



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Engagement with Europe

15 June 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister
Mr Sammy Douglas
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr David McIlveen
Mrs Sandra Overend
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Mr Andrew Hamilton)
Mrs June Ingram) Department for Employment and Learning
Mrs Patricia McVeigh)

The Chairperson:

Andrew, I believe you are under pressure for time.

Mr Andrew Hamilton (Department for Employment and Learning):

I am, but hopefully I will have enough time to deal with your queries.

The Chairperson:

In that case, fire on.

Mr A Hamilton:

I will not say an awful lot today. However, I thank the Committee for the opportunity to give an insight into what we are doing on Europe. We will explain how we are exploiting the opportunities that exist and what we have to do to better exploit them in the future. June will take five minutes to give the Committee an overview, and we will then be happy to take questions. We provided members with a paper that sets out some of the details.

The Chairperson:

OK. June, over to you.

Mrs June Ingram (Department for Employment and Learning):

Thank you. As Andrew said, we provided a briefing paper, and I will just give an overview of some the key points. First, members will know that the Barroso task force has been in existence in support of Northern Ireland for some years and has been an important framework within which European activities have been taken forward. A visit by Commission officials took place at the end of last March. The wider focus of that Barroso work is about encouraging engagement between Northern Ireland and the EU. There is also an imperative to increase the drawdown of competitive funds by 20%.

The most recent work of the task force has focused on four key thematic areas, and cross-departmental working groups have been formed around those. The thematic areas are competitiveness and employment, which Andrew chairs; innovation and technology, where the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) is represented; climate change and energy; and social cohesion, on which the Department is also represented.

The key aim of the March visit was to identify synergies between Northern Ireland policies and programmes, especially linking into the Europe 2020 strategy, looking to the future and at the areas of European activities that we would want to explore in greater depth with the Commission. We also wanted to identify concrete opportunities in the policies and programmes most relevant to Northern Ireland's situation. So, we are finalising discussion papers and drawing up action plans in a programme of work that will be taken forward subject to Executive endorsement.

In particular, DEL will want to ensure that we have the right structures in place to achieve our goals, beginning with developmental activity. We want to share best practice; encourage and increase co-operation; engage with networks; consider and engage on the new structural funds around 2014-2020 in conjunction with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) and other relevant Departments; and continue to explore how best to maximise funding opportunities. We will want to work with other Departments, especially with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) around the competitiveness and employment theme to support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

You will see from the briefing paper that we have a focus on the European framework programme, particularly in the higher education (HE) context, where, for example, we are represented on an InterTradeIreland-led working group that is tasked with planning a North/South conference in framework programme 7 (FP7). The conference is due to take place on 30 June this year. Committee members will be very welcome at that conference.

As part of our work on the Barroso working group, we are committed to promoting EU funding programmes in higher education and encouraging their participation in calls for proposals. For example, the universities' grant letter for the forthcoming academic year will include a dedicated allocation to encourage increased participation by the universities in the European framework programme for research and technological development, which is FP7. That initiative also reflects the increasing profile of the Barroso task force. As the European Commission's premier R&D programme, increased success in the EU framework is likely to become an increasing priority for the Executive.

You are probably familiar with the wider EU 2020 context, with its new strategy for jobs and smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Some initiatives are being developed out of that and there are headline targets across the EU. Initiatives include innovation union, youth on the move, an agenda for new skills and jobs and the European platform against poverty. There are many integrated guidelines and a framework within that for member states to operate within and develop.

I do not want to use up too much time, so I am going through only the general points. The briefing paper also gives an overview of our current activities and achievements. There is lots

going on: our participation in the lifelong learning programmes; our involvement in the development of the qualifications network; we chair a European (ESF) learning network on empowerment and inclusion, as well as, of course, acting as the managing authority for the ESF in Northern Ireland. We constantly look for funding opportunities where they are available, especially through, for example, the further education (FE) sector and the INTERREG programme.

Mrs Patricia McVeigh (Department for Employment and Learning):

Erasmus is one of the major programmes that we have in the higher education arena. I do not know whether members are aware of it, but one of the objectives of the Barroso task force is about the promotion of the Erasmus programme within higher education.

Erasmus enables higher education students and staff who are studying for any degree discipline to go to an institution in Europe. A high number of Northern Ireland students access this programme, which enables them obtain an international experience, gives them a wider perspective and increases their employability.

When students go to a higher education institution in Europe, their host organisation waives their fees. If they are in Europe for up to 24 weeks, their higher education institution here does not charge a fee. The students are also supported by EU funding, attracting at least €350 for each month they are there.

Northern Ireland's contribution to the funding of the programme is set by the European Commission. Our contribution is £15,000, a figure that is based on Barnett consequentials. Over 300 students from Northern Ireland are taking part in the programme, and we probably make a financial gain of £700,000 from that £15,000. It is a successful programme, and, of the UK participants, over 3% come from Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland has had the Erasmus student of the year twice. It is a very good programme, and it will continue until 2013, when it will be reviewed. That is our main European engagement.

The Chairperson:

I will move on, because members have questions. After Pat, Sammy will come in to ask the Department about the blue-sky thing.

Mr P Ramsey:

Andrew and your team, you are very welcome. It is a good presentation, and there are a lot of good news stories in it, particularly on Erasmus. At some stage, I would like to see the breakdown of students on that programme.

How will the outcomes that you have outlined be measured? For example, you mentioned maximising funding opportunities by 20%. Against what figures will the outcomes be measured? We need to know, although maybe not today, what the numbers participating in university have been in the past three years and what the aim is for the future.

It is about ensuring that the Committees in this Parliament have the capacity to deal with those issues. Those are important, and I want the Committee to take them much further. We hear constantly, particularly from the community and voluntary sector, that there is a pot of gold in Europe that we are not getting. We do not have a role in accessing funding, but we certainly have a role in scrutinising the Department to ensure that it is maximising every opportunity. It is important that we are taking on that role, but we need to do much more work.

Mr A Hamilton:

We fully accept that that is the Committee's role. You mentioned capacity, and there is potentially a capacity issue in Northern Ireland, but something is being done about it. A central fund is being established, which will allow a significant expansion of the resources that are available to Departments to pursue that agenda. That could be either by means of secondments to the European Union or by staffing up our office in Brussels. One of the issues for us is that there is so much in the EU, and accessing the relevant information is difficult. Hopefully, when that resource is in place, it will allow us to pinpoint our activities in a more strategically focused way.

Success in the pursuit of the opportunities has a lot to do with networks, and this will allow us to build our networks. Over the next couple of years, the key outcome in all this is that our networks with the Commission will be much stronger. We will know in advance of the opportunities that will present themselves, and we may even be able to shape those opportunities. We are coming to the end of the European social fund programme; we are now into the second phase of that. The big issue is shaping the next programme for the future, and we want to be —

The Chairperson:

Andrew, I will interrupt you there. I want to inject a bit of pace, because there are some questions that we want to get through. Sammy, you had some good points to make, so fire ahead.

Mr Douglas:

Over the years, I have worked with organisations such as Belfast City Council, which has come up with some imaginative ideas. Is there a mechanism for new ideas, new thinking and blue-sky thinking, to which the Chairman referred? It would be good to see some of those ideas written down here.

Jim has been involved in Europe for many years, and I am sure that he has come across groundbreaking ideas that are making an impact at a local level. There is so much happening in Europe. Is there a mechanism that can be transferred to us to give us an idea of some of the new stuff that is happening? The Erasmus programme is from 2007, is that right?

Mrs Ingram:

That is right.

Mr Douglas:

I am thinking about new stuff that is coming through. Obviously, with the way things are, we are looking for new value-for-money ideas.

Mr A Hamilton:

Certainly, we can come back to you on a more regular basis about this issue, and if things are happening, we can brief you on them.

We have a responsibility to market the programmes that we are responsible for, such as the European social fund. However, for the other programmes, it is more difficult to do that, because the process is almost bottom-up. It is our universities and further education colleges that are identifying the opportunities, developing partnerships, building on the partnerships that are in place and working up the proposals. We do not actively do that ourselves, but certainly we will let you know of any opportunities that we are aware of.

Mrs Ingram:

There are mechanisms in government across Departments to look at EU issues, but, as Andrew said earlier, we want to enhance that and enhance the two-way communication so that we are disseminating information but also gathering ideas and looking at how we can have influence.

The Chairperson:

I am quite sure that you are all doing wonderful jobs, but, as you probably heard, we have relatively little knowledge of what is going on. This is a complicated area, and we need to look at specific issues. What Sammy is saying, and as Pat brought up before, is that it is appropriate that we have scrutiny to ensure the Department is not missing any opportunities and is encouraging other organisations to take them up. So, we need to look at the feedback mechanism.

Mr A Hamilton:

One of the things that we want to do is map out all the projects that our stakeholder organisations are engaged in so that we have a complete overview. We have a very good overview of the European social fund, for which we are responsible, but we would not necessarily know of all the projects that our colleges are pursuing, for example, under INTERREG. We want to have a look at that and use the information to identify further opportunities.

The Chairperson:

I know that you are under time pressure. As much as I was really pleased to hear about Erasmus — we will come back to that, because there is some feedback on it — it is a £15,000 project, and we are looking at a framework 7 proposal of €50 billion. There is a difference of scale there, and I am not convinced that our universities are getting in to the proper drawdown of that.

There are issues with the research councils in the UK, and it is not good enough. That is something that we need to be looking at and getting on top of. I mean absolutely no disrespect, because Erasmus is very important and I will come back to it in my closing comments because I want to hear what people get out of it, but —

Mrs McVeigh:

It costs us only £15,000, but it is a European-wide programme, so it must cost millions.

Mr Allister:

I want to pick up on the seventh framework programme, which probably has the most potential. Paragraph 38 of your briefing tells us that you have a target of €50 million for Northern Ireland drawdown. However, the last sentence of that paragraph states:

“University drawdown is estimated to be about 80% of the NI total.”

Given that the R&D money in framework 7 is for companies, universities and anyone else who is involved in research, is having 80% of it going to universities the right balance? Does that suggest that private companies are substantially missing a trick?

Mr A Hamilton:

First, driving the innovation agenda in FP7 is the responsibility of DETI. We encourage our universities to participate, but it is recognised that universities in Northern Ireland account for a much higher proportion of R&D.

The Chairperson:

If it is the responsibility of DETI and they are getting only 20%, and we are responsible for universities and they are getting 80%, it seems to me that there is something of a mismatch there.

Mr A Hamilton:

In many respects, it reflects the structure of our economy, which is very dependent on SMEs and small companies with fewer than 10 staff. However, part of the strategy for improvement will be to encourage our universities to work with SMEs.

Mr Allister:

We have big companies as well.

Mr A Hamilton:

We have very few, relative to —

Mr Allister:

Bombardier Shorts, for example, does a lot of R&D. Is it cutting into this in the way that it should be?

Mr A Hamilton:

I do not know, but we recognise that our universities account for a greater proportion of R&D activity.

Mr Allister:

I do not wish to be pejorative, but it seems that universities are more aggressive about pursuing it than private industry.

Mr A Hamilton:

They are very aware that it is a source of income, but they recognise that the world is getting more competitive and they will have to work hard.

Mr Allister:

In that context, it states in the document that a lot of DEL's portfolio on R&D is made up of cross-border R&D projects. Does that mean that some of the 80% that goes to universities is going to universities outside Northern Ireland?

Mr A Hamilton:

We have a target of €50 million, which is for Northern Ireland. That would be our share.

Mr Allister:

There are collaborative programmes between the universities.

Mr A Hamilton:

There are collaborative programmes. In fact, research demonstrates that collaborative projects are more likely to attract resources.

Mr Allister:

The point that I am driving at is, under those collaborative programmes between Queen's University and Cork University, or wherever, is there a differentiation in the funding that comes to Queen's? Is it apportioned with that which goes to Cork?

Mr A Hamilton:

As part of the consortium, shares of the resources are all worked out at the beginning and the

resources flow. Therefore, Queen's will be fully reimbursed for its share of the programme.

Mr Allister:

You talk quite a bit in the document about cross-border collaboration, etc, and you are going to have a conference. Is there any collaboration with GB?

Mr A Hamilton:

There would be —

Mr Allister:

Such as?

Mr A Hamilton:

I may not have an example.

Mr Allister:

Even between universities or UK-wide companies?

Mr A Hamilton:

I do not have the detail with me, but we can share that with you.

Mr Allister:

I am interested in contrasting that, because, carrying it back to Erasmus, there is a lot of collaboration through the British Council on a UK basis, which makes Erasmus very successful. Therefore, collaboration on a UK basis has worked very well. However, it seems to me —

Mr A Hamilton:

We are engaged on UK-wide initiatives around the qualifications framework.

The Chairperson:

There is an issue here that I will pick up with Jim and the team when the session is over because certain information is not available. Jim, do you have any other points?

Mr Allister:

No. That is fine.

The Chairperson:

OK. We will come back to that point for you.

Mr McElduff:

What is the extent of DEL's lobbying presence in Brussels? Does the Department for Employment and Learning have a dedicated team or division that is focused on European opportunities?

Mr A Hamilton:

We do not have anyone in the European Commission at the moment. However, in the past, we had an individual who was seconded to the European Union.

Mr Allister:

Were they seconded to the European Union or to the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels?

Mr A Hamilton:

They were seconded to the European Union. We will want to exploit the opportunities that I mentioned earlier, and we are actively considering whether we should second someone to the EU.

June is responsible for the European division, and she looks after the social fund. She is a contact point for other matters pertaining to Europe.

Mr McElduff:

I welcome that information. June's job title today is stated as "director of strategy and employment relations division."

Mrs Ingram:

The word "European" is actually included in the title, but it has been omitted. The correct title is "strategy, European and employment relations division."

Mr McElduff:

OK. Thank you.

Mr Douglas:

Patricia, you mentioned Erasmus. My question is one that I have brought up before. The programme allows students to go out and spend a year wherever. I know of a recent situation of a young woman who came back from Canada. It was a great experience for her, but it took her three years to get on the programme because she just could not afford it. She had to pay everything up front, including her flights and hotel. She is from a lone-parent family. Is that your experience with low-income families?

Mrs McVeigh:

No, but I am aware, for example, that the European Union wants to extend and widen participation for people from low socio-economic groups, so it is giving an additional grant of €500 to encourage people. We will certainly look at that to see whether that —

Mr Douglas:

Will I get you some information?

Mrs McVeigh:

Yes.

Mr Douglas:

There must be a lot of other people out there who would not embark on that excellent programme because they have to pay everything up front, including accommodation, fees, etc.

Mrs McVeigh:

Whatever support they are normally entitled to as a student, such as maintenance and student loans, they are entitled to when they are out on an Erasmus programme.

Mr Douglas:

That was the problem: they were not able to get the student loan until they went out.

Mrs McVeigh:

I can certainly check that.

Mr Lyttle:

Obviously, the Erasmus programme has been mentioned. The Leonardo programme applies to staff and students in further education. Would it be possible to get additional information about exactly what the Leonardo programme is? It says that it is a Europe-wide opportunity:

“to promote the development of skills and training.”

Can we hear a bit more about the types of courses that people from further education are developing through that programme? There was a British Council event in the Assembly on Monday, and the Europe-wide exchange clearly advances our young people greatly. It is a great opportunity, but one concern was raised as to whether those types of opportunities are being afforded to people from a further education background or a secondary education background vis-à-vis university and grammar. It would be good to learn a bit more about the Leonardo programme.

Mrs McVeigh:

Students who attend FE colleges and are on higher education equivalent or foundation degrees are eligible for the Erasmus programme.

The Chairperson:

OK. We have a fairly hefty schedule, so I want to get through this business. People go on the Erasmus programme, have a great time and are enriched personally. Do we bring them back together and find out what we can learn? Is there any collective response?

Mrs McVeigh:

We hold an event for them, but we do not monitor their performance. When they are in a university or higher education institution, they can and should attain credits while they are there. Those credits then will be reflected when they are leaving university. It will be noted what they did in Europe, so it will be reflected and employers should know. It is reflected in that way.

The Chairperson:

When you were responding to Chris’s point — we will drop you a note on this — it is not just for the benefit of the individuals; it is about the benefit to Northern Ireland. You might want to

consider how we trap some of that. I have heard from people who say that they know lots and learned lots but there is no one to tell. You need to fill the loop. You might address how and whether we might do that.

The next point is about the whole European issue. With the research presentation that we had before and with this one, I am not sure that we are really getting to the nub of matters. We mentioned staffing levels, but we have no networking at the moment. I think that we have just reduced by one the number of staff out in the European office. They are not being replaced. It seems to be a fundamental issue, particularly with framework 7.

I am coming to the point that you will make: it is someone else's responsibility. I suggest that the Committee write to the Department to suggest that it get a response from DETI on whether, if the universities are going to take the lead on research and have the capacity to do so, the responsibility for that should come under the remit of the Department for Employment and Learning rather than DETI's. We will at least ask the question.

Mr A Hamilton:

We will certainly give you a response.

The Chairperson:

You certainly will. That is very kind of you. I want to pick up on Jim's point about how framework programme 7 is working. I cut him short, but the point was well made. My understanding is that applications to framework programme 6 had to involve multiple European countries — I think it was a minimum of three — and SMEs, but it was so complex that people could not make it work. Framework programme 7 was supposed to do away with that. If that was not the case, I need your lead on it. It was supposed to be less complicated. If I am right, framework programme 7 runs out in 2013, so, presumably, we will then be into framework programme 7, so we need to make sure that we have some influence on it.

I am convinced that our flagship universities and FE colleges should be able to take a greater slice of the research grants, yet that does not seem to be happening. We have a responsibility on that line. What I have in mind — this is my final point, and the Committee will have to talk about it — is that you find a way to brief the Committee on whether we should go to Europe to see what we can do on networking. Given that it is an Executive priority to increase our drawdown of research funding, the Committee needs to get to the front and centre of the matter.

What I have just said is a bit woolly because I do not know enough yet, but some response on how the Department intends to tackle the European dimension would be useful. That may include a briefing and perhaps — I am only saying perhaps at this stage — it is worth us looking at going to Brussels.

Mr Allister:

Perhaps we should ask the head of the Executive office in Brussels to come to the Committee. Let the mountain come to Mohammed.

The Chairperson:

I would like it to come. I accept your point, Jim; you have our support, so we will do that as well. However, I do not think that we have the focus or understanding to maximise available opportunities, and that is an area in which the Committee ought to be taking an interest. You might start the iterative process on how we should get up to speed on that and think about how we might respond.

Mr A Hamilton:

We do not disagree; we recognise that more opportunities exist. That having been said, we also have to manage expectations. People think that there is a pot of gold, but once something that has been presented as a major opportunity has been divided across universities from, say, six member states and by the relevant number of years, it can turn out to be a fairly small annual amount; therefore we need to manage expectations. Nevertheless, Northern Ireland could take a greater share of the available resources.

The Chairperson:

On the base numbers that I have, Queen's University, for example, attracts £300 million external research funding. How much of the £50 million that you mentioned in your paper goes to Queen's and how do we find a way to get that figure higher? Northern Ireland's natural resources are almost entirely its people and their brains, so we have to find a way of leveraging our flagship brands. That is an important issue for the Department.

I then look to the point that Chris brought up. There are also issues around Leonardo, as we are still not particularly clear about what it is. However, skills and training is something that our further education colleges ought to be looking at.

The thrust of our argument is that we are not getting to grips with what is out there. I accept that we may find that it is not a pot of gold; it may be just a few coins, but we should at least get an understanding about what we can achieve.

I will close on that point, unless Andrew has any closing comments. We will drop you a note on this.

Mr A Hamilton:

We will respond to that, but we are happy to engage in more detail about the programmes, particularly FP7 and our work on it. We can come back to you on those issues.

The Chairperson:

That is very kind; thank you very much. We will draft some letters for the next Committee meeting and members can see whether they cover the points that they want raised.