



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Review of Initial Teacher Education  
Infrastructure: Queen's University Belfast

17 September 2014

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Employment and Learning

Review of Initial Teacher Education Infrastructure: Queen's University Belfast

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

Mr Robin Swann (Chairperson)  
Mr Sammy Douglas  
Mr Phil Flanagan  
Mr David Hilditch  
Mr Chris Lyttle  
Mr Fra McCann  
Ms Bronwyn McGahan  
Mr Pat Ramsey  
Mr Alastair Ross

**Witnesses:**

Professor Paul Connolly	Queen's University Belfast
Professor Tony Gallagher	Queen's University Belfast
Professor Patrick Johnston	Queen's University Belfast

**The Chairperson:** I welcome Professor Patrick Johnston, president and vice chancellor of Queen's University; Professor Tony Gallagher, pro-vice-chancellor; and Professor Paul Connolly, head of the school of education. Gentlemen, you are very welcome to the Committee this afternoon. Patrick, over to you.

**Professor Patrick Johnston (Queen's University Belfast):** Thanks very much, Chairman. Thank you to the Committee for inviting us to discuss our views on the international report, 'Aspiring to Excellence'. With me are Professor Paul Connolly, who is the head of our school of education, and Professor Tony Gallagher, who is the pro-vice-chancellor for academic affairs and a leading international educationalist.

The university welcomes the report of the international review panel. We believe that it is a comprehensive report that provides an excellent in-depth analysis of the challenges and opportunities that we have in Northern Ireland around initial teacher training. We note that the report highlights — and we agree — the importance of focusing on delivery of world-class education based on the principles of international best practice. That goes right through the report, and we agree with that. We believe that that is absolutely critical to underpinning both what our children need for the future and what our society needs, and also to developing and contributing to a knowledge-based economy.

We entirely agree with the panel, as we said in our original submission to the Committee and to the panel. We believe that the education system here should attract the best possible candidates. It should be competitive. We want those candidates to be able to secure jobs and to grow in the sector, developing it here in Northern Ireland. We also agree that the teacher education programmes must be

academically strong. There must be close partnership with schools in developing and delivering that. We need an environment that is underpinned by a research ethos that complements and drives forward the whole educational ethos, and also provides students and, indeed, teachers, with the opportunity to directly engage in that.

We also agree with the recommendations on delivering a pluralistic educational framework that protects diversity, which is an important feature and issue within the educational framework in Northern Ireland. We believe that that can be protected in a number of ways, as outlined in the report. We also believe that developing a strategy for teacher education in Northern Ireland is extremely important and that the admission systems should align with UCAS.

As I have already said, all of that was highlighted in our original report to the international panel. We agree with its conclusion that the status quo is neither viable nor sustainable. We note the four options that it has recommended as a way of potentially delivering on some aspects. We believe that the only option that will actually deliver world-class education training in a sustainable way and that meets the best principles of international practice is option D, a single institution of education. It is our view that Queen's is best placed to do that. However, we firmly believe that option D is the only option that is really going to deliver the type of quality that we wish to see for students, teachers and the whole sector.

**The Chairperson:** The question I asked some of the other witnesses is this: do you believe there was openness of mind on the part of the Minister and the Department going into this review, or was there a predetermined outcome?

**Professor Johnston:** I believe that there was an openness of mind in the whole review process. The report itself is certainly very open and comprehensive. The fact that the report brings four options to the table for discussion underpins that openness. I do not believe there was any prejudged way forward prior to the commencement of bringing the panel together. I think the report itself speaks to that.

**The Chairperson:** You have been very clear in your paper and your presentation this morning that Queen's favours option D because of the values and ethos behind it, but you have also said that you see Queen's as the centre for option D. Would you still support option D in Northern Ireland if Queen's was not the centre?

**Professor Johnston:** Yes, we would. We believe that Queen's is best placed because close to 80% of the existing provision is either within our affiliated university colleges or within our school of education. We believe that we already provide a very comprehensive suite of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and have a very dynamic research portfolio with research fellows and post-doctoral fellows and academic leaders, with over 30 of those in the school of education in Queen's currently. We have had an income of over £13 million across the past five years. I think that that speaks for itself with regard to the potential and the existing quality.

That having been said, if the decision were to create a single institute for Northern Ireland elsewhere, we would support that because we believe that it is the best option for children, Northern Ireland's education system and the economy going forward.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Good morning. It is good to see you again. Clearly, as the Chair has outlined, you certainly went for option D. Do you not see a situation, particularly in Northern Ireland, in which there is a place for faith-based education? There would be no role for faith-based education in option D.

**Professor Johnston:** Well, I disagree with that assumption. First of all, I actually believe that faith-based education is very important. There are many examples around the world and close to home, both in the Republic and also in the Glasgow-St Andrews evolution over the past decade, where faith-based education has been brought into and amalgamated with the wider opportunity that exists in universities. If we take Loyola University in Chicago, for example, we see that it has faith-based education surrounded by a much wider and integrated opportunity for research in that framework. I am not saying that there will not be challenges, but my belief is that the two are not incompatible at all. It is a matter of working through the issues to deliver those opportunities and ensure that some of the advantages in faith-based education actually come to the fore.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Being devil's advocate, if you went for option D, what assurances would you give St Mary's that it would be able to protect its autonomy on finances, ethos and the integrity that it believes it has, and justifiably so, in going forward?

**Professor Johnston:** If option D became the preferred option, we would obviously then work with St Mary's around an agreed framework that would bring it completely into the university, being supported financially and otherwise. We would have no intention to pull out of west Belfast; indeed, very much the opposite, as I said in my previous visit to the Committee earlier in the summer. It would be my intention that the university's presence in west Belfast is strengthened in both its visibility and impact through St Mary's being part of Queen's in a much more integrated way. St Mary's would benefit from getting access to very deep partnerships around research and also critical mass around educational programmes of real depth. I see that only as being beneficial and indeed, probably in terms of the financial issues, actually expanding the financial impact of St Mary's because it has become an integral part of Queen's and linking that to the social fabric, which we have discussed before, in west Belfast, which it currently does so well.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Is it not presently getting that expertise from Queen's, for example, academically or on the appointment of staff, and your assistance in doing so? Are all of those elements not there?

**Professor Johnston:** Not to the level that it should be. There is not the level of integration on academic programmes. There is duplication. Indeed, there is not the joint planning. There is not really the research base that there could be and probably should be in my view. So, I think that opportunities that would grow from an integrated approach are significantly greater. They are not there currently.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Again, as someone who strongly favours the retention of St Mary's, I have a sense that option D and the takeover by Queen's of the whole training concept would bury St Mary's entirely. Option C is an initial teacher education federation, which would enable the integrity of Stranmillis and St Mary's to remain intact. Can you see a circumstance in which you would be part of that?

**Professor Johnston:** We would not rule that out at this juncture. However, I would say very firmly that, in a federated model, we will not easily achieve the quality that we want to achieve and have a world class educational system. You also have issues around the sustainability and financial viability of the current system. That will not be easily addressed in a federated system. We cannot have a system in which 18% of our graduates are getting jobs in Northern Ireland. We are currently training people to go to Saudi Arabia to teach, not to teach in Northern Ireland; that is an indictment.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Is the 18% reflective of the graduates coming out of St Mary's?

**Professor Johnston:** It is reflective of the total graduates coming out. Eighteen per cent of our graduates are getting jobs as teachers in Northern Ireland.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I, personally and politically, would have to be convinced of option D. Another submission this morning is opting for it as well, but I am not absolutely sure about it and would need convincing.

**Professor Tony Gallagher (Queen's University Belfast):** The approach that we are taking to this is putting the needs and interests of our young people, and not the needs and interests of institutions per se, at the centre of considerations. We have had this debate in a different context, and exactly the same principle was applied. We already know that, in the school system, there is too wide a variety of outcomes for young people. Absolutely central to school improvement is the quality of our teachers and attracting the very best people to train as teachers and work in our schools. The current system is not attracting the best because too many of the people who go in are not going to get work as teachers in Northern Ireland. It costs 30% to 40% more to train teachers in colleges here than in other places. In a place of this size, if we want to put the needs and interests of young people at the centre of our consideration, the current system just does not look fit for purpose.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Have you ever had any discussions with St Mary's on this concept that you have?

**Professor Johnston:** No, we have not had direct conversations with St Mary's. I have met Peter Finn several times, but that was prior to the report. I have, however, written to him in the last week to ask for a meeting of our senior management teams to discuss the report in more detail together. My own

view is that option D has the potential to drive the very-high-quality system and, at the same time, protect some of the things that are very valuable in St Mary's.

**Mr Douglas:** Thanks very much for the presentation. Sorry that I was late coming back. Patrick, you mentioned an integrated approach in response to Pat's reference to St Mary's University College. What does that actually mean for St Mary's?

**Professor Johnston:** That is where the further discussions would have to go. What you would be doing, at a broad level, is bringing together various programmes: the PGCE, some of the B Ed programmes and some of the masters programmes. You would be integrating those and probably modularising them with greater depth. You would be making sure that there was harmony across some of the practice-based learning but also in the content of courses and, indeed, where those are sited. So, you would have greater critical mass of lecturers, senior lecturers and professors involved and research underpinning every aspect of that at both undergraduate and postgraduate level.

The other thing that would integrate is planning, so that we in Northern Ireland and nationally and internationally can become even more adept in research within the educational spectrum and become pilots for new methodologies around education going forward and, very importantly, in the dynamic of further education. I am not necessarily talking about masters or PhD programmes; I am talking about the continual education of our teachers because it has to be seen as a lifelong thing. That, of course, enhances the quality. It also enhances the passion and commitment that the education profession brings to what it does in schools.

**Mr Douglas:** How would that impact on St Mary's? At the moment, it is based in west Belfast. It has been suggested this morning that it would potentially merge with another college; Stranmillis, for example. I know that you have a good track record of working in disadvantaged communities, places like Sandy Row. How would you continue that support for those disadvantaged communities?

**Professor Johnston:** As you know, Sammy, as an institution, we have signed up to the manifesto for education, which five of the Ministers have already supported. I am a patron of that. The university, through Professor Gallagher, sits on the steering board for that, which is a very visible statement of our commitment to west Belfast in what we do.

I do not want to come down and make specific recommendations, because I think that that would be improper. What I am getting at, as I have said earlier, is that we would not see St Mary's coming into Queen's as a case of, "We are going to close St Mary's." It is very much the opposite. It would be an opportunity for Queen's to have visibility in west Belfast in developing programmes around education and potentially other things related to the economy there. I do not want to get into specifics, because that is where we need to have more debate about what it would look like. Some aspects would still be present in St Mary's and some would be on the Stranmillis campus. However, the visibility and impact of Queen's in west Belfast would be much greater through being present in St Mary's.

**Mr Douglas:** As Pat mentioned earlier, we have met staff from Stranmillis and St Mary's over the last couple of years. A theme from some people, not everybody, was their perception of Queen's University as being very much a secular university, which it is in many ways. You mentioned the importance of faith-based education. How does a secular institution encourage faith-based education?

**Professor Johnston:** My view is that you embrace it. In other words, you have defined courses, as we already do in our school of education, relating to religious education and preparing people to teach in the Catholic secondary school sector. We are a secular institution, but that does not mean that we cannot embrace faith-based education. I believe that faith-based education is very important.

**Mr Douglas:** So do I.

**Professor Johnston:** I think that it delivers real added value. I do not think that it is beyond us to maintain what is very good about the system and, at the same time, build on it in a very significant way. My colleagues, Tony and Paul, may want to comment on that.

**Professor Gallagher:** Paul can say a bit more, but most post-primary teachers for the system are trained through the University of Ulster or Queen's and go out to work in controlled, maintained, grammar, secondary or whatever types of schools. The shared education work that we have

pioneered over the last 10 years is all about providing the best of the diversity in the system by allowing faith-based schools to work with other schools in collaborative networks to do that. We train all the region's post-primary RE teachers.

Teachers who want to work in Catholic schools are given an opportunity to do the certificate if they want to do so and if that is a requirement to work in a Catholic school. We have always provided that context. As well as the two teacher training colleges, we have associated colleges. All the theological colleges are within the framework of Queen's as well. There are historical reasons why our charter is the way that it is and why we have a secular character, but that does not mean that religion is absent from Queen's University, far from it.

**Professor Paul Connolly (Queen's University Belfast):** As Tony has said, the key issue is that we have pioneered the shared education model in Northern Ireland. We have provided all the evidence base behind it. Currently, there are 130 schools and 9,000 pupils impacted directly by different forms of collaboration. Respect for diversity, faith-based education and other forms of education provision is at the heart of that. Last year, I chaired the ministerial advisory group that looked at options for the Minister of Education around shared education. We came up with a very clear support for diversity in the education system and faith-based schooling. Option D does not threaten faith-based education; it supports diversity. In the report of the international panel, there are many examples and models of how respect for diversity can be covered and included in different models and forms of provision. The last thing to say is that there are many very strong Catholic post-primary schools across Northern Ireland, and most of the teachers in those schools, certainly in the STEM-based areas, in mathematics, science, modern languages and English are trained at Queen's. Again, there is no way in which we can be undermining, nor is there any distinction between a strong school of education with diversity as its focus and strong faith-based schools; the two can work together very well.

**Mr F McCann:** I just want to pick up on some things that have been said. I am from west Belfast and, when it comes to looking at option D, the Minister has an agenda which St Mary's and Stranmillis do not fit into. Therefore I am deeply suspicious, when I look at all the options, that the whole review may have been narrowed to a point that it delivered the desired result.

I was under the impression that St Mary's already delivers high-quality education to teachers and had a very high rate of teachers going into employment. You spoke about the North of Ireland rate but dealing specifically with St Mary's, does it buck the trend?

**Professor Johnston:** I cannot answer the specifics on St Mary's and where they go, but I can say, in a holistic way, that only 18% of our graduates in 2013 got jobs in Northern Ireland. In June 2012, it was 12.3%. We know that a lot of graduates go to work in the Middle East and may eventually come back. We also know that over 300 people who were trained in GB ended up working here.

We now have a system that is not serving our teachers very well. First, we are not attracting the very best and brightest, partly because they have a low chance of employment, at least in Northern Ireland, initially. That is one of the real reasons. You are absolutely right about quality: quality is good and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) assessment has said that. What we are getting at is international best practice and the quality that goes beyond ticking a box. It is about where you get to excellence. You go from the level of competence and being good to the level of excellence.

That is what is behind my commentary and that of the university; it is that we are missing that trajectory towards excellence. Why? It is because we do not have the critical mass. We have a distributed model that is not integrated. It is not underpinned by international best practice, nor does it align with what is happening very closely around us in GB and in the Republic of Ireland. We are not necessarily seeing the returns in terms of the impact of that education system, particularly in the post-primary sector.

**Mr F McCann:** Are you saying that you will be able to deliver that critical mass only if St Mary's becomes part of —

**Professor Johnston:** I am not focusing the argument on any institution, including Queen's. I am saying that the best option for Northern Ireland and for young people and teachers of the future here and, indeed, for our economy is to have a single institute of education, no matter where that is, integrated into a much wider framework.

**Mr Ross:** Your favoured option is option D, a single institute for education. I understand the reasons for that, and I agree with some of the rationale you have given us. You have also tried to give some comfort to those who are particularly concerned about the St Mary's or Stranmillis sites.

The University of Ulster representatives will be here after you, and they will presumably argue that, geographically, it is important that the constituency in the north-west and on the north coast of Northern Ireland is serviced and has the ability to get initial teacher training there. They will argue that it is important for teacher placements that that provision is there because continuous professional development tends to be done after working hours and it is easier, geographically, for that to be done there. Can you give us an idea of how you would ensure that there is still provision across Northern Ireland, even if there were a single education centre based at Queen's? Would you have a physical presence, or would you try to get one elsewhere in Northern Ireland?

**Professor Johnston:** First, my belief is that it is possible to do it from a single institution, should that single institution be in the north-west or in Belfast, and have that connect to the schools and their infrastructure across Northern Ireland. We do that already, for example, in the health sector, which I was in. We have sub-deaneries for education in all our major hospitals across Northern Ireland, including Altnagelvin, and we have an infrastructure that relates to that.

I believe that option D — an institute — can deliver for everyone in Northern Ireland in relationship with that quality agenda that I have talked about already. Does that involve having a physical structure in certain places? It could. I do not want to rule that out or in at this juncture. I just believe that one institution will have the capability, in size, integration, resource and planning, to really deliver something comprehensive, which is why I think that the two-site model dilutes that and will not deliver quality and that we will be back here in 10 or 15 years' time re-discussing the pros and cons of that. I turn to my colleague, Professor Connolly, to answer this as well.

**Professor Connolly:** It all depends on how we see initial teacher education and continuing professional developments in where we are heading, whether it is through single institutions or one larger one.

The model in which we are all based in one building and where everybody comes to that building for training and ongoing professional development is one that we should be moving away from. In our research, in the school of education, we have run a large number of very practical trials in schools — 800 schools across Northern Ireland and beyond, and 36,000 pupils. So, we are not a Belfast-based institution with regard to research. We are covering the whole of Northern Ireland, and much of our research is in the South and in England. We have a much broader vision. We are not constrained by a building.

As far as professional development is concerned, if we are really taking the model of shared education seriously, then one of the challenges I have identified in the school of education is that we need to move away from a model in which trained teachers, if they want professional development, have to sign up for a three-year masters degree, and come in every Wednesday and Thursday night against all the elements. We need to move to a different model, one in which there is a proper partnership with schools — we have excellent partnerships already but we need to take that further.

The model that we are exploring now, and which we have money to pilot next year, is one in which we are asking schools to work together, in area learning communities, to identify their needs and what they want to be focusing on regarding priorities, and for us to be flexible enough to deliver modules or short courses that are bespoke and can address those needs and, critically, can be delivered out in those area learning communities.

We should not be thinking about whether there should be one institution or two institutions. We should not be thinking that those are where we should be providing much of our work. If we are really going to be radical, and have an international world-class system, we need to be fully embedded with the schools and have that partnership model.

**Mr Lyttle:** Given your own international standard of expertise and experience in education and given some of the things that have been said in the Committee today, would you say that, given the stature of the educational experts who were appointed to the panel, would they have done anything other than offer their own independent proposals in relation to a way forward for teacher training in Northern Ireland?

**Professor Johnston:** I was appointed only recently, and I met the panel only at the point where it delivered its report. I formed the impression that they were absolutely neutral as regards any preconceived ideas of where this might go. They analysed every aspect of the system comprehensively. The report, in my view, is outstanding in that regard. It looked at best practice across the world, and those examples are cited. They are very important examples. The panel presented four options. They presented a very insightful and balanced report, and I do not think that they were swayed by anyone.

**Professor Gallagher:** Just to add to that: the panel is an incredibly distinguished group of experts in education, and Pasi Sahlberg is probably the leading commentator in education reform in the world at the moment. He was a key figure in the Finnish education system and, for a number of years, he has literally been going round the world talking to people about how the Finnish system is organised and why it comes top in all the international league tables in school performance. He is currently a visiting professor in Harvard, and he advises Governments all over the world. To get someone of that stature to take the time to look at our system was a real bonus, and there is absolutely no question that people of that stature looked at our system with a fully independent mind and an incredibly informed perspective.

**Professor Connolly:** The stature of everybody else on that panel shows that they are not people who will be dictated to by the chair, however international they are. You have John Furlong from Oxford University, who has done reviews around the world. He has just come back from Hong Kong where he looked at the system there. There is an eminent set of people on the panel.

The thing to stress is that their report is not just their own views; they report on the evidence internationally. A fair amount of what they have reported on are the findings from the British Educational Research Association (BERA), which has, over the last couple of years, conducted a major review of teacher education and the place of research within that and future directions. The findings from that independent review are very much part of what was put forward by the panel. It is not simply one person dictating to everybody else or one person having their own view; it is very much grounded in a very objective international view of the situation.

**Mr Lyttle:** That is helpful information, Chair. As a relative lay person in relation to educational expertise —

**Mr F McCann:** Certainly not unbiased —

**Mr Lyttle:** I will try to remain constructive, Chair.

**Mr F McCann:** You are certainly not unbiased.

**Mr Lyttle:** Given some of what has been said this morning, it is important to remember the standard of work that has been presented to the Executive and the Assembly to give proper consideration to in order to improve and reform matters.

I have not responded too much to some of the political attacks here today, Chair. I will probably just leave it that way, to be honest.

**The Chairperson:** Fra, do you want in again?

**Mr F McCann:** I will just leave it, Chair.

**The Chairperson:** Gentlemen, thank you very much.