



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Careers Education, Information,
Advice and Guidance in Northern Ireland:
Colleges Northern Ireland

5 December 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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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 David Hilditch
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr Pat Ramsey

Witnesses:

Mr Justin Edwards	Colleges Northern Ireland
Mr Gerard Campbell	Colleges Northern Ireland
Mr Les Myers	Colleges Northern Ireland
Mr David Smith	Colleges Northern Ireland

The Chairperson: I invite Colleges Northern Ireland to the table. I remind Committee members that the evidence session is being recorded by Hansard.

You said that there will be a bit of repetition, but perhaps that is to be expected. We are interested in finding out what needs to be done, and we want a dialogue rather than the usual presentation. Gerry, will you introduce the team?

Mr Gerard Campbell (Colleges Northern Ireland): I am the chief executive of Colleges Northern Ireland. You have met Justin Edwards from Belfast Metropolitan College. We also have Les Myers, who is the senior careers manager in the North West Regional College, and David Smith, who is the learning director in the South Eastern Regional College (SERC).

You will be pleased to hear, Chair, that we will not go through any detailed pre-submission but will use the opportunity for a question-and-answer session. Some of the issues that Justin and Paul O'Connor emphasised in their presentation and question-and-answer session are issues that we will aim to get into dialogue about with the Committee now. That is the process that we suggest.

The Chairperson: Excellent. We will go straight into questions.

Mr P Ramsey: Presumably, Colleges Northern Ireland has a very consistent approach to careers, and I am genuinely keen to hear about its formal approach to the primary and post-primary sectors. Is it consistent throughout all the areas? Where can we improve to try to attract more younger people? The Committee looked very extensively at that during the people not in education, employment or training (NEET) inquiry and made very serious recommendations. We know that colleges in Northern

Ireland play a huge and vital role in ensuring that young people are not NEET, but we also have to ensure that, at a younger age, they go down the right path when they leave school. Therefore, what is your approach to the primary and post-primary sectors? Is that linked to the career guidance approach of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL)?

Mr Gerard Campbell: I will kick off, Pat. There is a reasonably consistent approach across the six colleges. The journey that they have been on over the past five to six years after being merged into the six regional colleges means that there is a lot more consistency of approach in how they engage with the primary and post-primary sectors.

Justin mentioned the entitlement framework in his earlier question-and-answer session and the danger with funding being reduced for schools, particularly where we have made some real progress over the past number of years. We have to engage with young people in the cohort between the ages of 14 and 16 and give them the opportunity to experience what a vocational pathway means. They get the opportunity to engage in the colleges, use the world-class facilities and engage with lecturers who have built up that business experience. That is probably stronger in some colleges than it is in others, and some of my colleagues will come in on that point. The consistency of approach is important, and, at the moment, there is no seamless transition of careers advice through from schools to colleges, to DEL's Careers Service, to employers and to universities. Justin gave the example of Skills Development Scotland, and we now need a one-stop shop for the individual, whether that be somebody from a disadvantaged background at the age of 14 or 15 or somebody who is thinking about going into university or on to a foundation degree programme, so that he or she can see the real opportunities out there and how those link to employability.

Mr David Smith (Colleges Northern Ireland): There is a real issue around colleges being seen to poach students. Schools might be nervous about inviting in colleges to talk about vocational options, and that is understandable. If we are talking about pupils aged 14 or younger, perhaps what all those who have opportunities, routes and qualifications to offer need to do is say honestly what those routes are, where they lead and how many people get jobs. For some people, that might be through schools. For others, it might be training organisations. For others, it is colleges. However, we have to do it honestly.

Mr Justin Edwards (Colleges Northern Ireland): I will try to avoid reiterating what I said earlier. There is an obsession with qualifications. Qualifications are not the endgame. The endgame is employment and opportunities. What we have to do is get careers advice in all its guises — be it from us, Careers Service or what happens in schools — to start to look at the labour market intelligence and filter that through to ask what the right qualifications are that lead to those career opportunities in the current marketplace. I have already spoken about Skills Development Scotland, and we have looked at the Australian system, with the tapes. Australia is very tied into developing qualifications for local industry and employment needs. The system is seen not as the conduit to qualifications but the conduit to employment. The careers advice is in and around that. There is something to be said for having in that space a strategic tie-up between all the relevant bodies to think more creatively.

The Chairperson: The danger, Justin, in coming up with ideas is that people will always come along and ask you more questions about them. What we really look for in a submission is what you would want us to do. Nowhere in the paper have you mentioned the Australian set-up. The opportunity is here for you to tell us not what should be done but how we should go about doing that. What changes do we have to make? What are the roadblocks? Be brutally honest. There is a crisis out there, particularly for our young people, and our pontificating is not going to fix it. We need to know what we have to do.

Pat, I am quite happy for you to come back in, but Jim has indicated that he would like to speak. I will bring you back in in a moment. Given that we have a diversity of people in front of us, I am quite happy to have an interactive discussion.

Mr Allister: I want to explore with you whether kids are falling through the cracks between the careers advice schools provide and what the colleges provide. I am thinking in particular of the interplay between colleges and schools. You mentioned the fact that sometimes there is a stand-offishness, because schools suspect that it might be about poaching kids. I think that we all know that some schools are better than others at providing careers advice. You have an outreach to schools. You mentioned in your earlier evidence that 40 schools are coming in. What about the schools that are not responding? Are those schools more than self-sufficient in their careers provision or are they falling

below expectation levels and no one is picking them up and forcing them up? Is there a problem there? If so, how can it be addressed?

Mr Les Myers (Colleges Northern Ireland): Our linkage with schools is, in fact, by invitation. We offer our services. We offer information. It is the prerogative of the school either to take up that offer or not take it up.

Mr Allister: Therefore, the school that is lackadaisical about it does not go looking for help or co-operation. It simply stagnates. The 40 schools that engage get better, because there is interplay and co-operation. We must have a sector out there that is stagnating and not doing all that it should be.

Mr Myers: There is also a refinement of that issue. We can have access to sectors of pupils in schools but not access across the continuum of students. The likelihood of our careers advisers and marketing people having access to those students who have the potential of remaining in A-level streams in a school is drastically reduced, because they are the students who will stay on and be fed into the A-level streams in schools. There is a core issue about young people of all abilities having open and free access to the progression routes that further education colleges offer.

Mr Edwards: To return to the specific example of the 40 schools, that is the first example of every school in the greater Belfast area engaging with us simultaneously on a particular activity. That activity was driven by the Belfast Education and Library Board, which I believe had a small amount of funding available to the area learning communities (ALCs) to release science teachers for continuous professional development (CPD) so that they could become more aware of what skills industry needs.

I attended the meeting at which that proposal was presented to the ALCs. The question was put, "That seems very useful, but what do we do? What is the CPD activity?" At that point, I stepped in and said, "Look, this is the CPD activity that we would like to offer: come and talk to employers in, at and around school." Therefore, if the funding is on the right scale and attached to an activity that really develops understanding, not just among careers teachers but schoolteachers, schools will participate.

To come back to the point that David made in his earlier answer, we have difficulty where schools sometimes think about the 16-plus provision and the level 3 provision and are driven by numbers. They sometimes do not consider colleges, because we are perceived to be in a competitive environment. To my way of thinking, we are not in a competitive environment. Let us just get out all the facts and information and let the learner make the choice. If we do not give learners all the information, we do them a disservice.

Mr Allister: You can understand, however, why a school, to which numbers are important for its viability, would be cagey about a process that could see a haemorrhage of their numbers.

Mr Edwards: Yes, in the same respect as a further education (FE) college could —

Mr Allister: Well, does it? Is it a two-way process?

Mr Edwards: In some cases, yes. You know —

Mr Allister: Predominantly, is it a one-way process?

Mr Edwards: In half of cases, engagement is very good, and in the other half, it is not. I think that the —

Mr Allister: No, I mean as regards student flow.

Mr Edwards: Is it in a one-way direction?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr Edwards: The entitlement framework provides a percentage, but a smaller percentage, predominantly. Therefore, yes, it is a one-way flow.

Mr Gerard Campbell: It is also an issue across Northern Ireland that some schools just do not engage, and there would probably be resistance to engaging with FE colleges.

Mr Allister: That is where my question started. As a consequence, are pupils being failed in that regard, or might it be that the provision is adequate for them?

Mr Gerard Campbell: What happens is that, at age 16, they eventually make their way through to one of the regional colleges anyway. At that stage, they might have missed the opportunity —

Mr Allister: They do not stay where they are, you mean?

Mr Gerard Campbell: Yes, they might have missed the opportunity for the previous two years to have had a taster and examples of different vocational pathways, because that linkage has lost.

This often works well in practice where personal relationships have built up between senior staff and academic staff in the colleges and schools. There is, however, a non-commitment in some areas and actual resistance.

Mr Allister: That is because of that tension between the two sectors?

Mr Gerard Campbell: Yes.

Mr Allister: If that is to be resolved, how should it be?

Mr Gerard Campbell: I think that DEL and the Department of Education between them must take this by the scruff of the neck and work it out. Ultimately, the young people are being failed. This is a major issue. Colleges —

Mr Allister: How do you take it by the scruff of the neck?

Mr Gerard Campbell: I think that the Departments and their two Ministers need to work together for the good of young people.

Mr Allister: Are you moving toward compelling schools and colleges to co-operate on careers?

Mr Edwards: I think that that is a potential solution.

The Chairperson: You could pick up on the fact, as you do in your paper, that you want an independent careers service.

Mr McElduff: Chair, just to add to that: is there to be a "new legal duty"?

Mr Gerard Campbell: That is the road that is being gone down in England.

The Chairperson: That is the English model, but there is an issue here. Sorry, Jim —

Mr Allister: No, I was just teasing that out a wee bit.

The Chairperson: There definitely is an issue. You will think that I am chiding you, but I repeat that there is no point in sending me through papers that give me the same old guff about what you do and how many people you have got. If there are issues, we need to get them on the record so that we can sit and talk about them. That is why I invite you to write back. I would say the same thing to the universities if they were listening. I want real input. I do not want to read, "Here is what we are doing. It is all going terribly well, and if you ask us, you will not be able to get us wrong." I want to know what the issues are —

Mr Allister: We have the monopoly on guff.

The Chairperson: Exactly. *[Laughter.]* I am glad that you could come in after 'The Nolan Show'. We all had to listen to you on the way in.

Mr P Ramsey: For half an hour. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Allister: There is always a knob.

The Chairperson: You are right, and most of us used it, but anyway.

The point is that we see you as professionals. We see that there are certain elephants in the room that are not being tackled. I have to say to you that many of our top schools will not look at FE colleges or the other qualifications that you offer as suitable for all but their weakest pupils. We need to address that. You need to say it, get back in and do it.

Equally, there will be people for whom an academic qualification is absolutely the right way to go, and we need to recognise that as well. A restructuring is needed. We cannot be all things to all people. It is just too complicated to manage.

Mr McElduff: To be honest, I have a question in the area of the "legal duty". I think that it was covered. Where was the implied criticism? What is not working and where is the resistance, if it needs a "legal duty"?

The Chairperson: In the English bit, it did say —

Mr Smith: Perhaps the question is this: what is the point of careers advice? What are we trying to do? Are we trying to get people in to fill courses and classrooms? Are we trying to get them to get jobs, raise their hopes or make them more positive and look at things that perhaps they would not have considered? What is the purpose? Can we all agree what it is about? It is about not just qualifications and courses but jobs and raising esteem. How do we do it? Ask us, or any education provider, whether we know where all students go, what job they get if they get a job and how much they are getting paid. We know a lot, but we do not know the detail. To be able to answer that, and to say it to young people and parents, would take us a long way. That is my tuppence worth.

Mr Allister: Is that not monitored?

The Chairperson: Not completely.

Mr P Ramsey: It is the same as NEETs.

Mr Edwards: Chair, you made a valid point about grammar schools and selection: the idea of providing, at 16 years, information for high performers. However, beyond 16 — at 18 years — the colleges play another role, which is the provision of foundation degrees. In some cases, we hope that in future, we may be piloting higher education apprenticeships.

However, 60% of my applications for higher education come in before the summer, and then I get the other 40%, the late applications, which come in in August. That 40% is often young people who have just missed university entrance by one or two grades. They come from an A-level school provider and had hoped to get into university. They come to me looking for alternatives, whether foundation degrees or higher national diplomas (HNDs). Often, they do not understand because the careers advice was not given to them at 16 and 18, even though they were high performers, that those are other routes, and two-year routes. They can perhaps do their third year BSc or a two-year top-up with the University of Ulster or Queen's anyway. Therefore, we are actually missing another opportunity with those grammar schools. It is not just about 16 but about 18.

The Chairperson: I might say to you that a lot of the discussion about careers takes place too late. I think that you ought to be engaging with the earlier cohorts, even potentially in primary school. You need to get it into people's minds that there are different issues here. There is an issue about how we make that happen.

Certainly, in the holistic bit, someone needs to be thinking about the endgame. It is not just about qualifications — forgive me, but I forget who said that. It is about getting a job. Therefore, you need to know where the jobs are, and the qualifications are then a means to an end of getting that particular job. In the early stages, when people have still not made up their mind, that is the time when you should start to influence them. Colleges and universities have the resources to go and do that, and

they should. The point I am trying to make here is that it is not about doing this HND or that BSc. Someone has to say, "This is the job that you might be looking at in the future, and, potentially, that fits in with the Government's economic plan." I am not trying to stop people who want to do fine art from doing that. If people have a vocation, we should give them the opportunity to follow their convictions. However, in general, when most people are casting around and saying, "I can do anything", someone needs to tell them the right way to go about it. We need to do more in that area, whether it is through a fully independent careers service or whether it is through learned professions, colleges and universities getting deeper and saying, "This is part of our corporate responsibility. It is not about us; it is about them." We need to address that issue.

Mr P Ramsey: I chair the all-party group on learning disability, and I saw a trigger about that in the presentation from the North West Regional College. The big concern, particularly among parents of children with learning disabilities, is the transition from school, and, at the minute, only one in four of those with learning disabilities secures employment. Could we do better work, particularly with parents, in guiding and steering them on a proper course?

Mr Myers: I can only speak about the North West Regional College, but we are very fortunate in that we have excellent links through the Western Education and Library Board transition group and transition manager. Periodically throughout the year, at key points, we meet with a group of parents and young people to advise them and highlight the availability of qualifications and progression routes and where those progression routes lead. In general, careers advice sometimes works in reverse: we look at a profession, and then look at the routes that lead to it and bring it back to where the young person is at. That grounds it in reality. We have an excellent relationship with the young people with learning difficulties and special needs.

Mr P Ramsey: Is that done formally with the special needs schools or —

Mr Myers: Yes, and it is managed by the transitions officer, who operates on an area basis between the different schools. That is watertight and is a positive situation.

The Chairperson: I want to pick up on a couple of points from the papers. Point 9 in your submission says:

"Colleges NI recognise that employers do not believe that young people are in a position to make informed choices ... A recent CBI survey indicated that only 4% of businesses are confident careers advice is good enough and that 72% think that advice must improve."

Will you expand on that? How bad is the situation?

Mr Myers: On the student's transition from the secondary sector to us, we are now operating, in the FE sector, a semesterised system, and we engage in pre-course enrolment advice and guidance to find out whether the young person who has applied for a course has the correct information about where that course will lead. That, hopefully, will cement the aspiration with the progression. We often find that that is not true. The information that the young person comes in with to make good career decisions in vocational areas is sometimes very weak, and we have to ensure that we open up the broad panorama of courses that is available to them and enable them to make secondary choices. The key document that underpins that is 'Preparing for Success', which is a shared document between DEL and the Department of Education. We would have liked that document to be revised earlier so that more information on careers advice and guidance was put in earlier in a concrete way so that, when they come to make those decisions at transition points, they are better informed about the range of options.

The Chairperson: We will get a look at that paper. The key point is this: is there a problem? We talked earlier about schools, but to fix any situation, you first have to admit that something needs fixed. So, the statement that you make there is fairly stark. I would like any subsequent paper that you may wish to put forward to identify what you see as the problems with careers advice and the prospective solutions. I do not mean a wish list that amounts to "We should all co-operate". I want to see something that we should actually do. Obviously, there might have to be a bit of negotiation on that, but, first, it is about establishing that Colleges NI agrees — it is in your paper — with the statement from industry that careers advice is not up to the mark. I am getting nods on that.

A couple of other points also came up on this. At point 17, your paper states that, generally, as regards careers education, information, advice and guidance:

"provision is good, well managed and resourced".

However, we are also saying that we are not doing a great job in the totality, on the careers bit. So, I suppose that it is saying that you are great but everybody else is rubbish, which is never a great argument to put forward. We need to be real about this.

One of the key points that you brought out in your submission is:

"Recording of progression data post 16 ... is currently piecemeal and difficult to co-ordinate accurately".

Mr Smith: When a student leaves where do they go? Who is following up? What is their destination? What jobs are they securing? The collection of that data is piecemeal, in my opinion. We are all responsible for that, and that responsibility goes beyond the colleges as well, but I think that it is piecemeal.

The Chairperson: So we need to see how we might practically go about that.

Another point of concern raised in that part of your submission is the:

"Inconsistency of service from DEL careers service depending on area and staff."

Mr Gerard Campbell: Again, the service is not consistent across the country. It sometimes really depends on the individual and the work that that person does in developing and building good links with schools and FE colleges. It is just not consistent right across the piece.

The Chairperson: How would we go about fixing that?

Mr Gerard Campbell: At the end of the day, we need to communicate better and more strongly with DEL. There needs to be a frank conversation. That must be part of the overall development of the Careers Service, right across the piece. This is one small aspect, albeit an important one, but there needs to be further and stronger conversations between the colleges and DEL about how to link in with the careers and education advice and guidance that is happening in the colleges. We must also try to link in the role that DEL is playing. It is just not consistent across the piece.

The Chairperson: I agree. I think that we need to bring it to the attention of the Department for its comment. We need to work out a mechanism whereby your properly constructed feedback is included along with that of all stakeholders. A peer review does nobody any harm.

Your submission goes on to state:

"Recent research commissioned by the UK College body"

indicates a lack of:

"awareness of vocational options among children studying for their GCSE's at a UK level – with 74% unable to name NVQ's, 81% unable to name BTECs, and 93% unable to name Apprenticeships as post-GCSE options".

Is that likely to be similar in Northern Ireland?

Mr Edwards: I gave the example earlier of parents and young children coming to me at a very later entry stage, completely unaware of the options in both higher and further education, including those for training and apprenticeships. The models that we have are not widely known, despite the best efforts of colleges to promote them through schools. The DEL Careers Service does provide that information, but it is a matter of making sure that it all joins up. So, it comes back to the same issue of joining that together and looking at the model in Scotland, where all that information is found in one portal and you can make choices based on what is presented to you.

The Chairperson: OK. I am just saying that I think that there is an issue there, and we might send a letter to the Committee for Education, drawing the issue to its attention and asking what processes are in place in schools to tackle the issue.

I note the comment on Ofsted. Colleagues will have noted that Ofsted is doing a thematic review of careers guidance for the British Government. It will report in the summer of 2013. We will find out what the status of that is and find out how it is going.

There is a key point at paragraph 32:

"Parents and carers can have the most influence on young people and it is essential that schools provide real opportunities for parents to understand all progression options."

What steps are the colleges taking to engage with parents? The point was raised already by Pat. From a general point of view, parents are the people who influence pupils. Good teachers do as well, I suppose, but parents are there. Is there any coherent plan from the colleges to engage with parents?

Mr Smith: We invite parents in and try to brief them. That is after their son or daughter has made the decision to join a course. Prior to that, probably most young people come in with a parent or guardian. We try to brief them about what all these qualifications are about and what they mean. After they have joined, early in the first term, we write to them all and ask them to come in. We try to explain to them that it is different from school. We stress that you are able to ask questions and to come and say, "What is really happening to my son or daughter? What are all these bits and pieces of the college about? How are we getting on? What if I have a problem? And what if I am not sure that this is the right course for my son or daughter; what happens then?" We try to raise awareness that there are opportunities to change your mind. They made a big leap at 16, and for many of them that is difficult. We tell them what support we have available. We try to talk to parents and make FE less strange to them. They are the taxpayers who are paying for it.

The Chairperson: There are two specific things that I am interested in bringing up. I am sure that colleagues will come up with others. First of all, you might need to find an alternative way of getting to parents, not just through the schools. You could use the community campus. You should also look at the prospects for the youth employment scheme (YES) project. The colleges should be hosting and presenting the YES programme and encouraging parents to attend. It does not have to be in the college. We need to talk to people about something else. As Justin said earlier, when you get them in the door, you end up giving careers advice. You need to be looking at a different way to get at your target audience. You should look for such ways.

Secondly, Justin is doing his thing for the schools. David, what is the South Eastern Regional College going to do to reach all the schools in its area? Can you do something similar?

Mr Smith: Absolutely. We work with over 40 schools in our area. We have STEM events for young students and pupils to sample. There is a point that we need to take on board, and it is about primary schools. We are working well with secondary and grammar schools, but that is an area in which we have a lot more to do.

The Chairperson: I do not want to go on too long because my colleagues are here, even though I have given them opportunities to come in if they want to. There are some aspects on which I would like you to come back with proactive suggestions. You mentioned STEM at item 41. That is interesting. You have some great nuggets in the middle of all the waffle. I could have done away with 52 of these things, but at item 41 you say:

"There is some evidence of disconnect between the many different stakeholders and bodies offering STEM related CIEAG."

I agree with that. You have everyone from Sentinus Young Innovators to BT Young Scientist — this, that and the other. So, who is going to do the work for me and tell me, "Here is what is going on, and here is how you unify it."?

Mr Edwards: Chair, you have made the point about us coming back with some ideas. As regards STEM, it is about working more collectively, as we are doing with the schools. It is also about working more collectively with the universities, in particular, with regard to engineering and science pathways, and it is about bringing us together around industry bodies. I think that industry bodies have a clear role to play here as well: the likes of Momentum, which deals with IT. It is about bringing us together to make sure that the careers advice is a focused session that gives all the information and facts.

The Chairperson: Justin, I was at the science park's Christmas lecture, which was by Warner Chilcott, Northern Ireland's first billion-dollar company. It was fantastic — I was almost going to go back to chemistry. It is doing its bit on its own. We are not co-ordinating the really good bit that comes back in. I would like to see a way in which you, amongst others, co-ordinate that approach.

So, I have given you a number of things to think about. I have one last question on your submission, for information. It states that the electronic individual learning plan (EILP) is conceptually excellent but is, in operation, limited. It mentions SkillCheckLive and PathfinderLive. Does anybody want to tell me what those are?

Mr Edwards: The colleges have a combined scheme called the electronic individual learning plan. It is an online web portal. It has some functionality in engaging learners in discussing their career objectives, setting out where they are in their learning and what they want to do in the future. That feeds back into what the tutors and colleges are doing. Where we need to go with that is to link it back to outside data sources, so that the data from the labour market is coming back. That goes back to the point I made earlier about what is happening in Scotland, and so on. That data is coming back so that they are making better informed choices about employment opportunities. The Department required all colleges to adopt the EILP system.

The Chairperson: Does anybody use it?

Mr Edwards: It is used to a very good extent across the colleges. It has been used by tutors, and lots of training has rolled out of it. It is now about enhancing the functionality and taking the system that we step forward.

The Chairperson: I have another important submission to hear, and I want to give time to that, because it is from a school. Some points were made that you may wish to reflect upon — those will be in the Hansard report — about what you want and who is going to come back and tell us what really must be done. I stress that the opportunity is there for you to get things moving.

A couple of colleges made individual submissions. I want to touch on one or two issues. The Southern Regional College (SRC) is not here, but I am quite interested in a couple of things that it did. Presumably you all do this, but it talked about student surveys. Does every college survey students on what they think of the careers advice? It would be quite nice if you could bring that together and let us see what they say, rather than doing things piecemeal. I note, and think it particularly important, that the one thing the colleges have got, perhaps over and above schools and universities, is the ease at which they put students. I am sure that that is the case for all of you. I do think that students need someone who they can go and have a chat with, rather than someone who sits there and tells them the information. We should emphasise that.

To conclude, the SRC says:

"Throughout the year student focus groups ... are conducted on all campuses".

Do all colleges have student focus groups?

Mr Edwards: We all have the same process of self-evaluation, which requires focus groups —

The Chairperson: And two learner surveys annually, one conducted by the equality unit and the second by an independent organisation?

Mr Edwards: All colleges do something similar to that.

The Chairperson: We might get a combined response from the colleges on that.

Finally, do you do anything with regard to — I do not suppose you would call it personality testing — aptitude testing? Some recruitment people do that. Has anybody ever considered trying to work out, in a systematic way, what students are good at and what they are maybe not so good at?

Mr Smith: After Christmas, we will be piloting that with 300 students to try to look at how their attitudes and aptitudes might link to possible careers. On the other side of that, we are going to try to look at similar software for our staff to see what sort of skills and behaviours staff have that might help them with career progression. We are going to pilot that next year to see whether that is something we could roll out to help new students make decisions next summer. If they go through that online assessment, it will open doors for them and show that they may be more suited to certain career pathways than others.

The Chairperson: There are certain things that you are doing, on which I would like the colleges to come together. You mentioned in your submission the destination research and the distance travelled by SERC students. When will that research be available?

Mr Smith: We know at this stage that, of the students who finished last year, 3% did not secure employment. We have done that at a high level. We still have work to do on the bit about actual occupations and jobs.

The Chairperson: The thing is that they may just get moved down the chain to somewhere else. I would really like some collective information from the colleges. I noted in your submission, David, that the OFSTED report found that only 19% were successful in getting a job. If your whole business is about giving people skills to get a job, I want to know how successful you are. You ought to be able to provide me with that information.

Mr Myers: I can, in fact. Those figures are readily available. I skimmed them the other evening, in preparation for the meeting. We come in at 18%.

The Chairperson: Eighteen per cent?

Mr Myers: Of the students who have been in transition — in other words, moved out of the college last year — 18% went into employment.

The Chairperson: I know I have given you a lot of work to do, but there is real information that we can get. I want evidence-backed decision-making on careers advice. I want to know what we have to do to fix it. I need to know what the roadblocks are. When we come back with this report, we will have to have some really well-argued cases before we can go and change things. The Committee is determined to make changes. This is not about saying, "Everything is OK." This is about saying, "We need to do things better."

I am afraid, Lesley, that your submission was last in the list, but I did read it. I do not know whether David is aware of this, but I attended the Get the Edge event at the Lisburn campus of the South Eastern Regional College. Is that what it is called, David?

Mr Smith: Yes.

The Chairperson: That was a brilliant piece of work about trying to give people, through competition, the soft skills to present themselves. It is not just about qualifications. It is about how you are as a person and your employability. The Committee is going to visit the college to see that work because I was impressed by it. I am interested to know whether you think that there are other softer skills that we ought to be teaching and how the colleges would go about doing that.

Mr Edwards: One scheme operating in all our colleges, as the Committee is probably aware, is the careers academy. The careers academy invites 16- to 18-year-olds to participate in industry-relevant experience of paid summer internships linked to level 3 qualifications. Having seen groups of students pass through that programme, which requires them to enter the workplace and understand what it means to be part of a multidisciplinary team, I know that it is a very effective programme. The programme has great links to industry. We need to develop it further in all the areas that the colleges currently offer. There are other programmes like that one, such as the Deloitte WorkSkills programme and Get the Edge, which you talked about. All those programmes are about the softer skills and what

it means to be in the workplace. Colleges effectively replicate those programmes, even if they do not call them by the same name.

The Chairperson: It is too diverse. It is a bit like careers advice in general.

Mr McElduff: I have just a very brief question, to take this in a different direction. Is there an awareness in regional colleges of opportunities now presented by, for example, the Confucius Institute at the University of Ulster? Is any collaborative work taking place to ensure that our students are aware of entrepreneurial opportunities?

Mr Edwards: I will take that question, having just come back from China. Our college has a memorandum of understanding with Beijing Polytechnic. Working with them, we have an exchange programme through which we raise awareness. I can tell you that the big shock for me was the ethic and ethos towards entrepreneurship and enterprise in China. I was blown away by where China is in vocational education. Its core programmes and approach to essential skills are not just in maths and English, but maths, English, ICT, physics and chemistry. That is integrated in their core programmes.

We have been talking to the Confucius Institute about getting an exchange programme where we can exchange vocational lecturers between ourselves and China and learn from them about enterprise and growth. At the same time, they want to learn from us about quality education, qualifications and provision, so there is a lot of work going on in the background on that.

Mr McElduff: I want to commend you for that answer. You would think he had sent me a note to say, "Ask about China".

The Chairperson: We do not have time to deal with it, but I want to stress the importance of entrepreneurial activity and personal financial capability. When the Committee went on its study trip, it got figures on the rest of the European Union, and European young people are least likely to consider a self-employed career as an option. They think that it is far too risky, yet all the evidence suggests that our major multinational corporations will not be able to provide the jobs that young people need, which means that they will have to work for themselves. That is an area that you need to look at. It is not just the skills that you will need to enable you to go and work for somebody else; it is the skills that you need to go and work for yourself, and, hopefully, employ somebody else. If Northern Ireland is to get back to where it once was, it needs entrepreneurial activity.

Mr Gerard Campbell: It is also an option that is promoted throughout the six colleges. We do an annual awards ceremony in conjunction with the Federation of Small Businesses, so each of the six colleges promotes entrepreneurial activity and tries to develop that seed in individuals and show them that it is not only about going out and working in a particular organisation, industry or company but about looking at investigating the opportunities —

The Chairperson: I do not know that you give people enough support. I do not think that it is integrated. I look at incubation centres and the mentoring that happens after you leave college or school. It is really difficult for young people to start up their own business, to fill in their income tax returns and to do their VAT returns. We need a total solution. It is at least as major a plank of what the colleges should be delivering as skills for industry.

My colleagues will tell me that I have been quite long-winded in saying to you that youth unemployment and unemployment in general is the single biggest challenge facing Northern Ireland. You are at the front line of trying to work it out, and you had the opportunity to come back and tell us in succinct but well-thought-out processes what we should be doing next on the issues. When you read the Hansard report, not just of your submission but from the universities as well, you will see the themes that have been brought up. On that note, you deserve a break.