



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Review of Initial Teacher Education
Infrastructure:
Briefing by the Expert Panel

24 September 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 Phil Flanagan
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Professor John Coolahan	National University of Ireland Maynooth
Professor Gordon Kirk OBE	Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers
Professor John Furlong	University of Oxford

The Chairperson: Gentlemen, you are very welcome. I advise members that Professor Pasi Sahlberg is, unfortunately, unable to attend. He was due to take part via Skype. However, we are joined by Professor Gordon Kirk OBE from the Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers, Professor John Coolahan, professor of education at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, and Professor John Furlong, professor of education at the University of Oxford. Gentlemen, you are —

Mr F McCann: Chair, before you go on, is there any indication when the chair of the panel might be available to come to the Committee or —

The Chairperson: He said that he would take any concerns or queries addressed directly to him in the meeting via correspondence and that he would comment on the Hansard report. We tried to get him via Skype or telephone conference, but, unfortunately, he was not available. However, he assured us that the three gentlemen in front of us would be able to respond to any and all concerns that might arise. Gentlemen, there is no pressure on you whatsoever. *[Laughter.]* We received a briefing at our previous Committee meeting from all five colleges and universities involved in teacher training in Northern Ireland. I hand over to you for an opening statement or brief.

Professor John Furlong (University of Oxford): Thank you very much. There is one more apology, and that is from another panel member, Professor Patricia Broadfoot from Bristol University. She had a prior engagement that she was unable to get out of and regrets not being here. Thank you very much for seeing us.

As you are aware, this is the second of a two-stage review process. In the first, a Grant Thornton report focused on the financial stability and sustainability of the two university colleges. As a second phase of the review process, the Minister asked us to look at the case for reform of teacher education in Northern Ireland and whether the funding could be more appropriately used if the training institutions were able to move to a more shared or integrated system. Specifically, our terms of reference were to review the international evidence on best practice; look at how practice in Northern Ireland measured up against those international trends; and then to come forward with a series of options for the future infrastructure of the sector as a whole.

It is important to make it clear that we were perfectly comfortable with the terms and conditions set down for us. They clearly asked us to come up with options for the infrastructure of initial teacher education, which is within the Minister's remit. You will also know that, throughout the report, we said that, in order to do that, we had to look at teacher education more broadly. We could not talk about infrastructure until we had a view, and we were specifically asked to look at best practice internationally.

First, our report sets out what we think is international best practice. We then look at how Northern Ireland relates to that, and we read off from that a series of options for infrastructure — solely for infrastructure. We are aware that, in some senses, in looking at the content, we are looking at areas outside the purview of this ministry, but we do not make recommendations. We comment on them, but our recommendations are confined quite clearly to the infrastructure, which is within the Minister's purview.

The evidence was extensive. We looked at international trends and the current policy frameworks for teacher education in Northern Ireland and many other countries, and we talked to the teacher education community. We had senior representation from all five institutions. We had 111 written statements, which we were able to interrogate. We also talked more informally to a wide range of other stakeholders. We read the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) reports, and we talked to other people about faith-based higher education and initiatives in other countries where similar issues have been struggled with. We talked to colleagues about the nature of pluralism in contemporary society. Very importantly, we engaged with a large body of evidence on international best practice, which was put together recently by the British Educational Research Association (BERA), working collaboratively with the Royal Society of Arts (RSA). That was an inquiry into the role of research in teacher education, which I chaired, and, coincidentally, it came out at the same time as we were working on these sorts of issues. So it has been very influential, and it summarises a huge amount of international evidence in the field.

What we find from international trends in teacher education and what we summarise in our report come down to five key principles. First, we found that a high-quality system attracts the very best candidate and constantly works to improve its capture of the very best candidates, academically and dispositionally. It is not about wanting only academic high achievers; you also want people who have the disposition for teaching — you want both. The courses should be competitive compared with other courses in higher education and very practice-focused. We are not developing new academics; we are developing people who will be practitioners.

High-quality courses have a strong link between theory and practice. All sorts of ways have to be found to give people strong practical experience and the opportunity to read in order to find out what is happening elsewhere, what practice is like in other contexts and what research tells them. Then, it is about bringing the two together into their world of practice.

A good system also has strong links between initial teacher education and continuing professional development. In the best systems in the world, that is a seamless transition.

Finally, all that work and the best systems build on an understanding of how people learn to be teachers. We know an awful lot from research about that. The highest-quality courses are explicitly built around that research knowledge: they research what they are doing and feed that back into to a constant cycle of improvement.

Those are the five principles that we talk about and which we learned from the literature. Before going on to the options, we evaluated what we saw in Northern Ireland.

Professor Gordon Kirk (Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers): When we took the five principles and looked at provision in Northern Ireland, we could see undoubted strengths in the system. Northern Ireland is not new to the teacher education business; it is a mature system with a

number of key strengths that we identified, including very impressive work on internationalising the teacher education curriculum. However, we also identified a number of what we refer to as shortcomings. First, the system is small and fragmented. At undergraduate level, we are talking about 1,400 students. Many high-quality teacher education institutions comfortably have more than twice that number. Therefore, we have to ask whether we need five institutions, if we include the Open University (OU), to handle that number. Do we need five separate management systems, five separate financial offices, and so on and so forth? There are issues there about the impact of the small size and fragmented nature of the system on the quality of provision.

Secondly, we saw a number of ways in which the system called out for improvement. We had concerns about the strategic leadership of the teacher education sector. We were worried about the discontinuity between initial teacher education and continuing professional development. We were also worried about the extent to which research activity actually informed teacher education. The performance of the different institutions is very uneven. We saw a number of anomalies relating to the university admissions system and the certificate in religious education. There were some areas of unevenness that we wanted to draw attention to. The reason why some kind of review is essential is that Northern Ireland faces two major educational difficulties. One relates to the overall performance of the education system, which, as judged by international standards, is middling. It is not catastrophic, but there is an acknowledgement that there is a long tail of underachievement in Northern Ireland. Some of the indicators of the effectiveness of the education system are not encouraging: the number of NEETs — those not in education, employment or training — in Northern Ireland is twice that for the UK as a whole, and four of 10 school-leavers do not get five good GCSEs, which is usually considered to be the test of employability.

The second reason is that Northern Ireland is moving from a period of conflict and social division to one in which all political parties have produced a succession of policy documents on the need to create a more cohesive community and the need to have more shared values across the community. Teachers are not solely responsible for addressing these two problems, but they have a big and important role to play. Therefore, it seems to us that, to address these big difficulties, Northern Ireland needs a teacher education system that is playing at the top of its game. The status quo is not strong enough. Those who simply take refuge in the status quo and mark time fall behind. There is an imperative necessity for teacher education in Northern Ireland to move forward.

What principles should inform the further development of the sector? Of course, these are the five international trends that we identified, but in Northern Ireland we identified a further principle, which we call the principle of pluralism. It is manifestly the case that there are different conceptions of teacher education in Northern Ireland. The panel believes that it is silly to run away from those or to deny their existence; rather, the aim was to acknowledge that there were different systems and perspectives on teacher education, and to find a way in which institutions could pursue their distinctive missions more securely.

Tied to the principle of pluralism, we wanted to express that, in addition to identifying what is distinctive, there is a need for some provision of shared education — ways in which all those graduating to teach in the schools should have some experience of what it means to be members of a particular community, so that the education system might help to play its part in removing or alleviating some of the social divisions. When we talk about the five trends, we tied to the principle of pluralism the notion that there is a need for a strong development of shared education.

Before moving to the options, we identified a number of conditions that need to be met. There is a strong case for a Northern Ireland teacher education advisory committee that exerts a big impact on the strategic direction of the sector. One of the members of the panel liked to invoke the practice in Scotland, where there was a very strong Scottish Teacher Education Committee. It was responsible, obviously — Governments are there to govern — but the Scottish Teacher Education Committee was able to harness views about the development of the sector. Some such group is needed.

Also, the pattern of teacher education needs to be strengthened. There is still a lot of support for undergraduate and postgraduate teaching, and we support that. That is another international development. In addition to that, we think that the one-year postgraduate course is far too compressed. It could, as in other places, be extended to two years. There is a need for a huge investment in the continuing professional development of teachers. We have a number of conditions that need to be met, including the need for a more rational and understandable approach to workforce planning in teaching. It is quite difficult to get at what exactly is happening with regard to numbers in teacher education. That system needs to be improved, and then there is a need to utilise the available

resources more intelligently so that they help to enrich the quality of the service. All of that is preliminary to going on to the options.

Professor John Coolahan (National University of Ireland Maynooth): Thank you, Chairman and members. As was suggested from our analysis, we did not consider that the status quo is best positioned to deliver the type of quality system that is desired for the future. Accordingly, in section 8, we set out four options for the most appropriate infrastructure to support the enhancement of the provision that we judge to be required. We looked at the options against four key criteria to check them out, as it were, or take a perspective on them. One is the quality: do they have the quality in terms of representing the characteristics of best international practice, which we discussed earlier? The second is efficiency. The third is continued support for the existing tradition of diversity in Northern Ireland. Finally, the practicability, as it were, or the ease of implementation of the particular options. We also highlight some features of the Northern Ireland context that we believe need to be taken into account in relation to the options.

Option A talks about a collaborative partnership whereby the four current providers — because the OU is no longer giving initial teacher education — would operate with a much greater level of collaboration and cooperation. Evidence of collaboration and cooperation, which we specify in the report, would be a condition of funding going forward. The four institutions would continue, but there would be much greater cooperation between them.

Option B posits the idea of a two-centre model: one based in the north-west, potentially in UU, and the second in Belfast, taking the form of an institute of education. Here we would focus on the existing traditions that exist between Queen's University, Stranmillis and St Mary's. They already have arrangements whereby the St Mary's University College and Stranmillis degrees are validated by Queen's University. That would be built on as another possible way forward. We spell out the aspects of that which we think might recommend it.

Option C sees a Northern Ireland teacher education federation in which existing institutions would continue, but where some of the responsibilities would be ceded to a supra-institutional agency. We spell out the details of that in option C.

In option D, we talk about a Northern Ireland institute of education whereby teacher education across the Province would become the responsibility of a single institution, the Northern Ireland institute of education, but, nevertheless, where the individual traditions and ethos, and so on, of the different institutions would also get recognition. The idea is that there would be much more integration than in the one or two.

That is an outline summary of the report. We are happy to take questions, and we are very pleased at the amount of interest you are taking in the report.

The Chairperson: OK, gentlemen; thank you very much. Gordon, you referred to the pluralism of society and the historical nature of Northern Ireland. How much were you swayed or influenced by the notion that you could see this report or recommendations as a way of bringing teacher training together in a way that could play into the solution of the Northern Ireland problem? Was there a greater thought process that if you could solve teacher training you would be contributing to solving the problems of Northern Ireland?

Professor Kirk: All sorts of factors contribute to the well-being of the community. The school is not the only agency that is involved. I think that everyone recognises that the most critical factor of a school is the quality of the teachers. We considered what institutional arrangements would enhance the quality of the teaching and the teachers, and, in that way, we hoped to address some of the big challenges facing the community. That was the predominant theme in all of our deliberations.

Professor Coolahan: It is true to say, Chairman, that we took note of the policy documents by the various political parties in the North over the recent years and their concerns for society evolving in a way in which there is greater collaboration, mutual respect, understanding, tolerance etc, as would be proper in civic society. We noted that and the emphasis placed on shared engagement. That certainly weighed on us.

Professor Furlong: Also, this is not the first review of teacher education in Northern Ireland; I think it is the fourth. I think that there were discussions in 1932 about the same sort of issue. One of the criticisms that we had about the most recent reviews is that they did not respect and start from a

position of respecting pluralism. They were rationalistic reviews from outside about how the world ought to be in ideal terms from the point of view of teacher education. We were absolutely convinced, from the beginning, that we had to recognise the distinctive nature of teacher education in Northern Ireland, which is a pluralistic one. Any solution or movement forward for the future has to have that as its heart. That is a partial answer to your question. It is not going to solve everything in moving society in Northern Ireland forward, but it is a critical part of it. I think that we wanted to make sure that our work was based on that principle.

The Chairperson: I suppose that another underlying current of the work that concerned the Committee was the process. The Grant Thornton report came first. It almost set out the finances of which institute was going to be the solution and had a future. How much did that play into your deliberations? I know, Gordon, that you mentioned infrastructure, I think, and the importance of it. Did you take the hard cash and the structures?

Professor Furlong: It was one of the things that we started with, yes, but we started with many others as well. We noted that. We debated that report, but we put a great deal of our energy into looking at international best practice and how Northern Ireland measures up against it. We also took great cognisance of the employment rates — the business that Gordon referred to at the end. For me, that is the real crisis that the sector faces. The employment rates for graduate teachers a year after they have graduated are that only 18% of those students are being employed as teachers. A year later, it has settled down, but it is between 30% and 40%. It has been like that for five years. It is not just about the Grant Thornton report; that is another indicator that there are infrastructural challenges to be faced. It is all of it. Of course, Grant Thornton was there, but there were so many other things as well that were encouraging us to think seriously about options for the future.

Professor Coolahan: We did read it and take note of it, but genuinely I think that we did not let it weigh unduly on our considerations. It was just a factor with certain facts about the costings and *[Inaudible.]* It did not weigh too much upon us. We were just aware of it and carried on with our own reflections, which were kind of different to Grant Thornton. The emphasis was different.

The Chairperson: Can you give us details on your engagement with the five current providers? I will be honest with you, gentlemen; we had the five providers up with us last week and some of them were critical, to say the least, about how they thought that they were possibly engaged with or "not asked the right questions" — I think that was the phrase that was used.

Professor Kirk: We sought submissions from them and received copious documentation. We then engaged with them. All of those discussions were collegial and constructive. At every session, this opportunity was extended to witnesses: "Now, is there anything that you would like to say to us that you have not had the opportunity to say?". So, if our institutional colleagues say that they did not really quite have the chance or that we did not ask the right questions, we certainly gave them the opportunity to enlighten us — genuinely.

As we all know because we have all worked in institutions like that, colleagues in the institutions have a huge interest in getting this thing properly sorted out. We had to — our professional way of operating is to proceed via consultation. We were very anxious to get the views of those working on the ground. We took seriously what they had to say. Of course, having heard their views, it was our responsibility then to interrogate that evidence and to have discussions amongst ourselves. Since it was quite clear that what the Minister expected from us was a number of options, we thought that we, as an independent body, having deliberated and identified the options, should put these to the Minister. We think that we conducted relationships with the institutions in a collegial and positive way.

Mr Flanagan: Thanks for the presentation. If the findings of any of these reports had been that there were no educational or financial issues, would you still have brought forward the same recommendations?

Professor Furlong: No educational issues? We were specifically asked to compare provision here with international best practice. I think it falls short in a number of key regards. I think that we tried to make that clear. Those are not questions about finance or about lack of employability; they are questions about the quality of what you are trying to achieve here. That was one of the key dimensions of the remit. It is quite clear that, in taking the next step forward in development, although the system has key strengths, it also has a number of key weaknesses, which Gordon outlined at the beginning.

One of the things that I am particularly interested in is the way in which teacher education in the 21st century draws on research evidence and scholarship, but then provides new teachers with ways of bringing that into their practice. One thing that is quite clear to us is that the research capacity of your teacher education system here is very differentiated. You have a couple of institutions that have a really high-quality research base and two institutions that do not have a particularly strong research base at all.

I am also aware that nowhere in Northern Ireland are there what I would call really high-quality links with the school system. There is still a dominant model whereby the student spends their time in the institution, is prepared and goes out on teaching practice. The best systems in the world build really close relationships with schools themselves actually running a key part of that professional education. That is where the best systems are going, and you are a long way from that. You are not alone. Lots of practice in the rest of the UK is a long way from that too. Some institutions in England are doing fabulous jobs, but lots are not. I could go on in more detail, but I will not. There are lots and lots of things. If you want a better-quality system, the system itself needs to change. Our job is to ask what infrastructural arrangements would facilitate those sorts of developments.

Mr Flanagan: Is it your belief that smaller institutions cannot do that?

Professor Furlong: I think it is an issue about whether they can be directed to do that. There is an issue about capacity, an issue about research capacity and an issue about how you get leadership capacity in five institutions as opposed to one, two or three. They could come together in various federal forms to give you that capacity, but there is a clear issue about how it happens with the current system.

Mr Flanagan: In your engagements with the sectors, am I right in thinking that you met the Council for Integrated Education?

Professor Furlong: We did.

Mr Flanagan: Why did you do that? I am not saying you should not have, I would just like a rationale for it.

Professor Furlong: We were interested in talking to a range of different bodies that related to questions of infrastructure. It clearly has views about infrastructure. We met it and a whole range of other bodies because we wanted to hear what they had to say.

Mr Flanagan: Under the Good Friday Agreement there are two aspects of education that are afforded special privileges — the integrated sector and the Irish-medium sector. Is there any reason why you met the Council for Integrated Education and not Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta?

Professor Furlong: We did not meet the — I cannot remember; pronounce the name for me again.

Mr Flanagan: Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta.

Professor Furlong: We did not meet it because that is actually about the content. We do not talk about anything to do with the substantive content. We do not look at early years education, further education, English language education or any of those things. We assume that all of those things are good, important and part of any teacher education provision. We did talk to those people who have views on the infrastructure. There is a clear difference.

Mr Flanagan: How do you know that Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta does not have a view on infrastructure?

Professor Furlong: It is a content issue, surely. We did not talk to people who were specialists in early years education or in modern language education. It is not that Irish language is not a hugely important issue. It clearly is a massively important issue strategically, but that is to do with the content of teacher education, and that is clearly outside of our view.

Mr Flanagan: But the perception certainly exists that, because you engaged with the Council for Integrated Education and not with other organisations that may well have a view on the issue, what is

actually being driven here is a social engineering agenda as opposed to an educational one. That is the view that many people have.

Professor Furlong: If that is what is being read, that is really unfortunate. It is certainly not our intention. Our view is quite clear about who the appropriate people to see are. They were not to do with getting into the curriculum of teacher education at all. That was not our job or our remit. It is clearly outside the sort of things that we should be doing according to our remit. We were asked questions at a much more global level about different forms of provision in which, of course, all of those different contents exist and will continue to exist in anything that we put forward.

Professor Kirk: An important part of our thinking was that we were not in the business of standing in the way of institutions pursuing their distinctive educational missions. We repeatedly make that point. Clearly, Irish-medium education is an important strand in teacher education provision, as is post-16 education. We are satisfied that they were already on the agenda. They were enthusiastically pursued by the institutions. What is the most appropriate framework within which those might be pursued even more effectively?

Mr P Ramsey: Good morning. You have taken on this role knowing that it is contentious, very emotive and hugely sensitive subject matter, because, while there are five providers, only two of them feel under threat that, through this process, they might lose their ethos and their identity, and St Mary's in particular is so passionate about its faith-based education. Can you outline to the Committee how many times you met Stranmillis and St Mary's?

Professor Furlong: We met them twice. We met them for a full afternoon each, and they fielded a large number of colleagues. As Gordon said, we had a full, open and frank discussion. We also met them at the end of the process and, of course, as Gordon also said, we got quite extensive documentation from both institutions.

Mr P Ramsey: You met them once during your deliberations. Was the second time you met them after you published your findings?

Professor Furlong: No, it was prior to publishing them.

Mr P Ramsey: Just prior to publishing the findings.

Professor Furlong: Just prior to publishing them, yes.

Mr P Ramsey: So, for the record, you met them to discuss your findings before you released them.

Professor Furlong: We met them to discuss our findings.

Professor Kirk: No. We met them so that we could share what our findings were with a strongly interested group. In other words, it was not intended to be a negotiation. It was intended, at the point of publication, to help to ensure that the arguments that we were presenting were grasped by those who would be most affected.

Mr P Ramsey: I will ask again just for the record. Did you have a meeting and hold discussions with St Mary's and Stranmillis regarding your findings and recommendations before they were released?

Professor Furlong: We informed them about them. That was probably the nature of the meeting. We wanted to make sure that they fully understood them and so we spent an afternoon with them talking about them in detail when they were about to be released. It was not a negotiation, and I do not think that, given the nature of the inquiry, it should have been a negotiation. This was our report. There were lots of things to be done afterwards in terms of discussion, but it seems to me that it would have been inappropriate to go into repeated negotiation with some of the key individuals about what the future shape should be. They were our recommendations.

Mr P Ramsey: I did not suggest that you should have. I believe that, in a major academic study with findings like this, it would be common practice for extensive engagement with those who are part of that inquiry. Is it not common practice?

Professor Furlong: Not on this sort of inquiry. Absolutely not.

Mr P Ramsey: I believe that it is not only good practice but good manners given the context that two organisations — one in particular — could lose their identity, but I will move on.

The Minister, when he led the debate in the Chamber, talked about one of the models of best practice, and Stranmillis said last week — I am not sure if Queen's did — that this is a Dublin City University (DCU) model of best practice. Was any member of the panel involved in that process leading up to what is now a successful change?

Professor Coolahan: Yes. I might be the person involved there, because one of the things that I do is I chair St Patrick's College of Education in Drumcondra. At the initial stages, when the Government moved towards amalgamation of institutions in Dublin, I was involved, and then I withdrew from direct involvement because the negotiations were between the four institutions. It is important to explain that we gave the case studies, including the one on DCU, because we thought that that would help to illuminate. We are conscious that the religious dimension is very significant in the teacher education traditions in the North of Ireland. The whole report makes reference to that, and we back that. In the case studies, we were anxious to show instances where institutions like that came together or made efforts to come together and where the denominational concerns of the institutions that were integrating were protected.

The only reason why we gave you the case of DCU in the South was to show one instance. Of the four institutions that were coming together, three were denominational teacher training colleges and the other was the university department in DCU. They came together formally, and the arrangements are very well ahead now. Coming together, they paid great attention to the denominational concerns of the Catholic denomination and the Church of Ireland denomination within the university framework. We thought that we would just illuminate and illustrate in a sense. We were not saying that this was the way that it should be anywhere else. That was one instance of six case studies that might help to show instances where, particularly, concerns about amalgamations between universities or institutions were conducted in such a way that there was sensitivity and concern for the denominational traditions and value systems of the institutions being engaged. That is purely as illustration.

Mr P Ramsey: I appreciate, John, your frankness on it. Can we get details on the three denominations that you referred to in terms of their incorporation to the new body? I am keen to see how that is a model of best practice and how the ethos, the autonomy and integrity of a faith-based organisation and of the board of governors of these institutions have agreed to that process. Is it possible to get that?

Professor Coolahan: It is, yes, and both archbishops — the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin and the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin — are formally there and are formally at the actual occasion. There is a document that spells it out, and I can send you a copy of it.

Mr P Ramsey: That would be useful. I made the point at the beginning that it is very contentious because, in essence and not to be crude about it, some of the options would bury St Mary's and end the tradition that it has in Northern Ireland as an institution. That seems to be favoured by one of the major institutions in Northern Ireland: Queen's. That is option D. Gordon, you referred to shared values. We all want to have shared values, but we also have to have a place in society where those strong, traditional faith-based values are no different, and we have those same shared values without being forced into a situation of integration. Do you not find that there is a place in Northern Ireland, unique as it is, where faith-based education is a principle point?

Professor Furlong: Absolutely.

Professor Kirk: It is one of the cardinal principles. We endorse that. We say that there are different conceptions of teacher education. One of these is faith-based teacher education, and we strongly support it.

Mr P Ramsey: Can you please explain to me then how that could be achieved, in my own ignorance, through option D?

Professor Furlong: We absolutely believe in the importance of having faith-based teacher education in Northern Ireland, because that is what Northern Ireland absolutely wants. That does not mean to

say that you have to have a faith-based, entirely independent institution. That is not the same thing. We need to disassociate those, so, in option B and option D, we suggest that the two religiously based institutions — the two colleges — should become part of a university sector and should still have an existence within that. We give one example of how that has happened in Glasgow, with St Andrew's College becoming part of the faculty of education there. There are also some very interesting models that are worth looking at of a slightly different sort in Cambridge, where you have a denominational teacher education college that has come into the university and still has a constitution as a denominational body. It is functioning as a college, it has an interest in education and it does other things as well. I know that it is challenging, institutionally, but if we can get this right, the idea of bringing faith-based institutions into a Russell Group university, giving them the opportunity to be at the top table academically in terms of their influence and ability to produce research and intellectual leadership at the highest level for their sector, would be a brilliant thing to struggle for. We need to work out how, in option B or option D, we can do that. There are examples around the British Isles where that has been achieved.

Mr P Ramsey: It is interesting that, in many respects, you are putting the cards on the table by identifying that there is only one university in Northern Ireland that is affiliated to the Russell Group.

Professor Furlong: No. I was talking about —

Mr P Ramsey: Ah —

Professor Furlong: All right, fine. *[Laughter.]* You have caught me out; I should not have said that.

Mr P Ramsey: But you did say it.

Professor Furlong: I know I did. I am responding to the presentation made by Queen's University the other day when it said precisely that it would like to be the leader of this new sector and find ways of protecting the denominational traditions and faith-based teacher education that came into such an amalgamation. It also said, as I would, that if it is not Queen's it could be somewhere else.

Professor Kirk: There is always a difficulty when you say that this happens in some other part of the globe. Would it happen and could it be made to work in Northern Ireland? That is difficult, but we felt an obligation as a panel to bring before our readers the fact that there are institutions in which the faith-based tradition in teacher education flourishes. Indeed, there are institutions in which different faith-based traditions coexist and flourish. If you say, "Well, OK, that happens in Liverpool but is there any guarantee that it could happen in Belfast?", then that is a difficult question, but there are ways in which we can learn from practice elsewhere. We might have to make certain adjustments to take account of the particular circumstances, but, if the issue is whether it is possible for faith-based teacher education to flourish within a larger institution, the answer is yes it can.

Professor Coolahan: It is important to stress that our deliberations draw out our reflections. We were anxious to ensure that there was no such thing as burying an institution, be it St Mary's or any other one, and that all the time, although there might be different amalgamations and structures, we were paying respect to the tradition's emphasis and values. It does not necessarily mean, as John said, that you always have to have a small, standalone institution to do that. Many riches can be gained as well as faith flourishing; there is no question of burying it in any of the four options.

The Chairperson: Pat, we will come back to you; other members have to get in.

Mr Lyttle: Thanks for your presentation. I found it extremely helpful to have an international independent review of the system in Northern Ireland. The examples put forward have generated helpful debate. You can see yourself in Northern Ireland that people try to impose all sorts of agendas on anybody who makes any intervention on any policy issue, so I am grateful for that —

Mr F McCann: You can be guilty of that yourself.

Mr Lyttle: OK, I will go further then. Questioning the academic best practice of professors from Harvard University, the National University of Ireland and Oxford University completely lacks any credibility whatsoever. The talk of burying institutions is emotive and unhelpful in a rare way, I have to say. I do not think that anybody is engaging in that business.

I will try to ask two substantive questions. Two key issues were raised; the importance of connecting initial teacher education with university-level research and the importance of balancing pluralism with cohesion, sharing and integration, which as you rightly mentioned, not only the political parties but the First Minister and the deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland have identified as key goals for our society. You go as far as to say that in terms of connection to university level research:

"Provision has not yet been sufficiently infused with the intellectual power which university involvement in teacher education makes possible",

and that without that type of activity:

"education...will slip into steady decline, with irreparable damage to the life chances of young people."

In terms of the second issue of balancing pluralism, you cite an example and say that it is possible for denominational teacher colleges to make provision within a single institution at a university. Will you comment on those two issues and those contexts a bit further because they seem to be two positive contributions to the debate?

Professor Kirk: We look upon universities as being the intellectual powerhouses of any country and making a huge impact in every area of public life. The wise community tries to find ways in which that intellectual power is used for the betterment of the community. We think it would be disastrous if the intellectual power of the universities of Northern Ireland was not put at the disposal of an enhanced teacher education system.

What creates that intellectual power is, of course, the research base of the universities. Teaching is a knowledge-based activity. It assumes that people are practising in the light of the best available evidence about how children learn and develop. That knowledge comes through research, so teacher education institutions ought to be embedded in a culture of that kind. That is why we strongly assert that if teacher education is not subject to that influence then the quality of the education provided is undoubtedly weakened and the life chances of children are affected.

On the second issue, we strongly endorse the principle of faith-based education. We would just find it inconceivable that anyone could read our report and not see a strong endorsement of the principle of faith-based education. But we also feel that that needs to be counterbalanced by a movement towards the kind of shared education that lessens the tensions and disagreements that exist in communities.

In one of the areas where we did intrude into matters that are, strictly speaking, the concern of the DE, we say that every teacher education, every person who is going to be a teacher, should have some experience of what it means to work in shared education, irrespective of the faith-based tradition in which you are learning to become a teacher. There should be a shared education component.

We do not elaborate on that. It is an activity. If the recommendation is accepted, it would be a matter for those involved to develop but we strongly believe that it should be a significant part of every teacher's professional preparation.

Mr Lyttle: I think there was one helpful question asked previously, which was to help us to understand better how the denominational ethos of colleges can be accommodated and protected within single institutions of education. If there is information that can help our understanding in more detail as to how that can be delivered then that would be helpful to get hold of. I would agree with that question.

Mr Douglas: Thank you for your report. At our deliberations last week, I asked Professor Peter Finn about internationalisation. I think you mentioned it this morning. He seemed to be quite upset because I asked him to elaborate on this point. This is what he said:

"This is the one part of the report that causes me concern and annoyance. I have invested 20 years of my life promoting the internationalisation of the student experience."

When you think of growing globalisation, you realise that Stranmillis College is the same as many other colleges in that it is very much involved. Was there any reason why your report did not explain the importance of the whole international dimension, given that it was prominent in the report to the Irish Government?

Professor Coolahan: Thank you for the question. I think that we can answer that. In many ways, when we met the institutions, we were very gratified with the extent of internationalisation. As a matter of fact, we used this sentence in our report:

"One of the striking features of teacher education in Northern Ireland is the way the teacher education institutions, not least the two university colleges, have become members of international networks".

We were very gratified with that, and we commented on it. Indeed, that day at St Mary's, I remember commenting that I was so pleased to hear that. So, in a way, to us, that did not amount to a problem. We felt that it was well established here. Maybe we should have commented more on it, but we did note it. We were very pleased with it and, therefore, were not worried about it. In the South, however, it was much less developed.

Mr Douglas: OK. I have a final quick question. You mentioned the importance of shared education and faith-based education. Was that the response of the five panel members? I know that two are not here today. Was there consensus?

Professor Furlong: Absolutely. We spent a lot of time talking about it, educating ourselves about it and finding out more about it, and it became an absolute core principle. Every single one of us has signed up to it.

Professor Kirk: May I say, Chair, that not only does this key dimension of education feature in a lot of public documents — 'Advancing Shared Education', the Good Friday Agreement, Together: Building a United Community and documents of that kind — but all the institutions, every one, without fail, express explicitly a commitment to the principle of shared education?

Mr Douglas: That is good.

Ms McGahan: Thank you very much for your presentations. I am not sure whether you watched last week's Committee proceedings, but St Mary's emphasised a collaborative partnership approach but not that as outlined in option A. You stated that you had two meetings with St Mary's, and I am assuming that that approach was discussed.

Professor Furlong: No. It has never been mentioned before. I would be interested to find out St Mary's meant by that. It was a new phrase.

Ms McGahan: OK. Do you agree that that type of approach fits in with shared education?

Professor Furlong: I really do not know. I do not know what it means by it.

Professor Kirk: We take the view that, whichever model or whichever of the four options you go for, shared education should be an integral part of it. So, it is not tied to any particular model or option.

Professor Furlong: I think that what Peter Finn was saying was that he did not support any of the four options that we set out and that he had a different vision about how the system can go forward. I would be very interested to have a discussion with him to hear him elaborate on that. There may be a fifth way, but I simply do not know what it is. Of course, in our view, shared education should be a core part of it.

Ms McGahan: We have a model of shared education at Moy Primary School in Tyrone. I have been involved in engagements with that school. It takes a collaborative approach but has its own autonomy, and I think that that can be accommodated. I ask that you follow that up with Peter Finn. I will certainly speak to him as well about there maybe being a fifth option.

Professor Kirk: We were operating on the understanding that our work was part of a process: that there had been a stage 1, and we were stage 2. We consulted the institutions and came forward with options for the Minister, and those options would become the focus of discussion between the Minister and Departments. I would be very surprised if, in these further discussions, there was to be no further elaboration on which option is most appropriate, how shared education might be developed and so on. That falls into the next stage of the journey.

Ms McGahan: OK. Thank you.

The Chairperson: John, as regards St Mary's collaborative approach, which it put to the Committee last week, may I clarify for our record that it never put that or any other documentation forward in either of the two meetings that it had with you?

Professor Furlong: I am not aware of it. I am not aware of it using that phrase. When I read the transcript, it was in the context of talking about, "Well, here are four options for the future of teacher education in Northern Ireland", and this notion of collaborative education was part of that debate. I do not recall hearing that phrase in relation to that debate. That is not surprising; until our four options were on the table, it was not possible for St Mary's to think about what its alternative might be. I am not criticising it for that, but I, personally, am not aware of it.

Professor Kirk: It is undoubtedly the case that in the long, sustained submission that we received from St Mary's, there is reference in some of the early pages, I recall, to working in partnership and collaboration. However, it did not strike us as being the central thesis of that submission. The central thesis of that submission was that the Catholic ethos was essential and could be protected only through institutional autonomy.

Mr F McCann: You will be glad to hear that I will be brief. I know that, when you were looking at all of this in the round, it was purely education-based and the historical impact of a university on an area would not have been considered. Nor was the impact that a university has on the economy of a local community considered. To touch on the whole question: St Mary's is unique in the quality and level of education it provides in the Irish language. I cannot understand how you would look at the thing and talk about content but not include the content in and around the provision of Irish-language teaching.

Professor Furlong: We have discussed this already. We have not discussed any content of teacher education; we have talked in broad principles. Of course Irish-language education is vitally important, and would have to be important in any system that goes forward. We learnt about what they were doing in St Mary's, and we have no doubt that it is very good quality. However, we learnt about a huge range of other things that St Mary's is doing. Irish language is particularly strategically important and would have to be protected in any further development of the sector as a whole. In a sense, that was kind of outwith our remit.

Professor Kirk: I say again that our central concern was to set out ways in which institutions can pursue their institutional missions more effectively. That was what we were considering; not to cut this and that or undervalue that, but, rather, given the rich tapestry of provision in Northern Ireland teacher education we asked this question: what is the most appropriate infrastructure that will enable that work to get better? There has to be a way. We sensed that in discussions with the institutions. All of them said, "Of course, we need to find ways of improving, because if you don't improve you mark time and can begin to fall backwards". We are not prohibiting anything. We are trying to suggest that, in the Minister's concern about infrastructural issues, our formulation of the question asks this: what is the best arrangement that will allow institutions to pursue what they are doing more effectively?

Mr F McCann: OK. You spoke of a number of anomalies in the system, including the use of UCAS. Why was that never discussed with St Mary's?

Professor Furlong: I am not sure. I do not think that, for us, it was a huge thing. It was just an anomaly that we noted. It is a technical difficulty that needs to be sorted out. I do not think that it is one of our headline things. There is another one about governance of the institutions. That is another anomaly that was brought to our attention. It was brought to our attention and we have noted it; it is not a headline feature.

Mr F McCann: Usually, if a report notes something as an anomaly, you would go back to whatever source might have been responsible.

Professor Furlong: Maybe we should have, but, quite frankly, I do not think that it is a headline thing. It is an anomaly, we raised it and it would be good if the Department and institution itself — I see from Peter Finn's discussions the other day that he decided to look at that issue, which is good.

The Chairperson: Very quickly, Pat.

Mr P Ramsey: We appreciate the work you have put into it. You may think that you are getting a grilling here, but we are doing it for good reasons.

Professor Furlong: You are doing your job.

Mr P Ramsey: We are doing our job —

Professor Furlong: Yes, that is fine; we are doing ours.

Mr P Ramsey: Correct me if I am wrong, but you, John, have indicated that B and D would be your preferred options.

Professor Furlong: It depends on whatever hat I am wearing. If you want to talk to me outside, I will tell you what my preferred options are. In fact, any of them would, in my view, be a significant improvement on where we are. However, there are complex issues, particularly about their achievability. I think that the opportunities of B and D getting faith-based education really built into university structures is a huge opportunity that you have now and that you should get excited about and get behind and not worry about how you get the institutional structures right to protect faith-based education but get it at the highest level of the university system. That is a fabulous prize to be struggled for. That is why I am excited about B and D. If we cannot go there, A and C will also, in my view, lead to improvement. That is talking entirely personally. I am not talking for the panel now, but I am excited about the opportunities here.

Professor Coolahan: I support that line too. When we came to study the project here, we were conscious that it was sensitive and difficult. We spent a great deal of time learning and thinking about it, and trying to get under the cultural thrust of the place etc. As we worked on it, we got more excited as the process went ahead. We are of the conclusion that there is a tremendous opportunity — to pick up on John's word — looking forward to the future and the public and educational good. My own issue is that if it moves along these directions, within three to five years Northern Ireland would genuinely have a really world-class teacher education system. This kind of opportunity comes once. A lot of the ingredients are there now. There are structural issues to be worked at, but, hopefully, people will keep an open mind, tease it through, see what the values are and genuinely say, "Well, maybe we can work together better and, in the long run, achieve greater efficiencies and qualitative change". The potential is great. We just hope that the chance is taken.

Professor Kirk: When you look at the so-called top-performing countries — countries that top the league tables and so on — teacher education is an integral part of university work in all of them.

The Chairperson: OK. Gentlemen, thank you very much for your time here today and for being so open and honest with us in your response. We appreciate that very much.

Professor Furlong: Thank you and good luck. *[Laughter.]*