



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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**COMMITTEE  
FOR EMPLOYMENT  
AND LEARNING**

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**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

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**Outcome of June Monitoring**

22 June 2011

**NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY**

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FOR EMPLOYMENT  
AND LEARNING**

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22 June 2011

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

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)  
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Jim Allister  
Mr Barry McElduff  
Mr Pat Ramsey

**Witnesses:**

Mr Trevor Connolly ) Department for Employment and Learning  
Ms Maryann Smith )

**The Chairperson:**

Trevor and Maryann, I apologise for having kept you for so long. However, with the debate on tuition fees coming up next week, the Committee had to deal with the universities in some detail. We will finish at 1.00 pm. If we do not deal with everything today, we will come back and deal with any outstanding issues at another time.

Jim, if you leave, you will cause me a bit of a problem. We need four Committee members to take a formal briefing.

**Mr P Ramsey:**

Can we take the briefing quickly then?

**The Chairperson:**

Fire ahead, Trevor. Tell us the bad news.

**Mr Trevor Connolly (Department for Employment and Learning):**

The Department made five bids in the June monitoring round. It was successful with its first bid, and that was very gratefully received.

The second bid was for a new proposed pre-work programme. In the last comprehensive spending review (CSR), the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) received £2 billion for welfare reform, and, as part of that, it has introduced a pre-work programme. We want to introduce a short work placement scheme of between two and eight weeks to help people attain good working habits and to improve their employability. The Department made a bid for that new scheme in the June monitoring round. We do not have the money in our budget for it, and, effectively, we will continue with business as is.

The Committee will be aware that the budget for the employment service is already stretched. It is staffed to provide for a jobseeker's allowance register of 35,000 and it is currently dealing with a register of 60,000. Therefore, the bid is a proposal for a new programme that we do not have the funding for. Until we get some funding, business will continue as is.

The next bid is for Apprenticeships NI, which, as many Committee members will know, is a demand-led programme. I want to make it clear that we can honour our existing commitments with that programme, but we may have problems in dealing with a growth in demand. We are currently in June, the next big intake to the programme is in September, so we will not have a fair idea of the end-year forecast position until October or November. We can honour all existing commitments, and we are trying to anticipate what the growth will be throughout the rest of the year and work towards that.

**The Chairperson:**

We will note that and we will look at it in October.

**Mr Connolly:**

If memory serves me correctly, school leavers start in September and have between eight and 10 weeks to finalise their plans. That impacts us in the monitoring rounds, and it could be the start

of November before we have the firm numbers.

**The Chairperson:**

We can note in the minutes that we are OK with what we have got, and that we will look at it again in November to see whether there is a shortfall.

**Mr Connolly:**

Yes. We are simply trying to forecast the ongoing demand in that area.

The fourth unsuccessful bid that we made was for PhDs. In the Budget 2008, we received funding for innovation, and it was a Programme for Government commitment to increase the number of PhDs by 300. There is a run-out factor with those courses, and we made a bid for that funding. All the funding for innovation was taken from our baseline on 31 March and was not returned. That funding is not available to us in the current year and for the remainder of the period covered by Budget 2010. We placed an unsuccessful bid for that funding in the original Budget 2010, and we are now bidding again. The costs are already in the system. They cover PhD students who are in place and who are finishing their courses. Ultimately, if we do not get any further funding, the universities will have to take up those costs.

**Mr Allister:**

Were those places committed to in the Programme for Government?

**Mr Connolly:**

They were committed to in the Budget 2008.

**Mr Allister:**

So, has there been a reneging on that commitment?

**Mr Connolly:**

The places are there. They were funded through the funding for innovation stream for the three years of Budget 2008, but that funding ceased in March 2011.

**The Chairperson:**

We will take a paper on the detail of that separately, because we do not have time to go through it

now. The point that Jim is making is that we need to understand that, if there was a commitment to do it, regardless of whether DEL or someone else was the budget holder —

**Mr Connolly:**

In the Programme for Government 2008, there is a clear commitment to increase the number of PhD students by 300.

**The Chairperson:**

We are now into a different Programme for Government and Budget.

**Mr Connolly:**

Yes. The students are in the system now, and the bid is for the run-through costs for them to complete their PhDs.

**The Chairperson:**

No mandate can be bound by what went on before, but there is a run-out. We need a quick note on that and the implications.

**Mr Connolly:**

The bid represents the run-out costs. We anticipate that by 2011-12, 2012-13 and 2013-14, all of those 300 students will have gone through the system, and the cost decreases accordingly in those three years.

The final bid was for capital. Northern Regional College and Southern Regional College have not benefited from new buildings through PFI funding. We have a strategic outline case, which has been approved by the Department of Finance and Personnel, but, between now and when the funding happens to put in new campuses, their big issue is with maintenance and running of the existing campuses. A large part of that is compliance with health and safety. That was the background to the bid. Unfortunately, we did not get any funding. Once again, we are back to the position that we will bid again in October, but, if that funding is not found, the ultimate consequence would be that any costs that are incurred would come from the reserves of the colleges themselves.

**Mr McElduff:**

I understand that there are physical accommodation issues at the Enniskillen campus of South West College. I might have expected that to be covered in the original June bid. Might the Department look at including those in a future bid?

**Mr Connolly:**

We bid on behalf of the returns that we are getting from the colleges. If we were to get something from South West College, we would include it. The bids for Northern Regional College and Southern Regional College were made principally because neither of them had benefited and they have a campus that, realistically, in the current funding environment, will be in existence for the next four years.

**The Chairperson:**

Trevor, it has been useful to hear what you have said. We will pick those issues up in the next monitoring round. I have rushed through this because of time constraints. I do not know whether it has helped other members, but it has helped me to improve understanding of what happens next. We will pick up on those matters after the summer recess. Thank you very much.