



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Belfast Metropolitan College

11 January 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

**COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

Belfast Metropolitan College

11 January 2012

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister
Mr Sammy Douglas
Ms Michelle Gildernew
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr David McIlveen
Mrs Sandra Overend

Witnesses:

Ms Marie- Thérèse McGivern) Belfast Metropolitan College

The Chairperson:

We welcome the principal and chief executive of Belfast Metropolitan College, who is sitting in splendid isolation. We will see what Marie-Thérèse has to say to us.

Thank you very much for your kind invitation to visit your wonderful college, Marie-Thérèse. Sammy Douglas and I were singing its praises the other day, so it is good that we have got down here to have a look. We will be very pleased to hear what you have to tell us. If there are other issues that you wish to make us aware of or have us consider, we are happy to hear about them.

Ms Marie-Thérèse McGivern (Belfast Metropolitan College):

Thank you very much. I am absolutely delighted that the Committee for Employment and Learning has come here to hold its meeting. Since I joined the college in November 2009, this is the third time that I have come to speak to the Committee and update it on what is happening. I am very grateful for the interest that the Committee has taken in the college, and in further education (FE) in general. That position is shared by all the directors of FE colleges in Northern Ireland. The Committee has been a particular champion of FE. We commend, salute and thank you for that. Therefore, the news last night and this morning is, at the minute, sending shivers through the FE sector. Perhaps we can talk about that later.

The Chairperson:

I will talk at some stage about the news that has come out. I am quite happy if you, in your presentation, want to bring it up. However, we might deal with it as a separate subject. Whatever way you want to work it in, we value your opinion. I think that Committee members may want to say something on it, so you need to be aware of that during your presentation.

Ms McGivern:

I would be delighted to hear members' views on the proposal.

I have provided the Committee with a briefing paper. As you are aware, the Belfast Metropolitan College is the largest college in Northern Ireland and the fourth largest in the UK. We currently provide over 500 courses. We have over 30,000 students, 8,000 of whom are full-time. We have around 1,000 staff in full-time posts, with probably an additional 600 who are part-time. At present, we have an annual turnover of around £56 million.

Our vision is outstanding learning for successful futures. We have three key drivers for action: to put the learner at the centre of everything that we do; to deliver the highest quality that we can; and to achieve the highest impact that we can on the economic and social well-being of the individual and of communities across Northern Ireland.

The Committee will be aware that the college came into a number of severe difficulties and was subject to an efficiency review. The efficiency review, which was finally published in January 2010, indicated a considerable level of weakness across a range of issues. I have outlined the issues in the briefing paper and, therefore, will not read them out. As a result of that very

difficult report, our parent Department, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), made it a requirement that we produce a college improvement plan (CIP). The plan was a wide-ranging re-engineering and restructuring of the organisation, and it was approved in October 2010. The plan set out a three-year action plan as to how the organisation would become sustainable again. Since October 2010, we have been working to bring to fruition the CIP and its content. We have been asked to do, and have been doing, a range of things: to develop new corporate strategy and planning; to establish, very importantly, a robust financial plan and system to create stability in the organisation; to be robust in public accountability; to establish strong leadership and management; to develop a strong performance culture in the organisation; to restructure the organisation to make it fit for purpose; to review and re-engineer the curriculum; and to rationalise estates.

Over the period, we have been on a journey. We are not at the end of the journey, because we still have work to do, but there have been significant changes and improvements in the organisation as we have moved forward. We have created and agreed a new corporate strategy. We have developed a very robust business planning process in the organisation and have rebranded what used to be known as BMC as Belfast Met. We thought that an important thing to do, because we think that some of the problems that emerged in the organisation were to do with an incomplete merger, whereby two previous colleges failed to create a new, agreed identity between them over what the new organisation should look like. We felt that it was important to break with that history, and that is why we went with the Belfast Met brand.

The stabilisation of the financial position is perhaps the most important thing that we have achieved in the intervening period. We project a deficit of £1.3 million in this financial year, but we project a surplus for next year. That will mean we will have moved into surplus for the first time since the college's formation. We have, for public accountability and audit purposes, cleared what was a backlog of annual accounts. When I came here, we had still not cleared the 2007-08 accounts. We are now absolutely up to date. The 2010-11 accounts were completed in the timescale set down by the Department — the first time in Belfast Met's history. We received unqualified audit opinions for 2009-2010 and 2010-11, and we also achieved a first satisfactory rating for internal audit for the organisation in 2010-11, so there have been significant improvements in financial accountability, as well as in robustness in systems.

We have completed phase 1 —

The Chairperson:

Can I just check something? I have a note that states the latest accounts for the year ending 31 July 2011 were signed off on 29 November without qualification. However, the accounts have not yet been made available to the Assembly. Do you know why we do not have them?

Ms McGivern:

I am very surprised at that. I see no reason that those figures should not have been shared with the Assembly. I can get you a photocopy, because there is a copy sitting on my desk. The accounts are unqualified. We still have a number of priority 1 issues, as you would expect. We have not eliminated every problem.

The Chairperson:

Rather than do that, I will just note it and ask the Committee for its agreement to write to the Department to request those accounts. It is important to understand that the current set of accounts is unqualified and that there are other issues.

Ms McGivern:

I would be delighted for the Committee to see them, because I think that they indicate the level of improvement and change that we have achieved.

The Chairperson:

Do members agree?

Members indicated assent.

Ms McGivern:

We have also completed phase 1 of a major restructuring process that has completely redrawn the organisational chart. That has created a much stronger line-management process. One problem in the organisation was the lack of clarity in line management. There is a new leadership and management team. As I said, we have completed phase 1 of our redundancy process. We achieved that on the academic and management side with 90 voluntary redundancies in the past year, and phase 2, which is currently taking place, is concentrating on the support side. We are of the opinion that we will probably take around 31 positions out of the organisation on the support

side. Again, we hope to do that through voluntary redundancies.

Phase 1 of the curriculum review has taken place, and phase 2 is happening this year. That will create a much better, fit-for-purpose curriculum, which will meet the needs of the Northern Ireland economy to a much stronger extent than previously. We have also begun to work very strongly on our success measures. In a sense, the initial priority was to get the finances right. We are now working on success measures such as student retention, achievement and success, and I know that that is of particular interest to the Committee. Those measures had been, in my view, very poor. The first quarter health check has not yet been published, but I believe that it will be published very shortly. However, in a year when you would expect disruption to have been caused by the restructuring, we still achieved a 4% increase in student retention and a subsequent increase in achievement and success.

The Chairperson:

How are we doing with your presentation? These people shout at me if I keep them for too long. Some members have asked to go.

Ms McGivern:

I have nearly finished, and I then want to have a discussion.

We have done a major review of estates, and part of that has been the move to the Titanic Quarter. We will open e3 in April this year. Going forward, the challenges remain significant. Major among them is the one that, I suppose, faces us all in the public sector — we are in hard times, austerity is not going to ease, and I think that we will all be forced to do more with less. We are working hard to diversify the college's income base further.

Higher education (HE) has particular issues. We think that we do a good job in HE, for which we do not believe that we get strong enough credit, understanding or acknowledgement, and that applies to FE in general, not just this college. That is a particular issue that we will find challenging in the future.

We continue to embed a strong performance culture in the organisation, ensuring that we have much stronger outreach with stakeholders and communities. Although we have done fabulous work with the Titanic Quarter campus and e3, we still acknowledge that Castlereagh, for

example, is not, in our view, fit for purpose in a real sense. We also suggest that our presence in north Belfast is too light. Those are major issues that we have to solve with the estates.

In finishing, I will say that, for a long time, FE in Northern Ireland has been regarded as the second choice, the second chance, the place to which you go when you fail. This college and others in Northern Ireland are trying to achieve recognition of the reality, which is that FE colleges are a first choice. People come here to enhance their life chances, and we do that — it is not a second-chance situation. That is the strong message that I worry may get diluted as we move forward if DEL, which has been supportive to us and strongly pushed that message, disappears. There are problems ahead if the work that we have done is diluted subsequently.

I will leave it there, Chairperson, and am happy to take questions.

The Chairperson:

Excuse me, Marie-Thérèse. I am sure that you will not mind, but I have just received a text from Maggie Taggart of the BBC, who would like to take a shot of the Committee in session. Do people agree to that? She will not record what we say; it is probably end-of-an-era stuff. *[Laughter.]* A Chinook helicopter will be landing on the top of the building. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Gildernew:

It is for the obituary page.

Mr McElduff:

We are in the Titanic Quarter, too.

The Chairperson:

We are. Tell you what, Barry — not much gets past you, son. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Gildernew:

This was a bad choice.

Mrs Overend:

Women and children first. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Allister:

Captain McCrea. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson:

We will do this, if the Committee is happy to.

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

I want members' questions to be short and sharp, because we have an appointed length of time. We particularly want to deal with the issue of why the finances were in a mess and the fact that you have got them sorted out. I want to talk about what you think the future of FE should be, in particular in the light of what may happen to the Employment and Learning Committee, and all of that. If there are general questions about the college, that will be OK.

Mr McElduff:

On accessibility issues, Marie-Thérèse — public transport and that sort of thing, perhaps from the west of the city — will you tell us what issues were raised by people in parts of Belfast about the location of this wonderful college? Secondly, what percentage of course provision here might be described as higher education?

Ms McGivern:

There were initial doubts, and people feared that the Titanic Quarter campus would not be accessible, that public transport would prove difficult and that, for that reason, people would not come here. That has not proved to be the case. First, we have a good bus service. At peak times, the bus runs every 12 minutes and every 20 minutes at non-peak times. That will improve once the signature project opens, because it expects so many visitors, so accessibility will increase.

The other interesting thing is that if you were to stand here from 8.45 am onwards, you would notice a great number of students walking to college. That is good, because it opens up the area. The pattern of where students come from shows that they come from every part of the city and beyond. We did some geographical analysis of our sites, and it is interesting that no site in west Belfast or east Belfast serves only its local community. For example, at the Whiterock campus, we have a hairdressing section that attracts students from greater Belfast, Antrim, Portadown and

beyond. Similarly, we have people travelling from west Belfast to do apprenticeship work at the Castlereagh campus, which people might think only serves east Belfast. We were concerned and worried —

The Chairperson:

I will tell you what I want you to talk about, because I am sure that it will come up. The Committee receives correspondence about car parking and charges here. Will you tell us about that issue and the steps that you have taken to try to ameliorate it?

Ms McGivern:

The unfortunate part of the public-private partnership (PPP) contract under which this college was developed is that, for quite a long period, the car parking will be in the hands of a different operator. We have no control over the car parking, we do not get any money from it and we are subject to whatever the car park operator wants to charge. Initially, we were able to get a fairly low rate from the operator, but, when we were here for a couple of months, it put the cost up. We protested and had some robust conversations with the company, but its position has not changed. We entered into a discussion with the operator of the Odyssey car park. It gave us a better offer of £3 a day, which is cheaper than the car park below us.

There is a general problem with parking around here. It is policed by the harbour police, and they are very robust in their approach. People get clamped much more here than in other parts of the city, and that causes problems. Taxi drivers, for example, complain that if they stop for even a short time, they will be moved on.

There is an issue about parking in the area generally, and there is no point in denying that. Indeed, if a big concert is on, it is particularly problematic. We get complaints, and I receive regular e-mails, every few weeks, in which someone will make a comment about some aspect of the car parking. It is not ideal. As I said, we have done our best with the Odyssey car park, we got a better deal from it, and it is not too far for people to walk. We have some free, disabled car-parking spaces outside the building, but, unfortunately, they operate on a first-come, first-served basis.

The Chairperson:

Marie-Thérèse, I have to get a few other folk in. Are you happy —

Mr McElduff:

What about the delivery of HE?

Ms McGivern:

As you know, the FE sector in general delivers about 18% of HE in Northern Ireland. In this college, the HE and FE functions are split. HE is smaller than FE, but we have 1,500 HE students here every year. That is a big number of students. They are doing very well, and we deliver good HE. It relates back to my earlier point that Northern Ireland has not yet come to terms with the fact that FE also delivers HE and that it is not just the two universities that deliver it. Often the degree discussion is about the universities, but, given that 18% of degrees are delivered through FE, that conversation needs to be enlarged.

Mr Douglas:

Marie-Thérèse McGivern, thank you for your presentation. On the issue of car parking, there will be another major problem in 10 or 11 weeks' time when the Titanic signature project opens. What will your response be to that? That is a huge development and hundreds of thousands of people will be on site. There must be opportunities between the college and that project.

Ms McGivern:

There are, and you have brought up a great point. I should also have mentioned that we are working with a kind of Titanic Quarter family now. Bridge End train station is about to be rechristened as the Titanic Quarter stop. The closed footpath that used to connect the station to this area will be reopened so that, fairly soon, you will be able to come to the Titanic Quarter by train and stop at Bridge End. That is being done in preparation for the opening.

We are very excited about the opening of the facility there. One of the big areas that we work in is hospitality and catering, and it is interesting that the company that has the catering contract, Fitzers, has already come over. We are doing work with it. It will use our facilities for training its people — mostly young people — who will be working on the catering side. What is more interesting to us is that Fitzers has agreed to take our catering students, who will get access to working directly in the private sector as part and parcel of their work here with us.

That is one relationship, and we are working on a whole series of developments, not just on

that project. We are talking to the Nomadic Charitable Trust, which will open a small cafe. We are open to any training opportunities that come our way, and that is a relationship that we will want to build as we move forward.

Mr Douglas:

Is that the Nomadic outside?

Ms McGivern:

Yes, the Nomadic is the boat just outside the door.

The Chairperson:

It has been built brilliantly. I will bring Michelle in, because she has to go. Sammy, I will bring you back in.

Ms Gildernew:

Marie-Thérèse, thank you for the presentation. It is impressive to hear that, from a poor beginning and difficulties at the start, the Belfast Met's fortunes have been turned around. Well done to you and to the management here for doing that. I agree with you, and I will pick up where you left off. Higher and further education and the FE sector are hugely important not only for training apprentices but because, in the current economic climate, many students prefer to do a foundation degree at home in Omagh or Dungannon or wherever before transferring to university. We need to get the message out that the further education sector also delivers higher education opportunities. Many regional students do first-, second- and third-level qualifications at home and come up here to Belfast to continue after that. I have two nieces at university and a niece at the tech in Dungannon, and she is hoping —

The Chairperson:

You do not have a niece here as well, do you?

Ms Gildernew:

I have nieces every road and direction, so you dare not talk about me, Basil. My niece is studying beauty in Dungannon and is hoping to come here to finish off. From that point of view, accessibility is a big issue.

You said that you hope that the 31 redundancies in phase 2 will be voluntary. How certain can you be that that will be the case?

Ms McGivern:

I cannot say that absolutely and definitively, because we make it fit according to how many people submit expressions of interest and are willing to move forward. We were able to do it with the 90 redundancies that we made on the academic and management side, and we are fairly confident that we can do the same with the rest. Our preferred route is to bring those about by voluntary, rather than compulsory, means. That is the whole thrust of the work. As I said, we achieved it in the first phase. We are very hopeful that we will be able to achieve in the second phase.

The Chairperson:

For the record, do you want to explain why the financial situation got so bad? I am not pointing fingers, but I think that you should bring out the question about the staff who were coming from the two colleges that merged.

Ms McGivern:

We have gone over the merger forensically, and the efficiency report also looks at it. The seeds of the problem with the Belfast Met began with the merger, and the merger was not done in the right way. There are many lessons that can be learned from that as we move forward to try to bring more and more in. It may be that DEL will have to merge. There are lessons to be learned from mergers, which are difficult and tricky. In fact, many of our Scottish colleagues, who are moving in the same direction of merging, are coming over to ask us how they can do it better.

First, I think that some of the routes were there. However, not enough time was spent looking at what the two organisations were bringing to the table or at how much of the old resources the organisation would need in a new situation. The fact that we are now making 120 redundancies indicates that, really, those should have been done at the time of the merger. We should not have had to carry those. The deficit build-up began with carrying that number of people.

Secondly, I think that the organisation had not sufficiently thought through the impact of taking on the Titanic Quarter. That had to be fixed.

The third problem emerged around the structure that was agreed for taking the organisation forward. I do not know why that particular structure was decided on. To my mind, it was not very focused on performance and was not what I would regard as one with traditional line management in which there is one manager for each person. The structure they came up with was called the matrix structure, and, in many cases, one manager was responsible for a number of people, and, for example, I would be working to three managers. Call me old-fashioned, but if someone has three managers to work to, they will start to lose clarity. The organisation lost clarity of purpose.

A complex set of problems emerged. There is not just one reason why the financial problems got worse and worse. However, I think that there was an initial underestimation of the costs and that the new organisation did not need the sum total of all the people who worked in Castlereagh and all the people who worked in the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education (BIFHE). They should have taken more people out at that time. That was the first burden on the financial stability. A big cost, of maybe £2 million to £2.5 million, was being carried by the organisation. It really should not have started with that.

The Chairperson:

Were the two organisations that made up this organisation still recruiting prior to the merger?

Ms McGivern:

I think that they were. My understanding is that recruitment was going on. They did take 35 jobs out in the merger, but, as I said, we think that that number should have been closer to 150 or 170. That, married with a very strange structure, meant that the organisation started to lack clarity very quickly.

Mr Douglas:

Marie-Thérèse, you inherited a lot of those problems on your appointment. To use an analogy, well done on turning a big ship around. It is not totally turned around, so, I wonder how we as a Committee can help you at the Belfast Met achieve the vision, targets and goals that you have set out.

Ms McGivern:

For me, this Committee has already started down that track. It is essential that Northern Ireland

understands how important skills are to economic development. That message cannot be underlined enough, over and over again. If we do not get skills levels in Northern Ireland up, we will not achieve the economic success that we are trying to get. You have been a big champion. Number one, the Committee, for the rest of its life — about which I am worried — needs to make sure that the message that skills are absolutely essential carries on. There are obvious things, such as the financial problems that we all face. The Committee has championed the issue of apprenticeships. We need to look very strongly at that in Northern Ireland. Connected to those young people not in education, employment or training, or NEETs — which is, I think, becoming a cliché — we have a horrendous youth unemployment problem coming down the track. Apprenticeship routes are very important and we have to keep those open. I would like to see more varied and flexible work around apprenticeships. I would like to see apprenticeships for the over 25s expanded again, because we have cut back a bit on those. That is a difficulty. We have so many trails of people beyond the age of 25 who could be brought back into employment.

The other interesting thing about apprenticeships is that Northern Ireland has no level-4 or level-5 apprenticeships, whereas everywhere else in the UK does. Apprenticeships have to continue to be very high on your agenda, or the agenda that you pass on, as does youth unemployment.

I began my working career at the end of the 1970s and was involved in youth work with the young unemployed. I remember why the youth opportunities programme (YOP) was started, because I was one of the tutors in YOP at that time. I have the sense that we are almost repeating history and are moving into the situation of the early 1980s, when so many young people had nowhere to go. We know how long it took us to move out of that. Those are big issues. HE remains a big issue. I do not think we do second-class HE here or in any FE college. That is a very strong issue.

I will throw in this last point, although it is in your dying days. I have been a public servant for a very long time, and I believe in robust accountability. However, we in Northern Ireland are at a point at which the requirement for accountability is becoming almost burdensome. We need to look at that, because we are spending an incredible sum of money on looking, examining and auditing. I worry a wee bit about where the balance is going, because we need to put money into a front line programme.

The Chairperson:

I sort of agree with you, but the point is that you are going to lose £1.3 million this year and that there were financial overruns previously. There has to be some watchdog to say that there is an issue.

Ms McGivern:

I am not in any way suggesting otherwise. I believe in very strong public accountability, but my experience here has been that the burden of accountability is becoming stronger and heavier. Initially, it was good, but you have to find a balance between accountability and making things happen.

The Chairperson:

I should not have interrupted you. We will come back to that, but I want to get through this.

Mr Lyttle:

Thank you for your presentation. It is extremely important that we are here today, given the essential changes to Departments and the centrality of further education to economic recovery and gaining youth employment. Regardless of whether the Committee exists, I hope that the Assembly continues to put out the message that FE can be a first choice for learners who seek employability. I imagine that all the members, wherever we are after this, will continue to work with you to get that message out.

Obviously, there were significant concerns about and objections to the speed of the sustainability plan and the level of redundancies and how they would affect service provision. At this stage, what feedback has there been from staff on how the redundancies have played out in those two regards?

The learner access engagement programme is another programme that is coming up in Committee. Notwithstanding concerns around finances, the building is fantastic. I spoke to students on the way in today. It is great that the college is located where it is. I am sure that Sammy will agree with me. It is great to have it. What work is being done to make sure that we bring people to the building to get them on the first path of gaining skills?

Ms McGivern:

I will talk quickly about the redundancy programme. It was a difficult programme, but we have done it relatively successfully. We achieved all the redundancies via voluntary means, which was very helpful. I get a sense of what the mood is by talking to staff, or I can do it on an evidential base by looking at how many complaints I am getting from trade unions. My sense is that that concern has fallen away, and we are not getting any sense of a low morale or a difficulty. We produced an evidence base, and we showed staff the reason why we had to do it and why we had to take what were very difficult and radical measures. As I said at the time, I did not think that I was making a change in career to make people redundant. That was not the reason why I came here. I came here because I have a passion for education. I think that the college has moved past the shock of that first process. Even in the context of what was a difficult period, we increased student retention, student achievement and student success. That shows that the people who are staying on are deeply committed to the organisation, and, for me, there is a growing sense of pride in what the metropolitan college can achieve. Obviously, the building helps significantly because it is a visible and tangible change, and when e3 opens next April, it will be another tangible differential.

The Chairperson:

It is probably worth explaining to members what e3 is and the fact that it is even more high-tech.

Ms McGivern:

E3 is our newest campus and is on the peace line at Springvale in west Belfast. It is nearly complete and will cater for a variety of uses. Some 200 higher education students will be there at any one time. We will have a number of schools programmes there and will also work with small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to a large degree. The infrastructure in the new e3 campus is as cutting edge as is possible. First, it will have a digital media facility, which will be better than that which the BBC has in terms of broadcast and picture and developing gaming and all those other areas. It is in the heart of west Belfast, and we are working very closely with the west Belfast community to make sure that the whole benefit of the project is recognised.

Secondly, it will have a very high-tech engineering and composites suite. Therefore, there will be a special oven for baking composites and for composite development. Composites are very lightweight plastics that are now used for wind turbines, planes and ships. We are working directly with Bombardier and will have a research facility there. Our oven will be the best

composites oven in the island of Ireland, not just in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson:

Perhaps you should call it something other than an “oven”.

Ms McGivern:

I think it is called an autoclave. Effectively, it is a big oven for baking composites, but it is cutting edge. As I said, it will be the best facility in the island of Ireland, not just in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson:

When will e3 open?

Ms McGivern:

It will open in April 2013. We are working directly with Invest NI, and that has been a very good development. I talked earlier about reaching out to stakeholders, and our relationship with INI has been fine, but it has not been strong. However, e3 has been a linchpin because INI can see the potential for clustering around it because it wants to push the Springvale site, which is beside it, and it wants to attract more companies as time moves on. I know that there are plans for a further incubation space there. Therefore, we will complement one another. That is very exciting, and it is very good for Belfast and for Northern Ireland. There will be a lot of cutting-edge technology and infrastructure up there, and we need to make sure that it is maximised and that it pays dividends.

The Chairperson:

Regardless of whether the Committee is still together or not, I am sure that all members would really appreciate getting an invite to it whenever that is practical.

Ms McGivern:

I would be delighted to do that. I do not know what your timetable is like, but I would be delighted to bring you up and give you the hard-hat tour because the building is complete, and we are now putting the infrastructure inside it.

Chris, you asked a second question. I have not forgotten about it, and I alluded slightly to it in

respect of the work that we do with communities. As well as our main campuses, we operate in over 100 various places, including community centres, youth centres and libraries. Therefore, we have a very big community process. We are happy to work in the community and when people are working and coming in often at level 0 or level 1 and learning essential skills with us, or even just doing something for leisure, we want to make sure that we are always providing route ways beyond and into the college. Therefore, we encourage our students to come into this campus and into Castlereagh and Whiterock campus to see what the route ways are, and we constantly give them those route ways.

We believe that that community networking, the community partnership that we have in many communities across the city, is really important. It is an important way of reaching the hard to reach — the people who we need to get to if we are serious about changing our statistics and our skills levels.

Mrs Overend:

Thanks for your very interesting presentation. I appreciate your comment that the further education sector should be recognised as a first choice for career development and not just as an avenue for those who fail. We need to develop that further. What measures and methods are you using to improve student retention? Will you explain that in more detail? They may be extended to encourage people to come in to begin with.

Ms McGivern:

First, we brought in a much stronger monitoring process. If a student misses even one week, we are much more robust about contacting them to seek reasons for their absence and to establish whether there are things that we can help them with and to offer support services. We have increased that a lot. So the monitoring framework has been increased significantly. We have made the link between our already very good support services and the academic side much stronger than it was previously.

The other thing that we do is continually talk to staff about the need to regard every student who comes through the door as a precious person. They are precious. I sometimes get odd looks here because I say that, in a sense, we have to be like Marks and Spencer: if people come through the door, we have to treat them as though we want them to stay, to be part of the family and to be part of the community. Obviously, Marks and Spencer want them to spend money, whereas we

want them to stay and complete a qualification with us, but we have to treat them the same way. Some people say that we do not want to think like that. I believe that it is a good thing for us to consider each student to be as precious as Marks and Spencer would regard every one of its customers. Through staff communications and our staff training and development, that message has been constantly delivered, and we are starting to bring about a different ethos in this college about the importance of the student.

We have been, and are, developing much stronger student voice processes, so that students have quicker ways to feed back their thoughts about a course, general facilities and whether there are things that we can do to make life easier for them. That has all been part of the round. Last year, we had a good lift; we had a 4% increase in retention. This year, we are looking at it really seriously and working hard. We have many action programmes in place and are working with both our parent Department and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) on this, and I like to think that we will see an even better increase in our retention and achievement rates.

The Chairperson:

When are the retention figures due? You said that some indicators were about to be published.

Ms McGivern:

As you know, DEL has instituted a really good process — the quarterly health check. The first of this year's is due soon. Last year, our retention figure was 85%. That relates to the year before because you always do the calculations at the end of the year. We think that our retention in the first quarter of last year will have gone to 89% — a 4% increase in a year. The Committee receives the health check, so you will receive the first one.

The Chairperson:

I would like to see those figures, because the comparator figures from other colleges would be higher.

Ms McGivern:

They were. As you can imagine, this college's whole figure work will always, in my view, be lower. What is interesting in the health check is that our essential-skills numbers, for example, are the second highest of all six colleges. Therefore, despite all our disadvantages, setbacks and

challenges here, there are areas in which we have been doing really good work and, regardless of our bad figures in other areas, essential skills is one of them. Within the college we have examples of really fantastic practice. The Prince's Trust, which attracts a lot of very disadvantaged students with difficult backgrounds, has a 98% retention rate. You can achieve excellent retention rates if you put your mind to it.

Mr Allister:

I have two issues to raise, if I may. What you say about the consequences of a mismanaged merger is interesting and significant. However, the Comptroller and Auditor General's report identifies much deeper issues than that. It leaves one with the impression, and it is hard to escape the conclusion, that there was a culture of financial profligacy abroad. The report talks about the financial statements not being up to standard; about a significant number of weaknesses in financial controls; about instability in the financial department; and about temporary staff running big departments as consultants instead of there being proper line-management control. It really paints quite a shocking picture. Yes, I am sure that the mismanaged merger contributed to a lot of that, but what about the culture of financial profligacy and mismanagement that seems to lie at the base of the findings in the Comptroller and Auditor General's report? Has that been fully tackled? Has it been rooted out?

Ms McGivern:

I will not say that it absolutely has been. What I can tell you about is the trend of the audit reports. We work directly with the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) — it lives with us, and it will do for the foreseeable future, until it is absolutely satisfied that we are robust in every sense. The trend is good and is moving towards robustness and a "satisfactory" rating. I want to get it to "substantial", not just "satisfactory".

However, you asked me whether there was such a culture, and it is clear from the reports that there was a culture in which —

Mr Allister:

Did any heads roll?

Ms McGivern:

All that I can say is that the people who were responsible for finance then are not with us any

longer. Some people from the finance side left as a result of the efficiency review; they resigned and left the organisation. I share, and I did share, your amazement when I came here and looked at what we had inherited and at the amount of work that we had to do to start to put robust systems in place. There were real difficulties that were not helped by the fact that the organisation went through three directors in a very short period. Chairpersons came and went as well, so all those factors contributed to a lack of robust scrutiny of financial systems, processes and audit processes. We are now back on track. We will not, in my view, be where I want us to be until we are achieving a regular audit rating of “substantial”. We are still climbing the hill. We are not there yet, but we will get there.

Mr Allister:

My second issue concerns the college’s contribution to apprenticeship provision. You are situated in an area where we still have some significant manifestations of manufacturing, such as Bombardier. However, to many of us, it seems that apprenticeships have been the poor relation of skilling and getting people into unemployment.

Ms McGivern:

Absolutely.

Mr Allister:

It seems to be an old-fashioned idea that has been overwhelmed by more newfangled things that may not have the same, lasting impact. How far does the college value and nurture the concept of apprenticeships? How far does it build deep-rooted relationships with manufacturing business in the community? If the college were gone tomorrow, would we notice any impact on apprenticeships? Is the college really contributing, or could and should it be doing a lot more?

Ms McGivern:

It can always do a lot more. I want to push that, because I have a passion for apprenticeships. Apprenticeships is something that we are missing a trick with in Northern Ireland. We really need to work hard to reinsert the concept that being an apprentice is a good thing and a great pathway.

You asked where we put apprentices. We provide most of the apprentices for Bombardier, and we have just received a grade 1 outstanding accolade from DETI for that work. Bombardier

is delighted. In fact, it is so delighted that it wants to do more work with us in providing other training in its organisation. Bombardier regards apprenticeships as a really important route in, and it is a great company to work with. There are some other parts of the private sector in Northern Ireland that have lost the concept of apprenticeships. We need to push that again and push it back.

As to whether apprenticeships are important, I can tell you that our bricklaying student Philip Green was awarded a gold medal at the WorldSkills London 2011 competition last October. He had trained with us since he left school with no qualifications whatsoever. In fact, he would tell you that he hated school. He came to us, and five years later he received the gold medal as the world champion. Northern Ireland had seven competitors in the 44-person Team UK in that competition, and it was no mean feat for us to achieve that. Philip is effectively the best bricklayer in the world. He trained in our college, and we use him as a tool when we go out to schools to encourage young people to see the apprenticeship route as important and strong.

Mr Allister:

How wide is the apprenticeship base?

Ms McGivern:

It is strong, and we have a lot of apprentices. However, because of the economic situation, there are difficulties in trades on the construction side such as plumbing and bricklaying, and many employers are not taking on apprentices. Our numbers are not where I want them to be, because we cannot get the placements that we need. We did the programme-led apprenticeship scheme, which did not involve employers. That was important and a good gateway, and many of the young people who have come through that scheme have done very well.

The Chairperson:

On Jim's point and on the detail that you have provided, the Committee would be interested to know whether there is an issue with placements and the number of apprenticeships.

Ms McGivern:

I will do a small briefing and send that to the Committee.

The Chairperson:

That would be wonderful.

Ms McGivern:

That will give you the numbers. It will also show you where the successes and difficulties lie in the area.

The Chairperson:

I am a wee bit short of time, but I am interested in what you think about the planned removal of DEL. We have had a few words about it. If colleagues want to say a few words, I am happy, but it will only be — sorry, David, you were at the bottom of the list to ask a question, and I did not see you. Marie-Thérèse, hold that thought until we find out what David wants to ask you.

Mr D McIlveen:

Marie-Thérèse, you do not have to hold that thought. My question is connected to what the Chairperson had started to raise. In your presentation, you mentioned Invest NI a couple of times and DETI on quite a few occasions. If there were to be a restructuring of Departments, would you see DETI as a closer partner for DEL than the Department of Education (DE)?

Ms McGivern:

You are putting me on the spot.

The Chairperson:

That is what these Committees do.

Ms McGivern:

I do. In this college, we have strived to meet the DEL agenda of pushing employability and job enhancement. Our job is to do that, and we have an important role to play in economic matters. We also do a lot of work with SMEs. You are asking me where my heart would take me if DEL disappears, and I think that there will be devastation in the FE sector if that were to happen. We increasingly have had a very good relationship with our Department, which has been very supportive of FE, but, more so, we also have — I said this at the beginning — a great Committee for Employment and Learning that has championed FE.

The theme in DE is strongly education, and a number of our education colleagues regard FE as a second chance or as second best. We might have a healthier future if we are aligned with DETI/Invest NI. I think that we can do and deliver more there. That is a personal view, not my governing body's view. I am speaking off the cuff to you on that today. The agenda that you and we have been pursuing is closer to the heart of DETI than possibly DE.

Mr D McIlveen:

It was a very direct question, and I appreciate that I got a direct answer.

The Chairperson:

Since we are on the topic, does anyone else wish to have a quick word on the matter?

Mr Douglas:

I want to ask Marie-Thérèse a very quick question. Chris talked about where the centre is located. You mentioned Portadown and other places in respect of your outreach programme. Can you give us an idea, in percentages, of from where the students are coming? Not all of them come from Belfast.

Ms McGivern:

That is correct. More than 30% of our students come from outside greater Belfast. One student comes from Ballycastle, and we have a lot of students from Ballymena, Portadown and Dungannon.

The Chairperson:

If you have that information to hand, please send it up.

Ms McGivern:

That is not a problem.

The Chairperson:

Would anyone else like to say anything about Marie-Thérèse's comments on DEL?

Ms McGivern:

They are still reeling from the shock.

The Chairperson:

They are wondering what the future holds.

I will finish on this, Marie-Thérèse. There are some lessons to do with the PPP that I am not sure have come through. There is the whole financial accountability of things. You have gone to considerable lengths to deal with some issues, but there are some things that you cannot unravel. Do you have any lessons on that for us? How do the lessons that you have learnt get back into wider society?

Ms McGivern:

Private finance initiatives (PFIs) have had mixed results in Northern Ireland. The measure of the success of a PFI lies in the team that is assembled on the public sector side. We had a good team — the DEL officials plus the team here. Our team was led by a person who previously worked for the private sector and, therefore, was aware of the tricks that are required to do a PFI. To do a PFI, and to do it well, is tricky and complex. There is a lot of learning to be had from knowing how to get in there, how to manage it well and how to be effective. You need to have people who are on the ball and who are as strong as the team that the private sector will put in place. The private sector will put such a team in place, because that is its job. It is there to make a profit and to make the PFI work. If you are going to swim with sharks, you need to think about putting a few sharks of your own in the water. That would be my kind of start, and it comes from my experience of being director of development at Belfast City Council. When you are dealing with developers, you have to be as sharp as they are.

The Chairperson:

As ever, I like your forthright style. Let us see where that takes us. I want to move on, but I thank you most sincerely for the time that you have given us. There are issues that will come out in audit and things like that, but it is to your credit that we have got ourselves in some sort of positive shape.

We seem to have lost a lot of members. Are we quorate?

The Committee Clerk:

We have four members, which is not enough to take decisions. We can continue to hear

evidence. Barry is away, but Jim is coming back.

Ms McGivern:

Thank you for coming. There is a hard-hat tour available, if you want to go up and see what is going on before your end date, or even if you wish to do so independently.

The Chairperson:

Given the future of the Committee, we will probably need hard hats.

Ms McGivern:

You can have a hard-hat tour any time you want. I would be delighted to do that for you.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much.