



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Performing Arts, Technology and Innovation
Centre: South Eastern Regional College, Bangor

6 February 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)
Mr William Irwin (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr David Hilditch
Mr William Humphrey
Ms Rosaleen McCorley
Mr Basil McCrea
Mrs Karen McKeivitt
Mr Oliver McMullan

Witnesses:

Ms Corrine Courtney-Lee	South Eastern Regional College
Ms Shiona Croft	South Eastern Regional College
Mr Ken Webb	South Eastern Regional College

The Chairperson: We welcome the officials to the meeting. We have Ken Webb. Ken, please introduce your colleagues. I apologise for the delay. I think that you are aware that we had Sport NI with us in relation to an Audit Office report, which took some time. Thank you for coming to us today. I hand over to you to make your presentation.

Mr Ken Webb (South Eastern Regional College): Chair, thank you very much for the invitation to come along. With me are Shiona Croft, who is head of school for performing and creative arts, and Corrine Courtney-Lee, who is the assistant head of school for performing arts. We have a short presentation, which has been circulated to the Committee, and we also sent in a paper. With your approval, Chair, we intend to quickly go through the presentation. We will highlight some of the points and then, obviously, we will take questions.

Briefly, in outline, I will give a quick update on South Eastern Regional College (SERC). Then, I will focus on the performing arts, technology and innovation centre, with particular reference to the benefits that there will be to students, industry, business and the community. As I said, we will then take questions.

By way of reference, our Bangor campus is one of four main campuses, and we have smaller campuses at Holywood, down in the Ards peninsula and also at Ballynahinch and Newcastle. I will focus on a couple of key facts. Last year, 20,836 qualifications were achieved by 10,133 students at the college. In particular, I want to point to the figures on when students complete their further education (FE) courses. Last year, 96% of the students leaving the college following the completion of

their FE courses went on either to higher levels of education or into employment. Four per cent went to unemployment, and, although I do not find that satisfactory and we are working hard to improve on that, that figure is set within the context of overall youth unemployment of around 18% and graduate unemployment of 10%. The college has a real focus on ensuring that we are giving students the skills to enable them to get a job and obtain a career.

We engage with over 5,200 businesses and with schools under the entitlement framework. The map that you can see demonstrates the geographic spread of the businesses that we deal with, and we also work with businesses in the Republic of Ireland. On our relationship with local schools, I want to draw your attention to the success rates under the entitlement framework. Our overall success rate is 91%. The post-16 success rate is 96%, and the Key Stage 4 success rate is 88%.

From our point of view, it is very important that we have a focus on ensuring that we are helping to overcome disadvantage in the population. The slide that you can see represents the deprivation profile for the North Down parliamentary constituency. We can do this for any of the other parliamentary constituencies that we operate in. The people represented in area 1 are the most deprived, and those in area 10 are the least deprived. So, you can see that the North Down constituency has a profile that is undeprived, although there are a couple of little areas of deprivation in areas 2 and 3.

The next slide shows our student profile. You can see that our student profile is very much made up more of students from deprived areas and less on students coming from areas that are not deprived.

This is a 360-degree view of the performing arts centre itself. It is a four-storey building, one of which is below ground level. It is around 40,000 sq ft, half of which will be for performing arts. The cost, as you can see there, is just under £12 million. We hope to complete around Easter 2015. I will hand over to Shiona.

Ms Shiona Croft (South Eastern Regional College): I would just like to outline the types of programmes that we intend to offer and support. In performing arts there will certainly be programmes to support the creative industries. There will also be production arts, technical theatre and theatrical and film make-up. We identified the production arts and technical theatre through the creative blueprint of Creative and Cultural Skills, but there are skills gaps in technical theatre especially. We are trying to address that, but without the facility we are not able to offer that and cover the creative apprenticeships that they are trying to bring in as well, because the facilities that we have at the moment just do not lend to the technical theatre aspect — the sound, the lighting, the rigging and that type of thing.

The stagecraft is another area where we have had some success in the college at the moment working with the joinery students on certain projects. For example, we had a performance of 'Noises Off', which you will see a clip of later, and the joinery students made the set. The technology aspect of the new centre is advanced manufacturing, advanced engineering, software engineering and digital media. That is to cover the new areas of computer numerical control (CNC) machining, robotics and composites, and also for the innovation and incubation to promote start-up businesses of those particular areas. Here is a picture of what the atrium — the reception area — would look like. I will pass you to Corinne.

Ms Corrine Courtney-Lee (South Eastern Regional College): The facilities that will be in the building, from a performing arts perspective, will include a fully fitted flexible theatre — flexible in the sense that we will be able to house performances that have various different staging conventions. It could be the traditional kind of end-on stage or it could be theatre in the round. It gives the students the adaptable space to be able to experience those different staging conventions. We will have a second black-box performance space, which will also hold smaller, low-key music recital performances or workshop performances. We will have a scenery workshop with Scenedock, which, again, will provide us with the opportunity to deliver technical theatre qualifications. We will have a dance studio with fully sprung floors. At the moment, we offer a unique programme in performing arts at our Bangor campus, where we deliver a performing arts programme with pathways. You can choose to study dance as a pathway of your study. At the moment, that is unique to SERC.

We will have five rehearsal studios, which, of course, will be soundproofed and will have wireless recording technology, and we will have five industry-standard music recording studios. Two of those will be large recording studios that can hold entire ensembles or bands and there will be three smaller recording studios that will be more for the individual musician.

We will have dressing rooms and wardrobe and costume facilities, again supporting the technical theatre aspect. It has been identified through Creative and Cultural Skills that, for every person that is on the stage, there are eight jobs backstage. We intend to try to upskill our students to go out and grab those jobs.

We will have three small post-production Mac suites. We do a lot of film-making and a lot of integration with SERC's media department. Those Mac suites will give our students the opportunity to go in and do post-production work on sound and audio production.

Here is another shot of what the building will look like. We are really hoping to put all our music and performing arts students together in one space that is the social heart. At SERC in Bangor, our music and performing arts students are spread widely across the campus. There is not one place where they can go to be together and create and that is a social hub where the creative skills of the different disciplines can be brought out. We hope that putting all our students together will develop the creative skills and a sense of community.

Mr Webb: We move on to benefits for students. The centre itself will create the opportunity to have 400 additional full-time students across all the disciplines. There will be courses up to and including higher education. It will also give us the ability to make a wider curriculum offer under the entitlement framework. Our performing arts and creative industry courses draw students from quite a wide geographic area and are complementary to the facilities at the North West Regional College.

Ms Croft: The next slide shows the list of performing arts courses that we offer at present. The ones identified in yellow are new pathways that we hope to introduce. We will be advertising those from September. We are not hanging around waiting for the new building. We need to be proactive and make sure that we are taking substantial courses into the new building.

Our new courses will include dance, which we do not have as a specialist area at the moment. Students do dance in their community arts courses, but we have had feedback from students and their parents that they really want to follow a dance pathway as a specialism. The production arts courses are being offered to address the shortage of those skills through technical theatre. We will work alongside not just performing arts but our art and design, theatrical media and make-up departments. Students will study lots of different units.

We hope that the production arts courses will attract students who want to get into set design or craft design. It may attract a different type of student, perhaps boys who like the idea of doing set design. The joiners who did the stages for 'Noises Off' did not realise that they could use their joinery skills in that field. This will give them other opportunities to develop that. We hope to offer a HND in music production. That is a big area for event productions from a sound point of view. We also hope to have a foundation degree in performing arts not this September but the following September.

The next slide shows our part-time courses. The only part-time courses that we offer at the moment are in electronic music production, which are geared towards people from the industry who want to come in, use our facilities and learn a little bit more about the facilities but who are not particularly interested in getting a qualification. They work in the industry and want tuition and access to the studios that we offer. Those are bespoke courses, so they are obviously charged at a higher rate. And of course our leisure guitar is always extremely popular. We hope to branch out into instrumental tuition. That will support students coming from outside and our own students who also need individual instrumental tuition.

Under our specialist provision for industry using college expertise (SPICE) heading, we are trying to start running courses on vocal coaching and public speaking and presentation skills. We are hoping to target that at all walks of industry and anybody who has to make a speech in public, whether to a Committee like yourselves or whoever. Those people could avail themselves of vocal coaching or the presentation and public speaking course. We have experts who work in the industry. We have a very good, well-qualified vocal coach. That will broaden what we are doing in the performing arts.

Mr Webb: Continuing on the benefits to students, we have two examples, one of cross-curricular activities and the other of our media students creating multimedia productions.

Ms Courtney-Lee: The first example is a clip showing a set construction. We set up a time-lapse camera. You can see the construction students constructing our set for 'Noises Off' in 2010. Engaged in the project were 15 students studying level 3 in construction; 10 students studying level 2 in art and

design who decorated the set; five level 5 HND music students who did the sound production for the performance; 12 performers from the level 3 extended diploma in performing arts; and 10 students from our HND in performing arts who were the technical team for the production. From beginning to end, it engaged over 50 students. The set took around 10 days to construct. At the very end of the clip, you will see the students rehearsing.

Mr Webb: The two-storey piece of scenery was on a turntable. During the play, the whole set was spun around.

The second example comes from one of our student companies, Focus Productions, which operates in the media area. This short film was filmed outside Newcastle towards the end of August. We do not know what happened to that character after this scene. *[Laughter.]* It was filmed by students, but the equipment and so forth was provided by industry. They very much had industry support in producing it. It is one of a number of short films that have been produced by the student company.

Ms Courtney-Lee: I want to talk very briefly about our student theatre company, The Glass Umbrella, which I established in 2010 as artistic director. Our aim is to enlighten, entertain and educate. We established ourselves with mentorship from Kabosh theatre company and the Lyric Theatre in Belfast. Our aim is to bring together various disciplines and various levels of study in commissioning work for performance. We like to provide a balanced programme. We perform from various genres. We do musical theatre and comedy evenings. We do theatre, education, performances and workshops. We have quite a strong strand of newly devised performances that we created. It is a major area in the industry where learners can go out and create their own performances.

Over the years, over 100 students have worked for the company in a production or technical role, whether it is as a marketing manager or in costume, set design or theatre design. We do as much we can with the facilities that we have. We have commissioned work from over 350 students. We audition and cast students in roles. We commission the joinery department to construct some set for us. Recently, the BBC's education department commissioned us to perform in the 'Stargazing LIVE' event at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. We did a short scene on the trial of Galileo there for the BBC. The feedback that we got from it was that we were comparable to, if not better than, the professional theatre companies that it has used in the past.

The first picture is of a production that we did last year at the MAC. We had to hire the upstairs venue in the MAC because we just did not have the facility to stage the production in-house due to the technical restrictions that we have in our main hall in Bangor. We had sold out performances on both evenings and 100% of our audience feedback said that they would recommend our theatre company and would return to see our performances again.

The second picture is of a newly devised performance called 'Champagne for my Real Friends', which is based on the works of Francis Bacon, the Irish artist. We hope to take that to New York in April and perform at Brooklyn College, where we have a Glass Umbrella alumni student studying.

Ms Croft: On the benefits to business and industry, the new performing arts technology and innovation centre will have access to first-class facilities and to business-incubation spaces. I have already looked at expanding SERC's support to industry and benefiting students with the likes of bespoke training, placements for students and supporting people working in the creative industries. Finally, the theatre will draw people into the town and support the night-time economy.

The benefits to the arts community include an opportunity to access the cutting-edge facilities. With that list of the practical support from students that we can offer, as Corrine has already given examples of, we already have live projects where our students are working with the community. Something else that we are also mindful of is the amateur drama and operatic companies that can avail themselves of our training and support, whether it is theatrical make-up or productions. We could actually do a lot to support the amateur circuit as well.

Mr Webb: That completes the presentation.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much for that presentation. What is very interesting is that you are doing all of that work and we are not aware of it, yet we are the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee. You will be aware that we had quite a substantial inquiry into maximising the potential of the creative industries, which we reported on in March 2013. The evidence that we had demonstrated the need for

skills and the shortages that there are in particular skills in and around theatre production and skills development. It is encouraging that you are taking those gaps on board and moving forward with that.

In May 2013 we also started a work stream looking at the performing arts. The Northern Ireland Theatre Association said in its presentation to us that a clear, overarching strategic vision is required for performing arts, as is a clear policy direction across Government. Do you accept that that is a problem for you in working to try to support industry?

Mr Webb: We are very keen to participate in the production of any overarching strategy and, as a college, are supportive of anything that would help to inform us of what our provision is, in the educational sense, or anything that we could bring to that.

The Chairperson: I think that what surprises this Committee — and the Employment and Learning Committee — is that the announcement was made and no one was aware that it was coming down the line. A further concern for us — I suppose it is for Minister Farry to explain rather than you — is about the fact that there was no engagement with the Culture, Arts and Leisure Minister around that to make it something that could have a greater impact for Northern Ireland and its students.

Mr Webb: We consulted widely on the production of what is essentially an educational facility. I should say that it actually started back in 2005-06. Then, when capital became scarce around 2010, there was a pause in the production. The need for the facility and the background to it have been recognised for some time. Again, in producing the business case for it, we not only consulted widely, but we looked at the Programme for Government, the investment strategy, FE Means Business and Success through Skills. We would welcome anything that would help inform us in ensuring that our provision is meeting industry needs.

The Chairperson: The Committee has made a number of visits. We visited the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts (LIPA), the Lir, the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and Arts Educational Schools London (ArtsEd). They are very different facilities from what you are offering. What will you offer that will be unique for students in Northern Ireland and will make them industry-ready? I am aware that the Lir has a very close relationship with the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA). What will students going to the Bangor campus gain, and what will make them want to go to Bangor rather than elsewhere?

Mr Webb: We are very much focused on giving skills that will get them into employment and get a career, but also skills that provide students with multi-skill ability so that they can have opportunities to progress their careers in more than one direction.

Ms Courtney-Lee: As far as the theatre itself goes, back in 2005, Shiona and I sat with architects through every phase of that building, and we were so disappointed when it was shelved in 2010. However, we conducted quite a few site visits in 2005. We went to London and had a look at the Unicorn Theatre, we went to the Trinity Laban centre, and we went and had a look at the theatres in the National Theatre, so we did quite a bit of research when we were developing the theatre in the building.

I suppose what is unique about the centre in Bangor is that it is not just a theatre and a performing arts centre or a music centre; it is performing arts and music together. The music department was established first in the Bangor campus: it is about 20 years old. I came along around 10 years ago and set up the first performing arts full-time programme. Thankfully, Shiona nested me within the music department, and a partnership was born. We are unique in that we work together very closely.

For every performing arts show that happens, there are 10 or 15 musicians or music students there producing the sound, running the radio mics — creating and recording the sound effects, perhaps — so it is very much an integrated approach to education. That reflects the industry. Our music students are the pit band for our musicals, and that is a wide area of employment in the industry in Northern Ireland for musicians. We want to make sure that they understand the importance of integrating with other areas of study while they are with us because it is a big area of employment in the industry, especially when it comes to our devised theatre performances. They are used to working with multimedia, making and editing film, and recording and editing sound, and the performers and the technical students are able to amalgamate and see the value of working together.

The Chairperson: When students finish their course with you, are they industry-ready, or are they just at the foundation stage to go elsewhere to finish that training?

Ms Courtney-Lee: It is a bit of both. Ken said that 4% of our learners leave us and go into unemployment, but in the performing arts and music department, it is zero. All of our students go on to either higher education or employment. Some students feel industry-ready and go out and start either auditioning or applying for technical theatre jobs. We have one student who is presently working as a manager at Shine Productions in Belfast, and she is the events organiser for most of the gigs that take place at the Limelight. We have another student who studied at the Lir and is now in a play at the Metropolitan Arts Centre (MAC), and we have several students who are studying at Central Saint Martins school of speech and drama. It depends on the nature of the student and where they feel positioned, but we certainly skill them in a wide and varied area.

Students leave us with a voice-over artist showreel. All performing arts students, even if they come to us to be performers, leave with lighting experience. They know how to rig lights, they know how to run lighting desks, they know how to run sound desks, and they know how to edit video. So we are trying to give them a wide range of skills so that they can possibly go into any area of the industry. Some tend to go on to further and higher education.

The Chairperson: Have you given any consideration to having a relationship with a school such as the Guildhall?

Ms Courtney-Lee: Yes. We are currently seeking to establish a foundation degree. We presently have an articulation agreement with Queen's University so our performing arts students can avail themselves of a second-year position in the second year of their degree in drama. We have the same articulation agreement with Queen's for its music technology degree, and we would really enjoy being able to establish a relationship with a drama school or a theatre school per se. First and foremost, we must approach local universities for our foundation degree.

The Chairperson: I mention that because, when we were over in London, we were cheeky enough to suggest that they might wish to contact you to do that. I know that they are trying to move out of London and have a broader reach, and Northern Ireland was somewhere that they had not considered. Hopefully, we have sown a seed. That might be a useful contact to give industry credibility to moving from London, and it is just a suggestion.

Ms Croft: You asked what is unique about SERC. From our point of view, we are unique because we offer performing arts. A lot of the other colleges just offer an acting pathway or dance pathways, whereas we offer the full package where students get to do strands of the various areas. You mentioned going into employment: a number of students who have left have not gone to university but have got jobs on 'Game of Thrones'. So they are actually going out there and getting industry experience, and that is because the way that we deliver our curriculum is all through live projects. That is unique, and I have actually encouraged the way the way that the performing arts staff have delivered the curriculum across the rest of my school — in art and design, photography and things like that. They need to be working out — [*Inaudible.*] — to give them that experience. We do not want them just to have tick-box assessments and then go out but not really be industry-ready.

Mr D Bradley: Good afternoon. Thanks very much for the presentation. I am full of praise for your vision for the arts and the creative industries through this project. You may have mentioned this during your presentation, and I may have missed it: what is the total cost of the new building?

Mr Webb: Just under £12 million.

Mr D Bradley: Is that all coming from DEL?

Mr Webb: Yes, all of our capital comes from the Department. We are a non-departmental public body now. All of the colleges are. Our capital derives totally from the Department.

Mr D Bradley: You showed a slide that indicated the socio-economic background of your students, and you said that the profile is mostly from socio-economically disadvantaged areas. Do the students who take up courses in drama, creative arts and so on come from a wider geographic hinterland or area?

Mr Webb: The college draws students from not just the four council areas in which the college has campuses —

Mr D Bradley: The phrase that I was thinking of is "catchment area".

Mr Webb: We actually draw students from much wider afield. From the map in our presentation, you can see that students come from as far afield as the north-west in some instances, and, to the other side, Craigavon and so forth. That reflects the course offering that we are providing. Students are able to do that for higher-level courses, but, obviously, for the lower-level courses, you would not expect students to travel as far. This is not a facility for north Down; it is more of a regional facility. The business case that was made was on the basis of it being a regional facility.

Mr D Bradley: Is there a commercial aspect to the performances that you put on or the films that you make? Do they generate any income for the college?

Mr Webb: Some income is generated on occasions, but it is put back into the school.

Ms Courtney-Lee: It covers our expenditure on costumes, props, sets and make-up. We have a student who is in charge of the finance aspect of the Glass Umbrella. It cost us somewhere in the region of £2,500 to hire upstairs in the MAC, so we were running at a loss before we even started.

Mr D Bradley: That is expensive.

Ms Courtney-Lee: We balance the books, but it very rarely provides a commercial benefit. It does sometimes, which is good for the students to see, and that money is reinvested in the theatre company and, perhaps, we would use that money to buy a piece of equipment. *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Webb: Across the college, promoting student companies to operate in a commercial way provides the students with an opportunity to develop their wider enterprise skills. They are not just looking at becoming an actor or a lighting operator; they are also doing it from the point of view of running a business and understanding the roles that are in play in that. Because the companies go on from year to year, the students change from year to year in them. For example, Focus Productions, the student film company, filmed the Newcastle air show, from which it broadcast live to satellite uplifts that were then broadcast on the Internet from various positions around Newcastle during the air show, including a mussel boat in Dundrum Bay. Down District Council paid Focus Productions for that, which we were able to reinvest into more equipment, or back into the students themselves.

Mr D Bradley: It is a very good idea to use those opportunities to enhance the students' business skills and make them aware of what it is like to work in the business world.

If the Chair will allow me a last question, I want to ask you about the Black Box theatre. Does it have retractable seating or no seating or both?

Ms Courtney-Lee: Yes. It will have a small amount of retractable seating in order to invite audiences in for more low-key recital performances. Often, we do a performance workshop where we show a work in progress and ask for feedback from our audiences.

Mr D Bradley: Do you have the more traditional tiered seating in the other theatre?

Ms Courtney-Lee: Yes.

Mr D Bradley: Once again, congratulations on your vision and innovation. I wish you every success with the project.

Mr McMullan: My question was answered earlier. I congratulate you; I had no clue that the facility was there. Listening to you, I think you are quite enthusiastic about it and I am sure that it will go from strength to strength with people like you at the helm. It is a good opportunity for young people to have a facility such as that to get into the arts. Well done.

Mr B McCrea: Thank you very much for the presentation. I am not sure that I am quite as into the congratulations yet. One of the issues that the Chair mentioned was that we have gone off and done quite a lot of work; we have gone to the Barbican and to Andrew Lloyd-Webber's school in Chiswick, looking at all these things about how you might integrate. It is surprising to me, as a member of this Committee, that we only heard about your great initiative when it came on the news. I wonder why

you did not bother to inform either the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure or this Committee: we are quite interested in culture and theatre.

Mr Webb: The genesis of the programme was back in 2006. Obviously, it is primarily a teaching facility, but, as I said, we are more than happy to engage and we consulted widely on its production. However, the overall strategy position is more a matter for the Department than the college.

Mr B McCrea: I am not sure that that is quite right. You say that you consulted all and sundry, but you did not consult the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure or the Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure. It seems that it is the best kept secret in Northern Ireland. Why would you not engage with us and try to get support? We go to the Lyric, the MAC and the Black Box. Why would we not know? Why is it a surprise to us that your great thing happened?

Mr Webb: I would have been happy to engage with the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee. My experience is that we would not normally present ourselves to another Committee. The Committee that we normally approach or that approaches us is the Employment and Learning Committee.

The Chairperson: Did you present to the Committee for Employment and Learning?

Mr Webb: Sorry, I beg your pardon. Not directly on this, but the college had to produce a business case that had to be reported to DEL, which in turn reports on its capital investment to the Committee. The business case was also approved by the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Mr B McCrea: Ken, you are very astute on these things. You know your way around things and run a very tight ship. I just cannot believe that you did not think that it might be of interest to the Committee. I might have been on another Committee when you were looking at this.

The concern that we have is that the theatre and performing arts sector is so disparate. We get people trying to do things in T13, youth projects and this, that and the other thing. If we have learned anything from our trips to other places it is the importance of getting clusters together and people working together and that anything that is done in isolation does not necessarily work. That is an issue for you, and it is an issue for us in government. We cannot work in silos, and everybody tells us off for not working across the silos and not working together. I think that we have missed an opportunity, and it is disappointing that we did not know about this until you showed us what is going on. Are there any other secrets that we should know about? You have kept this quiet since 2005. You should be in MI5. What else is coming up that we should know about? What are you going to do next?

Mr Webb: As I said, we are more than happy to engage in the production of any overarching strategy. We are more than happy to come and talk to you at any time. Indeed, I regularly speak to political representatives on an individual basis and have spoken to representatives individually and —

Mr B McCrea: That makes me feel even worse. I am an MLA in one of your areas. I will give you my card just to remind you who I am, and you can let me know.

I just cannot believe this. I meet Ken. You want to get public support for these matters. The arts is under pressure. People think that it is some form of luxury and do not understand that it is actually a commercial opportunity with career paths and that we have to do these things. We are supportive of that, and we would like to help. We should all try to find ways of communicating the good work that you undoubtedly do. I really wanted to see what happened at the end of the film. It was great. I had to turn away because it was a bit gory, but it was really good.

Let us see what we can do on that, and you might have a think about how we can engage in the future. That is the main reason why members said that they wanted to come along. We asked our Minister whether she knew what was going on, and she did not. We need an integrated, overarching strategy for culture, arts and leisure that includes performing arts and theatre. Let us do it all together and see if we can build something around the success of 'Game of Thrones', 'Dracula' and all the rest of the bits. I will say no more than that, Chair.

Mrs McKevitt: It is good to see you again. If this project is anything like your catering facilities or your beauty school in Downpatrick, it will be well worth having.

Mr Humphrey: Are you declaring an interest or interests? *[Laughter.]*

Mrs McKevitt: Do you think I need it?

It sound likes a very exciting programme and project, and I concur with Dominic in wishing you well with it. I have one question on the fees. On the visits that we have gone on, we have been told that fees are an issue. Given that you are a regional college and this will be a regional project, what way will the fees work out for a student who might be interested?

Mr Webb: It obviously would depend on the course. In higher education there are fees for which full-time students can obtain student loans. There are also fees for part-time courses. We try to keep them as low as possible, but we have to do that in an economic way. Most of the FE courses are basically free. Indeed, students who qualify may also receive additional financial support through the normal avenues.

Mrs McKevitt: Is it the college's intention to open this up as a free course?

Mr Webb: As I said, there are a number of courses. Some of the courses will be free because they are full-time FE courses and students may qualify for additional EMA payments or other arts payments. There are fees for higher education courses, but students have access to student loans. For part-time courses, the norm is that there is a certain level of fees and there would be a subsidy to make the course affordable.

Ms Courtney-Lee: HE fees are very competitive in comparison with the rates that universities charge. I think that it costs about £2,300 a year for learners who come to us for the two years at higher national diploma level. That compares with the up to £9,000 that universities charge per year.

We have a second year cohort of 18 students, of whom 14 are applying to university. Most of them gain places in the second or final year of a degree programme on the basis of the grades that they have been awarded whilst they have been with us.

Ms McCorley: So they are saving a few years' tuition fees.

Ms Courtney-Lee: Yes. We are keeping them in Northern Ireland longer, and they are saving money.

Mrs McKevitt: Is there any way that you will be able to attract students from across the water or from the South?

Ms Courtney-Lee: We hope to. Our higher national diploma in performing arts has grown through word of mouth, and we have students enrolling on it from places like Derry and Newry. Quite a large number of students have moved to Bangor to live and study at that higher level. We hope to eventually attract students from across the water and internationally.

Mr Irwin: I noticed that there was some confusion about the planning permission for the centre. Has that been resolved?

Mr Webb: Yes, that was reported in the press. We will provide any information to support the facts of the work that has been done to Planning Service if we are asked.

The Chairperson: I appreciate the work that you do, but I encourage you not to miss an opportunity. There are real opportunities in working with others and having close collaborations with other schools to produce a really fine product for the students of Northern Ireland and attract others from across the water. You are in the enviable position that you have government funding and have not had to go out and get someone to raise money on your behalf. You are at a clear advantage with that.

I look forward to seeing how things move forward, and I think that it would be useful for us to keep in closer contact as you take the project forward. We have asked both Ministers whether they have any thoughts on producing a joint strategy for the performing arts, but it is clear from the conversations that we have had that such a strategy would be necessary and that you would benefit from having that in place.

Thank you for presenting to us this morning, and I hope that this will not be the last time that we have a conversation about the project.

Mr Webb: Chair, thank you very much. We appreciate it and would be delighted to keep in touch with you. As I said, the project started in 2005-06 and then paused in 2010 before it resumed and took off again. The window of opportunity has been very tight, and, perhaps, it would have been good to have this conversation earlier. As I said, we would be absolutely delighted to engage in the development of any strategy and work under any strategy. We want anything that can help us to ensure that we provide the most relevant curriculum for our students and their futures. We want our students to get a career and a job.

The Chairperson: Thank you.