



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

College Development Plans:  
DEL Briefing

8 May 2013

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Employment and Learning

### College Development Plans: DEL Briefing

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

Mr Robin Swann (Chairperson)  
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Phil Flanagan  
Mr David Hilditch  
Mr Fra McCann  
Ms Bronwyn McGahan  
Mr Pat Ramsey

**Witnesses:**

Dr Mary Mclvor	Department for Employment and Learning
Mr Richard Monds	Department for Employment and Learning
Mr Daryl Young	Department for Employment and Learning

**The Chairperson:** I welcome Dr Mary Mclvor, director of the further education division; Mr Daryl Young, the deputy director; and Mr Richard Monds, head of further education finance and funding. You are very welcome. We received your briefing paper, so the assumption is that members have read it before the meeting. Please feel free to make an opening statement.

**Dr Mary Mclvor (Department for Employment and Learning):** We will take about 10 minutes to cover some of the areas in the briefing paper in a wee bit more detail.

We are here to talk to you about the college development plan process, which is an important process in budget allocation for our regional colleges and the monitoring of college performance. The college development plan starts with a number of crucial policies that the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) has for FE: the delivery of qualifications; improving skills; addressing numeracy and literacy issues with essential skills; making sure that the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) agenda is central to what is taught; and the Minister's priority skills, so that the curriculum is skewed towards those. Funding is a major lever in ensuring that policies are implemented, and the college development plan process is the key way in which we do that. Colleges are required under legislation to produce a plan. In the past, when there were 16 colleges, that plan was probably more about looking back instead of forward. From 2007-08, we changed the funding formula when colleges became regional colleges, because they are big businesses with a big turnover. The college development plan process is now much more forward-looking; we look at allocations for the next year and have a three-year window for their plans and ours. The process is a bit like the Committee. When we have a college in for a bilateral, we have the chair, the chief executive, the senior management team and perhaps the chair of the audit committee. They will present to the Department what their performance has been against our targets for the previous year and what funding and courses they would like to bid for in the following year. That gives us an

opportunity to make sure that colleges are aware of the policies and of the Minister's key priorities. We look at their performance and where they have and have not done well, and we ask them to address any underperformance. We also take the opportunity to recognise best practice because we see a great deal of best practice.

My colleagues will tell you a bit more about monitoring and quality, which is very important to us. The college development plan process is not only about funding, although that is key, it is about making sure that further education is delivering quality. We measure quality by looking at numbers, retention and achievement, because we would like all students to stay in college, to do their best and to get something at the end of it.

I will ask Richard to take you through some of the detail of the college development plan process.

**Mr Richard Monds (Department for Employment and Learning):** As Mary said, the process has been developing and evolving over the past few years. It is now pretty well embedded in the further education sector and the Departments, which are in a financial planning and monitoring cycle now.

As Mary said, the process of allocating resources will kick off in the autumn when we ask colleges to bid for resources to support their curriculum provision for the new year. The biggest development now is the increasing amount of data and information that we look at. The colleges will identify what information we have, which informs the process. That is relating to the curriculum targets, which — *[Inaudible.]* We are also looking at performance in the current year. We will bring all that information together and compare it against STEM areas, priority sectors and areas of particular importance, such as foundation degrees and essential skills.

The fundamental part of the process is the bilateral, whereby we speak to the chair of the governing body and the senior management team. We look at how important the budget has been in the previous year, what it is in the current year and examine it and challenging bids for the coming year to ensure that they are in line with government and departmental priorities. We will consider bids at the bilateral meetings and, afterwards, we will allocate the grant to the colleges based on the outcomes of those meetings. We will look at their bids for particular areas and will set curriculum targets, which will have a certain amount of funding associated with them for the coming year.

The funding model is designed to support the various policy priorities. A number of weightings will be applied in certain areas; for example, courses at level 2 and above will get a weighting of funding. Increased weightings will also be applied for certain courses that are more expensive and more resource-intensive to deliver.

The Department is required to deliver a certain number of efficiencies every year, as are colleges. This year, we will also look at quality and performance, and Daryl will touch on that. We are looking at outcomes and specific qualifications, so there will be readjustments as a result of poor performance in course delivery in certain areas. We will also look at performance in previous years where colleges have failed to meet their targets and will require certain readjustment in their future settlement.

That is essentially what the process is about. We are finalising budgets for the 2013-14 academic year, and once colleges have been given their budgets, which is around this time, they will come back to us with their financial budgets for the next year. That is a brief snapshot of the grant allocation process. As Mary pointed out, the process has evolved into more of a quality and performance monitoring process. I will hand over to Daryl Young to talk you through some of those areas.

**Mr Daryl Young (Department for Employment and Learning):** Thanks, Richard. I will look at stuff that you do not have in your briefing pack, such as some of our wider quality performance monitoring. The first thing that we provide a college with is a detailed performance pack, based on validated learner retention and achievement data. It may be worthwhile explaining retention, achievement and success. Retention is straightforward: it is the proportion of learners who complete the course that they started. Achievement is the proportion who complete the course and get their qualification. Success is the percentage of those who start the course and end up getting a qualification. Therefore, success tends to be a lower figure because it takes account of people who have left during the year. We have common definitions of those across the sector. Believe it or not, it was not always the case, but we now have agreed definitions. The analysis goes right down to individual course level, so although the overall levels of retention and achievement are very good across the sector, there are pockets of poor performance at a course level. This information allows that to be identified; it also allows the Department to challenge colleges through the process that Richard outlined and allows

colleges to challenge themselves. I will say a bit more in a moment about colleges' self-evaluation process.

We also recently introduced a quality performance adjustment, where we recover resources from colleges where performance has been particularly poor. For example, for courses whose success rate has been very poor — between 1% and 19% — and there is not much of that, we take 100% recovery of the resources back. If success is between 20% and 39%, we take 50% recovery, and if it is between 40% and 59%, we take 20% recovery of the cost of those courses. We are doing that for the first time in the current year, and we will probably recover about £250,000, which is 0.2% of the budget. That is a very low proportion of the budget, but that is how we want it to be because we do not see this as a method of getting money back from colleges. It is supposed to drive up quality, so the fact that we are recovering so little from colleges is a positive sign.

Retention, achievement and success have increased over the past few years. Retention has been reasonably stable, at between 87% and 88% over the past two or three years; achievement has gone up from 65% to 83%; and success has gone up from 57% to 73%. That is a combination of better data management in colleges, better quality provision and better outcomes from the provision.

Something that you will probably hear about in a separate briefing is work that we were doing on econometrics. The economists in the Department have worked with academics in the University of Ulster to adjust for the age and social background of students and the courses that they take in order to strip out all the variables so that we can compare colleges on a genuinely like-for-like basis. In that way, we can see if student X goes to college A whether he is more likely to have a successful outcome than he would if he were to go to college B. That is proving very useful.

We also produce quarterly health checks based on key performance indicators. One of the key recipients of the health checks is the college governing bodies, as it allows them to look at the detail of their performance and to benchmark against other colleges. It includes retention and achievement, but it also includes enrolments, finance, governance, staff ratios, space utilisation and key performance indicators.

Colleges are required to produce annual whole college quality improvement plans and self-assessments; they assess themselves every year on their strengths and weaknesses and produce quality improvement plans to address weaknesses and to build on success. Those are inspected annually by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). That used to be a desk exercise, but the ETI now goes out and sits in a college for two or three days to make sure that colleges' processes are secure. The ETI inspects colleges every third year, as there is a rolling programme of inspections: two per year across the six colleges. There are follow-up inspections where performance is shown to be poor.

Finally, we have introduced a quality managers' forum, which is a reasonably recent introduction. Each college has a quality manager who is responsible for driving up quality. The forum is an opportunity for quality managers to come together two or three times a year to share best practice and to receive presentations from outside the sector. In all of this, we are trying to drive up quality with the colleges as aggressively as we can.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much. Mary, when talking about the plans, you referred to a bilateral, and Daryl said that the Department challenges colleges and that colleges are allowed to challenge themselves. Do colleges get to challenge the Department in their development plans?

**Dr McIvor:** At bilaterals, colleges can challenge departmental policies that they find difficult to implement or if they feel that there are pressures. For example, the Department is very keen that, at level 4, which is foundation degree level, colleges move from the old HNDs to foundation degrees. That is the policy of the Department. Colleges tell us that they struggle with that a little bit, because employers are so used to the old HNDs. Therefore, we talk to the college and impress upon the governing body the reasons why the Department feels that foundation degrees are better for employers. We depend on them to make sure that that message goes to employers as well as the work that the Department does.

There is quite a robust exchange, and that is welcome, because it gives governing bodies in particular an opportunity to talk to us about their role, what we expect of them and where they feel there are difficulties. We take that on board.

**The Chairperson:** We were made aware last week in one of the documents that we received that two colleges are under review. Is the bilateral or the creation of the development plan for those colleges any different? They are assessed once a month rather than quarterly.

**Dr McIvor:** The bilaterals are similar for all colleges, but we have two colleges under review, or "under improvement" as we call it: Belfast Metropolitan College and Northern Regional College (NRC), which have extra improvement plans to bring them up to the standard that we expect. So, in those monthly meetings that you referred to, that is where the extra plans are discussed rather than at the bilateral.

**The Chairperson:** Richard, you said that if colleges score 1% to 19%, there is 100% claw-back, but if they score 20% to 39%, there is 50% claw-back. The Department has pulled back £250,000. How many courses has that affected? How long does it take to decide that a course is not scoring highly and should be phased out?

**Mr Monds:** Ultimately, such decisions are for colleges. We do not want the process to have the perverse outcome where colleges automatically cancel courses because their success rate is below 20% or 40%, so we give colleges an opportunity to come to us. For example, a course may have poor success rates because the people on it all have jobs, which affects retention and achievement rates. We would not want to penalise a college for people on a course getting a job, because that is a reasonably good outcome. There is an opportunity for us to have a debate on the reasons behind the poor performance so that they can present us with evidence. After that, we can decide whether a claw-back is justified.

**The Chairperson:** Is the review process decided by the ETI inspection?

**Dr McIvor:** It can be decided in a number of ways. For example, Northern Regional College asked the Department to be put into improvement, because it was forecasting deficits in its finances over the next couple of years and recognised that close inspection was needed. With Belfast Metropolitan College, the Department put in a group of consultants to do a review because there were big issues in the college with finances, deficits, staffing and quality. Therefore, we put a group of consultants in who then did a report. The basis of that report was that a great deal of improvement was needed in various areas of the college. The college then went into a process of improvement. That was about three years ago, and Belfast Metropolitan College is about to come out the other end of that. That college is now financially stable, and all the issues have been addressed. Rather than meet the college every month, we now meet every quarter. The college is at the end of its improvement plan; just a few more things have to be achieved and it will be out of that process.

**The Chairperson:** The NRC came into it voluntarily because of finances. Are its books not balanced?

**Dr McIvor:** Mainly because of finances.

**The Chairperson:** Is it not nearly back in the black?

**Dr McIvor:** Not yet, no,

**Mr P Ramsey:** Good morning, Mary and your team; you are very welcome. It was an interesting presentation. I was keen to hear how you evaluate the performance against the targets, and I would like a wee bit more information on that. We have figures about retention, and according to the figures anyway, some of your best practice is in retention. Some regional colleges seem to be doing quite well in retention compared to others. How would you evaluate performance separate from just retention and success?

**Dr McIvor:** Performance separate from that? We look at how far a college is meeting the Minister's STEM agenda and at a breakdown of the number of courses that it has in science, technology, engineering and maths. We look at the best performers, and we challenge those colleges that are not best performers to look at their curriculum, to change it and to make sure that they give students good advice about where the jobs are so that more are attracted to STEM subjects. We look at the Minister's priority skills areas and whether a college is meeting them. We look at levels 2, 3 and 4 and at the college's numbers and performance in them.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Would you audit the curriculum in each college?

**Dr McIvor:** We do not audit the detail of the curriculum, but we look at the balance of the curriculum

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**Mr P Ramsey:** Who does audit the curriculum?

**Dr McIvor:** The ETI inspectors look at the teaching and learning; that is their expertise. In the college development plan bilaterals, we bring the information from the inspectorate into those, so there would be challenges to do with the quality of teaching and learning.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Can you share with us information from ETI's review of the curriculum?

**Dr McIvor:** ETI publishes all its reports.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Could you get us the curriculum audits that it has carried out over the past two years in the colleges?

**Dr McIvor:** ETI carries out inspections in which inspectors look at the curriculum. However, they do not do curriculum audits; colleges decide their own curriculum, and ETI will comment on the balance of it.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Who independently assesses the curriculum that is being performed in a college?

**Mr Young:** I think what you are asking is the extent to which, for example, the balance between areas such as hairdressing or construction or engineering —

**Mr P Ramsey:** You are saying —

**Mr Young:** Those types of provision —

**Mr P Ramsey:** It is not unreasonable.

**Mr Young:** The Department's starting point is that the colleges have expertise and knowledge in their local areas. Whether that is knowledge of their learners or the needs of local employers, they are probably in a better position than the Department to make those decisions locally. So we do not intervene at that detailed level. However, we make sure that, in broad terms, colleges are delivering against their strategic priorities because what is a priority for employers in Fermanagh is not necessarily —

**Mr P Ramsey:** That is a reasonable point. I have always argued that, for the needs of industry and the business community, there is variety in each region in Northern Ireland. I am trying to determine whether that variance is being acknowledged by inspections or curriculum audits to determine whether we are getting best value. I am not sure that we are getting best value. In my constituency, industry tells me that its needs are not being met — for example, a number of IT jobs in and around the Foyle constituency cannot be filled. What liaison is there with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on supply and demand? What links are there with universities? What are the links with post-primary schools? The colleges do an excellent job, particularly with NEETs and youth unemployment, but I am not getting any sense of a holistic, joined-up approach with industry to meet needs. People complain to me. What are you doing in the regional colleges to make sure that they are meeting the needs of their region?

**Mr Young:** That is an incredibly difficult and important issue. In the past, we relied on the sector skills councils being able to speak for employers in their sector, identify those employers' needs and perhaps get involved in the process of developing the qualifications that would end up in college frameworks. It is a difficult issue across the UK. A number of reviews are under way in England and Wales, and, indeed, here, to look at the way in which employers' needs are reflected in the qualifications that are developed and, in turn, delivered by the colleges. It is complex and, over the years, is probably a nut that has been particularly difficult to crack.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I take your point that it is quite fashionable for young girls to become involved in hairdressing. The Committee is conducting an inquiry into careers education, information, advice and

guidance. I will make a general point that is not about a specific college. The turnaround in beauty and hairdressing courses seems to be quite high compared with other areas that are not meeting demands. People often tell me that their daughter went to college for two years but that there are no jobs in that area. How do we ensure that the guidance to our young people in the community is given at the right time and the right place to encourage them into areas of growth rather than areas in which there is no growth?

**Mr Young:** That is a huge issue when personal choice comes into play and rubs up against best advice. We used to weight funding into priority areas. It was sometimes difficult to meet those targets because individuals will vote with their feet.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Are there priority areas?

**Dr McIvor:** There are priority areas, which we weight. Our message to colleges is that we want more people in those areas. We challenge colleges, and they have improved the numbers studying STEM subjects. It is slower moving than we want because, as you say, young girls want to go to do beauty and hairdressing courses because it is a nice thing to do. It is sometimes really difficult to get those people to change their minds.

You mentioned IT, and we recognise the fact that there is an issue with IT. Employers in the Belfast region and the north-west tell us that there are shortages. The Minister has set up a review with employers in those areas to see what extra work we need to do with colleges and universities. We recognise that there is a skills gap.

**Mr F McCann:** I want to pick up on an issue that Pat raised, which is the crux of what we are dealing with. How do we guide young people from a fixed notion of where they want to go in life to a position where they pick up on new types of employment and are educated for those? My daughter was studying leisure and tourism. After two years, she felt that she had always wanted to do hairdressing, so she returned to college, took a hairdressing course and has not looked back. She has been in employment ever since. You talked about meetings between the Department and the colleges at which the colleges raise issues. Have there been occasions when the colleges' interpretation of what they are delivering was at odds with the Department's? If that happens, do you try to work towards a meeting of minds to sort things out?

**Dr McIvor:** We all use the same information. Information in further education is now very good, so there is no escape. We all use the same source, so we no longer have situations when there is disagreement on what is being delivered. We can see it, the colleges can see it, and we all use the same data pack. There is a meeting of minds because we are using the same evidence.

**Mr F McCann:** Last week, we picked up on the fact that, over the next number of years, because of budgetary considerations, there will be a reduction in available money. We are talking about how we maximise opportunities for college students. Have you worked out the impact that that will have on your ability as a Department, and the colleges' ability, to deliver on what we are setting out for them?

**Dr McIvor:** We are in the final year of the comprehensive spending review period. Colleges have had efficiencies imposed on them, and they have delivered on those efficiencies. The lecturers' contract is now fully utilised, and class sizes are as big as we want them to be. If there are further reductions in the next comprehensive spending review period, we face a challenge. The colleges are now pretty efficient. We might look at reductions in the number of places because we do not think that there are many more areas in which to seek further efficiencies in colleges. At the moment, it is OK, but we have concerns about the next comprehensive spending review period. We hope that we do not have to cut numbers.

**Mr Young:** It is worth reflecting that, over the past few years, some colleges have been able to deliver provision way above the level of funding with which we provided them. They are almost at saturation stage and will find it very difficult to do that. In that sense, we have been getting positive returns out of two or three of the colleges that are in a financial position to do so.

**Mr F McCann:** When I was a councillor and efficiencies were mentioned, it meant "cuts" to everyone. We can debate and argue about that, but when you reach the point at which efficiencies stop and the service that is being delivered is impacted on, do you argue that that will seriously hamper people's ability to deliver a service?

**Dr McIvor:** I hope that we will not be in that position. We do not know the allocation in the next comprehensive spending review period. However, we do know that colleges are more efficient than ever, and there is very little room for further efficiencies. We hope that we do not reach that situation, but if it happens, we will argue strenuously that colleges are the engines for skills and the economy, so they need to be fully funded.

**Mr Flanagan:** Thanks for the presentation. Annex 2 of your briefing paper includes percentages for retention, achievement and success rates. Is there any chance of getting actual numbers instead of percentages?

**Mr Young:** Yes. Our statisticians put out a detailed statistical release, which is on our website.

**Mr Flanagan:** I want something simple — nothing detailed or complicated.

**Dr McIvor:** OK.

**Mr Flanagan:** With retention, achievement and success rates, has any work been done on the percentage of college leavers who actually go into employment?

**Dr McIvor:** Colleges do their own leaver surveys, and they are all quite different. We want to do exactly what you ask and have consistency across the sector. Universities publish employment figures, which are helpful to people who are choosing a university.

**Mr Flanagan:** Post-primary schools do it.

**Dr McIvor:** Exactly. Our statisticians are working with the colleges to try to get leaver surveys along the same lines as higher education leaver surveys. We have some statistics, but we want to improve them.

**Mr Flanagan:** When you say that you have some statistics, what does that mean?

**Dr McIvor:** This is the stuff that Daryl has —

**Mr Young:** Colleges capture statistics in June, and they largely comprise what students think they will be doing when they leave college. They are not completing that area of the college system terribly accurately. When students leave in June and that is the last that the college sees of them, it will always be a difficult task. Students are saying only what they are going to do or would like to do after leaving college. We want to replicate the work in universities, which consists of a fairly robust leaver survey about five or six months after students have left.

**Mr Flanagan:** When can we expect that to be done?

**Mr Young:** We hope to undertake a pilot in the coming academic year. We are working up what the survey would look like.

**Mr Flanagan:** Are you drafting a new survey just for FE colleges, or are you taking the one that the universities use? Are you aiming for consistency?

**Mr Young:** We will have some consistency. The colleges want consistency because they are being asked in relation to higher education in FE, so there will be similarities but also some differences.

**Mr Flanagan:** How do your current statistics on where people go and finding employment compare with the success of the universities?

**Mr Young:** I will have to come back to you on that. I am not sure about the university figures.

**Mr Flanagan:** Your figures are broken down by regional colleges. Has any work been done on different sections of each college, such as health and beauty or engineering?



**Mr Young:** The data pack that we referred to breaks the figures down in some 19 or 20 sectors. There is also a lower tier that breaks the figures down to individual courses. It is tracked at every level.

**Mr Flanagan:** What is done with that information?

**Mr Young:** It is used by the Department and the colleges. The statistical release that our statisticians put out will have that information at the initial level and across the 20 main sectors. That information is readily available.

**Dr McIvor:** Careers advisers in the colleges, for example, use that information when they talk to students who need guidance on which course to take. They could show that students on one particular course tend to go into employment or that students on a different course tend to go on to higher education. That information could be used to point students in the right direction. If a student wants a job, he or she can be told about the college courses that are most likely to lead to a job.

**Mr Flanagan:** How do prospective students use such information?

**Dr McIvor:** I am not sure whether colleges publish that information on their website. We will check that for you to see how they publicise that to students. Careers advisers use the information, but I do not know whether they communicate it on their website. We will come back to you on that.

**Mr Flanagan:** In 2011-12, the South West College had a success rate of 78%. Surely the college should champion that.

**Dr McIvor:** Where students go?

**Mr Flanagan:** Surely the college should be shouting from the hilltops, for prospective students, the fact that 78% of its students were successful in their courses. That information should not simply be included in a departmental report and left there. The college should be using it to market itself.

**Dr McIvor:** The college will use that. Staff go into primary and secondary schools and use that information. Colleges do a lot of their own marketing; we do not tell them to do it. They are independent organisations and will do that without our asking them. They take ownership of their data.

**Mr Flanagan:** However, if it is not that good, colleges are not going to do much with it.

**Dr McIvor:** I would not say that any college is "not that good". They can use it —

**Mr Flanagan:** In 2009-2010, the overall success rate was 57%. That is not that good.

**Dr McIvor:** It is not that any longer. We identified that that was an issue. You will see that the success rates are now much better. Over the past three years, the Department has focused heavily on improving those rates. That has been done.

**Mr Young:** It is perhaps worth pointing out that, although the 2009-2010 figure is 57%, a reasonable element of that is probably down to the colleges' data quality. When we shine a spotlight on a particular area, we find that the accuracy and quality of data going onto the system improves drastically. That happened with enrolments when we started to attach funding to enrolments. Over the past couple of years, we have been pushing colleges on this aspect, which has improved the data. The figure of 57% is probably as much to do with poor data as it is to do with poor performance.

**Mr Flanagan:** The Committee recently visited Enniskillen and heard about the college's redevelopment plans for the campus. Has the Department any update on those plans?

**Dr McIvor:** As far as we know, the business case is nearing completion. We await that business case to see details on costs, and so on.

**Mr Hilditch:** Annex 1 of your briefing paper shows budget allocations and includes a table for earmarked funds with an explanation. From a layperson's point of view, I am particularly interested in

the Northern Regional College, which is, by ratio, quite low on earmarked funds. Does it not take on special projects? What does that table tell me?

**Mr Monds:** Funds are managed from the Department. Earmarked funds are demand-led, so each college can bid for a proportion of the resources, depending on what they are available for. The Care to Learn scheme is for childcare, and the additional support fund is to allow colleges to support students with disabilities who incur additional costs — for example, if a personal tutor is required. The need to call on those funds is down to the profile of a college and the students.

**Mr Hilditch:** The Northern Regional College, therefore, is not behind in any way.

**Dr McIvor:** No; it is demand-led so the figures reflect the demand at a college.

**Mr Monds:** All colleges have equal access to the funds, so whether they need to call on them is down to the profile of the students.

**Ms McGahan:** Thank you for your presentation. Last week, MEP Martina Anderson and I visited the STEM centre at the South West College. That is an amazing facility. My question is similar to Pat's. Is there anything more that we can do as a community to encourage young people to enter those growth areas?

DEL's budget savings and delivery plans state that there has been a reduction in the Department's flexibility in responding to new and as yet unforeseen demands over the period. Does it concern you that that could impact on the growth areas? You spoke about saturation. I am conscious of the fact that one third of unemployed people have no qualifications.

**Dr McIvor:** Anything that impacts on the FE budget is of concern, particularly if it is focused on numeracy and literacy. It is one of the Minister's number one priorities that numeracy and literacy issues are addressed at colleges. Whether it is a 16-year-old, a 19-year-old or a 40-year-old, they should be able to go to an FE college, and the gap in literacy and numeracy can be filled by essential skills.

I wish that we knew how to fix STEM. There are issues about influences on young people and how we get it through to parents that, from primary school onwards, their kids should be focusing on STEM subjects. How do we get that across in the schools? STEM subjects are seen as being more difficult and challenging than other subjects. How do we get beyond that? From our point of view, we try to promote STEM subjects in FE colleges. If we had STEM centres everywhere, primary-school kids would have a wonderful opportunity to see that science is not boring and is not all about sums. STEM is about 'CSI', investigation and setting up your own business. You get all those things from the STEM centre. The challenge for us is to get experience into our primary schools, secondary schools and colleges, and to get parents to understand that science, maths, engineering and English, as a foundation, are really important subjects.

**Mr Young:** One issue is that by the time the colleges get individuals at the age of 16 and above, and if they have not been stimulated in that way, it is, sadly, almost too late because so much of the foundation work has been done at an earlier stage. That is why we are so keen to continue to work with the Department of Education, through the entitlement framework, to encourage and enable schools to send young children to the colleges, as part of their 14-16 education, to try to open their eyes to some of the things that Mary outlined. If they have not been stimulated by the age of 16, it becomes quite difficult.

**Ms McGahan:** I have a 16-year-old daughter. She got careers advice last week, which was excellent, but she had already chosen her career path. That is also part of the difficulty, as is partnership with the parents. That lacks big time.

**Mr Buchanan:** Last week, we looked at some figures, and the number of fallouts was somewhat alarming. What are you doing to address that issue in colleges where there is quite a high fallout rate and people are not completing their courses?

**Dr McIvor:** The fallout rate is about 12%. We see that as a wasted opportunity for students, and it is a waste of public funding when a place has been allocated and is not taken up. We place a great deal of focus on that. In the bilaterals that we mentioned, we look at that in great detail for all levels and all

courses in every college. We compare and benchmark, and we ask any college sitting below the benchmark what it is going to do. We keep an eye on what the colleges do. The health check that Daryl referred to, which goes out every quarter, tracks retention. We also have the quality managers' forum. There is lots of best practice. Colleges are upping their game in retaining students.

The South Eastern Regional College was the first college to introduce a case conference. Every week on a Friday afternoon, each department sits down and looks at the students to see whether there are indicators of those who might be leaving — for example, homework not being done, assignments not being handed in, a student not attending classes. People are assigned to talk to those students to make sure that they do not leave. However, there will always be some turnover — for example, those who get a job, and those who decide that college is not for them. FE colleges focus on ensuring that they retain as many students as they can. We see that in action, and we have seen the product of that. Retention is now much better than it was. Those case conferences happen every week in every college. If it looks as though certain teachers have higher fallout rates than others, they will be given extra special help to improve the quality of what they do to make sure that they retain more students. It is as focused as that. A lot is being done in that area.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I was reflecting on your comment about the Belfast Met and the North West Regional College with regard to IT jobs. If the Belfast Met produced a curriculum audit for the college with a reduction in ICT courses, would you challenge that?

**Dr McIvor:** We would challenge any reduction in any STEM courses. We would ask the college to explain why that had happened. We would want to know whether it was due to the demand of employers or the demand of students, and the issues involved.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Will you further explain how the North West Regional College, which supposedly produced a curriculum audit with the reduction of courses in ICT, got away with it?

**Dr McIvor:** I cannot comment on the detail of that.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Do you not know about it?

**Dr McIvor:** We know that the North West Regional College has done some restructuring, as have all colleges. It does not necessarily mean that fewer students are taking those courses. Sometimes, it relates to the types of IT courses, and the curriculum audit is aimed at not reducing students but putting the focus on demand.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Mary, perhaps you could reflect on what I have asked you and come back to me on that specific point. Were you aware of the curriculum audit that was carried out on the reduction of ICT? Did the Department approve it, knowing that industry's needs were much greater? The industry is still saying that it needs more students with ICT-related qualifications. Will you come back to me on that?

**Dr McIvor:** I will come back to you on that.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much for your time this morning. There will be a few action points.

Mary, you said that there was a letter from the Minister about a review of employers in ICT.

**Dr McIvor:** It is a group that he has.

**The Chairperson:** Could the Committee have an update on the details of that? We will also contact the departmental liaison officer. I do not think that we were aware of it either.

Thank you very much for your time.