



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Confucius Institute

19 October 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister
Mr Sammy Douglas
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr David McIlveen
Mrs Sandra Overend
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Dr David Barr)
Professor Ailbhe Ó Corráin) University of Ulster
Professor Pól Ó Dochartaigh)

The Chairperson:

We will now receive a briefing from representatives from the University of Ulster on the Confucius Institute. I apologise for keeping you waiting, but finances are heavy on our minds at the moment. You are welcome to the meeting. We are keen to hear what you have to say. We invited you here so that Queen's can hear of your great success. Professor Pól Ó Dochartaigh will introduce the rest of his team.

Professor Pól Ó Dochartaigh (University of Ulster):

Thank you for the invitation to come to talk about the Confucius Institute. As I said to you when I met you up at Stormont a couple of weeks ago, I feel it is important to introduce not only the Confucius Institute, but to do so in the context of languages in general for Northern Ireland. To that end, I have brought with me Professor Bertie Ó Corráin, who is professor of Irish and director of the Irish and Celtic Studies Research Institute, and our newly minted head of the school of languages and cultures, Dr David Barr, who is a graduate of French and Spanish. As you know, I am dean of the faculty of arts, but my day job is professor of German.

I realise that you are running late, so I am sure we will be able to keep this short, if you like. There are three things, and I will start with the Confucius Institute. I will try to contextualise that in the languages strategy, and, at the end, I will say a few words about the many different ways in which languages can and should be taught for the benefit of society. The three of us will be open to questions at the end of that.

The Confucius Institute, on which the Committee has had a briefing paper, is part of the People's Republic of China's engagement with, if you like, soft power around the world. It is similar to the notion that underpins the British Council, the Goethe-Institut for Germany and the Alliance Française for France. One difference in the way the Chinese are doing it is that they are seeking a partner overseas, usually a university, in which to establish a Confucius Institute. Each overseas institution has a partner institution in China. That is very much about matching up compatible interests and so on.

There are several Confucius Institutes across the UK, including in Manchester, the London School of Economics (LSE), Cardiff, Edinburgh and Glasgow. There are two in the Republic, and we felt that it would be good to get one for Northern Ireland. You will be aware that both universities put in bids, and ours was selected. That does not mean it is a Confucius Institute for just the University of Ulster. It is at the University of Ulster but it is very much for Northern Ireland, and we indicated very clearly that we are interested in collaborating across the board in Northern Ireland to promote and enhance awareness of China.

As we see it, the Confucius Institute's primary remit is to disseminate awareness of Chinese language and culture, and bring people over from China who will teach Chinese language and culture. It will not be taught in the narrow sense of just language and literature, but in the widest

sense, which includes awareness of the Chinese political system, Chinese history, Chinese business culture, etc. From that point of view, there is the potential for engagement right across the board. In its core sense, it is about that level of dissemination and increased awareness of China here in Northern Ireland.

The potential benefits that we see deriving from that are not in the realm of, for example, just engagement in schools with China or with people learning the Chinese language and about China's culture; it will also open doors for our businesses etc to explore the possibility of exporting to China. It will offer possibilities for Chinese direct investment in Northern Ireland a few years down the road on the back of the work that the institute will do if there is a greater pool of Chinese language specialists in Northern Ireland. I am aware that some Northern Irish youngsters are studying Chinese over in GB. It is the aim of the University of Ulster on the back of this to establish Chinese as a subject in its own right at the university. We already teach it as part of the applied languages degree but it is very much at an introductory level, with a module in second year and a module in the final year.

That, in a nutshell, is what the Confucius Institute is about. I see it in terms of the economic context, which is that Northern Ireland, as we are all well aware, needs to move away from over-reliance on the state sector or public sector towards a greater and stronger private sector. To do that, Northern Ireland needs to establish a broad-based resource in the skills that young people have as they come through the education system and which will make Northern Ireland an attractive place to invest and work in. That will create the potential for foreign direct investment and create a pool of people in Northern Ireland who can take Northern Ireland produce and businesses overseas and represent Northern Ireland instead of what most of the English-speaking world has to do far too often, which is to rely on speakers of other languages who have acquired English. We would like Northern Ireland to get to the stage that Northern Ireland can rely on Northern Irish people who have learned other languages to represent Northern Ireland overseas.

Professor Ó Corráin is one of a team of three. The others are Professor John Gillespie, from the University of Ulster, who is on study leave, and Professor David Johnston, from Queen's. They recently worked on a languages strategy for Northern Ireland, and their draft report is with the Department of Education. We had a meeting about that with Minister O'Dowd last week, and the report is being finalised for publication in the next few weeks.

That report is very much about three aspects. First, there is the educational side of languages, and the transferable analytical skills that young people acquire in learning languages, which will serve them well in employment. Secondly, it is about the business and commerce benefits to Northern Ireland of having greater engagement with languages, and I am sure that Bertie can talk more about that if he is asked. Thirdly, it is about social cohesion. When people acquire and engage with different languages, they understand other cultures and understand difference better, and it would be fair to say that Northern Ireland could do with a bit of that as well.

There is sometimes a widespread perception about how we approach language teaching, which is why I have brought David along. David is one of the UK's foremost experts on computer-assisted language learning. At the University of Ulster, we take a very modern and contemporary approach to language teaching. They take business texts from contemporary journals in France, Germany and Spain and use modern technologies and methodologies to acquire the language. Those skills, while useful for the language, are also useful for employment.

I will contextualise it all by saying that the Confucius Institute will give a great boost, not just to awareness of China in Northern Ireland and the massive potential for Northern Ireland to engage with what is about to become the world's largest economy, but to language as a whole.

The partner institution of the Confucius Institute here is the Zhejiang University of Media and Communications, which is in the town of Hangzhou, about 100 miles from Shanghai. China has 33 provinces, and the province of Zhejiang has been at the forefront of moves towards a market economy in China. It is very much open for business and looking for partners overseas. It is a province with a mere 60 million people, so it has about the same population as the UK.

That province has a number of Confucius Institute partnerships around the world but only one in the UK, which is with us at the University of Ulster for Northern Ireland. There is real potential to develop and engage with that province as an opening into China. Bearing in mind that there are almost 1,000 people in China for every one person in Northern Ireland, that country, as a whole, is too big for us in Northern Ireland to make a significant impact on it. However, by focusing on the province of Zhejiang and its proximity to Shanghai, which is very useful, we have a chance to make an impact. I would like us as a society, not just in the university, to explore and exploit that chance.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much. You are to be congratulated on the Confucius Institute, and it is nice to see. We are supportive of all our universities, and we know that both put in very competitive bids. Do members want to make any brief comments? I know that members have had a briefing, and some will have attended the reception in the Long Gallery.

Mr McElduff:

I join you in congratulating the university in achieving this status. I think that there are eight, nine or 10 universities in Britain that have a Confucius Institute.

Professor Ó Dochartaigh:

I think it has increased to 15 or 16.

Mr McElduff:

There are now three universities with Confucius Institutes on the island of Ireland. Is there any evaluation of tangible successes that have been delivered by any of the other Confucius Institutes? Secondly, is there any potential for creating this type of engagement, greater cultural engagement or business opportunities with the other countries that are known as the BRIC countries — Brazil, Russia, India and China?

Professor Ó Dochartaigh:

Confucius Institutes only started being set up in 2004, so most of them are not even through their first five-year plan. I should say that Confucius Institutes are set up with different purposes. The Confucius Institutes at the University of Edinburgh, in Manchester and at the LSE have been set up with a very strong academic bent. They have a strong tradition of teaching Chinese, engaging with Chinese culture, and so on. The one in Glasgow, for example, is very much about enhancing the teaching of Chinese in Scottish schools. In London, there is a Confucius Institute for traditional Chinese medicine, which is a very specialist remit. Edinburgh's Confucius Institute is the one that I have had contact with along with the one at University College Dublin (UCD). The Scottish Government have bought into it big time and has promoted funding.

I should say that there is potential for match funding in a lot of the activities that we do. The Confucius Institute is about promoting and enhancing Chinese culture and awareness of Chinese Culture. It cannot in itself function on the back of Chinese funds; that is a slight mistake in the

briefing that MLAs received. It can function only as a conduit for promoting Northern Irish business. What we can do is open doors and make that part of our remit, but we will have to seek funding from here. There is a good chance of getting match funding for a lot of the activities.

As I said, the Scottish Government have bought into that model, and the Confucius Institute there feels that its links with China have been significantly enhanced by that. First Minister Alex Salmond has been out in China in that regard.

I have not engaged with the other BRIC countries at this stage. At an academic level, we have explored links with India, and we are keen to do so. However, I could not say much about Brazil or Russia in that regard.

Mr Ross:

You mentioned how important China is to business and that it will be the biggest economy. FG Wilson, which has a factory in my constituency, is quite active in China. Having spoken to business leaders in Northern Ireland, I know that they often find it difficult to do business in China. They are used to being able to go and sign, seal and deliver something and come home, whereas in China it takes much longer because of the different culture and practices. What help can the Confucius Institute give to business? Do you have links with Invest NI, and are you able to work with it to help those companies who want to go out to China with some of the cultural differences?

Professor Ó Dochartaigh:

There are two things. Invest NI has an office in Shanghai. As I said, that is only 100 miles from Zhejiang where our partner university is based, and we will be going to Zhejiang in January to sign off on the programme of operations for the next year and a half. I have also been invited to a meeting with a number of people, including someone from Invest NI, on the back of the Chinese gymnastics team deciding to base itself in the Salto National Gymnastics Centre in Lisburn. The agreement was signed in July, I finalised a job description for a director late last night, and that is with our HR team to sign off. Therefore, we are still very much at a developmental stage, but we certainly envisage interacting with Invest NI.

Companies here, such as FG Wilson or Bombardier Shorts, have long-established links with China. We have potential in that we could offer bespoke courses on doing business in China and

about the ways it is done. It is a very different business model in China. There are different expectations there and this is where, to use an in term, intercultural communication plays such an important role. We cannot simply turn up and do things the way that they are done here, because the Chinese will understand that differently. When they do certain things, there is an expectation of how you should signal that you welcome that, and we do not know what that is unless we engage. That is exactly the type of courses that we will promote.

We have someone in our international office in the university who will be on the management board of the Confucius Institute. He was one of the researchers for a book about UCD's engagement with its Confucius Institute, which was entitled 'Doing Business in China: The Irish Experience'. We have a lot to learn from that book and the experiences that they had. However, it is not just the Irish experience that matters. We are now part of an international network, and there are a number of institutes across GB. We can draw on that expertise and the networks of people that the various institutes have and bring them here to do bespoke courses for us. All the expertise will not reside at the Confucius Institute here or in the University of Ulster, but we will be the facilitators.

Mrs Overend:

I will be very quick. Alastair covered most of my questions; I was also wondering how you were going to link in with Invest NI. How do you plan to inform businesses of your work and courses? How will you get that information out there?

Professor Ó Dochartaigh:

That is very much part of the job description of the director, and, as I said, I sent that job description to our HR department last night. Until now, it has been about raising awareness and getting the message out through the media and places such as this. We have been up at Stormont quite a lot to meet people, and, as you know, Sandra, I spoke in Westminster recently when the Assembly and Business Trust was there. The director's job will be full-time, and the remit will be to spread the word and contact business. We will try to do an audit through Invest NI —

The Chairperson:

Pól, I want to get through. We can take the general point, and when the director is appointed we would be interested to see whether we can assist. Perhaps that is the way to take up Sandra's point.

Mr Douglas:

My question was linked to that, but I want to take it on a wee bit further. I was up in west Belfast recently at Delta Packaging, which has a Chinese director and has a plant in China, and my question was going to be about how we can link businesses in the two countries.

Last year, a number of people who I would describe as language tourists visited east Belfast. They were very interested in C S Lewis, who, as everybody knows, was born in east Belfast. There are obviously huge opportunities for tourism. Indeed, from what I have heard, China will be the biggest market for UK tourism. Will you also link into tourism?

Professor Ó Dochartaigh:

When we were out in July, we discovered that, two years ago, of the ¥2 billion that was generated in Chinese cinemas in 2009, ¥1.6 billion was taken for the film ‘Titanic’. Most of the people whom we spoke to were not aware that the Titanic was built in Belfast. Their eyes lit up at the thought of coming here.

Mr Douglas:

It was built in east Belfast, and I hope that you told them that. *[Laughter.]*

Professor Ó Dochartaigh:

I do know that, yes.

Mrs Overend:

I missed out on name-dropping my constituency.

The Chairperson:

Sammy, you will have to broaden your horizons a bit.

Mr McElduff:

No, he was in west Belfast recently. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Douglas:

I got my passport stamped. *[Laughter.]*

Professor Ó Dochartaigh:

We have already worked out that the growing Chinese business class has become ever more interested in golf, so, on the back of our successes, there is real potential for Northern Ireland. That is definitely part of what we are looking at.

The Chairperson:

Do you have any golf courses in east Belfast, Sammy?

Mr Allister:

I hope that they are particularly interested in north Antrim and that you told them about the Giant's Causeway and Royal Portrush.

Mr Lyttle:

You have 30 seconds to make your pitch.

Mr Allister:

All of this sounds very good, and I am sure that it is. However, from what I pick up, it is funded, at least initially, by the Chinese Government. Are there any strings attached? The institute's role will go beyond language. There has been worldwide concern about human rights issues in China, particularly over the persecution of Christians. Many disturbing examples have emerged. If, for example, under this course, someone wanted to do a PhD — it seems to extend to that level — on the treatment of Christians in China, would there be any restraint from the funders? Are any strings attached concerning that type of restriction, tying into the human rights concerns that exist over China?

Professor Ó Dochartaigh:

When we run courses as part of the Confucius Institute, discussion will be free, open and easy. No one will try to put any line for anyone. There is no restriction in those terms whatsoever. Do the briefing notes refer to PhD courses?

Mr Allister:

Yes.

Professor Ó Dochartaigh:

I think that there are one or two points that are not quite accurate in the briefing that we gave to the Assembly. The funding, of itself, does not include PhD studentships. It is about promoting awareness of China and of Chinese culture. On the point about awareness of the diversity of China, when we were in the Confucius Institute headquarters in Beijing in July, the first thing that we were shown was an exhibition about China's cultures that included Tibet, the Uyghur region in the west and Inner Mongolia. The institute made no bones about celebrating that diversity. That will be part of what the courses teach, if that it is what people are interested in learning about. No one will try to censor anyone in that context.

Mr Allister:

Are you sure about that?

Professor Ó Dochartaigh:

Absolutely. It would be a challenge to our academic freedom, and we simply would not allow that.

Mr McElduff:

Can we hear more about the current Chinese language course provision at the University of Ulster? Is the language tradition or dialect that will be taught tailored to the province of Zhejiang or that of Shanghai?

The Chairperson:

Pól, dealing with that issue might be useful springboard for leading on to a more general proposition about language. The Committee Clerk has whispered in my ear that she was in China. When was that?

The Committee Clerk:

It was three years ago.

The Chairperson:

You happened to see a programme —

The Committee Clerk:

I saw a half-hour programme advertising the Giant's Causeway.

The Chairperson:

It is interesting to see things such as that when you travel.

Mr Allister:

When you go to the Causeway, you see an amazing number of Chinese and Japanese visitors.

The Chairperson:

I wanted to put that on the record. Please answer Barry's question and then broaden that out into talking about some general issues to do with language.

Professor Ó Dochartaigh:

I brought these two gentlemen for a purpose. David is the head of school of languages, literatures and cultures, and he oversees language teaching. Bertie will talk about the broader strategy.

Dr David Barr (University of Ulster):

At the university, we teach French, Spanish, German and Irish as our main undergraduate language provision. We also teach Chinese, as part of the degree in applied languages and translation. That degree focuses primarily on skills such as interpreting and translation. Chinese is a part of that. The reason that we have not yet developed a more substantial Chinese provision is simply because, with the current maximum student number (MaSN) restrictions, we focus on the traditional languages that we have offered for a long time. This year, our numbers are very strong and healthy, as they have been over the past number of years. We have an intake of around 70 students this year in French and Irish alone, which is substantial.

I should say that our provision tends to focus on professionally orientated skills. A few moments ago, the dean mentioned computer-assisted language learning. That is one element of what we teach. We teach our undergraduates and other students about using language as a medium for communication. Obviously, we broaden that to intercultural awareness, but —many employers make this point to us — many graduates of the University of Ulster have a tremendous linguistic ability. Their language skills are very professional. Offering Chinese at the Confucius Institute will expand that and give us a greater opportunity to develop with our partners in the

university as a whole, in areas such as the Ulster Business School (UBS) — the University of Ulster’s faculty of business and management — which offers courses specifically on Chinese with business.

Professor Ailbhe Ó Corráin (University of Ulster):

The commitment to the Confucius Institute is part of a greater commitment that we have in the University of Ulster to the promotion of language skills in the community in general. It has been clearly demonstrated by the British Academy, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and other business organisations that there is a serious language deficit in the UK in general, and Northern Ireland is no exception to that.

We feel that it is seriously important, not only from the point of view of personal development and social cohesion, but from that of trade, tourism and economic development, that we have in the community the language skills to ensure that we have the ability to develop international co-operation of this type. As Pól said, we have developed a Northern Ireland languages strategy to that effect. It was commissioned a number of years ago by the Department of Education, and we have attempted to look as comprehensively as possible at languages in Northern Ireland, and not only at modern foreign languages but at indigenous languages, including sign languages and those of migrant workers and immigrants.

The strategy is in three sections. One looks at the promotion of languages in the education sector; another looks at their promotion in the business sector; and a third looks at the importance of language in social cohesion and understanding. I am open to questions on the languages strategy in general. As Pól said, it was submitted in March to the Department of Education, which has circulated it to relevant Departments. It will be published in the very near future.

Professor Ó Dochartaigh:

May I add one point to that, to give you a flavour of the importance of languages? A study came out of the business school at Cardiff University in 2007 that used business research methodologies, which I do not even begin to pretend to understand, on how countries are more likely to trade with other countries that speak the same language or are close by, and how having language skills enhances trade, and so on. The study factored in all those things and came to the conclusion that, in 2005 alone, because of its want of adequate language skills, the UK lost £9 billion in foreign trade. That gives the Committee a flavour of the potential for enhancing the

wealth of this country by investing in languages.

The Chairperson:

I will tell you what I am interested in, and I am not sure that we will be able to do justice to it now, so we may need to organise something up in Coleraine or wherever, but my experience of the Confucius Institute, or at least of the Chinese, is that the lead-in with culture led to opportunities that were not envisaged. Once you have reasons for engaging, the language then becomes important, because it helps you to be more effective.

Please do not take this the wrong way, because I mean to move on to a more positive note, but when people start to talk to me about a language strategy for Northern Ireland, I think that we have enough troubles dealing with English. I genuinely think that you need to broaden the institute's role to include an understanding of social cohesion and cultural recognition on all sides. That is quite an interesting debate, and I would have some interest in seeing the report and talking to you a bit more about it. Whether we do that as a Committee, you might want to consider how best to explain it, because I am sure that you will not be able to do all of it now. Having had my say, I want to open the meeting up to members, because I am aware that there may well be differences of opinion that need to be aired and addressed. However, that is my take on it.

Mr D McIlveen:

Broadly speaking, I agree with what you are saying, but it possibly overcomplicates the issue slightly. We are quite lazy about language in this country, and in the UK in general, because it is just presumed that the whole world speaks English. It is only when we travel and go into an ice-cream shop in Spain, where the person working behind the counter can in three languages tell all the tourists the flavours that they are looking at, that our eyes are opened to the untapped potential of broadening languages. This is a good-news story, and we should put our weight behind it.

Professor Ó Corráin:

That is a very important point. The other important point is that it has been clearly demonstrated in research that learning another language and bilingualism, or even trilingualism, are very important for the cognitive and intellectual development of the individual's mind. We should be very worried about that deficit in our education system and the development of our children, because it is important to realise that it is not only about the obvious economic importance of

languages and trade tourism but personal and intellectual development. The Chairperson also indicated the importance of cultural understanding with not only the rest of the world but internally in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK.

The Chairperson:

I studied German, as I mentioned to Professor Ó Dochartaigh, and I do not think that I was one of his greatest successes, because, any time that I went to Germany, they all insisted on practising their English on me. When most of our trading connections are with people who speak English, we have not quite won the battle of why languages should be of interest. I know that you will know this already, but languages are not given the priority in our education system that they might once have been given. I think that that is because people say, “We are always watching American movies.” Therefore, an argument needs to be made that says that there are greater things, such as the cognitive abilities that you are talking about and also even the cultural aspects.

We would be interested to find out how we can help you to do that. You have put your report into the Department of Education, but when it is released perhaps you will consider bringing it to the Committee.

Professor Ó Corráin:

We can send you a draft copy.

Professor Ó Dochartaigh:

You are right when you say that so many people that you engage with internationally can speak English. There is no arguing with that. However, there are different levels at which they speak English. There is clear evidence of the ability to clinch deals, even though they might speak great English, by being able to speak to people in their own language. One University of Ulster graduate, Suzanne Hill, who is also the honorary consul of Slovenia, works in Belfast and has a company that advises companies on export. She addressed our students last year and spoke about how she was advising a company from here in negotiations in Texas. It was not even in country that speaks a foreign language — well, it was Texas, so perhaps. *[Laughter.]* Although the CEO of the company that the company from here was negotiating with had brilliant English, she realised that it was not his first language. Something in her linguistic ear picked up on that fact. She realised that he did not just have a Hispanic surname but was a native Spanish speaker. During the break, she started speaking to him in Spanish. The 10-minute break became a 45-

minute break, then they came back, and, within 10 minutes, the deal was clinched for Northern Ireland. Afterwards, he explicitly said that it was because she spoke to him in Spanish, which put him at ease.

As the linguistic experts will say, you can guarantee that, of all of the people who have learnt English as a second language, even if they have learnt it really well, what they are saying to you in your language is not the same as what they are thinking in their own. Very few of them get to that really high level of genuine bilingualism, and when you can tap into their innermost feelings by speaking to them in their own language, you create a sense of trust and engagement that is more likely to clinch the deal for you. I think that that is very important.

The second point was about the habit of the English-speaking world in general and our failure to engage with other languages. That does not just apply here, on this island, the UK or wherever but throughout the English-speaking world. Languages have been severely neglected throughout the UK for a number of years now. Government policy has been terrible. There are emerging signs that politicians are beginning to realise that. Michael Gove has been talking about it recently, while, in Dublin, the Royal Irish Academy has just launched a language strategy.

Until very recently, I was arguing that Northern Ireland could give itself a head start on these islands by having a pool of well-skilled graduates in languages and people with language skills. Other countries are beginning to realise that as well, so if we do not do it, we may end up being left behind when it comes to attracting foreign investment and having a pool of skilled graduates. I totally endorse what you are saying, Chairperson.

Mr McElduff:

The scale of the challenge was brought home to me by a meeting that I had with the current Irish ambassador in Luxembourg, who was previously the first secretary in the Irish embassy in China. He said that there was a world map on his office wall that did not have the island of Ireland on it. I want to put that down as a marker.

Mr Buchanan:

The Confucius Institute is a good-news story, given the business potential that there is. You have classes for students, but how do you propose to open the institute up to businesses? For instance, businesspeople across Northern Ireland may no longer be at college, but they may have a desire

to expand their business and do business in China, and, in order to do that, they need to get a grasp of the language. Are any night classes proposed? Can something be done through some computer system? Are there any proposals to broaden the institute's function? For instance, I think that the further education college in Omagh could facilitate it if the demand was there. How do you propose to do all of that and broaden it out so that the institute is beneficial to businesses right across Northern Ireland, away out in the west as well as in Belfast?

Professor Ó Dochartaigh:

I will throw that over to David, but I will say that, when I was working late last night, I was corresponding with Michael McAlister of the South West College, who was inquiring about the possibility of Chinese courses for there.

Dr Barr:

I think that that is a very valid point. We have great intentions, and we have already been engaging with that. We have instigated a number of evening classes. There is a very successful diploma in Irish, classes for which run in the evening. In the past number of years, a Chinese diploma has been undertaken on the Belfast campus of the university. We are intending to roll that out further, including through working with colleagues in the Ulster Business School at the university to offer those types of short courses for language proficiency. My long-term intention is to have all our short language courses mapped into a European framework qualification for languages. That will allow business workers to come to the university to undertake short courses. Those courses will form part of a framework, and by doing, say, two units in that framework; you will get a European-recognised qualification in languages. Obviously, the more units that you do, the further up the qualification ladder you go. That is our main intention.

Mr Buchanan:

In what time frame do you think that will be rolled out?

Dr Barr:

I will meet representatives from the European framework organisation next week with a view to starting it in the next academic year.

Professor Ó Corráin:

One recommendation in the languages strategy is to encourage businesses to carry out audits of

the language competence that they have. It also recommends that Departments take the lead in that area to determine, by means of audit; precisely what language skills are in their Department. Once we know that, we can attempt to address any deficit.

Mrs Overend:

I just want to add that I have been sold on the Confucius Institute. As you said, it is about getting that message across to government officials. I wonder whether it would be beneficial for those companies that may have had dealings with China and have talked about or realised the importance not just of the language barrier but of the whole way of doing business. Perhaps if government officials were to hear representations from those companies, it would be beneficial and would sell the idea to them more. I am not just speaking from a personal point of view, but, as you know, China is one of the largest consumers of pork —

The Chairperson:

Do you need to declare an interest?

Mrs Overend:

I had better declare an interest. I just wanted to get mid-Ulster in.

Professor Ó Dochartaigh:

That is a fair point, Chairperson, because one of Northern Ireland's strengths is its agricultural sector. For Northern Ireland, which has a population of 1.8 million people, to start trying to think about supplying China through its agricultural sector, that would be a drop in the ocean. However, you can try to strategise around that. For example, everybody in China knows that Japanese beef is the best beef. Producers get 10 times the price that they would get if they were producing run-of-the-mill beef. Now, we could start in Zhejiang province, which has a population of 60 million, and aim to take the top end of the market with Northern Irish agricultural produce. Our partner university there has connections in business, and so on, so there is plenty of potential there.

The Chairperson:

I am sorry to cut you short, Pól, because you and Sandra make a really good point, which I had not considered. However, the purpose of the briefing was to talk about the Confucius Institute itself, although we have obviously widened that out into the general issue of language. I think

that you should take from that that there is an interest from my colleagues in the language strategy, which needs to be balanced. It needs to have a rationale as to why we would want to go and do it, but I think that the argument will stand up if we get the chance to make it.

What I suggest, subject to my colleagues' agreement, is that, whatever niceties that you have to sort out with your paper with the Department of Education, because I do not want to stand on its toes, I would like there to be an opportunity for you to talk to us about the language strategy in totality, taking on board the points that Sammy, Sandra and others have raised. It is interesting for those of us who may not have studied languages so much. Is there any hope for us or is it all just for people who have more agile minds? You might consider that there is an offer here. We like to take the Committee out, and, when we go up to the University of Ulster, that is an area that we might look at. You will have to get Dan McGinn to return my calls from time to time.

Professor Ó Dochartaigh:

He is sitting down the back.

The Chairperson:

I know that he is. I would be interested to see how we can do that. Some issues are quite challenging, internally and perhaps externally, but when you work through them, I think that we have sufficient competence to come up with a worthwhile strategy. We would like to see whether you can convince us of that. Like Sandra, just by the way that you have handled the thing with the Confucius Institute; I am convinced that it would be a good thing.

Professor Ó Corráin:

Do you want to wait for the all-singing, all-dancing and bells-attached thing to be published by the Department of Education, which should not be too long from now, or do you wish to look at a draft?

The Chairperson:

We are content for you and the Committee Clerk to work that out. We do not want to stand on your toes. I do not think that the issue resides just in education. I agree with the point that Sandra made about business and agriculture, and you may want to come back to us on some of the points that Tom raised. There is an issue here that we need to have a look at.

Mr Douglas:

I mentioned Terry Cross and Delta Packaging in west Belfast. I know two other similar businesses, one of which is in Lisburn and the other is in east Belfast. Have you a website or if they want to contact you?

Professor Ó Dochartaigh:

They should e-mail me.

The Chairperson:

Are you based in Coleraine?

Professor Ó Dochartaigh:

Our undergraduate language courses are based in Coleraine. The Confucius Institute will have offices there and in York Street.

The Chairperson:

Are members content to go to Coleraine at some stage to look at that?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

We will look at that and see how we can do it.

Gentlemen, thank you all very much. I am sorry that the session was a little rushed, but the trouble is that when people get enthusiastic, they want to ask more questions.

Professor Ó Dochartaigh:

Thank you, Chairperson. The one thing that I will sign off with is that we have commissioned a Chinese translation of “Keep her lit”. *[Laughter.]*