



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Careers Education, Information,
Advice and Guidance in Northern Ireland:
DMH Associates Briefing

27 February 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Chris Lyttle
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Dr Deirdre Hughes DMH Associates

The Deputy Chairperson: I welcome Dr Deirdre Hughes, commissioner at the UK Commission for Employment and Skills and chair of the National Careers Council in England. Dr Hughes advises Greater London on its careers advice structures. We are very glad to have you with us today. We will hand over to you to do a presentation and then open the session for the Committee to ask questions.

Dr Deirdre Hughes (DMH Associates): Thank you very much, Deputy Chair. I welcome the opportunity to present evidence to this Committee. By way of introduction, I forwarded a submission to the Committee in association with Professor Jenny Bimrose. I wear a number of different hats in my day job: I am a portfolio worker; I work at the University of Edinburgh, where I research young people's use of information and communication technology (ICT) for career decision-making; I work mainly at the University of Warwick, looking at issues to do with labour market intelligence and career decision-making; I have my own business, DMH Associates; I sit on a number of organisations such as the UK Commission for Employment and Skills; and I have had the privilege of working in Northern Ireland on more than one occasion to look at your careers strategy. I am here today to say that I specialise in careers policy in the UK, the European Union and on an international basis. I have worked in this area for over 25 years. I am from Coleraine, originally. I think that this is a very important topic with regard to the social, economic and educational outcomes for young people in Northern Ireland.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you very much. I will open up the meeting to questions from members.

Mr P Ramsey: Good morning, Deirdre. You are very welcome back to your own patch. I have been reading the notes that you sent. You talk about the importance of improved social partnerships. What do you see as the right model for social partnerships?

My second question is of a similar nature. In your submission, you talk about innovative and creative approaches to careers. We have seen that as well. There has been evidence of it in ICT and the creative industries, but is there anywhere in Scotland and Wales where they are doing a wee bit better than us, or where there is a model of good practice?

Dr Hughes: Your first question was about social partnerships. Findings across the UK, in Europe and further afield show that partnerships are the key to success, particularly when resources are very limited. Also, when you look at an area like careers, you see that it cuts across a range of different sectors: schools; colleges; universities; and community developments. I have looked at a number of different countries. For example, I have just come from Croatia where I have been doing some work. They are looking to do something different, and their model is to build on the jobcentres and ensure that careers services are seen as a community service that is different from having to go to the jobcentre. They are building a cadre of highly qualified careers professionals because they have seen evidence in other places that that can work. That is one particular model.

Looking across the UK, what is happening in England is very different from what is happening in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. It is sometimes known as an England experiment, where the market and the free market is now operating and private sector organisations are coming in. Having looked at a number of systems across the world, I believe that what really makes it effective is where there is a real clarity of purpose as to what the added-value benefits are of coming together and working in the interests of young people and adults. So, for social partnerships, as finances become tighter and tighter, it is really important to look at how the public sector can work effectively with the private sector and the voluntary and community sector. Linked to that, we must find ways to look at new possibilities and having some innovation.

With regard to innovative approaches, I want to put on the record that I have looked at career policy development in Northern Ireland over the past 10 years. I was very much involved in looking at the development of high street resource centres. In Dungannon, I looked at ways in which the provision could be improved for local people, and it was peripatetic.

On an international stage, I have pointed proudly to Northern Ireland, where there are models of really good practice. There is a lot of innovation here, but there is always room for improvement. I have been feeding to Catherine Bell specific examples of innovation. Indeed, there are not many countries where the Minister will come to sit in on a workshop of careers advisers looking at labour market intelligence. It should go on the record that the Minister here has taken a strong interest in that.

With regard to innovation, we have to look at how we involve parents in getting an understanding of the world of work and how it has changed since they were at school, their experiences and their aspirations for their children. Interesting models in Canada look at how parents have been engaged through education in the communities to look at how the world of work has changed and to become more aware of opportunities and reinventing routes into work that are, perhaps, very different from the ones that parents have been familiar with. So, parents are one example. I will give you three, and then I will stop but please do ask me more if it is helpful.

The second innovation, which I saw recently in England, Wales and Scotland, is an initiative whereby employers come in more to schools to give insights into the world of work. There are initiatives called Inspiring the Future and Speakers for Schools where the idea is to have an online matching system where schools can look at having a database of people who are willing to give short talks and introduce children from a very early age to possibilities that may not have occurred to them.

In another example, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) in Northern Ireland, and the equivalent Departments in Scotland and Wales, recently came together to see whether they could gain added value by working closely on labour market intelligence and information, and how they could learn from My World of Work in Scotland and the Careers Wales websites, which are highly innovative — I can say that from an international perspective — in the use of ICT and labour market intelligence to help the man and woman on the street to understand where opportunities are.

Mr P Ramsey: Deirdre, thanks very much. You bring to the table a bit of quality with your experience.

The Deputy Chairperson: Deirdre, you said that there was no shortage of models of good and interesting policies and practices but that the challenge was how best to implement those more widely. Where do you see the gaps in implementing those and what should we be doing to put them out more widely and make better use of the good models and best practices that we have?

Dr Hughes: There is significant scope to learn about good and interesting models of practice in Northern Ireland, across the UK and further afield. A recent development here that I believe is progressive is the careers strategy steering group, which brings DEL, the Department of Education, employers and the higher and further education sector around a table, where they have been getting to know each other and learning about models of interesting practice. The group is very new; I think it has met only twice or possibly three times. I was invited to present to that group. What I learned that day was they were talking to each other about how they do things in a certain way and there was a notion to join together. My one concrete recommendation to strengthen that forum would be to involve more employers, particularly a representation from small and medium-sized enterprises. Gordon Parkes of the Confederation of British Industry is on that group.

As regards ways of sharing good and interesting practice, I believe that your inquiry — it is probably the right time to review the strategy having started the process in 2000 and published it in 2009 — presents a really exciting opportunity to look at the next phase in our strategic development of improving careers education, information, advice and guidance for the people of Northern Ireland. Perhaps the steering group could support the work of the Committee and, indeed, come up with some of the innovation to highlight and showcase good practice. That is at a strategic level.

At a day-to-day level, I think that there is scope to have events that are very much about showcasing. Linking that to a particular strategy, where there is some accountability around showcasing how good and interesting practice is being taken forward, will help to formalise that a little bit more, rather than just leaving it to the goodwill of individuals.

Mr Allister: I want to ask you about one issue that interests me. Who do you think are the main influences on young people's career choices? Is it parents in the home? Is it school? Is it the peer group? Where, in your experience, does the real thrust of influence come from? I think that one needs to know that if you are to try to shape a certain direction in career choices.

Dr Hughes: I absolutely agree. All the international research evidence says that parents are the primary influencer on their children's career aspirations. Schools and teachers play an important role as well, because of the length of time that children spend at school and with their teachers. Their peers would probably come third. Other intermediaries such as careers advisers, etc, would be below the third tier.

Mr Allister: We are trying to improve the careers service that we offer in schools and ancillary places. However, no matter how good we make that, if we do not have an outreach to parents, who are the main influence, we cannot help to direct and shape. Is that right?

Dr Hughes: In looking to the next five years, we — I mean "we" in a collective sense across the UK — have a major job to educate parents in how the world of work has changed. For example, you are going to be looking at apprenticeships in your review. We have to ask how many parents fully understand how apprenticeships work. The opportunities to earn and learn and to be able to develop skills through apprenticeships have changed a lot and continue to change. I think that it is a challenge in resource terms, because there is only a certain amount of finance available to support that work, and there are competing pressures alongside many others.

What we know for sure from the evidence is that there are strategies, particularly in schools and colleges, where parents are involved in connecting to trusted information. They, therefore, know that they are receiving reliable information and that there is an intermediary of some sort who can support them in their decision-making.

I certainly know from the evidence that young people begin to form ideas about their occupational identity between the ages of nine and 13. All the research points to that and to the fact that, by the age of 11, they have begun the process of eliminating jobs perhaps for gender reasons — girls do not do certain sorts of jobs — and that is a major challenge for the economy.

Mr Allister: Just to take you back, are you saying that, even in this multimedia age, it is not, in the main, what kids see on TV or on the internet that directs their careers choices but what they hear in the home?

Dr Hughes: That is a research topic that Dr Kathy Harrison, Dr Sheila Semple and I have been looking at. On the one hand, we can say that, with technological advances and more people using

mobile phones and iPads, that is where more young people are being influenced. Without doubt, young people are influenced by technology; we all are in our everyday lives. However, this is an area that has been under-researched, partly because of the speed at which technology has been introduced.

One of the key points to caution policymakers against is the sense that, if we just put it all online, young people and parents will be able to help themselves, and that will be sufficient. The early research findings suggest that some people have described trying to get careers information from the internet as a bit like drinking water from a fire hose. You can be overwhelmed by the volume of information. That is why we have a careers profession. They are skilled helpers whose job it is to be able to cut through all of that to make the information reliable and easily understood. We have to look at ways of helping to strengthen careers education and the understanding of the world of work through our schooling system and make young people aware of the possibilities that lie ahead.

Mr Allister: In your international studies of how various countries tackle these issues, were there any particular examples of best practice that address the issue of enrolling or enlisting parents to shape the direction of what would be most suitable?

Dr Hughes: Canada would certainly be the area, and Alberta and Ontario in particular.

Mr Allister: How do they do that?

Dr Hughes: Through community involvement. They make use of their schools as community —

Mr Allister: Hubs?

Dr Hughes: — learning environments. Yes. They target parents to come in and find out about the world of work.

From my research and discussions, I have found that most parents will begin by asking where the jobs are and what courses would suit their child best to get the best start in life. One of the challenges is that the technology, the economy and how people live their lives are changing at such a pace.

In many countries across the globe, new models are emerging that try to better understand people's career trajectories and the different directions they go in. I would point the Committee to a range of different examples. In Finland, they have a system in which every school is required to have a careers improvement plan. However, they also survey parents, past pupils and teachers every three years to see how they can improve the provision and where people go to.

In Denmark, it is slightly different, and the Danish department of education believes that it is important to track individuals over time. So, instead of having a system that reports at the end of a young person's schooling on whether they went to university, college or into an apprenticeship or job, in Denmark, they believe that it is important to use ICT and online developments to track where individuals go up to and beyond the age of 25. That helps them to identify particular areas where people are not progressing in the way that was anticipated and feeds into their policy decisions about where to invest some of the resources. I would be very happy to provide you with examples of different international models outside the Committee. The careers strategy steering group may want to look at some different international models of practice and, perhaps, come up with some ideas.

Mr Allister: OK. Thank you.

Ms McGahan: Deirdre, thank you for your presentation. I am interested in the point you made about the careers unit in Dungannon. Dungannon is interesting as it has five post-primary secondary schools and a further education college.

I am the mother of a 16-year old who is at the stage of picking her A levels. She will do her GCSEs in May and June. She has identified a career path in which there is an oversupply of graduates, and I simply cannot make her understand that she should open her mind and maybe look at something else.

I think that teachers have a key role to play in this, but it is not really jumping out at me. Maybe it is because we expect them to be social workers, teachers and careers advisers, which is maybe unfair. Maybe we need a dedicated careers person.

My concern is also around emigration in that we are educating our children for export.

I welcome your presentation and everything you outlined.

Dr Hughes: Thank you. As you outlined, I think that schools have a real challenge. It is always quite easy to say that teachers should be doing more. However, evidence from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, which looked at this issue, shows that teachers go into teaching because they want to teach a particular subject and have a passion about it. They do not go into teaching to become careers advisers.

The good practice models across the world use partnership models. That is really important. However, for that partnership model to work well, it has to have buy-in from head teachers and governors around having active school plans. In many parts of the world — it is not particular to Northern Ireland — you will often hear careers advisers saying that they are trying to deliver an education programme in 30 minutes.

Something that I have found from talking to head teachers is that some feel that they are being asked to do more on top of already stretched resources. In England, I chair the National Careers Council that reports to the skills Minister, and I have been out looking and talking to head teachers. There is evidence that if young people have a sense of direction and are not just fixed on one particular career, we can use programmes to build adaptability and resilience in them to help them to cope with setbacks. That requires some understanding from teachers that the world of work is changing. It requires that partnership model. There should be a module in initial teacher training that ensures that every teacher has a short introduction on how the world of work is changing and the ways in which you can motivate your students to make the most of their talents, whatever they may be, and always to have a back-up plan. Good teachers, who are interested in careers, do those things really well. I have seen that in Northern Ireland through your teachers who have been involved in the careers strategy, and I have seen evidence of teachers investing in continuous professional development in that area.

There is such a huge opportunity to create a strategy whereby we can look at how young people are using online services. We can create and build capacity across our communities to have skilled helpers and to look at trusted information.

Mr P Ramsey: Something that has come up during the inquiry has been the content of the current curriculum. I heard the chief executive of Google Europe pointedly and aggressively telling everyone in an audience that the curriculum in primary schools must change considerably and that there must be more IT/ICT relevance. As Bronwyn said, we have been in schools in which there are children whose parents still want them to go into a career in teaching, but the jobs are not there. We are also hearing that ICT, the creative industries and financial services are the next generation. How do we make that massive change to ensure that the curriculum covers those things?

We heard that a lot of the schools here, particularly the primary schools, do not seem to be getting capital investment and are using computers that are out of date. How do we change the mindset right down to the basics so that we can ensure that children are better prepared for the work environment?

Dr Hughes: That perhaps goes back to the first point about social partnerships. Clearly, we need to find ways of being able to provide the best technology in our education system. Looking 10 or 20 years ahead, we will all be in a digital age. Therefore, there is something there around looking at social partnerships, where employers, not just Google but others such as British Telecom, can make an added-value contribution to our education system. That is one way forward.

The critical issue is that you could put as much ICT into schools as you want, but you have to have professionals who are trained in the use of ICT to teach it. That is a critical issue.

The Deputy Chairperson: Dr Hughes, we thank you for giving up your time and coming to the Committee today. We are very grateful to you. No doubt, your oral and written presentations, including the best practices and the best-practice models that you mention, will feed into the inquiry and, hopefully, help to guide the direction for the future of our careers service in Northern Ireland. It is critical that we get it right at this time. We are very grateful to you for addressing the Committee today.

Dr Hughes: It has been an enormous privilege for me, on an international stage, certainly in the past five years, to be able to talk about Northern Ireland. You are the only country in the UK where the Department of Education and Department for Employment and Learning are working together on a shared strategy. That is a model of really good practice, and you have all the foundations here to move to the next phase and draw on the highly innovative work being done. Sometimes, you do not realise how good something is when you are in the thick of it. You have certainly made tremendous progress, but there is still quite a lot to be done in the next few years. Thank you very much for your time.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you.