



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Inquiry into Young People not in
Employment, Education or Training
(NEETs)**

3 March 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr David Hilditch (Acting Chairperson)
Mr Jonathan Bell
Rev Dr Robert Coulter
Mr William Irwin
Mrs Claire McGill
Mr Pat Ramsey

Witnesses:

Mrs Geraldine Boden)	South Eastern Regional College
Mr Brendan Clelland)	BMC Motors
Mr John D’Arcy)	Association of Northern Ireland Colleges

Mr John D’Arcy (Association of Northern Ireland Colleges):

I am pleased that Geraldine Boden from the South Eastern Regional College (SERC) has joined me. She works in the training organisation in the college and is also an enterprise champion. She will talk some more about that. I am particularly delighted that Brendan Clelland, who was a student at the South Eastern Regional College, is here. Although our paper outlines very important issues, we felt that it would be useful to give an example of how colleges work with young people. I will hand over to Geraldine to set the context and to outline her role, after which

she will introduce Brendan, who will give an overview of his experience. Both colleagues are happy to take questions.

Mrs Geraldine Boden (South Eastern Regional College):

I am employed in the South Eastern Regional College in two capacities: as a training support officer in the training organisation and as an enterprise champion, through which I raise awareness of how students can set up their own businesses. I have been doing that for the past eight years, and it has proved to be worthwhile.

In the area of entrepreneurship, owing to the economic downturn, we are now asking students to be more innovative with their business ideas. We raise awareness and ask students in the college to talk to us and to consider whether they have a viable business idea. We run various courses, such as the certificate in business enterprise, through which we identify what level students are at and determine what skills we can equip them with. They arrive with practical skills, and we provide them with technical skills, such as in marketing, finance and how to approach the legal status of the business. We also offer mentoring support on a one-to-one basis, whereby we sit down with students and consider their needs. Some students may have strengths in marketing but finance may be their weakness.

One major barrier that we need to remove is that students think that a phenomenal amount of money is required to start up a small business. When we consider the legalities of that and create their projected cash flow and profit-and-loss accounts, they realise that they can raise capital through part-time jobs. That also contributes to their personal development and is good for confidence-building.

I am accompanied today by a pure role model, who came to me at 17 years of age and said that he wanted to set up his own business. I tried to persuade him to go back to school, but he insisted that he wanted to set up his own business. He said that he wanted to avail himself of one of our courses that had been advertised in the local paper. I was very lucky to take on that young man, and he proved to be one of the most successful entrepreneurs in the Down area. His business is now thriving. He now wants to resource his business and he is developing other business ideas.

Brendan did a certificate in business enterprise and was a level 3 student. Of the 15 students,

14 were at level 2, and he proved to be at level 3. Brendan brought a retired principal, a lecturer from another college and his brother with him to the course. They all wanted to develop business skills. Brendan is here today to tell the Committee his story, how he felt about the course and how SERC helped him to enhance his business skills.

Mr Brendan Clelland (BMC Motors):

My name is Brendan Clelland. I am 24 years old and I am the owner of BMC Motors accident repair centre in Castlewellan. I employ three workers, two of whom are apprentices. From an early age, it was always my dream to own my own business and to work for myself. I was never great at taking orders. When I left school, I immediately began work at the start of the summer in a job that I had lined up before I left. I trained with Pete, who helped me to develop the skills that I needed to run my own business, such as painting cars, and so on.

I knew that I did not want to work for someone else once I finished school, so I started to think about my old idea again. After I had saved up enough money from cleaning my teachers' cars — I sometimes took days off school to do so — I told my friends and family that I was going out on my own. They were a bit unsure because I was very young, but I told them that I was going to do it anyway. However, my friend, who is a former principal, and his wife, who is a lecturer, said that I needed more education before I started out on my own. Michael had seen an advertisement in the paper for a course, and he advised me to get in touch with the college. I knew that Geraldine ran the course, so I got in touch with her, and like the rest of the teachers, she said that I needed more education. That is when I decided to join the course and to learn more. The course was great; I enjoyed it, and we had good craic. I tried my best when I started level 3, and, thanks to Geraldine's help, I got my level 3 certificate. Geraldine has always been there for me. Even though it has been four years since I did the course, I am still in regular contact with her, and she is always helping me.

Mrs Boden:

Brendan, tell the Committee how you raised the capital.

Mr Clelland:

While I was still at school, I saved up the money that I had earned from cleaning cars and cutting grass at the weekends. However, I realised that I needed more capital, so I got a wee chip van. I had the chip van for a year or two and took it to fairs and similar events. However, it was quite

hard to juggle two jobs. I often had to cut short my work during the day in order to be in my spot for, say, a Thursday night, so I sold the chip van, which helped me to raise more capital. However, I was still a wee bit short, so I took out a small loan with the credit union. After I completed my course, I started working straight away, and I was able to pay back my loan pretty quickly. In fact, I paid it back quicker than the credit union required. It is going all right at the moment. However, I definitely think that my going to college helped me a lot, because that is where I learnt about profit and loss.

The Acting Chairperson (Mr Hilditch):

It certainly sounds like you put in a lot of hard work in a short space of time, Brendan.

Mr Clelland:

I did.

The Acting Chairperson:

It is always good to have young people along to share their experiences. We have certainly heard an entrepreneurial story this morning. Well done, Brendan. What is the weather like at the moment for car accidents?

Mr Clelland:

It is good. *[Laughter.]* I also got my lorry licence at Christmas, because I want to grit roads at night.

The Acting Chairperson:

Thank you for telling us about your first-hand experience.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter:

It is really exciting to hear your story, Brendan. Thank you for coming along today. Geraldine, your work, naturally enough, centres heavily on students. What is your role, in conjunction with Invest NI, in helping small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to develop?

Mrs Boden.

At the moment, we are identifying a number of small businesses in the Down area with which we will do a business assessment. A number of the businesses want to grow their business and equip

their staff with NVQ experience.

Therefore, we are identifying whether there are marketing or finance courses. Exporting is a major module at the moment, and we refer students and business owners to Invest NI, as it runs workshops. If 20 businesses in the area are looking for a specific module, such as exporting, which is in major demand at the moment, we will contact Invest NI, and one of its mentors will come to speak to the businesses on site in the college. We then take it from there.

We have a close relationship with the small and medium-sized enterprises in the Down area, and we are drafting up a proposal for the Ards and Belfast areas, because we have the expertise in the college. I do some delivering for Invest NI, and its marketing and financial growth is there and the potential is there for the SMEs. Therefore, we work very closely with them. In fact, one of the units of the certificate in business enterprise looks closely at small and medium-sized enterprises in Northern Ireland. There has been a major growth in SMEs between 2000 and 2009.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter:

A number of people have contacted me lately, and one person in particular owns a little firm that is not exporting, and she is having difficulty with Invest NI because of that. It is a bakery business, which sells locally, but the lady who owns it with her two sons feels that they need training in management. We have discovered that there is a grant available for that, but she does not know where to avail herself of it.

Mrs Boden:

Has she approached Invest NI?

Rev Dr Robert Coulter:

Yes.

Mrs Boden:

Has she approached any of the local enterprise agencies?

Rev Dr Robert Coulter:

I do not think so.

Mrs Boden:

Where is the business based?

Rev Dr Robert Coulter:

It is based in Ballymena.

Mrs Boden:

She should approach the local enterprise agency in Ballymena, which will provide her with guidance and support. The agency will do an initial assessment with her to see where she needs help and where she can source funding.

Mrs McGill:

Thank you for your briefing. Congratulations on what you have achieved, and congratulations on coming here and giving the briefing to the Committee. It was very well done. You are someone who wants to work, and it seems to me that, from an early age, you had your own ideas and dreams about how you would progress, and you are living your dream. There is a lot of hard work in that, and I get the sense that you are not afraid to do that work.

What were the difficulties and barriers faced by your college friends who have not achieved in the same way as you have done? I just wonder what keeps those young people from achieving in the way that you have achieved. Is finance and funding a difficulty? I have spoken to some people who have said that it is almost impossible to get finance. They have said that it is not worth it, and they cannot cope with the financial burden, so they go away and do something else.

Mr Clelland:

Some people on my course, and even school friends, have gone on to set up their own businesses, but a few have not, because of the financial end of it, and, particularly, because of the fear factor of taking that risk.

I took a very small risk, because I built up a lot of my own capital by putting in the hard work. People need to put in the hard work and save, rather than drink, their money. One of my friends asked me how I got my possessions, such as the five Audis that I have lying about the place. I told him that whereas he buys a new shirt for going out at the weekend and wastes all his money, I put everything that I get back into my business. I did not really even have the time to do my

course, but I took the evenings off and put in the effort, because I knew that I needed to finish it.

There is a wee fella working with me who is with the training centre, and he has trained in bricklaying, plastering and plumbing. He was the sort of wee fella who did not care and messed about in tech. I was asked whether I would take him on, and I said to send him up before I would decide. I did a wee bit of homework on him and knew that he was a messer. The last apprentice who I trained won an award for being painter of the year. He is now going for an Olympic award in painting. The wee fella who was a messer is now saying that he cannot wait until he is working on Hummers. He is thriving, which shows that people will put in the effort if they are pointed in the right direction. He is a really good example of someone who did not want to know, but I think that he will make it.

Mrs McGill:

Thank you for that example. What happens when someone is not interested? You wanted to do everything that you did, and you gave the example of the young person who was not interested until he came to you. What should lecturers, teachers, or whoever it happens to be, do to encourage people not to drop out? How do you get people to do things that they do not want to do in education?

Mr Clelland:

Firstly, you need to find where someone's interest lies. When you find that interest, you need to set a goal for the person and say that he or she will be able to do what they want to when they achieve that. A lot of people do not know what they want to do, but that is where the colleges are useful, because they can make a lot of suggestions. I used to get wee books telling me what courses were available. I was happy enough just to do a level 2 to get the certificate and get to work, but Geraldine saw that I had the potential to go for the level 3; she was like a dog with a bone and would not take no for an answer.

Mrs Boden:

I knew that the potential was there and that all we needed was another bit in the business plan to crack it. The most important thing was getting the best out of him.

Mr Clelland:

The college has had students out at my business, and I can see that it is trying to point them in the

right direction. However, at the end of the day, it is up to the student.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Thank you all for your evidence; it has been very beneficial.