hits from September to December. People are using different technology, and there is new awareness-raising. So, we are moving into the community where people are at and are using different forms.

Mr Dallat:

When will the next international survey be carried out?

Mr Shannon:

It is happening this year.

Mrs C Bell:

The pilot has taken place.

Mr Dallat:

In the meantime, what are you relying on to try to deliver the programmes?

Mr Shannon:

The most up-to-date survey information was the recent Oxford Economics report. That is the one that I described, in which there is evidence that we have moved up about three percentage points. Moreover, it looks as if we are moving at a faster pace than other parts of the UK. That is good news.

Mr Dallat:

Sometimes, comparisons are not everything. I know that other parts of the UK, as you describe it, have particular problems in that they may be dealing with a multiplicity of languages and cultures from countries all over the world. Until recently, we have had it quite easy in that respect, yet we have produced the most appalling results.

Dr McIvor:

I want to address the earlier point about cancellation of Essential Skills courses and confirm that no Essential Skills course has been cancelled due to lack of funding. Where there is demand for Essential Skills, the college will have the funding to run that course.

Mr Dallat:

Thanks. Chairperson, those are all the questions I have for now.

Mr McLaughlin:

Good afternoon. In a sense, I want to pick up on some of the themes that were developed during John's questioning and, initially, to address figures 1 and 2 and paragraphs 2.9 and 2.10. When questions are asked about the education system, I have often heard two expressions. Indeed, I have heard it repeated recently that we have a highly skilled workforce. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment used that phrase in the past week when announcing a very welcome investment decision. I have no doubt that there are very highly skilled people in our workforce, but the broad sweep of the claim that we have a highly skilled workforce defies the information and the very difficult challenge that you have to deal with.

I have often heard it said, when people criticise the decision to abolish the transfer test or during the debate on the current state of education, that we have or had the best education system in the world. However, the statistics from 15 years ago indicated that some 250,000 people here had quite profound literacy and numeracy problems, and a further 300,000 had difficulties with literacy and numeracy and were in Band 2. That equated to over half the workforce at that time. The survey indicated that the older age groups performed worse than the 16- to 25-year olds, with 41% of the men and 37% of the women in Band 1 in the 56-to-65 age group. I strongly endorse

the comment that Mr Shannon made that the survey was a wake-up call. There are still people living in that fantasy world, and that may be impacting on your ability to get to grips with the issue and to get to the heart of the dichotomy that we are producing some 4,000 pupils each year who have literacy and numeracy problems. At one end, the Department is providing essential skills assessment, support and training, while, at the other end, we are manufacturing more clients for that programme.

Have you analysed why that systemic failure exists in our education system? Are you collaborating or consulting with your colleagues in the Department of Education to see whether we can remedy the problem at the end where people are already damaged and have skills deficits? The survey demonstrates the experience that those people have in life of unemployment and social and economic deprivation, including health problems. Given that 16-year-olds are coming out of the education system to join that cohort, it seems to be common sense and value for money that a preventative spending line should be built into the priority of the economy — the number one priority if we set aside the social and personal impacts. Are you collaborating to study the cause of the problems that those people are experiencing and to make the interventions at a time when they would be most effective?

Mr Shannon:

I smile because we see both ends. For example, we spent all day on Monday on student fees, which is the success story. We have two successful universities, more students going to university in this part of the UK than in any other, and the best A level results in the country. You are quite right that there is a huge dichotomy between success at one end and the opposite at the other.

We deal regularly with our colleagues in the Department of Education. We have discussed essential skills with them for many years, and we have made the details of our own experience with the Essential Skills programme available to them. Indeed, the Department of Education piloted a scheme in 20 schools a couple of years ago, which used our Essential Skills programme. The thinking behind that scheme was to see whether that route would be more successful in some schools than the more conventional routes, and 66 schools have now picked that up and seem to be having some success with it.

You are at risk of taking me into an area that is not my area of expertise. I am not in a position to comment in detail on the school sector, but there does seem to be agreement among educationalists that early years provision is very important, that extended school activity seems to be helpful, and that changes in the curriculum will be promising. We will try to do everything that we can do to help the Department of Education to stem the flow.

Mrs C Bell:

DEL sits on the Department of Education's literacy and numeracy task force and has fed into its literacy strategy, which is about to come forward. As Mr Shannon said, we are involved in the Extended Schools programme, and we have worked on the Full Service Community Network with the Department of Education. One of the big areas where there has been significant success has been the joint work that we have done with 14- to 19-year-olds, whereby they get a mixture of professional and technical qualifications alongside the GCSEs that they have to do in school.

Mr McLaughlin:

I have some perception of that, because, during my life's journey, I spent a very educational two years working with young unemployed people. I probably got far more out of it than the young people whom I was trying to help. The point that I am making is that, although I value them and give credit where it is due, those programmes are responsive, rather than preventative. I would not want you to stray into other areas, and I know that you will not do that anyway — you have been around too long to do that, Mr Shannon. My question is really whether there is collaboration and sharing. You are working with those 16- and 17-year-olds. Clearly, that produces evidence that is of value to those in the education system who I am quite certain are trying to equip those young people for work and for life.

Mr Shannon:

The answer is yes: we are doing that. The other thing that has not been mentioned is that —

Mr McLaughlin:

I want you to say yes. However, I also want you to take the opportunity for the record to tell us what that means. Can you tell me how you do that formally?

Mr Shannon:

As Catherine said, we sit on the Department of Education's strategy group for literacy and numeracy. We are giving that group the benefit of our experience in how we deal with the problems when they come to us. We have sat on a number of groups. The Extended Schools fora are operated by different boards. We sit on those groups. There are also a number of projects. We sit on the boards that operate family literacy initiatives in which we are also involved.

Another point that I want to make is that one of the key factors that influences children's performance at school is the support that they get from parents. Some of the people whom we work with will soon become or will turn out to be parents. The more we can encourage them to see the value of that training, the more they will be able to help their children in due course.

Mr McLaughlin:

Thank you very much for that.

Figure 1 and paragraph 2.9 relate to the international adult literacy survey. I do not know whether I had a senior moment, but did you explain to John why we have not participated since 1996? At least two surveys have been carried out since then. Is there any reason why we did not participate in them?

Mr Shannon:

Yes, there is. As I understand it, the results of the 1996 survey became available only in 1998. Following that, there was the Moser inquiry in England. Then, we set up our own essential skills strategy group to put together a strategy, and we launched our programme in late 2002. The next international survey came along in 2003. Therefore, it was too soon for us to look at it again when we had not actually done much to make a difference.

There have been other surveys in which we might have participated. The English did one in 2003, and the Scots did one in 2009. Our experts advised us that there were doubts about the comparability of those surveys and the standards applied and that it was better to wait for the next international survey, which is the one that we are now involved in. The experts have also said

that it is probably worth doing one of those surveys only every 10 years or so. It is expensive. The one that we are doing this year will cost us about £1.2 million, which would pay for 3,000 people to take the course. It is not something that you want to do too often.

Mr McLaughlin:

I am surprised that it is so expensive. I did not realise that. Nevertheless, to have any hope of achieving your aspirations and targets, you do need to know who you are addressing and the correct level of provision.

Mr Shannon:

That is why we did the Oxford Economics survey. We did it as an interim measure to give us some indication that we were heading in the right direction while we waited for the results of the next survey.

Mr McLaughlin:

OK. I will move on. Are you satisfied that there is sufficient access to the Essential Skills programme in rural areas?

Mr Shannon:

Yes. There was a time when provision was a little patchy, but we now have some very persuasive evidence that we have fixed that. Mary, do you want to say something about that?

Dr McIvor:

Yes. We look at waiting lists throughout the six regional colleges and the 350 centres. Those centres are all over the Province, and wherever someone is — a rural area or a city — they are not far from one of those centres. At the moment, there are only 100 people on the waiting list for the Essential Skills programme, and they are being assessed to see at what level they need to enter. Once that assessment is done, courses will be provided. Essential Skills courses run every couple of weeks; it is not something that people can do in September or January only. As soon as a number of people become available, a course is started by a college. There are not really any waiting lists, which I think says that, wherever you are in Northern Ireland and provided that there is demand, you can access an Essential Skills course.

Mr McLaughlin:

OK. Thank you for that.

Figure 2 in paragraph 2.10 of the report is a bit depressing. It shows just how far we are behind the international experience. I do not think that we should take comfort from the fact that England, Scotland and Wales are having similar problems. What information do you have on the cause of the deficit between our performance and the internationally higher performing regions? What is the difference?

Mr Shannon:

We had a look at some of those who are doing so much better. Catherine, would you like to explain what we did?

Mrs C Bell:

We know that countries such as Sweden and Finland put learning very high up their list of priorities. As Mr Shannon said earlier, we know that early intervention with babies and toddlers makes a big difference. Those countries look at learning differently; in fact, their lifelong learning strategy is called 'The Joy of Learning'. Everything they do is treated as a learning activity. They train their teachers differently, and I know that the Department of Education has gone to Finland to look at how teachers are taught. There is a different culture.

We looked at different states in America as well, because they are English speaking and have problems that are similar to ours — they have many more problems than we do — and we saw things that we knew would make a difference. One thing that makes a difference in some of the states is the fact that, before a person can get a job, they have to get what is known as the general education diploma. That is the equivalent of English and maths in the high school diploma. We have never gone as far as to say that you cannot get a job until you have literacy and numeracy, but we have made progress with many employers who would, in the past, have said that someone had to have GCSEs in English and maths.

Our qualifications have such high standing — I say that advisedly — that employers are

accepting Essential Skills at level 2 as the equivalent of an A*-to-C grade in English and maths. Indeed, the two universities, Queen's and the University of Ulster, accept the Essential Skills qualification as well as GCSE English and maths. Learning is a cultural thing. We try to bring in as much as we can, but it is difficult.

Mr McLaughlin:

I readily accept what you say about the cultural difference. Even in a country like South Africa, which, God knows, has its own problems, they do not have a problem with the culture of learning. They seem to have had particular success with that.

As regards policy development or refinement, are your findings and experience as you come to these conclusions being fed into the policy debate? I know that other Departments are involved, and this may need high-level policy commitment. Is the problem we have, in a sense, a product of the fantasy that we had the best education system in the world and did not have to worry about such things? It is no good to us if we cannot achieve our priorities.

Mr Shannon:

If we want to reflect on the past a little bit; we have moved from an economy where this was less important. Perhaps if a person were manually skilled, it did not really matter.

Mr McLaughlin:

Maybe in heavy industry it did not really matter.

Mr Shannon:

Now, of course, there are European Regulations to read, even if a person is doing manual work. As manufacturing has declined and services have become predominant, this may be more important than it has been in the past.

Mr McLaughlin:

I understand why, at community level, that culture could emerge and be sustained. However, it is less clear to me why the system did not recognise that the industrial era had finished and that we needed new skills, and that there had to be a step change in education, training and skills.

Mrs C Bell:

Our biggest hurdle is in getting people to value education. If there is value in it, people will recognise that, and if there is value in lifting a book, people will do so. We recently had some encouragement through working with the Central Procurement Directorate in trying to raise the number of essential skills contractors who are getting contracts in Northern Ireland. They made the commitment to help address the essential skills deficiency of their workforce. Recently, we have been successful in getting essential skills included as a pre-requisite for contractors applying for cleaning and canteen-type jobs. So, even people in lower level jobs were getting that, because employers were saying that their employees need to be able to read health and safety regulations and be able to look at portion control and so on. However, until we have a society in which education is valued by everybody and not just those who are going to achieve, it will be an uphill struggle.

Mr McLaughlin:

Dr McIvor, you answered the question on the FE colleges' network, but the report recognises, in paragraph 4.8, that Armagh and Newry, for example, were better provided for than Enniskillen. I think you alluded to those problems. Do you feel that you have corrected that imbalance now?

Dr McIvor:

When the report was written, the full network was not in place. However, I am confident that, with the number of centres we now have, there is not an imbalance. We made the point earlier that there are no waiting lists. We checked with the colleges again last week to ensure that that was the case, and that there are no waiting lists for essential skills courses anywhere, whether in Armagh or anywhere else.

Mr Shannon:

Sorry, but at the risk of giving the Hansard reporter a nervous breakdown, we have provided a nice little map showing the more deprived areas in a lighter colour, and indicating, through a series of yellow dots, the fact that there is a very good distribution across the Province. There are really no serious blank spots there at all.

Mr McLaughlin:

Are you leaving the map with us?

Mr Shannon:

Yes, we can do that.

Mr McLaughlin:

I have two related questions to finish. There was evidence that some learners found the college environment a bit off-putting. Also, you took the decision to take the voluntary and community sector out of the tuition role. First, did that take into account that perhaps some people felt a bit intimidated by the college environment, and have you come to the conclusion that the quality of tuition from the community and voluntary sector was not up to standard?

Mrs C Bell:

When we took the decision about learner access and engagement, one issue that we had was that we had a contract with the Workers' Education Association and the Ulster People's College. The latter was not involved to any degree on essential skills; it had other problems.

The difficulty was that we had not gone out to tender, because we had contracts with those organisations over many years. However, times have changed and we needed to put the contracts out to tender. When we examined the provision, we realised that a lot of the community groups involved were contracting themselves with the college to do the teaching and learning. We had seen evidence of that in the United States, whereby the community college worked with a community group that could engage the hardest to help. It could encourage, mentor, and, when the going got tough, keep the learners engaged, but they used the community college and its expertise to do the teaching and learning.

We are pleased that our tutors in Northern Ireland are the highest qualified tutors across the United Kingdom. Because of that, the Essential Skills programme is not seen as the poor relation to any other programme that we offer. We have many organisations, for example, that deliver Training for Success and Steps to Work, and they have qualified tutors. We have some groups, such as a community organisation in Andersonstown, that also have qualified tutors. Those

bodies deliver the service themselves, and in many other cases, they contract with the college. As I said, the college has 308 out-centres that are working actively on essential skills, and, if my maths is OK, another 42 that they have been dealing with under the ESF in the community.

Ms Purvis:

Who monitors the Learner Access and Engagement programme?

Mr Shannon:

We have recently engaged PWC to carry out an interim evaluation of that, and we have an interim report.

Ms Purvis:

Has that been published?

Mr Shannon:

No. We have not got the final report yet. I have only just seen the interim findings, which we dug up for the purposes of this discussion.

Ms Purvis:

How do adults who are not connected with community groups engage in this? Are they seen to be a vulnerable group?

Mr Shannon:

We have television and radio adverts as well as websites, and all of those provide opportunities to connect. We have our own careers service as well as a range of advisory services plugged into the whole programme.

Ms Purvis:

I will come back to that point, because I would like to drill down into it a bit more.

Mr Dallat:

I refer to paragraph 2.17, which mentions the strong links between literacy performance and

qualifications. However, paragraph 2.14 states that the percentage of working-age adults in Northern Ireland with no qualifications is the highest in the UK, and by some margin. Will you explain that?

Mr Shannon:

The figures at paragraph 2.14 seem to be a consequence of the large number of people who dropped out of school without qualifications. Considering the workforce as a whole, including older groups and people who left school many years ago, there seems to be quite a group of people who have no qualifications at all.

Mrs C Bell:

We have looked at our statistics, and we have substantially improved on the number of people who have no qualifications or very low qualifications; level 1. At one stage, we were at 44%. We are now at 33%. That is still not acceptable, but one thing that a number of employers have told us, although it is very early work, is they have skilled workers but not necessarily qualified workers. We are looking at a system whereby we can try to assess a person's skills and accredit them. The new qualification and credit framework suggests that we can do that. That is no defence for there being no, or low, qualifications, but we have made a significant improvement.

Mr Dallat:

Do you agree that, given the pattern of change in the workplace, these are not issues that we can just talk about every few years? This is critical. People are signing on for unemployment benefit for the first time and are being sent constantly for interviews, but with no qualifications.

Mr Shannon:

It is the one area in which, if we want to be economically competitive, then we are worse off than our competitors. That is why the skills strategy, when it was first published in 2004, majored on that.

Mr Dallat:

Where I come from, there are also fairly large numbers of people from other parts of the world, Poland in particular. If one were to look at their CVs — and I am sure that you have seen them

— they not only have basic qualifications, they have allied qualifications as well. It pains me that, in a place in which you said we had the best education system in the world, so many people have nothing to put on their CVs.

Mr Shannon:

However, you noticed that the Poles did particularly badly in the survey. They were significantly worse than us.

Mr Dallat:

There are other reasons for that, are there not?

During the consultation, prior to the launch of the Essential Skills strategy, it was suggested to the Department that more specific targets were required to include new targeting of social need, the urban/rural split, and learners with learning difficulties. That is addressed in paragraph 3.19 of the report. What was your response to that?

Mrs C Bell:

We were seeking advice, so we needed to take account of it. Hence, 4% of the essential skills learning over the years has been with people who have special needs. We have demonstrated that we took the urban and rural issue seriously, and we have set targets for colleges, both for 16-year olds to 18-year-olds and those aged 19 and over. It is interesting to look at those statistics, because each college is different due to its location and the population it serves.

Mr Dallat:

Did you set targets for them?

Mrs C Bell:

We have targets for each college.

Mr Dallat:

It may be useful if the Committee had sight of those.

Mr Lunn:

Paragraph 3.7 of the revised report refers to the need to develop a framework to improve the professionalism of tutors and set up a quality assurance mechanism, to which I think you referred earlier. Do all your essential skills tutors have formal qualifications? Has that always been the case?

Mrs C Bell:

It certainly has been the case since the start of the strategy. Initially, to get it started, we had people who had qualifications in literacy or numeracy. If they were trained teachers, we exempted them. However, we then worked with Queen's University and our colleges, and anyone teaching essential skills must go through the Essential Skills programme. It is currently at level 4, and we want it at level 5. We are also working with the University of Ulster on the post-graduate certificate in further and higher education, so that essential skills are built into all teachers who are being qualified in further education. Let me put it like this; that is the policy, and we do check.

Mr Lunn:

Do you know how many tutors are currently involved in the programme across Northern Ireland?

Mr Shannon:

It is my understanding that it is 510.

Mr Dallat:

How many are threatened with redundancy at the moment?

Mr Shannon:

None that I know of.

Mr Dallat:

Thank you. I will hold you to that.

Mr Shannon:

I said, none that I know of.

Mr Lunn:

That will be good news for some. Do you have sufficient numbers of tutors in each discipline at the moment?

Mrs C Bell:

Yes. We do not have a dearth. At one stage, building capacity was a challenge, but we believe that we now have a sufficient number of tutors.

Mr Lunn:

Between 2002 and now, has there been any time when a shortage of tutors has constrained the delivery of a programme?

Mr Shannon:

When we decided that we would build capacity, and before we pushed the numbers, we were conscious that we did not want to get into that position. It may be that, in some localities, supply and demand have not always been at equilibrium. However, I do not think that it has been a serious constraint on the development of the programme.

Mr Lunn:

Are you happy with the levels?

Mr Shannon:

Yes.

Mr Lunn:

In my earlier days, I had to study for insurance exams at the College of Business Studies in Belfast. I studied for a particularly difficult one about consequential loss. We all had a go at it and our tutor was very good. On the day of the examination, we were mightily surprised to find out that our tutor was also doing the exam. That does not happen anymore. He failed.

[Laughter.]

Mrs C Bell:

We are continually examining this programme. Although we started at level 4, we are now pushing it level 5. In fact, we are saying that a person who delivers essential skills must have a degree in English, maths, computing or ICT before they even start training.

Mr Lunn:

You touched on my next point. Page 50 of the revised report, or page 51 of the glossy one, which is a bit like a prayer book, refers to the ETI inspections of essential skills provision in FE colleges. I think that you have answered this question, but are all tutors now quality assessed within a given period?

Mr Shannon:

They would certainly all be picked up at some point in the inspection process. We have not targeted essential skills as such; we targeted priority skills, and they would be picked up in the course of that inspection.

Mrs C Bell:

During every inspection, the inspectors look at essential skills. It does not matter whether it is through our training providers or through our Steps to Work programme. The last annual report said that the provision has been deemed to be satisfactory or better for all providers on the training side and the FE side. It was deemed to be very good in four of our colleges. One has been deemed good and the other satisfactory. We do not accept satisfactory as being sufficient, so the colleges are required to put action plans into place to address the weaknesses. We did notice a dip in performance of the colleges. Maybe Mary will point out what we did.

Dr McIvor:

Around 2008, we started to see a bit of a dip in success rates. Obviously, given the priority of the Essential Skills programme, that was not acceptable. We immediately met the curriculum directors in each of the colleges and we looked at performance rates. We were able to see the number of students, the success rate, and we were able to highlight what we expected. As a

result, we had a number of action plans from the colleges that we followed up with them. Obviously, some were doing some really good things around best practice. We had a roadshow that we took around Northern Ireland, and every essential skills tutor was invited to attend. We looked at best practice and we set out the Department's expectations of performance. As a result, as you will see in table 6 in the report, in the next year, performance went back up.

Mr Lunn:

You are very good at anticipating my next points. Paragraph 5.26 refers to the ETI's 2009 assessment of essential skills provisions in FE colleges. The results on qualification achievement rates, which are not in the report but are on your website, seem disappointing. Dr McIvor, you just referred to a bit of a dip in 2008. That year, Belfast Metropolitan College had a success rate of 27% in literacy and 7% in numeracy. That was a spectacular dip. I have a feeling that I know what you are going to say, but go ahead.

Dr McIvor:

That was the year I referred to. Obviously, that level of performance is one of the biggest issues for us. You will be glad to know that Belfast Met is now a lot better than that.

Mr Lunn:

It was not the only one, but it was by far the worst. The next lowest percentage was 36%. In the southern area, numeracy was at 72%, which I am sure is good in your terms. The north-western area did not produce figures, but just said that they were poor.

Mr Shannon:

The point is that we are keeping a very close eye on all that. When we spot unsatisfactory performance, we go in with inspectors as part of our routine monitoring process, or we make a special visit.

Mr Lunn:

You have already answered questions about the professionalism and quality assurance relating to tuition. However, when one sees a rate such as that, even though it is an isolated dip, does that suggest a weakness in the quality of the tuition?

Mrs C Bell:

There are a lot of reasons for that. However, it is totally unacceptable. Every year, colleges are required to produce a self-evaluation report and an action plan. We have the inspectorate, which assesses that. We do not see performance rates until afterwards, unless an inspection is going on and the inspectorate has raised it. However, as soon as we see a performance rate such as that, we intervene.

I am not defending poor performance. We want to root out poor performance, and we have withdrawn contracts on the basis of poor performance. In the area of essential skills, training sometimes takes place in one year but people do not achieve until the next. Again, however, that is no defence for poor performance.

Mr Lunn:

I want to move on to attendance rates. An ETI report was carried out on Belfast Metropolitan College in February 2009, more or less at the same time as the report to which I just referred. It said that the quality of learning provision is seriously impacted upon by poor student attendance. The report highlighted attendance rates of between 50% and 78% for the classes visited. Some other colleges also experience similar problems. What have colleges been doing to try to manage attendance and punctuality better?

Mrs C Bell:

Attendance and punctuality are fundamental to success. Although the Department does not intervene on something as specific as that unless it was picked up with us, we certainly pick up on performance. Attendance is an area that a college, in its self-evaluation, should pick up on. Principals and curriculum managers should be looking at a lot of indicators, including attendance, punctuality, dropout rates and success rates.

Dr McIvor:

The self-evaluation reports of some colleges have looked at things such as attendance. A couple of issues have come up that colleges do need to look at: for example, where an essential skills course is badly timetabled and the essential skills qualification is not sufficiently integrated with

other qualifications that students are doing. Colleges recognise that those are things that they need to look at, because they lead to poorer attendance. Colleges need to address that in their improvement plans.

Mr Shannon:

The inspectorate will look at the self-evaluations and should pick up those points.

Mr Lunn:

Does each college have a formal attendance management policy for essential skills students?

Dr McIvor:

Each college has an overall attendance policy. However, in their self-assessment reports, colleges need to look specifically at essential skills, which is something that we ask them about. Given the cohort in essential skills, it is important to make sure that there is attendance and that, if there is a difficulty with attendance, colleges address that.

Mr Lunn:

It is obvious that there must be a correlation between poor attendance and poor tuition. If we can get people in their late teens to admit that they have a problem with literacy or numeracy, they can make a conscious decision to try and do something about it. Yet, there is an attendance rate, in the case of the Northern Regional College, of 22%. Does that mean that they are being insufficiently stimulated by the tuition, or by the quality or enthusiasm of the tuition? I do not wish to be unkind to anyone, but that is what it suggests to me.

Ms C Bell:

One thing that became very apparent when the inspection of priority skills areas was taking place was that, where the vocational tutor was using his or her area to address literacy and numeracy, particularly numeracy, learners were stimulated because they could see a purpose in it. We have worked hard to encourage colleges and tutors to contextualise the learning or the area that the essential skills tutor teaches. If something stimulates you, you will want to learn.

However, inspectors also found that, in some instances, essential skills and occupational areas

were going along parallel lines, and that the essential skills tutor was not using construction or hairdressing, or whatever, to set the context for literacy and numeracy. Interest is important: if a person failed English and maths at school, they do not want to do English and maths in the same way again and that should not be happening. Poor attendance, as Mary said, could also be because the class is timetabled poorly or for some other reason. We certainly do not condone it.

Dr McIvor:

Where there is a problem, and you mentioned one that is in an inspectorate report and which is unsatisfactory, we will ask the college to do an improvement plan to address that. That will be followed up by the inspectors who will go back again and look at it. We will help the college with an organisation, the Learning and Skills Development Agency, which will go in and give them post-inspection support to help them address the issue. So, there is a process in place for addressing those difficult issues.

Mr Lunn:

There is a case in the report somewhere of a dramatic report over four years. Thank you very much.

Mr Irwin:

I thank you for your presentation.

Appendix 2 summarises the Department's December 2005 in-house review of the Gremlins campaign. The results suggest a high level of awareness of the campaign among the public: some 75% of those surveyed were aware of it. How many in that 75% came from the target population, for example, from among those adults lacking literacy and numeracy skills?

Mr Shannon:

We do not have that statistic available to us. However, the strategy in the early days was to make everyone, not just the target audience, aware that there was an issue. The Gremlins campaign was later criticised by some people for being a little negative, but it was very effective in attracting attention and getting people to talk about the issue. A total awareness figure of 75% was appropriate at that stage; and the campaign that we have been running more recently built on that by focusing it much more precisely at the target audience, having created the general

awareness a few years previously.

Mr Irwin:

Paragraph 4.4 of the report states that the Gremlins campaign was replaced in September 2008 by a locally-orientated campaign that specifically targets the hardest-to-reach groups and employers. How does it differ from the Gremlins campaign? Have you had any indication as to its impact?

Mr Shannon:

Yes. We evaluate this annually. The latest evaluation states that more people than ever want to improve their essential skills: younger people, those employed part-time, and those who have a few qualifications have the greatest desire.

Those with the least desire to improve tend to be unemployed and have no qualifications. The main benefits perceived by the target audience are the ability to get a job or to get a better job. We are getting useful feedback about the effect at the moment.

Mrs C Bell:

As with any campaign, eventually the “Gremlins” campaign lost its effect. When we did our surveys to decide whether we should continue with it, one of the things that came out was that people were embarrassed. We used gremlins because it was a national campaign and we did not have to pay for any of the development work; it was very cost-effective. The new programme, “Get the Know-how”, saw an additional 2,000 enquiries, comparing one year with the next. That was refreshing. We targeted the campaign to run alongside the colleges’ campaign. The colleges were benefiting from the work of the Department, and that reduced the expenditure that we had to put into running the campaign anyway.

Ms Purvis:

The new campaign was targeted at hard-to-reach groups and at employers. What has been the impact of the campaign with employers, hard-to-reach groups and adults not engaged with programmes? Have you measured those impacts?

Mrs C Bell:

As I said, over the same period we saw an increase of 2,000 in the number of enquiries. The campaign has deliberately targeted television programmes that we know the hardest-to-reach groups watch. We looked at the number of hits after the programme went out. We ran it in September and January and found that September was very successful, January less so. Instead of running the campaign again in January, we brought in other things like our Essential Skills competition and the learner awards so that there are testimonials from individuals who have benefitted.

Ms Purvis:

What about the impact on individuals who have not engaged? Have you evaluated why it does not appeal to them and how you can change it to make it appeal to them? What has the uptake been from employers?

Mrs C Bell:

We are beginning to see real success with employers. That may also be because of the economic downturn and the fact that colleges have to be much more flexible.

We asked the Government advertising unit to look at the campaign and it found that there was a 70% awareness of it. Campaigns of a similar weight, public and private, normally have a 49% awareness. However, that does not address whether there are still people who are unaware of the campaign or how we get to them. That is why the college is working with the community. The community sector gets to the hardest-to-reach categories and engages with them.

Mr Irwin:

Paragraph 4.6 refers to drop-out rates in the programme. What has been the trend in recent years?

Mrs C Bell:

The retention rate overall is now 85%, which is very high for a programme of this type. PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) did the longitudinal study of the learner access and engagement pilot and evaluated it, and one of its findings was that people value their tutors. If a person engages with a tutor, they are generally more likely to stay the course.

Dr McIvor:

One of the reasons is that some colleges now have retention officers. When they see a drop-off in a student's attendance, the officer will contact them to see what the issue is. It seems to be working well because retention rates are equal to those of the universities.

Mr Irwin:

Is there a difference between the drop-out rates of older and younger people?

Dr McIvor:

We do not have information on that.

Mr Shannon:

We will write to you about that.

Ms Purvis:

Who measures the drop-out rates? Is it NI Direct or the colleges?

Mrs C Bell:

It is done in several ways. Colleges submit their returns to the Department, and we quality-assure them because the statistics are compiled to Office for National Statistics standard. The inspectorate looks at the results as well. Rates are measured from several sources, not just the colleges.

Ms Purvis:

Who measures non-uptake? If, for example, you engage with someone to encourage them to take up essential skills but they do not, who measures the non-uptake and finds out why they have not engaged?

Mrs C Bell:

It is an area that we have not gone into or asked the colleges to go into; however, it is certainly something that we could consider.

Ms Purvis:

Do your outreach and careers advice measure it?

Mr Shannon:

It might be a part of the contract.

Mrs C Bell:

I do not know.

Dr McIvor:

The contract is paid for on the basis of getting people into a college. A community or voluntary organisation is paid on the basis of the number of students whom it can put into essential skills.

Mrs C Bell:

The Local Employment Intermediary Service (LEMIS), which has organisations in several communities, engages the most difficult-to-reach and works with them. From April of this year, we have agreed to pay a bonus to the LEMIS provider — not to the individual who gets a bonus anyway once they go on a course — if they can get a person with whom it engages onto an Essential Skills course. However, we have not set up a specific system to find out what happens when a person engages but does not subsequently take up.

The Chairperson:

It would be useful for our report if you would provide a note with regard to drop-out rates since 2002.

Mr Irwin:

Paragraphs 4.27 and 4.28 list various initiatives used by the Department to promote the benefits of essential skills to employers. How successful has this been, and how many participating employers have engaged with the Essential Skills programme?

Mr Shannon:

We did a review of the scheme in 2006, and one of its recommendations was that we should work much harder at engaging with employers. You will see a list of work already under way at that point in 2008 and 2009.

We are involved on two particular fronts, although there is a range of activities. We have engaged with the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils. As a consequence, we have six pilot schemes that are due to finish in the spring with a range of small, skills-based organisations. That has been working very well. The parallel work is with the unions, where we have been funding the union learning fund.

Mrs C Bell:

Ten unions are involved in projects, and individual colleges, under the employer-engagement projects, are required to engage with employers. In the past, colleges' inflexibility was criticised; they wanted to run it from September to June, from 9.00 am to 5.00 pm. That has gone.

They work on employers' premises and across six days; in some cases, they work shift patterns, which involves being there at 11.00 pm. It is incredibly difficult for employers, and many of them say that it is not their responsibility to train their staff in essential skills. That is understandable. Some time ago, we ran a North/South conference on working with employers that addressed how learning could be contextualised to embed essential skills. That is starting to bear fruit. For example, the Beeches Management Centre, the Belfast Trust and Belfast Metropolitan College have been running occupational skills courses and building essential skills into those. Therefore, a person will be getting work skills while having their essential skills needs addressed. It is a continual challenge.

Mr Irwin:

What percentage of participants who undertook Essential Skills training and who are now employed attended the courses in their own time?

Mrs C Bell:

I do not know that specifically, although there are different patterns. Some companies will allow

it to happen during working hours; others run a two-hour programme, which involves an hour of the participant's own time and an hour of work time. I suspect that although some employers give encouragement and have an interest, they require the person to do it in their own time. That is not specific to Essential Skills training; it is the same with skills training generally.

Mr Irwin:

The report says that the enrolment figure for 2009-2010 is almost 50,000. What is the reason for such a marked increase?

Mr Shannon:

If you look at the trend from the start, you will see that it increased constantly. We increased capacity, there has been more interest, and our marketing has been successful. ICT, although not included in those figures, has been added, which means that there is another cohort. We are building each year.

Mrs C Bell:

At the outset of the strategy, people talked about basic skills in a disparaging manner, whereas the term "essential skills" does not seem to have the same stigma attached to it. That is encouraging. I appreciate that it is difficult for adults to admit that they have weaknesses in literacy and numeracy; they have gone through their adult lives with coping skills. Adults will have no fear in saying that they need to learn how to use a computer, so ICT can be used as a hook to get them involved in other forms of learning.

Mr Irwin:

I think that I picked you up right when you said that ICT is not included in that 50,000. Is that right? I did not expect that to be the case.

Mr Shannon:

That is what it says in the footnote. We can provide the figures if you need them.

Mr Lunn:

The report says that the Audit Office had discussions with the Educational Guidance Service for

Adults (EGSA). The report highlights case studies that made it difficult for people to access the service. Case study 4 points out that, in one area, six to eight people wanted to learn but there were no providers of essential skills training in that area. It says that the WEA was contacted to see whether it can make provision. Is that a common occurrence? What can you do to tackle that problem?

Mr Shannon:

Those are indications of problems at that stage. However, following that, we put a great deal of effort into dealing with those issues, and we hope that those are in the past.

Mrs C Bell:

There are 350 centres, the colleges, the network of training providers and the Steps to Work providers. In September, we did a survey into how students felt about their Essential Skills course and how they were engaged. One thing that surprised me was that the survey targeted 9,000 courses. That beggars belief. It shows how we have increased the number of people who are getting involved. However, there is a great deal of interest in ICT, particularly as it is free.

Mr Shannon:

The courses run continuously now. It used to be that someone would put their name down and wait until a course came up. That is no longer the case.

Dr McIvor:

If you put your name down today for an Essential Skills course at your local college, you should be offered one within a matter of weeks after an initial assessment to see what level you need to go in.

Mr Lunn:

Case study 3 is to do with facilities in colleges, in particular the operation of a crèche. It concerns somebody who could not pursue their course because there was no room in the crèche and, subsequently, because it cost too much. Those are two problems. Are you satisfied that there is enough capacity in the crèche system in further education colleges? What can you do to overcome the problem of affordability for the less well off?

Dr McIvor:

We are conscious that there are barriers, particularly for essential skills students who are single parents and so on. Colleges have a discretionary fund to which students can apply to cover things such as crèches or, if it is not affordable, travel to the college. That is how colleges offer help to students.

Mr Lunn:

I know that you can never make it perfect, but are you satisfied that the problems in the case studies can be overcome and should not be a barrier?

Mr Shannon:

Not a lot of information is coming our way to say that those are still major barriers.

Mr Lunn:

Paragraph 4.23 states that further education colleges award learner support contracts on the basis of a competitive tender and that applicants are asked to satisfy criteria around staff qualifications, competence and accountability. How many contracts have been awarded and what level of competition has there been?

Mrs C Bell:

At present, colleges have 32 contracts, some of which are multiple contracts with organisations such as the Workers' Educational Association. As we said, the college delivers the training and the organisation engages and supports the learner when things get difficult.

Mr Lunn:

Is payment tied to performance and targets?

Dr McIvor:

Payment for those who are contracted is targeted on the basis of the number of learners that they can get into the Essential Skills programmes. The college then takes over and produces the Essential Skills training, but contractors are meant to go out to search for the hardest to reach, get

them in contact with the college and follow up on that. Contractors will not be paid until the person has gone into the college, started the course and stayed on it. That is the contractor's job and focus and that is what they are paid for.

Mr Lunn:

Is the performance aspect just numbers?

Dr McIvor:

What they are paid to do is very tightly managed.

Mr Shannon:

PWC's interim report says that the programme promotes good partnerships and represents good value for money. It says that hard-to-reach groups such as single parents, the long-term unemployed and those experiencing intergenerational unemployment are being reached. Those people are being offered an additional layer of support that would not otherwise have been available.

Mr Lunn:

I assume that you have normal quality-control procedures. Have any contracted organisations been judged to be less than satisfactory and their contracts terminated?

Mrs C Bell:

Yes. That is a role for the college. The college has the contract with the organisation, and we know that in some instances colleges have terminated contracts.

Mr Lunn:

Paragraph 4.26 says that the learner support service has been given insufficient funding to assist all potential learners who may be looking for support. Have you had to turn learners away because of lack of funding?

Mrs C Bell:

Not that we know of. We have no waiting list. We wrote to the colleges recently about students

being turned away because colleges did not have sufficient capacity. From recollection, although I will follow it up with the Committee, the answer was that no students had been turned away because of lack of capacity. However, we will follow that up.

Mr Shannon:

There was a hiccup in ICT at the beginning, but that seems to be satisfactory now.

Ms Purvis:

I want to return to my earlier line of questioning about hard-to-reach adult clients and those not connected with community groups. I know about the partnership between further education colleges and community groups; however, many people are not connected to community groups or they live outside neighbourhood renewal areas and so may not have an active community base. What is being done to target those adult clients? I am thinking of people who are homeless, adults who have mental ill health and the older age groups.

Dr McIvor:

One of the ways of targeting those groups is the advertising campaign, which runs on radio and TV, targeting the type of people that we want. The advertisement urges the person to text or get in contact. As soon as the contact comes through to the NI Direct website, it will be sent to the further education college, which will contact them and get them onto a course, or, if the individual does not want to go to a further education college, the college will look at the centres near the person, which might be a community hall where a course is running.

Ms Purvis:

Catherine spoke earlier about the first year of the advertising campaign and the increase in enquiries by 2,000. Did you evaluate those 2,000 people to find out whether they are the type of adults that I have just been talking about?

Mrs C Bell:

I would have to check whether the Government advertising unit did that on our behalf, as it was doing the evaluation. I mentioned LEMIS. For those with mental ill health, there are organisations that run Essential Skills courses from European social fund (ESF) funding.

Ms Purvis:

I am aware of that, but I am thinking of how homeless and unconnected people might become engaged.

Mrs C Bell:

We have worked with the Prison Service and, over the past year, with the health and social care trusts to see whether there is a gap in provision for care leavers. We have also worked with the Fostering Network to see if we can get involved with foster carers who have essential skills deficiencies.

Mr Shannon:

It will be interesting to see the final versions of the PricewaterhouseCoopers report that assesses the learner access and engagement programme. It said that, in 2008-09, 74% of total enrolments were women; 47% were aged 46 years and over; and 45% were from the most deprived 20% of super output areas. That is encouraging.

Ms Purvis:

It will be an interesting report; I look forward to reading it. I want to return to —

The Chairperson:

Dawn, John wants to ask a supplementary on that issue, if you do not mind.

Mr Dallat:

It can wait.

Ms Purvis:

Please go ahead.

Mr Dallat:

I would like to hear more about your work with the Prison Service, as in the distant past some

very good stories came out of it, given that some 60% of inmates have serious numeracy and literacy problems. At one stage EGSA was involved, and perhaps still is. Literacy and numeracy training for prisoners is a critical part of the programme, and it would be remiss not to discuss it.

Mr Shannon:

So far, 2,500 prisoners have gained qualifications, which is quite good. Belfast Metropolitan College works with Maghaberry Prison and with the young offenders centre, and the North West Regional College works with Magilligan Prison.

Mrs C Bell:

They have five dedicated tutors who work solely in the prisons.

Mr Shannon:

It is essential work, although there are problems because the prison regime is frequently not conducive to making clients available during the times that tutors would like. That is an ongoing problem. We were invited to make representations to the current review of the Prison Service, and the issue on which we majored was that one of the most important rehabilitation opportunities in prison is essential skills and that the service really should organise its regime to give priority to that activity.

Mr Dallat:

Am I hearing right? Am I being told that the Prison Service is standing in the way of prisoners' access to education?

Mr Shannon:

In a working day in Maghaberry, for example —

Mr Dallat:

Or Magilligan, which I know better.

Mr Shannon:

I pick Maghaberry because it is the remand prison, so priority will be given to getting prisoners to

court, then to medical appointments, and then to visits; education and training are pushed down the agenda every day. The solution is a reorganisation: visits should be in the evening and medical appointments at the weekend. However, that runs counter to the culture of the Prison Service.

Mr Dallat:

I am glad that that came up because I am sure that we will want to ask questions about other places, given that the common denominator among so many who have committed offences is poor literacy and numeracy, which is passed on from one generation to the next.

Mr Shannon:

People leaving prison with a competency in essential skills that they did not have when they entered would be critical in the prevention of reoffending.

Mr Dallat:

Is there an Essential Skills programme for adult centres for people with special needs? When I visit those centres I notice that sometimes the books in the libraries are not really adult books; they are books that you would expect a child to be reading.

Mrs C Bell:

We do not have a contract with adult centres, but colleges work with them, often for leisure courses if an adult has severe learning difficulties. Four per cent of enrolments are for students with learning disabilities or difficulties. Colleges are targeting them as well as people whose first language is not English, although we do not capture those figures in Essential Skills.

Ms Purvis:

I want to return to your work with employers. What is the extent of provision in the workplace? Is there one delivery model or is there flexibility? Some time ago, I visited Moy Park Foodservice, which was doing excellent work on essential skills. It provided small learning groups in the workplace because it was essential that the workforce had essential skills because of the machinery that was in use.

Mrs C Bell:

I will address your question about flexibility first. There is no one model that works with an employer. As I said to Mr Irwin, we have examples of colleges working with companies, such as FG Wilson (Engineering) Ltd, that want provision up to 11.00 pm. In some instances, the provision is made in two-hour slots: one hour will be the last hour of the person's shift, and the second will be an hour of the person's own time.

One of the greatest barriers was the requirement that we had laid down in a policy paper that provision had to be over a 40-hour period. However, we now have much more flexibility. For example, our provision with the Ministry of Defence is done on a two-week block because that is more sensible. There is no one model. It is up to the individual college to work with whatever suits an employer.

Capacity is an area in which we need to get more involvement with employers. We provide it for free, and colleges can use the occupational skills to develop the essential skills. However, it is difficult to build capacity with a small- to medium-sized economy; that is why we have engaged the sector skills councils. The energy sector skills council is doing a waste-management project with Larne and Limavady borough councils. So it goes on. However, we could do a great deal more.

Ms Purvis:

Figure 6 at paragraph 5.7 shows enrolments and qualifications from October 2002 to 31 July 2010. How many of those enrolments were from people at the lowest level of literacy skills? Have you broken enrolments down by literacy level?

Mrs C Bell:

We have. I do not have the figures with me, but I can get them for you. Twenty-six per cent of the overall qualifications were at entry level; 34% achieved at level 1; and 41% achieved at level 2. Our ambition is to get everyone to level 2 because it is the benchmark for the workplace.

Ms Purvis:

Could we have a breakdown of enrolments and qualifications achieved by year and age band and

also by literacy, numeracy and ICT?

Mrs C Bell:

Breaking them down by literacy, numeracy and ICT is not a problem, and I do not think that age band should be a problem.

Ms Purvis:

That would be great. The programme includes IT training. Do the statistics in figure 6 include IT enrolments and qualifications?

Mrs C Bell:

Any ICT enrolments with a start date prior to 1 April 2008 have been excluded, but ICT enrolments after that date are included in those figures, which means that there is another cohort.

Ms Purvis:

I would have thought that ICT trainees would not normally have problems with numeracy and literacy. Is that the case?

Mrs C Bell:

No. In fact, that was one of the barriers that we had at the outset in engaging people with ICT. We said that they had to have essential skills and literacy and numeracy before they could do ICT. We could not get them engaged, so we had to drop that requirement. We hope that getting them into learning will be a hook.

Mr Shannon:

ICT is not included in figure 6 because, when that table was produced, ICT was only starting and we did not want to do too much violence to the table. In the last academic year, there were 3,275 qualifications in ICT. So, it is beginning to hold up quite nicely.

Ms Purvis:

Paragraph 5.9 tells us that 31% of all Essential Skills participants were from the most deprived areas. Against what is that measured? Is that a good result?

Mrs C Bell:

It is the bottom 20% of the most deprived areas; if you take the bottom 40%, 54% of all enrolments are in those areas. We see a definite trend in colleges' performance: enrolments in colleges in deprived areas are much higher. Forty-five per cent of enrolments for Learner Access and Engagement were from the most deprived areas.

Ms Purvis:

Can you give us a note of the annual trend in percentages from 2002?

Mrs C Bell:

Yes.

Mr Beggs:

I want to pick up on some issues that other members raised. It was mentioned that attendance rates in some courses were 50% to 70%. I had been aware that 30% to 40% of secondary schools in some areas have less than 85% attendance. Do you agree that, if a pattern of absence from school is established, it becomes even more difficult to maintain subsequent attendance? To a certain extent, problems are not being addressed at school. The earlier they are addressed, the better it would be for everyone.

Mr Shannon:

I agree entirely. When discussing performance in this area, it is important to remember that we are dealing with a group of people who, by and large, have not done well at school and probably exhibited many of those problems. We have explained that the retention rate on our courses is 85%, which is as good as that of the universities. That is a remarkable achievement, given the background of many of those who are taking part.

Mrs C Bell:

The new Training for Success programme has skills training built in, and the Skills for your Life component of the programme focuses on addressing people's barriers, one of which is getting people to attend. In the 16 to 18 cohort that comes to us, we try to develop a culture of turning

up.

Mr Beggs:

I want to follow up on a line of questioning that Mitchel McLaughlin started about DEL and the Department of Education. The Department for Employment and Learning operates part-time Essential Skills courses. The Department of Education will have had a child for 12 years in full-time education with the associated costs, yet we are told that 4,000 pupils a year leave school without essential numeracy and literacy skills. Is that the working assumption that you have to continue with or will the issue be addressed at the earlier stage?

Mr Shannon:

The evidence is that, although the problem is serious, it is improving. There has been a significant improvement in the past couple of years in that figure. If that trend continues, the problem might diminish.

Mrs C Bell:

The Every School a Good School programme will take time to work through from primary 1 until a child leaves school. However, we are seeing evidence of improvement: the percentage of young people who leave school without grades A to G has dropped from 15% to 12% in the past year.

Mr Beggs:

I understand that one in five primary-school pupils leaves with inadequate numeracy and literacy skills. Does the problem start even earlier than secondary level? When I worked as a production manager, I was taught that it was better to get things right first time. Do you not think that the earlier we address the issues, the better for everyone: children, parents and our economy?

Mr Shannon:

Yes, absolutely.

Mrs C Bell:

That is why the work that is being done on family literacy is so important. If we can get parents

to recognise the value of learning and to have their own essential skills addressed so that they can read to their children and encourage them to stay in school, there will be a beneficial knock-on effect.

Mr Beggs:

Figure 7 indicates that some 123,000 young people aged between 16 and 25 were enrolled. Do you have any estimate for how many people from that age group with essential-needs requirements did not enrol?

Mr Shannon:

That brings us on to our work on those who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), for whom we are about to publish a strategy. The figure is about 10%. The situation here is slightly better than it is in other jurisdictions, but, nonetheless, it is a serious issue, and there is a commitment to tackling it as an interdepartmental and cross-sectoral group, to identify those people and what can be done about them.

Mrs C Bell:

Any young person who engages in any programme that the Department runs, whether that is Training for Success, an apprenticeship programme or mainstream further education, must do Essential Skills. People are assessed when they come to a college or a training organisation, so we get the ones who move from school into further education and training.

Mr Beggs:

Do you have any figures for the numbers of people aged between 16 and 25 who enrol and are parents? There is lots of international research and information that indicates the importance of parental involvement in early-years education and, as we mentioned earlier, in valuing education so that there are appropriate parenting skills, support and encouragement and everyone values education. Are you aware of how many of the young people who have enrolled are parents?

Mr Shannon:

I do not know if we have that information.

Mrs C Bell:

We have information on 16- to 18-year-olds who are parents, because we pay them an additional allowance. We can give you that information.

Mr Beggs:

I am conscious of the work of Professor Tim Shanahan of Chicago, whose involvement has led to a very dramatic improvement in numeracy and literacy within a one-year period in that area. Are you aware that he is carrying out a sizeable pilot scheme here, which is supported by Atlantic Philanthropies and being run through Barnardo's? That scheme involves the parents and helps them with their children's learning in those early years. Are you aware of that happening?

Mrs C Bell:

No.

Mr Beggs:

There needs to be cross-departmental thinking and awareness of significant programmes that can make a change.

Figure 7 at paragraph 5.8 shows that 70% of the enrolments came from people in the younger age category that I mentioned. However, the results of the 1996 international survey, in paragraph 2.8, show that the older age groups performed worse than the 16- to 25-year-olds. Do you think that you need to make greater efforts to engage with older clients? What plans do you have in that area?

Mr Shannon:

We have certainly found that the proportion of the cohort that is keenest in coming into the Essential Skills programme tends to be the younger age group. As the graph clearly shows, the proportion of those aged over 25 coming forward is much smaller. That is why we have been working with employers and the unions to pick up as many as we can in the workplace. We are picking up a number of people who are unemployed, because they are coming on to our training schemes. When we come to do the migration from incapacity benefit to employment and support allowance (ESA), a lot of people who are economically inactive will be coming through our job

centres for the first time. We may be able to pick up some older clients from there. It is an area that we want to concentrate on more. We have been giving targets to the colleges to get older people enrolling.

Mr Beggs:

What are the targets?

Mrs C Bell:

Each college has a different target, and we have said that we will send you those.

Mr Beggs:

OK. Thank you.

Figure 8 at paragraph 5.13 shows that some £40 million was spent over seven years up to March 2009 and that a further £30 million was spent in the subsequent two years. Given the extent of the literacy and numeracy problem, do you think that you have sufficient funding to address it?

Mr Shannon:

We have sufficient funding to fund the 20,000 people who went through the Essential Skills programme in the past 12 months. Our priority going forward is to try to protect that budget to ensure that it does not diminish. The Minister has said that he regards it as a priority programme. As you know, our funding is under serious pressure, and that will particularly be the case next year. Our objective is to try to protect the programme as much as possible.

Mr Beggs:

Are you saying that you are not yet certain whether your budget is protected?

Mr Shannon:

We cannot be sure yet. We will have a £40 million hole in the budget next year and a £31 million hole in the budget the following year. We will have to make cuts to meet that. The Minister has not yet decided finally where those cuts will fall, because his proposals are out for consultation.

Mr Beggs:

There was some discussion earlier about community involvement in outreach, which is essential for colleges. I was a member of a local strategy partnership that, during Peace II, had to pull £100,000 of funding from a further education college because it was unable to get students from the older age group for its basic numeracy and literacy courses as a result of its not having outreach and a community network to draw on. I want to reinforce that community outreach is essential.

As regards cross-departmental working in this area, I am aware of the YMCA Parents and Kids Together project, which has received funding from the Department for Social Development (DSD), the Department of Education's Sure Start, DEL and even the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. However, projects that deal with educational under-attainment in areas of need have frequently lived on a hand-to-mouth basis. When do you think there will be community planning that ensures that everyone addresses the issue collectively? Recently, there has even been pressure from funders to pull elements of programmes despite their being recognised as successful in getting people onto courses. For example, the disappearance of crèches, which are essential, could threaten whole programmes. When will there be joined-up thinking between Departments on such community outreach programmes?

Mr Shannon:

There is a cross-departmental strategy on the third sector, and we engage with other Departments on particular programmes. The sort of groups that you talked about chase funds from lots of different sources, and that situation makes a cross-departmental response difficult. DEL has tried to ask: what is the third sector best at? It is best at making connections and working with people. What are the colleges better at? They are better at standards and progression. If we can get the best out of both by having them work together, that is probably the best model. That is where we are with college provision.

Mrs C Bell:

We are also involved with neighbourhood renewal areas, where family literacy is a priority.

Mr Beggs:

Yes, there is some neighbourhood small pockets of deprivation (SPOD) money as well. However, there is essentially a useful group bringing together people in an area of educational need. It has been clearly identified in NISRA statistics etc, yet there does not seem to be openness and correct thinking between Departments. Funding now comes largely from DSD and DEL, and there is also some from the Department of Education. Bits of the jigsaw could easily fall off, and, suddenly, there will be no community outreach for educational underachievement in an area of need. Do you accept that people in those areas are very unlikely to travel 10 miles to their nearest further education college?

Mrs C Bell:

Although Mr Shannon was not able to say that the budget will be protected, the Minister has given the matter priority. Learner Access and Engagement and the work in the communities with 350 community organisations should help. People should not have to travel too far to get provision. I know that that is not an answer to the question about joined-up working.

Mr Beggs:

The impression that comes across is that some Departments have looked at their silo and their particular criteria but have not looked at the overall picture and how, if they rigidly enforce what they wish to have, they may end up with nothing. Do you accept that Departments should be talking together and seeing a fuller picture of the implications of their decisions?

Mr Shannon:

DSD, for example, will be interested in the disadvantaged areas, so it thinks geographically about the provision that exists in those areas. We tend to think about people, so we are trying to provide facilities for individuals, not for particular areas. You are right; sometimes we could better co-ordinate those two approaches.

The Chairperson:

You will be glad to hear that we are coming to the end of our discussion. We have looked today at the lessons that have been learned over the past eight or nine years. How will you apply those lessons to the process over the next eight or nine years?

Mr Shannon:

The positive lessons are that we were right to start slowly, to build capacity and quality and to do the thing right, even if it meant doing it slightly slower than some other jurisdictions. We might have done better with the statistical support for much of what we were doing, which is why we cannot always give you statistical answers historically. We have a pretty robust system now, and it will get better when we introduce the individual learner identification numbers in the colleges, which will come in during the next year or so. Then we can track individuals and where they go in the system or, indeed, out of the system and back in later, as the case may be. That is part of the future. If we can manage to keep the budget and not lose any of it, we will be doing well. If, for the next six or seven years, we can continue to attract the same degree of interest that we are getting now — 20,000 people every year — we will be doing well.

Mrs C Bell:

We look forward to the results from the international survey. That will be a watershed for us as well.

The Chairperson:

You mentioned the interim or draft PWC report. When will that be complete?

Dr McIvor:

It is a longitudinal study, which will follow the whole programme for three years. It is intended to publish it after December 2011, which will mark the end of the three-year pilot period. Then we will have the full three years of results to look at, which will give us some really good data that will answer some of the questions that have been raised today.

The Chairperson:

Is there any chance of getting some quotes from it today, or even a copy of the interim report?

Mr Shannon:

Would you like to have the interim information that we have got?

Dr McIvor:

We have a very recent report from the past month that we can share with you.

The Chairperson:

That is great; thank you very much.

Ms Purvis:

Are you continuing that longitudinal study beyond March 2011?

Mr Shannon:

We do not know whether the pilot will wind up or whether we will be able to continue. It all depends on the budget.

Ms Purvis:

I want to return to something that Catherine said earlier in response to Roy about the younger age group, the 16- to 25-year olds, who are coming into Essential Skills through Training for Success, the apprenticeship framework, and further and higher education. I have looked at the enrolment figure table in the report, and if we removed all the bands of younger people who are coming into Essential Skills through different programmes, it would make quite a stark difference to that table. Are you satisfied, then, by your focus on adults over 25 years of age?

Mrs C Bell:

When we started to include Essential Skills as a mandatory element in all our programmes, we became concerned that it was easy for colleges to target those areas, and that is why we have now set them targets for adults. It is also why we have specific initiatives such as those in the Steps to Work programme. We cannot make it mandatory, but we try to encourage anyone with a deficiency to have it addressed, and we give a bonus if people achieve that successfully. It is an uphill struggle, and we will just have to keep at it.

Mr Dallat:

You have referred to your colleagues in the Department of Education on a number of occasions. Is that a partnership? Is that the way in which it will develop in the future? Or will it continue to

be a fire brigade service, where you try to bail out people who have been failed by the system they have just gone through?

Mr Shannon:

I sense that there is a very real awareness in both Departments about the importance of this area. The Department of Education has a number of initiatives under way, and we are beginning to see some results coming through. We are very happy to work together. So I hope that it is a partnership.

Mr Dallat:

You think that it is a partnership?

Mr Shannon:

Yes, I think so. We will have our differences from time to time about methods. Not everyone —

Mr Dallat:

Alan, two Departments are involved in education. Can they afford to have their differences when 250,000 people out there are failed by the system?

Mr Shannon:

I agree; but there will always be a range of views about which programme is more effective than another and so on. We will continue to make the benefit of our experience available to the Department of Education.

Mr Dallat:

Are you satisfied that you have now got it right in respect of the hard-to-reach people? There are now tens of thousands of people from different parts of the world settled here, and many of them are not proficient in English.

Mr Shannon:

This report does not cover the English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) courses, which are funded separately and work pretty well. There is evidence that immigrants are doing an ESOL

course and then, having completed that, going on to do Essential Skills courses to progress further. One of the advantages of the colleges is that they offer that progression.

Mrs C Bell:

Some parts of the rest of the United Kingdom and the Republic ceased funding ESOL courses, because English is a very precious commodity to people. Our view is different, and we see it as a way of integrating people into our community. Therefore, we continue to give free funding for ESOL courses to anyone from within the European Union; those from outside it must pay. In 2008-09, some 6,000 people availed themselves of that provision.

The Chairperson:

The Committee recognises the importance of the work that the Department has been doing over the past number of years. It is not an easy task. We reckon that progress has been made, but we also recognise that many people have not really been touched by it at this stage. It is important that the Department addresses that.

I thank you for coming in for this session, which has lasted for two and a half hours. During the session, we asked you to provide some information, and we may want to write to you for further information. We will appreciate receiving that so that we can conclude our report. Thank you all very much.