



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Review of Initial Teacher Education Infrastructure:
Department for Employment and Learning Briefing

2 July 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Robin Swann (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Sammy Douglas
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Alastair Ross
Ms Claire Sugden

Witnesses:

Mrs Nuala Kerr	Department for Employment and Learning
Mrs Carol McCabe	Department for Employment and Learning

The Deputy Chairperson: I welcome Mrs Nuala Kerr, director of higher education, and Mrs Carol McCabe, head of quality and initial teacher education branch. We will give you 10 minutes for your presentation before we open up for questions.

Mrs Nuala Kerr (Department for Employment and Learning): Morning, Chair. Thank you very much. I am really glad of this opportunity to update the Committee on the review. Members will have heard the Minister's statement yesterday, and the report that he was talking about has now been published on the Department's website. I plan to talk through the structure of the report, and, between us, Carol and I will take questions, if that is OK.

As members will know, the review of initial teacher education infrastructure was announced in November 2011. The first stage focused particularly on the financial sustainability and stability of the two university colleges. The Minister made a statement about stage 1 in May 2013. The stage 1 findings focused on the cost of, for example, the premia that are paid to the colleges in addition to their core funding. Overall, the study identified that the cost of training a teacher in the Northern Ireland colleges is almost 40% higher than in their comparator institutions. On the back of the stage 1 report, the Minister announced stage 2, and he appointed an international panel in September of last year.

The review panel's terms of reference required it, first, to examine the case for reforming teacher education provision in Northern Ireland; secondly, to examine whether the funding provided could be used better by the teacher training institutions if they were prepared to move to a more shared or integrated system; and, thirdly, to set out options for the future shape of initial teacher infrastructure in Northern Ireland.

The panel drew on evidence from international literature and practices, the stage 1 review of the Grant Thornton report, and written and oral evidence. There is a wide range of writing on teacher education, including the interim and final reports of the recent British Educational Research Association and the Royal Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, Manufacturing and Commerce (BERA-RSA) — a long title — inquiry into research and teacher education, and, of course, the submissions from the various institutions, stakeholders and others who submitted evidence to the panel.

As a result, the panel identified five key trends in teacher education internationally. Those focused on attracting the best candidates to teaching, offering competitive and practice-focused academic awards built on research, developing strong links between theory and practice, establishing strong links with continuous professional development and understanding how student teachers learn.

Northern Ireland does parts of that very well, in particular attracting the best candidates. However, there are areas in which we perform less well; for example, developing links with a research-based and research-rich environment.

In addition to the international trends, the panel also commented on faith-based education across Europe and beyond. You can see that the panel valued the contribution that faith-based training offered to our community. We may pick that up later during questions.

As for the strength of the current provision, the panel identified that teacher education in Northern Ireland has a number of key strengths, one of which is the widespread commitment to further enhancement of the teacher education provision offered. Others include the positive evaluations by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), the alignment with the Queen's standards, the ability to recruit strong candidates and the high levels of satisfaction with the training that they received. However, there are some shortcomings in the provision, and the panel identified weaknesses, which are discussed in more detail in the report. The first is the size and relatively fragmented nature of the provision. It commented that the scale of teacher training in its totality across five institutions here would be the size of a single institution in the rest of the UK. Secondly, there are issues with the quality of provision when judged against international trends. Among the issues that they raised were that there are two separate Departments; that there is a disjunction between initial teacher education and continuing professional development (CPD); and that the link with the research performance is extremely uneven.

Finally, there were areas relating to anomalies and inequalities in existing arrangements. One was access to the certificate in religious education for admission to teacher education programmes. However, there is also admission for teacher education either through UCAS or direct application to an institution. There were two ways of gaining access to the provision itself. That caused the panel to consider what would promote international best practice in student education. I will pass over to Carol now.

Mrs Carol McCabe (Department for Employment and Learning): Going on from the information that Nuala has just provided, the panel, having discussed the international principles, also talked about a further principle that needed to be taken into account in Northern Ireland, and that is to do with pluralism. The panel acknowledges that there are competing interpretations of teacher education and its nature and purpose and comments on those, in some detail, further on in the report. The panel also states, however, that the principle of pluralism cannot be accepted on its own and that programmes of teacher education should make provision for students of different faith traditions through shared use of premises, mixed classes, shared teaching and other forms of social engagement.

The panel states that the system that reflects those principles requires four conditions to be met and focuses on an agency or body providing strategic direction; an agreed pattern of teacher education programmes; the introduction of a more rational and dependable system of workforce planning; and the need for effective use of resources to eliminate unnecessary duplication of provision and to deploy staff in a way that avoids duplication. Section 8 of the report identifies four options, and the panel identifies common features that all the options share. These include that each teacher education course should include a programme of shared education; that each teacher education centre should become a major centre for continuous professional development; that both the concurrent and consecutive programmes should be maintained, perhaps extending the PGCE to two years and to the award of Masters level; and investing further in continuous professional development.

There is a list of the common features that the panel identified. The panel summarised those features in four key criteria: quality; efficiency; continued support for the existing diversity of provision; and the

potential ease for implementation or practicability. Each of the potential options in the report for reconfiguring the infrastructure is evaluated with reference to those four criteria.

Of the four options that the panel identified, option A is to do with collaborative partnership. That would involve the four current providers, with collaboration being a condition of funding. Option B, is a two-centre model with a Belfast institute of education. The first centre would be based at the University of Ulster with provision in the north-west, and the second centre would be provision in Belfast at Queen's University institute of education. The third option is a Northern Ireland teacher education federation. Existing institutions would continue but with some ceding of responsibilities to a supra-institutional agency. The final option is the Northern Ireland institute of education, where teacher education across Northern Ireland would become the responsibility of a single institution, the Northern Ireland institute of education.

Mrs Kerr: The panel believed that each of the options would contribute, albeit to a different degree, to the further development of teacher education infrastructure in Northern Ireland. First, it advises that the options are not discrete entities and that some of the elements could be pursued in part as well as in the form set out in the report. Although the panel's specific concern was the initial teacher education infrastructure, it also argued that that could not be effectively considered without reference to other key aspects of provision.

The report will provide the starting point for a constructive engagement between providers, stakeholders and politicians in Northern Ireland. The panel recognises that there will be many points of detail that will need to be addressed. That will be picked up with the various stakeholders in the autumn.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation. The Minister was questioned about this on the Floor of the Assembly. The panel identified the four options and has highlighted the inequalities in the present system and that all undergraduate recruits should apply through the UCAS system. Where does the report go from here, and when will it be finalised?

Mrs Kerr: The Minister's intention is that we will allow all the key stakeholders and deliverers and all interested parties to consider this complex report, as we believe that it is worthy of careful thought. The summer break gives us an opportunity to consider it in much more detail. Our intention is to return to the discussions in September to pick up on the options with the stakeholders in the autumn and the run-up to the new year. We expect that we will have made good progress in those discussions towards a way forward that is agreeable to all parties towards the beginning of the new year. Depending on how the discussions go, a public consultation on the options may be required. That would extend the time, but we do not know exactly how discussions will go from September onwards.

Mr P Ramsey: Good morning, Nuala and Carol. This has been a long journey. As I said in the House, it has not been an easy passage either in the Committee or in the House. I want to follow on from the Chair's comments. I think that the Committee would favour having accelerated process to engage with all the stakeholders and look at an option that is favourable to them and that we can get consensus on. They are due to see us in September. Is there any thought of bringing in facilitators to get to some arrangement or consensus with the stakeholders?

Mrs Kerr: We have not finally mapped out how we will engage with the stakeholders, but we will bear that in mind; it sounds like an interesting proposition.

Mr P Ramsey: I am not talking on behalf of any of the groups, but, quite honestly, some of the stakeholders are suspicious of you. Institutions have a concern about losing their Christian values and ethos. They believe that, at times, the Department did not accept or respect that ethos.

It is interesting that both Nuala and Carol mentioned CPD. Previously, I asked you directly why there was no formal collaboration with the Department of Education on the delivery of this programme. Are there any further thoughts on why there was no formal collaboration between Departments, given its importance?

Mrs Kerr: I do not know about the specifics. As for any suspicion attaching to what we are doing, I hope that the report has dispelled some of it. I know that there were considerable reservations about the Minister's intentions to close the institutions. I hope that the report has shown that that was not the intention. The report highlights the respect that needs to be attached to the faith-based institutions. I

hope that the manner in which the arguments are presented in the report gives some comfort to those who have concerns about their ethos and mission being diluted by the report. I hope that, on that question, you and the others would be more content.

You are right about the CPD: the way the legislation has presented us with this is that we have responsibility for the infrastructure, buildings, and teaching and learning funding but not for the content of what is delivered in the institutions or the content of CPD, which come under the Department of Education's responsibility. The content of initial teacher education is in their area of responsibility. However, I do see that there is a need for us to take their perspective into account.

Mr P Ramsey: That is what I cannot get my head round. You are now suggesting, after this long period, that you need to take their perspective into account when careers professional development is solely the responsibility of the Education Department.

Mrs Kerr: It is, yes.

Mr P Ramsey: Both of you referenced those as key areas, yet you do not have a perspective from education. I find that astounding, given the remit that the Department of Education has for the continuous development of teachers across Northern Ireland. I suggest to you again that there is another piece of work that needs to be done to tie it all in.

One question that I asked in the House I will ask again — the Minister did not respond to me — and that is about respecting and accepting faith-based organisations and their ethos. I sincerely hope that there will be no financial penalties if they are not seen to be collaborating as the Department and some of the options insist.

Mrs Kerr: Our intention is to look forward in a positive manner to encourage the institutions in the direction of the final option when it has been identified. That will be the subject of discussions in the autumn; therefore it is a bit premature to say which of the options we will be following. We hope that there will be buy-in, not that we are saying at the outset that there are those who will not participate in the ultimate outcome.

On that question, I hope that there will be consensus and a way forward and that the issue will be about how we apply the funds in a positive manner to achieve the best for the children of Northern Ireland.

The content of initial teacher education courses and CPD are the responsibility of DE; that has clearly been their position and ours up until now. What the report highlights is that some things need to be done if we are to achieve international best practice in teacher education here. So we will have to consider how we will take that forward and where the interests of our colleagues in DE lie relative to the interests that we have responsibility for.

Mr P Ramsey: I am surprised, given its importance, that there have been no formal discussions.

Mr F McCann: Thank you for the presentation. The launch of the report was eagerly awaited. As Pat said, many believe that, given Grant Thornton and given this report, the Minister has a fixed agenda on where he wants to go: the closure of St Mary's and Stranmillis. Was a "do nothing" option included in the report that would maintain the colleges and work with them in their present form?

Mrs Kerr: First, I do not believe that. It is the Minister's repeated belief that it is not his —

Mr F McCann: You cannot speak for the Minister, Nuala.

Mrs Kerr: I do speak for the Minister.

Mr F McCann: No, you can't speak for him in particular.

Mrs Kerr: I speak for the Minister on departmental policy when I am here. It was never the Minister's intention to seek the closure of St Mary's; he made that clear at the beginning of this work and repeatedly throughout.

He wishes for the best possible conditions that will allow teacher education to flourish in line with international best practice. That is what we are seeking.

Sorry, I have forgotten your second question.

Mr F McCann: It was on the "do nothing" option.

Mrs Kerr: The nearest to a do nothing option is option A, which is essentially that the institutions continue as they are but that they will cooperate more in different areas and that that cooperation will be supported by funding and be a condition of funding. That takes into account very much that the two institutions will continue with the same level of autonomy but that there are greater levels of cooperation in different areas.

Mrs McCabe: The report specifically mentions a do nothing option, and, on the need for change and the options that are described, the panel has commented in the report that it does not believe that the status quo is an option. It has suggested the other four; therefore doing nothing, in its view, is not an option.

Mr F McCann: Has the Minister planned for a subsidy withdrawal from each of the colleges?

Mrs Kerr: The Minister has four options to consider, and that is what we will be doing in the autumn. It will be what comes out of that process of discussion that determines whatever action is necessary. The intention is to create a new environment with consensus across all the relevant institutions and to achieve that through discussion on the basis of these options.

Mr F McCann: I could not pick up whether that means that subsidies will be withdrawn or not. Are you saying that that will be part of the process?

Mrs Kerr: I am saying that the Minister is entering into a new process. I cannot foresee what the outcome will be. We have a range of options, and the Minister, in discussions with the sector and others, will reach a conclusion, we hope, on a single option that has consensus across the board. So the question of penalties or anything else does not come into that.

Mr F McCann: What happens if, at the end of this process, one or other of the colleges does not buy into the report?

Mrs Kerr: That is a position that we will have to consider in the course of the process.

Mr Swann: Sorry, ladies, for missing your presentation. I do not see anywhere in the paper where it states that the Department will tackle the mismatch with the Department of Education setting the number of teachers who are to go through whatever option is proposed or followed. Is that in discussion anywhere?

Mrs Kerr: It is raised in the report, and the panel recommended that we needed a more dependable process for identifying the number of teachers who need to be trained in response to the needs of the schools. It is addressed in the report.

Mrs McCabe: The report also comments on the better links between the two Departments on teacher education generally, so it is in that context that that issue would be picked up.

Mr Swann: However, you do not have buy-in from the Department of Education that it will do that as something flowing out of the report.

Mrs Kerr: In respect of that particular item, the Department of Education indicated to us that it was waiting to see what the report would say about what action it needed to take with its predictive model.

Mr Swann: Depending on the option taken, if the Minister of Education was opposed to one of those recommendations and then decided that he would keep on sending you I do not know how many teachers every year and is not worried about that, can he do that?

Mrs Kerr: He can. In legislation, he has the power to do that.

Mr Swann: I think that Pat might have mentioned the specific institution. The final part of the statement refers to the Minister engaging with stakeholders to bring forward these options. If one of the institutions flatly refused to accept any of the four options and were to revert back to the do nothing position in order to retain its autonomy, how will the Department manage that?

Mrs Kerr: At this stage, no decisions have been made on what would happen if there was no participation.

At this point, we are trying to seek consensus on the way forward based on some or other of the options that the panel has put forward, and we are still hopeful that we will get engagement. It has been indicated to the panel that there is recognition that there is scope for enhancement in what is offered, and all the institutions indicated their willingness to be part of that.

Mr Douglas: Are you aware of any public responses to date from Stranmillis and St Mary's to the Minister's statement?

Mrs Kerr: Just what we have seen in the press. We cannot say what the detail is, because it is a very complex report, and it would be unjust to take a knee-jerk reaction from the institutions as a statement on their position. The Minister's wish was that the institutions give careful consideration to what the panel said, because some of the suggestions are very rigorous and intellectually challenging. The panel was very keen that the institutions understood what the options meant, and they met them on Monday afternoon to talk them through the report. There may be opportunities to explore that again later in the year. I could not say that we have any specific reaction that you would want to hold anybody to at this stage.

Mr Douglas: I have picked up over this past number of months that St Mary's, who we have had here, seems to be open to it. I am not so sure about the extent of that in Stranmillis, but I imagine that it would also be open to change and to shared education as an example. I asked the Minister in the Assembly to give us an assurance that, if they are willing to work with the Department, the Department would support them to become sustainable. Economic viability is one of the biggest issues. Do you feel that there is a will in the Department to support Stranmillis and St Mary's to become sustainable?

Mrs Kerr: It is certainly the intention to find a way of balancing competing demands. We all know the financial pressures that everyone is under and will be under in the future, and the Minister will have to balance all those competing considerations. Carol, do you want to comment further on the willingness to cooperate?

Mrs McCabe: The panel had a strong impression that those whom they met in the early part of the year and who informed the report were definitely keen to engage in the autumn, and the context for that engagement is definite. We will talk over the detail of the report with the institutions and the stakeholders in the autumn, and I think that the panel's view is that there was a willingness from all parties to engage with them on the report.

The Deputy Chairperson: No one else has indicated that they want to ask a question. Nuala and Carol, thank you very much for coming to the Committee today.