



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Dissolution of the Department for
Employment and Learning**

15 February 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Employment and Learning

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)

Mr Jim Allister

Mr Sammy Douglas

Mr Fra McCann

Mr Barry McElduff

Mr David McIlveen

Mr Pat Ramsey

Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Mr Gerard Campbell

Colleges Northern Ireland

Mr Joe Martin

Colleges Northern Ireland

Mr Trevor Neilands

Colleges Northern Ireland

Dr Bill McGinnis

Northern Ireland Adviser on Employment and Skills

The Chairperson: We move to the consideration of the responses to the Committee consultation on the dissolution of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). I remind members that the meeting is being recorded by Hansard. Please check that your electronic devices are switched off.

There are 23 responses to the Committee consultation, and three further responses have been emailed to members. I will open up the meeting for any comments. I trust that you have all had a chance to read the submissions. I will take a quick run through them to give you a chance to find your place. Are there any people you think we ought to hear from, other than those already on the list? Mr Lyttle has suggested some others in correspondence. Is there anyone who has been missed?

Mr McElduff: In the South, as I understand it, the Department of Education and Science became the Department of Education and Skills in 2010. Is that right?

The Chairperson: I do not know.

Mr McElduff: I believe that it changed its title and its emphasis. It would be worth finding out the rationale for that.

The Chairperson: How would we do that?

The Committee Clerk: Research.

The Chairperson: OK, we will ask for the research.

Mr P Ramsey: I do not have a difficulty with that. I agree with Barry. It would be good to look at the models in other regional Parliaments and not just at the South.

The Chairperson: That is a good point. We should get a research paper on how we compare with other jurisdictions, including, obviously, the South, Scotland and wherever. Are members satisfied with that?

Mr P Ramsey: I have gone through the submissions, and, in most of them, there is a clear preference for a move to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). For the next meeting, if possible, it would be useful to get a summary — a two-page report — of the points and of where the organisations favour going to.

The Chairperson: Fortunately, I have done my own.

Mr P Ramsey: Have you? You can share yours then.

The Chairperson: That is a good point.

Mr F McCann: One of the other elements of DEL that sometimes seems out of kilter is the jobs and benefits offices. It makes sense for the two to be under the one roof because the services that they provide are so entwined.

The Chairperson: Before you joined the Committee, we had a very good briefing from the Department's employment services directorate. Quite often, people do not realise that DEL is involved; they think that it involves just social services. That fact is missed. We have had a briefing from the Department, but are there any stakeholders that this would directly impinge on? In our submission, we can say that we think that —

Mr F McCann: It seems to make sense, given that people go there for their benefits. The issue of benefits sanctions was raised last week. This directly affects the DEL jobs element.

Mr Ross: From the responses and other meetings that we have had individually, it is clear that it will not be an easy split. Most likely, some elements will go to the Department for Social Development (DSD), and teacher training and stuff would clearly go to the Department of Education (DE). However, it seems from the responses that the higher education (HE) and further education (FE) sector seem to favour moving towards DETI or a Department for the economy, or whatever you want to call it. Initially, Pat had said about putting a day aside and having a special meeting to take evidence from a number of stakeholders.

The Chairperson: That is part of what is on the agenda now. We have had the written responses. We said that we would write to whoever we thought might be interested and then call people from the list — or anybody else that you wish to add — bearing in mind that we have only a limited amount of time. We cannot call all 23 people, as we would never get through them. We could perhaps take evidence from the two groups that are here now, and, by the end of the meeting, you might have had a chance to reflect on some of the other issues. Would that be the appropriate way to deal with it?

Mr Douglas: A couple of voluntary and community organisations have responded, such as Include Youth. However, there is a whole range of training and employment organisations across Northern Ireland. I am not quite sure whether there is a forum for them or whether they know about this consultation. It would be good to elicit the views of practitioners on the ground. We have met some of them. The responses are very light as regards representation from the community and voluntary sector in particular.

The Chairperson: We did not go for a formal consultation, with advertising and so on.

Mr Douglas: Did we just write to those groups?

The Chairperson: We are still not sure of the timescale. We have not had any direction to say that DEL will be gone in three months, six months or six years. I had heard that there would be a proper consultation that would last four months. That would get us to around May. Presumably that would come back, a decision would be made and things would be implemented over the summer. However, that was one of those wee whispers that did not turn out to be anything more than a wee whisper. I wonder should we write to find out?

Mr P Ramsey: I think that Sammy's point about involving the community and voluntary sector is fundamental. We have a database of those who participated in the NEETs inquiry, most of whom came from the community and voluntary sector. Maybe we could use that database. That would not necessarily involve a huge mail drop; we could e-mail those groups.

The Chairperson: Right, we can take those who participated in the NEETs inquiry. Sammy, I am happy to include anyone that you or any other member may be aware of. The only issue will be our ability to process the information that comes in. There is a fair amount of work involved in reading 23 responses, and if we get 123 responses, it will take even longer.

Mr Douglas: Yes, I understand.

The Chairperson: We will take it that we will use the NEETs inquiry database that Pat suggested and contact any other voluntary organisations that are suggested.

Mr F McCann: I do know whether the likes of Advice NI and Citizens Advice would be part of that database, but there is a connection with DSD and the jobs issue.

The Committee Clerk: I do not think that we would have access to that. I do not think that they would give us that information. We would have to give the information to them and ask them to distribute it.

Mr F McCann: If you asked —

The Committee Clerk: Do you mean ask for their opinion? Sorry.

The Chairperson: We can look at that. Do we write to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister?

The Committee Clerk: You would send a memo to the Committee along with a letter to the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Committee will forward the letter.

The Chairperson: I think that we should write to the Executive to ask for some clarity. I am told that the letter needs to go to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. Is that appropriate?

Mr P Ramsey: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) is carrying out its own consultation. Could we not ask it to share a summary of that information?

The Committee Clerk: I do not think that it is doing a consultation.

Mr P Ramsey: Is it not?

The Committee Clerk: I do not think so. The press release just says that it will consult with parties.

The Chairperson: Let us write to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and copy in the OFMDFM Committee. We will deal with it ourselves. Depending on the response we get, we will, if necessary, go back to the OFMDFM Committee.

The Committee Clerk: So we will write to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and the OFMDFM Committee to ask when dissolution will occur?

The Chairperson: Yes. We should also ask what processes they intend to set up — for example, a consultation — and whether they can give us some guidance on the timescales.

Cathie, for approval, will you read out Mr Lyttle's list of those who have not been contacted. Do you recognise any of them?

The Committee Clerk: The Assistant Committee Clerk will help me out. CMI. Do you know what that is?

Dr Bill McGinnis (Northern Ireland Adviser on Employment and Skills): That is the Chartered Management Institute.

The Chairperson: Bill, we may have to get you to answer all of these for us.

The Committee Clerk: ILM.

Dr B McGinnis: It is the Institute of Leadership and Management.

Mr P Ramsey: Very good, Bill.

The Committee Clerk: The Chamber of Commerce; Eamonn Donaghy from the Economic Reform Group

The Chairperson: He was the boy who gave me a wee bit of hassle yesterday.

Mr F McCann: It was actually the other way round, from what I heard.

The Committee Clerk: The chair of the food industry future skills action group (FSAG); the chair of the ICT Skills Taskforce; Joanne Stuart, the chair of the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) implementation steering group; the sector skills councils — we wrote to the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils, so that is covered; the nine Steps to Work lead contractors; and the Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment (NIUSE). Will we write to all those?

Mr P Ramsey: Why not.

The Chairperson: But you will have to read all the submissions; there is no point in just writing to them.

Mr Douglas: To come back to my suggestion, I think that the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) is involved in an all-party group here, and it brought a lot of the NEETs groups together a couple of times for lunchtime presentations. So NICVA might be the body to bring one response on behalf of everybody.

The Chairperson: That is a good idea, Sammy. While we are on a roll, is there anyone else? Cathie has nothing to do this afternoon. No one? OK. I will refer to that at the end of the meeting to see whether there is anything that members want to do.

I welcome Bill McGinnis, the Northern Ireland Adviser on Employment and Skills, and invite him to give a briefing on the transfer of functions of the Department for Employment and Learning. I remind members that the meeting is being recorded by Hansard.

Dr B McGinnis: Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to you today. As Cathie is aware, because of the fairly short notice, I have not had time to prepare a paper; there were other business activities that I had to get involved in. However, I have had a good think about the subject and have prepared major notes on it.

I will give an introduction and refresh your memory of what DEL is all about, how it delivers its various functions and how the whole skills strategy fits in with the Northern Ireland Economic Advisory Group, of which I am a member. It puts the economy at the heart of government and the Programme for Government. We have looked at the economies of places such as Singapore, Finland and New Zealand, and we have looked to our near neighbours in the Republic of Ireland. We have seen how they have driven things forward and how skills have been very much part of that drive for the economy.

In many ways, skills are as important as corporation tax. They are one of the drivers in all economies, so it is important that we take that into consideration.

I will refresh your memory of the aims of the Department, which are to promote learning and skills, prepare people for work and support the economy. It is responsible for further and higher education, training and skills, employment programmes and employment law. In pursuing its aims, the Department's objective is to promote economic, social and personal development through high-quality learning, research and skills training and to help people into employment and promote good work practices.

It seeks to achieve those aims through four key areas of activity: promoting the provision of learning and skills, including entrepreneurship, enterprise management and leadership; encouraging research and development, creativity and innovation in the Northern Ireland economy; helping individuals to acquire jobs, including self-employment and improving the linkages between employment programmes, skills and development; and the development and maintenance of the framework of employment rights and responsibilities.

As I said, skills and employment are the key drivers to sustainable economic growth and a shared prosperity. A highly and properly skilled workforce has a crucial role to play in a modern knowledge-intensive, export-driven economy. Skills and employability support the expectation of other key drivers of economic success. They help economies to make the most of new opportunities and high-value activities; they encourage greater investment, including inward investment and innovation; and they help firms to compete successfully in export markets. Ultimately, they support economic growth and enhanced productivity.

The case for developing the skills and employability of our workforce is, therefore, compelling, but our skills profile remains weak compared with that of many other developed countries. There are too many with low qualifications and not enough with higher-level skills. There are also too many who are economically inactive. Research shows that, if we are to close that productivity gap with the rest of the UK, over 50% of our jobs in 2020 will require higher professional and technical qualifications and other higher education level qualifications — up from about one third currently. If we look at how the job market has changed in the last number of years, we can see that there are very few low-skilled jobs around. The people in that sector are the ones who have been most affected by the downturn. We have to move those people up the supply chain and get them into higher-value jobs. As I mentioned, Finland, Sweden and the Republic of Ireland rely heavily on their superior skills profiles to drive export growth and innovative capacity.

Addressing that agenda lies at the heart of the Department's purpose. It requires concerted and co-ordinated action across the skills continuum, ensuring that the economically inactive have a skills set that aligns with the needs of employers and the economy, and that lies with the employment service. The aim is to improve the skills set of the working population and those about to join the labour market — that sits in further education — and to encourage the acquisition of higher-level skills, and that sits in further and higher education. All that is set in the context of the skills strategy, which is the delivery arm of the policy. That is delivered through higher and further education and skills solutions. You are probably aware of all of that as it is mostly lifted from DEL's corporate plan.

There are a number of options. A couple of things probably automatically need to go to DETI. Employment rights and employment relations automatically sit with DETI. I am not sure why they were not put there when the Departments were set up. The ETI Minister announces the unemployment figures, yet they are not really connected to that.

Option 1 is to move everything to DETI. That creates a number of advantages. It would create a strong economic Department and underpin the strengths of the economic strategy, which would include not only the job creation function but the skills policy and operations to support job growth. It would also increase productivity and competitiveness. It would ensure that the skills strategy would be implemented in its entirety. If it is spread across a number of Departments, it will likely not be implemented in full, and there will likely be mission creep, which will not be effective.

There have been major changes in recent times. There is now quite a strong connection between Invest Northern Ireland and the Department for Employment and Learning. Take the Assured Skills programme that came about recently; though it, the Department prepares people for new inward investments. For example, a company coming here might need 150 ICT graduates. It could be a year before that company is here. In the meantime, the Department could be working with colleges and universities to get those people through or to establish courses to move that forward. There is strength in that model.

I have been involved in this since 1994, which seems a long time. I do not think that anyone senior in the Department has been around as long as I have, and I have a non-executive function. I was there pre-devolution, when we had the Department of Economic Development (DED) and the Training and Employment Agency. However, we were short of tools to do the job. In fact, we had very little access to further and higher education. The system may not be perfect at the minute and certainly can be improved, but we need to move towards keeping that in place or else we will lose what we have gained. We should not go back in life and look at something that was a failure. We should try to keep in place something that exists.

I turn now to pre-employment training and getting the unemployed into the labour market. I heard the Committee discuss the difference between the Social Security Agency and the employment service. The Social Security Agency is really about getting you your benefit. If you turn up in the morning and need cash for whatever reason, it has an obligation to get you sorted and onto some form of benefits. The employment service is a much softer way of dealing with people. It is about trying to get people prepared for work, getting them into schemes such as the Steps to Work programme, preparing them for interviews, getting their CVs sorted out and trying to get them into work. It is an employment issue, in my opinion. Some social issues are obviously connected with that. Quite often, those social issues remain with the Social Security Agency because they involve people who are not economically active. It is quite important that those things stay there.

Option 1 would bring the Careers Service, skills and Invest NI into one grouping. Further education is the main delivery arm of that and it is important that that stays there. It would support the work on STEM subjects and MATRIX. All of that is connected to the skills side. Those sit in DETI at the moment and should remain there.

It is difficult to see any disadvantages in not bringing it all together. I have no axe to grind. I just want what is best for the economy.

I am an adviser, not a civil servant. I am a businessman and run my business daily. I feel that what is best for the economy is the creation of a new Department.

Option two is that skills and employment would go to DETI with the other elements that I mentioned earlier, such as employment law. Further and higher education would then go back to DE, which was the position pre-devolution. Having the employment and skills services together provides economic benefits and supports economic policy in one Department. That is essential. FE and HE in the Department of Education would mean that Department's covering education from nursery to higher education, and it could support the 14 to 19 agenda in particular. You may be aware of discussion in England at the moment, where further and higher education is part of BIS under Vince Cable. The Secretary of State for Education has been trying to move them across to his Department, but Cable is making a very strong case for retaining them. It might be a resigning issue for him, if it were pushed. Cable thinks that it is very important that innovation, and so on, sits with his Department.

The Chairperson: His Department being education?

Dr B McGinnis: No, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Cable argues that HE and FE should stay with his Department. I think that, at one stage, they were under the Department of Education, but they were separated from it.

I am not sure what model they follow in the Irish Republic; it has changed. It is not exactly as it was described earlier. We would need a paper to know exactly how it sits. It is not as straightforward as it sounds. They had FÁS, the Irish national training and employment authority, which sat outside the

Department as a non-departmental public body, a bit like Invest NI. It was a very large organisation that delivered much of the skills agenda. However, it has experienced corporate governance issues in recent times, as you may have read. I am not sure how that sits at present.

We can all see that the FE sector has been well developed over the past number of years. Recently, I visited the new Belfast Metropolitan College building and had a look at what was being done there. It is a state-of-the-art building and is coming on in great leaps and bounds. The Department of Education has the major issues of downsizing and selection to deal with at the moment. I suspect that HE will look after itself; it can finance itself, to some degree, with a bit of support. However, I am worried that FE would become the Cinderella of education once more, because it must be the main driver for the technical and professional skills required for the industries of the future.

The other option is that skills go to DETI and employment to DSD, as some members said this morning. The pros and cons of separating further education and higher education are even. The pros and cons, as discussed earlier, still apply to their going to DETI.

In GB, there is a body called Jobcentre Plus, and that model would operate in Northern Ireland. I do not know whether you have taken evidence from that body. It is a one-step body, where you go to get benefits and look for employment at the same time. We work in a similar model, except that the two elements are separate: you go to top up your benefits first, and then you are sent to see an employment adviser. The GB model was an expensive system to bring together. We would have some slight problems with that model, including the fact that, at present, the computer systems do not talk to each other, because the benefits side is data-protected, which means that the information does not go through immediately to the employment side. So there are issues to be resolved and bringing the two elements together could raise fairly big IT problems. However, that looks like its natural home —

The Chairperson: Is that not the point that Fra made? Earlier, you said that you were not that happy about it.

Dr B McGinnis: Yes, but I am making the argument and looking at the pros and cons of various models. It is not for me to decide; it is for you, as the Assembly, to do so. I am just trying to give you a balanced view.

Mr F McCann: In jobs and benefits offices, there are fairly strong connections between the benefit and job elements. If you go into one, you are sent to the other, and vice versa. Reports are sent directly from job-focused interviews to the benefits side. It just seems to make sense that they both operate out of the same offices. They have the same focus. Not only do they pay benefits but they try to create an atmosphere whereby people enter employment, so it makes sense to have them based together. You said that the employment end was the soft option. However, it may be quite a while since you visited a jobs and benefits office to see how the system operates.

Dr B McGinnis: I do not mean that it is the soft option. My point is that you receive different customer care when looking for a job than when dealing with someone about your benefits. Maybe, you think that has changed.

Mr F McCann: The two are interconnected.

The Chairperson: We take the point.

It is back to you, Bill, to finish what you have to say, and then we will have a general discussion.

Dr B McGinnis: If we are to support the skills strategy, the employment service needs to stay within DETI. Invest NI has been given some £20 million in recent times to create jobs that require lower-level skills. The people for those jobs will come from those who engage with the employment service. I find that, if responsibility for related issues sits in different Departments, it is very hard to get joined-up government. You need to have control of the situation, because each Department gives its issues priority. We all like to talk about joined-up government, but it does not always happen. That is not just the case here; it applies everywhere, and something needs to be done.

The other option is that skills and further education go to DETI, the employment service goes to DSD and higher education goes to DE. One of the pros of that is that higher education, to a large extent, takes children who have gone from nursery school right through the system to university. In many ways, it is for the high-flyers who want to get a university degree. So that is another possibility, because HE is quite self-sufficient when it comes to funding. As well as getting a lot of money from DEL's innovation fund and money from Invest NI, it raises quite a lot of money itself. So there is a possibility that HE could go to the Department of Education.

We could consider skills and higher education going to DETI, the employment service going to DSD and further education going to DE. There are all sorts of options, but the one that I favour, as I am sure that you have gathered, is for everything to go to DETI. Daily and weekly, I see quite a lot of stakeholders and business people in the community, and their view is that we need a strong economic Department. Given the current economic situation, we need to get people back to work and create jobs, and it would be nice to have responsibility for all those areas sitting in the one place.

The Chairperson: What do you feel about the removal of DEL per se? Would you have advocated that anyway?

Dr B McGinnis: I would have advocated fewer Departments in the Executive.

The Chairperson: If there were to be fewer Departments, would DEL be the one to go?

Dr B McGinnis: I think so, because it sits alongside the economy. Either DETI takes over or DEL takes over. The other point to note is that, from a financial perspective, DETI is quite small and DEL is quite big. If you join them, the resulting Department will not be as big as the Health Department or the Education Department, but the Department of the economy and employment, or whatever they decide to call it, will be big. I would have liked more rationalisation, including looking at other Departments.

The Chairperson: I am happy for that to come out in the conversation. We will now have a discussion, Bill, which is an opportunity to exchange views.

Last week, we were pretty stressed because of our workload, but today is more balanced, so we can have a talk. This is a chance to put on record how we should look at things. I will open the discussion to the floor now and come in a wee bit later. Members can indicate if they want to ask a question, and I will let people come in several times, so do not feel that you have to get everything out in one go.

Mr D McIlveen: I probably will try to get everything out in one go, if that is all right.

The Chairperson: I keep trying to give guidance and keep being ignored. That is all right. Just carry on.

Mr D McIlveen: I will try to set the trend for an early lunch.

Bill, I want to check something with you. A couple of times, you mentioned economic inactivity as a problem that we must deal with. How much economic inactivity is down to too many people having the wrong qualifications for the jobs in the marketplace?

Dr B McGinnis: I cannot give you a percentage of the amount of economically inactive people to whom that applies, but employers tell me about the mismatch. Employers' needs have totally changed. Last week, for example, I visited a food company that trades at a fairly high volume. I have been impressed with what has happened in the agrifood sector, which is an area of growth. I discovered that most of the people working on the company's production line were engineers, not food scientists. The company had a food science department that was involved in all of the preparation, but engineers now run that plant. Before going to a company like that, I would not have thought that it needed engineers. There is a big change in what is happening, and processes are becoming more automated. Lower-skilled people cannot do those jobs because they involve a lot of ICT. The labour market has changed: the old jobs have gone and, I think, gone forever.

Mr D McIlveen: Let me just take that a step further. Would you support the slightly more dogmatic approach of careers advice as opposed to career options? At present, there seems to be an issue,

particularly in the upper end of secondary or grammar school, that young people receive career options rather than careers advice. Those options do not always send students in the direction that would give them the skills for which there is a demand in the marketplace. Should careers advice be a little more directional and dogmatic in pointing people towards skills for which there are jobs at the other side?

Dr B McGinnis: I think that it should be more directional. In fact, if you read my priority skills report, you will see that that is what it is really saying. It outlines the areas that we think will be good in the future, and the careers people should be taking that advice. I know that FE is taking that advice and moving its courses along in that direction. The grammar schools are a different issue. I have spent evenings giving talks at grammar schools, and most young people want to enter particular professions. That is just human nature. You bring them along, and they get involved in business-type research projects in lower sixth. I go along to some of the projects at Queen's or the University of Ulster, and they are fantastic. I speak to the kids afterwards and ask what they intend doing and whether they have thought of going to some of the local scientific companies such as Almac or Norbrook, but they all want to be doctors or dentists. The rewards from those two professions are much better than young people could get from industry for a long time, unless they are real high-flyers. I am not sure that you can change their minds, and, quite often, it is the parents' minds that have to change. A change in mindset needs to happen in Northern Ireland so that we look upon the guy on the shop floor doing an engineering job in the same way as we look upon a doctor. A big societal change has to happen.

Mr D McIlveen: What I am getting at is that a lot of people out there have, I believe, degrees in Canadian studies — I use that as a facetious example. I think that teachers can pick up, whether at secondary school or grammar school level, the potential of a pupil. So is there an argument for the careers advice to be a little more nurturing? The advice to pupils could be, for example, that they should head in the direction of a certain industry that is recruiting and has a good five-to 10-year plan.

Dr B McGinnis: Most educationalists would disagree with you. They say that young people should have a choice in what they want to do, but you are using terms that might be used in a dictatorship to say that they must do this or that. I think that young people should be guided to where the future jobs will be. It is important that they are given that sort of advice and those sorts of options. I am not sure that that always happens. In many schools, careers advice is very poor. It is offered by people who have never been in the world of work. They went to school, university and spent all their working life teaching. They have not really seen the real world of work, and some of their advice to kids can be quite outdated. That needs to change.

Mr McElduff: Bill, you cited Finland and Sweden as examples of best practice in joined-up government. Will you tell us a bit more about that?

Dr B McGinnis: They decided, way back, that their basic industries would not survive. We all know how well IKEA, for example, has done. It decided to outsource its product a number of years ago but still employs a large number of reasonably high-level people back in Sweden. Not a stick of furniture is made in Sweden; it is all made in the eastern European countries around it. Nokia is another example, although it went through a bit of a bad time. TVs, electronics, and so on, came from Finland, and Nokia decided to go for those high-level products. There was good joined-up government. There was a Minister responsible solely for the economy and for driving such things forward in those countries.

New Zealand has changed dramatically as well. That country was very much — not unlike Northern Ireland — based around farming. It had problems with its food exports in the years after the European Commission came into being. Exporting to the Commonwealth countries was fine, but that drifted away from them. We used to get New Zealand butter here, but you never see it now. There has been a big change in its economy, and it has tried more diversification in farming and grown quite a lot of new food products.

So countries can change, and the Republic of Ireland was going well until the downturn. It invested a lot of money in skills. The Republic is one of three pharma centres in the world. If you consider its exports, the Republic is holding on because pharmaceutical companies are expanding and amalgamating. Its status as one of the three pharma centres has been driven by skills and corporation tax.

Mr McElduff: Can you throw any light on a question that I asked earlier? Why did the South put skills into the Department of Education?

Dr B McGinnis: I cannot, honestly, throw any light on that. I am not sure, because the situation has changed so much. I am never sure of names, but I have gone down to meet people on the skills side. However, I have not really talked to people in the education sector, but it would be easy enough to find out.

The Chairperson: We will pick that up.

Mr Ross: Bill, you said that, from a business point of view, you favour a much smaller Executive and fewer Departments. Most people around this table have probably played out in their minds what a smaller Executive would look like, and it is certainly in our longer-term interest for that reform to happen. I presume that, no matter what reconfiguration results from reform, a Department of the economy will be one of the Departments.

I will follow on from what David said. At the moment, we hear from a lot of employers that the skills with which young people leave education do not necessarily match the needs of industry. If we had a Department in which that was all together, it would be much more beneficial to industry, businesses and the economy. As you said, that is your priority. There are those who advocate a Department for education and lifelong learning. We always hear, particularly in this Committee, about efforts to get adults into learning, and Scotland has a Department for Education and Lifelong Learning. How would you argue against those who advocate a Department for lifelong learning as being preferable to one focused on business and the economy?

Dr B McGinnis: If we are to turn the economy around, the number one priority is for everything to be together. You cannot stop people doing "Mickey Mouse" degrees, and I have heard the Committee refer to that before. However, that is what certain people want to do, and it is important that they are given the opportunity to do so. However, if we want to get people back to work, we have to give them an opportunity to do so through a Department for the economy. Very few people cannot work. You can go to university and get a degree in "whatever" studies, and people have the choice to do that. As I said before at this Committee, I favour bursaries for areas in which we want people to work. Perhaps we should penalise softer degrees to make it more expensive to get a degree in a subject that will not get you a job.

Mr P Ramsey: That is an interesting perspective, as ever. You make a very valid argument that separating FE from HE would undermine the contribution that FE makes across Northern Ireland and make it a second-class area. We ought to discuss that. However, all that depends on what OFMDFM wants in the carve-up.

The Committee has been focusing on the NEETs bracket for some time, and, if we are honest, we will admit that we are reactive. DEL has been asked to bring forward a strategy, but the problem is that early years provision is letting young people down when they get to a certain age. Where do you see NEETs fitting in? You are absolutely right in saying that we all talk a good game about shared and joined-up government, but, for various reasons, we are not doing the best at that here. It is easier for Scotland's single-party Government to collaborate much better than we do.

Dr B McGinnis: Soon after my appointment to this job, I met the then Minister, Reg Empey, for a first briefing. I suggested to him that the Department of Education needed to do more not to create as many NEETs, because DEL was spending a significant amount of its budget on correcting — I am not saying that people should not have second and third chances — what should be fixed at school. In this day and age, nobody should leave school without being able to read and write and having some ICT skills. That is a basic requirement, and there must be ways of sorting those schools out. They must deliver those basic skills, and that is how they should be measured. People should be kept back until they get to that stage. We all went to school with guys who were not up to the level of the class, but they were brought along, and most were able to survive in life. However, far too many young people leave school without those prerequisites, which are essential for any job.

Mr Douglas: Thanks for your presentation, Bill. Do you have any dealings with the Institute of Directors (IOD)? I imagine that you deal with people in that sector.

Dr B McGinnis: As part of my brief as the adviser, I meet all of those bodies about two or three times a year. I also see them socially at dinners, and so forth. Their views are very similar to mine. When doing my rounds recently, I asked for their views. The view of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) is similar, as is that of the Chamber of Commerce. All those bodies are pushing in this direction.

Mr Douglas: In its response to the consultation, the IOD said:

"While the IoD is in favour of rationalising the number of government departments ... This particular move appears motivated by political expediency rather than good governance".

Dr B McGinnis: I do not think that I should comment on that.

Mr Douglas: I was just surprised at that comment. However, the IOD calls for the:

"creation of a Department for the Economy".

What is your view on that? Clearly, there will be further rationalisation over the next number of years.

Dr B McGinnis: As I outlined, I think that a Department for the economy should contain DEL issues, Invest Northern Ireland —

Mr Douglas: What I am asking is whether you think that there should be a Department for the economy further down the line?

Dr B McGinnis: Yes, I think that the new Department should be called the Department for the economy, as that would show a fairly major change. It could be the Department for the economy and employment, or whatever you want to call it. There must be a new name; it cannot remain as DETI. I do not know what legislation that would involve, because I do not know the details, but it should have a separate name.

The Chairperson: Bill, people talk about joined-up government and how that might be part of the reason for creating a Department for the economy. However, many people would express the fear that the focus would be lost. The problem of NEETs, for example, is one that has exercised the Committee in the past. Would a Department for the economy look at NEETs, who are outside the economy?

Dr B McGinnis: I think that it would look at areas like that. If we are giving job offers, I think that changes have to take place, and we have to allow people who have been unemployed, new apprentices, and so on, to join those organisations at an early stage. In fact, that should be part of the letter of offer. We talk to them about that at the moment, but I am not sure that it is always enforced. However, within the one Department, you can hold them more to account. I have a simplification programme, as you have heard me say in the past. Businesses are utterly and totally confused about where to go for information. If you want information on management and leadership, you go to DEL, you go to Invest NI, you go to DETI —

The Chairperson: What I am asking is this simplistic question: if functions are to be moved to another Department, what would that Department be? Whether they are moved to the Department for the economy, as you have suggested, the Department of Education or elsewhere, how would you maintain oversight? We have some "super Departments" such as Health, which accounts for almost 50% of the Executive's expenditure. To me, that seems an imbalance when compared with some of the smaller Departments such as DETI and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), which have relatively modest budgets, so there seems to be a reason to try to equalise.

However, even in this Committee, the range of issues that we have to consider is quite challenging. It includes, and I am talking only about DEL as it stands, everything from science and innovation in the higher education sector to those who have fallen out of education and have no skills whatsoever, as

well as disability issues. How do we maintain focus? If a "super Department" were created, would there not be a danger of its concentrating on the top 20%?

Dr B McGinnis: There could, undoubtedly, be mission drift. The idea, I hope, is that the Assembly and the public hold the Departments to account for what they agreed to in the Programme for Government. This morning, I heard that the Executive achieved something like 75% of the targets set out in the previous Programme for Government, which is fairly good, and I think that we need to keep getting nearer to closing those things out. I understand that DEL has a mishmash of responsibilities, and it is very hard to get a handle on all of them. It deals with, for example, the social economy and people with a disability. Such issues are part of its remit. Could some of those become lost in a Department of the economy? I am not sure.

Mr Ross: The flip side of your argument is that there is, of course, another "super Department" in the form of the Department of Education, because it also has a massive budget. If you are arguing that some of those functions would get lost in a new Department of the economy, you could also argue that they would get lost in DE, because it is big enough already.

The Chairperson: I was not saying that functions would get lost in other Departments. My point was more about the oversight of functions. There may be reasons for having one Ministry. I know that this might be a case of, "Well, you would say that" but, perhaps, there could be more Committees looking at different areas. Would you have a Committee focusing on, for example, NEETs, statutory powers or children's champions? Is there another structure that could provide focus on certain areas while we reap the benefits of the "joined-upness" of one Department. I throw that out as an open question just to gauge whether we should consider that, rather than simply saying that piling everything into one Department will be the panacea.

Dr B McGinnis: To be honest, I am not sure that I have an answer for you. It is a very complex issue. It will be hard for a Department of the economy to get all the areas for which DEL is responsible to sit comfortably together. For example, it would be hard for a Department of the economy to do anything on disability, as is the case for DEL at the moment.

The Chairperson: The problem for most of those who end up NEET is that they have left the school system. Given that they are not in school, how can we affect them? They have said that education is not for them. The social factors are much more important: poverty, broken homes, inappropriate parenting skills and all sorts of other issues tend to lead to deprivation. It is not the case that people who are NEET are stupid. The fact is that there is a huge range of other factors. Society must realise that the sooner we find a better way of dealing with those folk, the better it will be for everybody. I am not sure that NEETs would get the focus that they deserve in a Department of the economy, because, self-evidently, they do not have the skills to participate in the economy.

Dr B McGinnis: First, there has been a dramatic change in the labour market in the past number of years. Take Harland and Wolff, Bombardier, Mackie's and even the Port of Belfast, for example, all of which employed large numbers in the past. Kids got jobs in those places through their parents, but that network no longer exists. I have been doing a bit of work on that in England and found exactly the same thing happening in all the big cities, such as Birmingham. In the past, depending on where you lived, your father or mother could get you a job. Those networks do not exist anymore, and kids are lost in many ways because they do not have the necessary social skills. That is why they need to stay in education, and they must come out with those three minimum qualifications. That is the only chance that they have to get into the world of work. That is where society has to change.

Mr F McCann: There were also those who were not able to walk into such jobs.

Dr B McGinnis: Exactly.

Mr F McCann: That must always be kept in mind. Schools also played a major part in trying to shape careers in later life, but that seems to have gone by the wayside. You talked about jobs going, be they from the shipyard or construction industry. We often hear that people need to be upskilled to meet the needs of new types of jobs. I had occasion to visit some of the training providers in my constituency. Many of the workshops for kids have closed down because the jobs do not exist. However, no thought

seems to have been given to how to train, encourage or upskill people to meet the needs of new employers. Where do you see that going?

Dr B McGinnis: I see that going to the Department of the economy as well. That is important. For example, the project that is being undertaken at the harbour by the company from Copenhagen, DONG Energy, will need many low- and medium-skilled jobs. People should be trained for those jobs. That is a simple bolt-on from construction. That is how to bring people on. You look at every industry, and, as things grow, you provide training that is suitable for those jobs.

Mr F McCann: I made the point that, a number of years ago, there was a problem due to a serious shortage of occupational therapists in the health service. People were asked to go into schools to try to encourage young people to train as occupational therapists or other medical professionals. However, they ended up bringing a number of occupational therapists from Australia to work in posts here. There does not seem to be a push to encourage industry or the health service, for example, to go into schools to try to encourage people to take up particular posts. It is taken for granted that, if you come from a certain area, you will end up in the construction industry rather than be encouraged to do something else. So change is needed. Certainly, there needs to be a change of mindset. Everybody has an equal right not only to education but to employment. If people need to be skilled up, that is what needs to be done. The issue is where it fits in. You say that it fits into a new Department of the economy.

Dr B McGinnis: Yes.

Mr P Ramsey: I was interested in your comments about fitting into a new Department. The MENCAP consultation response reflects the views of people with learning disabilities throughout Northern Ireland. It acknowledges the close relationship between further and higher education. It states that:

"Mencap believes that this would provide an opportunity for people with a learning disability seeking training and employment to take an active role in the economy".

It believes that it fits perfectly. The bottom line from MENCAP is that:

"incorporation of DEL functions into DETI would provide better opportunities for the inclusion of disabled people".

MENCAP sees that as fundamental in going forward. It goes on to state that it would put disability issues into the core direction of government and enable people to become economically active. That is what disabled people want. That is a different perspective. Sammy mentioned the community and voluntary sector and how it sees itself fitting in. It will be interesting to see what other groups say about how they see themselves fitting in. They see that they need to be part of the economic driver going forward. Alastair's point is so right. MENCAP expresses concern that people with disabilities would be swallowed up and disappear in the Department of Education and would have no direction.

Dr B McGinnis: We talked about supply and demand. For quite a while, there has been talk about teacher training colleges. We know that far too many teachers are being trained, but the demand comes from the Department of Education. We talk about joined-up government; that is something that we could be in total control of, but that does not happen. Far too many teachers are being trained. Should teacher training sit within the Department of Education?

The Chairperson: Bill, you could argue that far too many people are being trained as lawyers, doctors and other professionals. The argument is put that some degrees are just a good basic training. Certainly, teacher training colleges have said that graduates will find employment but not necessarily as teachers. I am not sure that people are quite ready at the age of 19 to decide where their careers will end up. What is important is that they have the skills that they need.

Mr F McCann: What about at age 11?

The Chairperson: I do not think that they are ready at 19 years of age. They may not be at 11 either.

Mr F McCann: I just thought that I would throw that in.

The Chairperson: Contributions are always welcome.

Certainly, careers advice is an issue. I am not sure that the real focus is on the economy — whatever it takes or whether it is in DETI. We tend to be reactive. We tend to deal with tactical issues rather than strategic ones. With regard to the skills in which young people need to be trained, the challenge is, as I am sure you would agree, one of productivity for Northern Ireland. It is not just about getting people into employment; it is about getting them into high-value-added jobs that reward them justly for their skills and actually utilise the labour pool. We need to find a way to step forward on that.

I am sure that you are on this page, given your role, but I think that the real generator of economic advantage is skills-based. You mentioned the skills deficit that you see in the Northern Ireland economy and where we have to get to in future years. Will you expand on that? What organisation or structure would be best placed to hit those quite challenging targets?

Dr B McGinnis: We need to move quickly and work on the priority skills because the skills have changed quite a bit from the last lot of priority skills. Change is happening, and we need to make that move fairly quickly, which will address some of those problems. It is about getting everybody to move at the one time. FE and HE are quite hard to move at any speed. Courses are set down and staff are in place. They have that whole system set up, so it takes a bit of time to change. From going around the colleges, however, I have found that tremendous change is taking place, with people looking at new industries and seeing jobs for the future.

The Chairperson: There is always a certain amount of inertia, otherwise you are moving backwards and forwards. However, we need some way to pull together. Bill, we are at the start of this process, and there is an opportunity for the debate to begin. Our society and Government need to work out what they want to do and what is the best form and function to achieve that. It is not just a case of bolting things together administratively, because there will not be any savings from that. It is about how you can be more effective and efficient. I am very grateful to you for coming and sharing your thoughts. As the debate goes on, it may well be that we will do something else. We would welcome your input in particular, given your emphasis on skills.

Dr B McGinnis: It is a challenging time. We are much better off than we were when I came into this role in 1994, when the unemployment rate was at 14% or 15%. We have made up fairly major ground. A lot more people have qualifications, and the skills of the workforce have improved. However, we are not making the leap fast enough, and we need to find some way to accelerate the progress.

The Chairperson: OK, thank you very much indeed.

We now move to the briefing from Colleges NI. We have Gerard Campbell, chief executive of Colleges NI; Trevor Neilands, deputy chairperson of Colleges NI and chief executive of Northern Regional College; and Joe Martin, Colleges NI board member and chairperson of South West College and former chief executive of the Western Education and Library Board. Gentlemen, you are all very welcome. We will be very pleased to hear what you have to say. This session is being recorded by Hansard. I remind members and the public to make sure that their phones are switched off.

Mr Trevor Neilands (Colleges Northern Ireland): We thank you for the opportunity to come along and discuss the issues on the agenda. You asked us specific questions and that caused reflection. We had a good discussion because you asked good questions. They not only asked what should happen to Departments but raised issues about what the FE sector does and how we should articulate what we do and what our priorities are. We have tried to do that in the paper that we submitted. We will talk around the issues in the paper; we do not intend to go through them in detail. We have looked at the broad strategic issues and identified all of the key relationships. For us, there are many, many relationships with more than one existing Department. We feel that we have a massive contribution to make to the development of the Northern Ireland economy, and, on balance, we have come to the conclusion that we can best develop and make our contribution if, structurally, we are as closely aligned as possible with the economic priorities. No doubt we will elaborate on that in the discussion.

My colleagues Gerry and Joe want to say a few words in support of the paper, and then we will be happy to enter into discussion.

Mr Gerard Campbell (Colleges Northern Ireland): I want to emphasise that we believe that colleges are vital to the economy and to getting economic growth back on the table, and the further and higher education sector is the key delivery arm of government in delivering the objectives and targets in the Programme for Government and the economic strategy. Colleges are distinct and unique in that they are neither large schools nor small universities. We have a distinct vocational, technical and professional offer right across the sector, and that links to raising skills and education, to upskilling and retraining people in our community and directly through to progression routes into higher education, including university, and, particularly, employment. We operate across not only the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education but other Departments, too. We take a strategic focus. We operate across OFMDFM. There are issues to do with child poverty, social exclusion and NEETs, which we have already heard about this morning. We also operate across the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) on rural exclusion and the agrifood industry, linking through to educational attainment in the criminal justice system. We would argue that a strategic approach needs to be taken to whatever decision is reached on DEL's dissolution, and the colleges are a key lever for the Executive in delivering on their economic priorities and the objectives in the Programme for Government.

Mr Joe Martin (Colleges Northern Ireland): We had a very interesting discussion that reflected many of the issues that are around here and which have been discussed earlier. Clearly, we have key links with the economy, and we also have very strong links with education. The dilemma arose when we were asked the direct question: with whom do you align yourselves? The six colleges have unanimously come to the conclusion that we need to be aligned, primarily, with a Department that focuses on economic development while maintaining very strong links with a Department whose predominant focus is learning, education and schools.

We have looked at the development of the FE colleges, and, in particular, we have looked at the key document, 'Further Education Means Business'. That document possibly addresses the point that you, Chair, mentioned earlier about the need for a strategy. A clear strategy is set out there. If you trace the history of where the colleges have come from, you will perhaps see more clearly why we are moving in that direction. Having been the chief executive of an education and library board, I remember clearly that, prior to incorporation, the education and library boards had responsibility for the colleges. With hindsight, I have to say that the colleges were the Cinderella element of a very large education and library board system. I say that with regret. Incorporation gave the colleges a new focus and a new direction, and it moved them upwards from the level that they had been operating at before.

I see how the merger of the 16 colleges into six colleges has brought that much further forward. That coincided, in a way, with DEL's key strategic document, 'Further Education Means Business', which linked further education clearly with the economy. In fact, the document states that:

"A central outcome of this review of the current strategy is to recommend that the primary role of the sector should be to support the economy through the development of workforce skills, employability and enterprise ... While the strategic objectives set out for the sector"

— that is, education, skills and so on—

"are inter-dependent, support for economic development should be regarded, by all, as the primary objective."

The whole document, particularly the chapter entitled 'Greater Support for Economic Development', is focused on that. Since the merger of the six colleges — I became a member of one of the new colleges four years ago — I cannot believe the development that has taken place over the past number of years. The links with business and industry, the relationships with employers, the level of skills training and the qualifications and professionalism of the staff have moved further education to a very high level. In fact, they are operating at all levels now, from level 1 up to links with the universities.

Interaction with the economy is absolutely central. At the same time, the links with schools are vital. We had to decide, on balance, in which direction to move. Our clear preference is for a move towards linking with the Department that looks after the economy, but not to be swallowed up in DETI or any other Department. In fact, the budgets for the six colleges amount to more than the budget for DETI, and the DEL budget is about four times the size of the DETI budget. It is not a question of being swallowed up or moving into a Department; it is a question of how the Departments can be realigned to focus on the key element of the economy.

On the other hand, that has to be balanced with the fact that we have a major responsibility for 14- to 19-year-olds. That ties in with some of the issues that were raised earlier. As from next year, the entitlement framework will be operative. There is a statutory requirement whereby the schools curriculum for 14-year-olds onwards, key stage 4, and then post-16, will be one third, one third and one third. One third of that has to be applied or vocational, or whatever you want to call it, as opposed to academic. That ties in with the issue of careers guidance. We have a key role to play in working with the schools to deliver that applied or vocational element of the curriculum. That is a new part of the debate that has to be opened up, because, while a lot of lip service has been paid to it and a lot of good work has been done, there remains a huge amount to be done. One of the things that the Assembly can do is to emphasise the key role of the vocational or applied element, which is now statutory. We need to discuss how that is brought forward.

In summary, we are saying that we want to be aligned with a new Department — call it the Department of the economy or whatever you want, but the economy has to be the key driver, and we are key to delivering on that — while ensuring that there are strong links and protocols or whatever with the Department of Education.

Finally, we want to ensure that we do not lose sight of the key priorities that FE delivers. I know that each college has to draw up its own corporate plan. In that, we have to set targets. Our job, as governors, is to hold our executive to account. We set the strategic direction and then we hold them to account for the targets that have been set. In turn, we the governors and the directors have to account for our stewardship to the Department for Employment and Learning or to whatever new structures are put in place.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. You brought out the key tenet that FE means business, but not everybody agrees that it has been a success. The University and College Union (UCU) gave us a submission stating that:

"The incorporation model which underpins the functioning of our FE colleges since 1998 was designed to make colleges into corporate organisations run on a business model. We believe that policy has been a failure."

Mr Neilands: I know that Committee members have been out to visit colleges. You will, therefore, have some evidence in relation to the way that FE colleges have developed. Joe very eloquently outlined the recent history of the further education sector and how it has moved through various phases.

The core of what further education colleges do has not changed in the 30-odd years that I have been involved in colleges, in the sense that we have a portfolio of vocational- and work-related programmes that we deliver to full- and part-time students. The difference now, as Joe talked about, is that, since incorporation, we have changed the way that we do that. Instead of sitting with a prospectus and saying, "If you are interested in what we do, come along and sign up with us", we are now much more outward-facing. We go out to other parts of society, particularly business and industry, but also the community sector and other public sector organisations. We interact with those organisations and have a greater recognition now of the role that we play.

As regards the question about business, the issue is what is a business model. If a business model is a model under which you can spend only the amount of income that you have, I would like to know what other sort of model there is and what the Assembly would like us to do. I do not see any other model in any part of the public sector other than one under which you get a certain amount of income and you make the best use of that income. Basically, you spend what you are given. I do not know whether that is the definition of the business model, but that is the way in which we have been asked

to operate over the last number of years as responsible custodians of public expenditure. In doing that, you try — and I hope that I, as chief executive, try — to make the maximum impact with that money in the region that you serve.

There have been advantages to incorporation and there have been disadvantages. There is no question about that. However, we argue that it has helped considerably to develop the role of the sector over the last 10 or 12 years.

The Chairperson: All I am doing is putting a statement to you. I am not expressing an opinion one way or the other at this stage. It is probably worth saying on the record that we have been out to a large number of colleges. We have all been very impressed by the infrastructure and investment. Nevertheless, in the submissions that we received, a number of the unions, including the UCU, indicated that they think that the role of the colleges should be in the Department of Education. I am just saying that there is a disparity of view, and it is something that the Committee will want to look at.

I will go straight into questions and then come back with a few tidy-up remarks myself, assuming that time permits.

Mr Ross: I have two points. First, you talk a lot about the linkages with schools. Some sixth formers and whoever else go to colleges to do part of their course. I visited the Newtonabbey campus, as you know. Young people enjoy getting out of the classroom and into workshops. They can do the vocational training and have a practical class as opposed to just sitting and learning things in theory. Is that proof that the linkages that young people want are in the practical stuff? They want links with business and to learn the skills that will be important to them when they are trying to get a job. Is there a reassurance that, if we move to a Department of the economy or whatever it ends up being called, those links with schools will be as strong as they are at the moment and you will still be able to deliver those courses but perhaps with greater focus on what industry demands?

Mr Neilands: I know that Joe would like to comment. That is another success story that I would point to. We quantify in the paper that there are some 12,000 school students involved in the six colleges in one way or another, and, as you quite rightly point out, that can include the school pupils coming to the college. However, some of our teachers go out to the schools, so it is a two-way sharing process. We regard that as one of the important developments that has taken place. I remind the Committee that we are talking about working with all sorts of schools — high schools, special schools and grammar schools. There is no section of the post-primary sector that we do not work with. We have been able to develop those relationships while being in two separate Departments. That is the current situation; we are in the Department for Employment and Learning and schools are in the Department of Education. So that is a positive example of working across a departmental interface.

From a policy point of view, that could be further strengthened if we were able to develop a policy framework between the two Departments that would cement the very important local relationships that we have been able to develop. I would argue that those local relationships have developed to such an extent that they would be able to survive any change in departmental structures. Everybody who is involved in this debate recognises that there should be a closer relationship between the world of education and the world of work. We are ideally placed to further develop that relationship. Therefore, if we were in a Department that is primarily focused on the economy, we would have that set of relationships already with us, and we would have the relationships that we have with business and industry, which give us the relevance that you are referring to. I can only see that strengthening those key relationships and allowing them to develop in more positive ways.

Mr Martin: I reinforce that very strongly. I have no doubt whatsoever that the links with schools are now so strong that, regardless of whether DEL continues as a separate Department or is aligned with any other Department, those links will continue. They must continue from the point of view of the schools. I do not think that sufficient emphasis has been given to the introduction of the entitlement framework. Many schools are not as aware as they could be or should be of the importance of the delivery of that one third of the curriculum, the vocational-type element. One of the concerns that we looked at recently was the fact that schools are developing school-to-school links. Although that is very important, the specialist expertise and facilities, the particular insights that are now well developed in FE and the links with the economy, which would feed into the points that were made about careers

guidance and so on, will be vital in delivering a really balanced curriculum that includes the vocational element.

For example, I read recently that Ballymena Academy is delivering a construction programme and was highly commended for it. It is being delivered for the academy by the Northern Regional College. Those links are so well developed that there is no doubt that they will continue. However, there needs to be far greater awareness. One of the weaknesses in the schools system is that it is not as au fait with or aware of the fantastic developments that have taken place in the FE sector over the past number of years or of what is to be offered through collaboration and co-operation there.

Mr Gerard Campbell: We have been clear on where we see the sector sitting — at the highest level in helping the economy. If we link that back to lifelong learning, we see that learning does not stop. Some 70% of the current workforce will be in employment in eight to nine years' time, and there will be requirements for upskilling and retraining, so it is important that that principle of lifelong learning does not stop at the end of the school years. There needs to be good collaboration and partnership working between the college, the FE sector and the schools, and that should be linked through to employment and future jobs — jobs that none of us around the table is aware of today. It is important to keep that at the centre.

Mr Ross: That leads into my second point. When Bill McGinnis gave evidence earlier, I said that there was an argument from some quarters that there should be a Department for lifelong learning. His point was that the Department of Education is big enough already and should continue its current focus on ensuring that early years provision is correct and that young people leave school with the necessary basic skills. Do you agree with the view that the Department of Education should concentrate on making sure that people have those basic skills and that you should concentrate, in a Department for the economy, or whatever it might be called, on ensuring that people are skilled for work?

Mr Neilands: I think that we would agree with that. I have always thought that the best possible preparation for success in high-quality vocational education is a good general education. Bill referred to other European countries, and the European countries that have succeeded in giving vocational education a high status are those in which it is clear that it is a route for those who are successful. It is not a remedial route; vocational education is seen as something for which people should strive and in which they can succeed. You are right; that is the issue.

On the question of lifelong learning, I go back to the important point that Joe made about the key purpose and objectives of the further education sector. Those were defined in 'Further Education Means Business' in 2006, and I have kept the three objectives of the FE sector in that document to the forefront of my mind in what we do in our college. Those objectives are that FE should be a key driver for economic development, an active agent of social cohesion and a promoter of lifelong learning. We do all of those. Therefore, whatever happens structurally in the Departments, we will always be a key agent for lifelong learning. If you want to see the evidence, all you have to do is walk into any FE college on any evening of the week and see the range of people who come through the doors. Walk around the classrooms and see the range of different courses and provision that take place in those buildings. That is the key to what we are about. Wherever we go within government structures, we will carry with us that key role of providing lifelong learning.

Mr Gerard Campbell: The number of essential skills enrolments across the sector shows that, in many ways, the FE sector is picking up the pieces when people leave the post-primary sector without having achieved a basic level of skills in literacy, numeracy and ICT.

Mr P Ramsey: Good morning, you are very welcome. Joe talked very well this morning about governance and accountability. I was tempted to ask a question on that, but I will park it for today —

The Chairperson: We are all very grateful.

Mr P Ramsey: That has been greatly tarnished.

On a serious note, we acknowledge the immense contribution that the colleges make to young people across Northern Ireland. I suppose that we must go back to the decision by OFMDFM to dissolve DEL

and it appearing that there will be a 50:50 carve-up between DETI and the Department of Education. Bill McGinnis made the point that HE and FE should remain intact, and there is a concern that the FE sector will become the poor relation. Will you expand a little on that?

The other issue is NEETs. Bill was correct in saying that the colleges and others are forced to bring forward strategies to make young people more fit for the workplace. Where do you see NEETs fitting into the new environment when DEL disappears?

Mr Neilands: There are so many aspects to the nature of the NEETs problem, if you want to characterise it like that, that it is hard to see anything other than a multi-agency approach being used to solve it. We see ourselves as having a major role to play because, apart from the many other things that we do, giving young people and slightly older people a second, third or fourth chance has always been part of the further education philosophy. Every time that there have been specific developments in rising youth unemployment, people have turned to the further education sector. I came into the FE sector in the 1980s, at the same time as the former Youth Training Programme was being devised in response to the particular problems of youth unemployment. So by the very nature of what the colleges do and our links, which we mentioned earlier, and the impact that our being work-related has on motivation, and so on, we have a key role to play in NEETs. However, we are only one of many agencies involved. I remember attending an event, held in the Building by this Committee or its predecessor, on a coherent response to the NEETs problem. That event brought together a whole range of people from the statutory sector and the community and voluntary sector. I am not trying to downplay how difficult it is to bring all those people together and get everyone pointing in the same direction, but no matter what way responsibilities are realigned, the NEETs issue must cross a number of Departments. A number of agencies across the statutory and voluntary and community sector must also be involved. The issue is whether we can produce a coherent NEETs strategy so that we all know what our contribution is. I argue that we have a major contribution to offer, but I would like that to sit within a NEETs strategy so that we know how our contribution aligns with those made from elsewhere.

Mr Martin: In practical terms, whatever strategy is agreed will be incorporated in the college development plan. That will ensure that it will be looked at and given priority. Another key element is that funding follows policy. Given that colleges are funded, to a very large extent, from the public purse, once a strategy is decided upon, the funding will follow. Part of that funding goes into different agencies, part will go into the college budget, and our college development plan must ensure that we are aligned with the Programme for Government and government priorities. The issue of governance was just mentioned, and our job as governors is to ensure that what is incorporated in the college development plan is implemented by the executive and that we, in turn, are accountable to the Minister and the relevant Department for carrying out those objectives. Once there is a coherent government strategy and the funding has been allocated to implement it, it is our job to ensure that we deliver, and we have to account for that.

The Chairperson: Joe, you have the opportunity to influence a coherent government strategy. It is not just about listening to what comes down and saying that you will do it. I was going to leave my next comment to the end, but I want to state, now that the subject has been raised, that I think that the fixation on Further Education Means Business is not entirely helpful. Trevor mentioned social cohesion and lifelong learning. I do not disagree with where you see yourselves in the future. I was particularly impressed by your provision of pastoral care to those who might not have found school the most enjoyable experience; I think that you should make more of that. I will not ask you to respond to that now, because I have a long list of members wanting to come in. However, I would like you to use the opportunity to tell government what the coherent strategy should look like.

Mr Allister: I want to tease out a few more of the outworkings should you fulfil your desire of coming under the umbrella of DETI. Does it matter at all if further education and higher education are under different Departments? Is it imperative, desirable or a matter of indifference that both are under the same Department?

Mr Neilands: If I had to choose one from your selection of words, it would be "imperative". I take that view because it is vital to the development of the Northern Ireland economy and the delivery of high-level skills that we regard higher education as a coherent provision. Over the past two years, we have carried out a number of consultations on, for example, a higher education strategy for Northern Ireland

and widening access to higher education. We have been able to make a major contribution to those consultations on the basis that we provide a substantial amount of the higher education in Northern Ireland. We quantify it in the paper by stating that we provide:

"20% of all HE provision to indigenous students studying within Northern Ireland".

That is a minority of higher education provision, but it is a very significant minority. It is also an important minority, because it provides the balance in the range of higher education available. As well as delivering degree-level courses, we deliver a lot of sub-degree level qualifications. We deliver higher national certificates and diplomas, which are very clearly work-related, and foundation degrees, which are related to vocations. All those, as well as being qualifications in themselves, allow progression into our universities and can be topped up to honours degrees.

In Northern Ireland, we have a coherent system that has a range and depth of provision. We argue that maintaining that range will be especially important, given what has happened with tuition fees and the financial pressures that people accessing higher education will face. It is possible that young people will be reluctant to go across the water to access higher education. There is, therefore, a greater need for higher education to be locally provided, not only on a full-time basis, but, increasingly, as we have found in our enrolments in the Northern Regional College this year, through part-time engagement with higher education.

We would argue very strongly that we are not detached from the universities and that government should view higher education as a single provision provided by the universities and colleges and governed by one coherent strategy. We would also argue for an equalisation of the funding, but, perhaps, that is a different argument.

Mr Allister: I am sure that it is.

You say that it is "imperative" that, wherever higher education goes, you go, and vice versa. That is very much an all-or-nothing approach. The powers that be might not decide the issue on the basis of the logic that you are expounding, and it might come down to a political decision to split the Department: the Department of Education has to get some of it, and DETI has to get some of it. If we give higher and further education to DETI, there is nothing left to go to Education. If you are taking an all-or-nothing approach and higher education goes to the Department of Education, for example, will you go with it?

Mr Neilands: All we can do is answer the questions that are posed.

Mr Allister: You could have said — or could you — that it might be "desirable", but that you work extremely well with schools, for example, which are already in a different Department, so the matter of which departmental umbrella is not the imperative issue? You did not say that to me. Why not?

Mr Neilands: In the paper that we presented, we looked at the entire range of key relationships that we feel that we have. No matter what way responsibilities are realigned, the further education sector will work across more than one Department. That goes without saying because of the role that we play. At the end of the day, we took a balanced view. We recognised that there were other arguments. The Chair mentioned conclusions that people have come to about our going to the Department of Education. We recognise that there are arguments in relation to that. On balance, however, we argue that we and the universities would be best placed to deliver our roles in a Department that is aligned to, or responsible for, the economy.

Mr Allister: If it were decided, against your better judgement and that of a number of others, that the universities should go to the Department of Education, is it your position that you, reluctantly, think that you have to go with them?

Mr Martin: We are arguing from an education point of view. If the political decisions made are different from the views that we have put forward, I have no doubt that we will do our very best to deliver, within a new framework, whatever has to be delivered.

Mr Allister: You must have a view about where, in that scenario, you would want to be.

Mr Martin: I think that we have expressed that view.

Mr Allister: You would go with higher education.

Mr Martin: I do not think that we are saying that we go with higher education in the sense that it drags us along with it. We are saying that there is great merit in our being with higher education. However, if it were decided that there was to be another framework, I have no doubt that we would do our level best to make the most of whatever scenario comes about.

The Chairperson: I have no doubt, Joe, that you will do whatever you can in the circumstances, but Jim is asking whether FE could exist in a Department with responsibility for the economy while HE is in a Department dealing with education. If you feel that you cannot answer that because you have to talk to others first, that is OK, but —

Mr Neilands: You are making me think about what I had intended to say in my summary, but your question has brought that forward. We in the FE sector feel that we are a confident sector; we know what our contribution is. Perhaps we should make this clear now: we will make that contribution in any changed government structure, and we will be a major asset to whatever Department we end up in. That is the bottom line. However, if asked for our view or preference, I would say that I think that it would be unfortunate if the important links between the college sector and the universities were broken. I think that I articulated as well as I could what we believe to be the important links. If they were broken, that would pose certain problems for government in the sense that two Departments would be funding higher education at the same time as developing an apparently coherent single strategy for HE and a single strategy for widening participation in HE. So I think that that would cause some difficulties. However, at the end of the day, we will, we hope, deliver our proportion — the 20% — of higher education. That is what the economy needs; it will not primarily be because whatever Department we happen to be in has decided that.

Mr Gerard Campbell: We have a very flexible offer of part-time routes to higher education and routes that are more flexible to those who want to go through to higher education.

The Chairperson: Jim has made his point, and if he wants to come back with more questions, that is up to him. Believe me, this session is not an interrogation; we are interested in exploring ideas. Issues may come up about which, on reflection, we might change our mind, because we do not know what others will say. I am aware that the session is being recorded and that the universities will read the Hansard report.

Given that you are so skills oriented, I think that you have a strong case for linking with the economy. Others may argue, and they may or may not get support, that higher education churns out professionals. That argument was articulated earlier. So higher education has a case to make for why it should be included in a Department for the economy. I am just saying that that is an issue that we are looking at. I have no doubt that this will be a developing discussion. I am only putting the arguments; I am not expressing an opinion either way.

Mr Martin: Would you allow me to make one very short point?

The Chairperson: Of course, Joe.

Mr Martin: I just want to pick up on the phrase that Jim used about us gravitating "under the umbrella of DETI" — I think that that was the phrase. I hope that that was not what I said; it was certainly not what we intend. We are not talking about being "under the umbrella" of anybody; we are talking about DEL being aligned with a new Department in which the focus would be different. In other words, we do not want to be subsumed into another Department, and, after all, DEL is a much bigger Department than DETI. However, the issue is their coalescing into a new dynamic.

The Chairperson: I agree with you, Joe — we will take over DETI. That is the Committee's new strategy.

Mr F McCann: Thank you for your presentation. I have certainly been a supporter of FE, and I believe that it has offered opportunities where none previously existed, especially in many working-class areas right across the North. Although it may not tap into a level that might be described as "professional", it has tapped into a level of education and training that, at one stage, was not offered to people. If you look at the direction in which nursery, primary and post-primary education is going, much of it operates, through a hub, as seamless education. It seems to make sense that that would follow through into FE and on into higher education. However, that is a debate and an argument for another day.

In his presentation earlier, Bill was fairly complimentary about the Scandinavian way of doing things. Are there examples in other countries that we can learn from and tap into?

Mr Neilands: I think so. What I always pick up from European examples, and I think that Bill referred to it, is the question of the relative status of academic versus vocational qualifications. That issue has bedevilled us, certainly as long as I have been involved in education. It is the idea that there is only one route to success, which is the academic route, and that the other is somehow of lesser importance. We have continually had to fight that battle and demonstrate that academic excellence can be pursued through high-quality achievement in vocational programmes, as evidenced, for instance, by the number of young people whom we send to university every year.

The other model that has certainly influenced policy thinking in DEL over the years is the one operating in some states of the USA. Some members of the Committee have been to see the role of community colleges in North Carolina and other states, and we can learn from that, too. Some years ago, I also had a chance to see the North Carolina model. There are significant differences between North Carolina and Northern Ireland, not least of which was the amount of money available to invest in the reorganisation of the economy in North Carolina. However, what impressed me was the clarity of roles, and we should certainly learn from that. In North Carolina, it was clear that the universities had a research and development role in supporting incoming investment, and community colleges came in behind them with skills development. That was supported by the advice/benefits system of the Department of Labor in North Carolina. I certainly think that that presents lessons in clarifying roles. We must ask: what are the roles, and what are the relationships? If we are making a case to support foreign investment, everyone should know what the various parts of the support system do, and they should all kick in behind that in a coherent manner. We have made some progress in trying to adapt that model for use in Northern Ireland.

Mr Gerard Campbell: May I make a point in answer to that, Fra? Over the past number of years, the influence and role of community colleges have been growing in the United States. The same issues — widening access and the cost of entering further and higher education — affect education in the United States and Northern Ireland. The community college offer is much more attractive to students who, traditionally, would have wanted a university-type education. In many ways, some of the issues that they face are exactly the same as those that we face here. Colleges, for example, have to deliver more for less money, and that has been the case over the past number of years. Colleges now deliver a higher-quality, value-added product. So there are many similarities, and we can learn from each other.

Mr F McCann: Thank you for that.

Pat raised the issue of NEETs. Although a lot of people use community colleges for education, there is a section of people who will not tap into that and feel more comfortable being trained and educated in the community. There are examples of where that has worked, even at school level. Recently, I gave a presentation to a community group. A number of young people in that group were not going on to study for GCSEs, but preferred to tap into community structures locally, and they got the equivalent of GCSEs through the training and work of local community groups. The same applies in other areas, such as job prospects, which community groups may be in a better position to deliver.

Mr Neilands: That illustrates another very important point that we want to make. Over the past number of years, in pursuing relationships and partnerships with the community sector, the colleges discovered that it meant also looking towards the initiatives of other Departments to enable that to happen. A prime example, in which a number of colleges have been involved, is that of neighbourhood renewal projects funded by DSD. That is an example of the further education sector having a relationship with

another Department because of that Department's remit. It illustrates the point that we were trying to make earlier and, indeed, which we emphasised in our paper: whatever happens with the realignment of responsibilities at departmental level, the further education sector, by its very nature, has a role to play in supporting the work of a whole range of Departments. Those interfaces will continue even after realignment, and we argue for a greater recognition of the role that we can play across a range of Departments.

Mr Douglas: Thank you for your presentation. I had a couple of questions, but my friend Jim Allister has asked them, so I will take his point a bit further. Trevor's answer to Jim's question was a bit like the famous verse in the Bible in which Ruth says to Naomi, "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay." Are you saying, this morning, that that is not your position and that, if higher education were to go to the Department of Education and you were to go to DETI or wherever, it would not be a big issue? In your written submission, you talk positively about your relationship with universities, which is good, but you also say that that alignment has helped with employment and supporting the economy. Trevor, if the Department's being carved up were to result in higher education going to the Department of Education, would that be a negative or backward step for employment and growing the economy?

Mr Neilands: As I tried to articulate earlier, it would be a backward step to do anything that interfered with the coherence of higher education policy in Northern Ireland and the development of the appropriate range and depth of higher education provision. I illustrated that by pointing to the need for a proper balance between sub-degree provision and degree and postgraduate provision. There is a need for a proper balance: between full-time and part-time higher education; and between provision centralised in university campuses and provision decentralised around the FE campuses. If you want a coherent contribution from higher education to the economic development and well-being of the citizens of Northern Ireland, you require that range and depth. That comes from coherence in higher education provision, and it would be a mistake to detach the colleges, which equate to 20% of that provision, from the other 80%. Doing that would not be an argument for coherence, and that is why we argue that it would be better for all concerned if we and the universities were in the same Department.

Mr Douglas: That is very clear.

Your submission also refers to your contribution to the economy, and one of your key concerns is that the momentum built over many years will be lost. Given that we are in the middle of a recession and that everyone is working harder to try to stimulate the economy and create jobs, can you explain how that might slow down that whole operation? Is it the practical aspect of people moving into a new Department with different staff and new learning? Is that the sort of thing that you are talking about?

Mr Neilands: There is bound to be some element of disruption. However, what we were getting at was that, as we tried to illustrate earlier, over the past number of years, it is not so much what we do that has changed but how we do it. We believe that we are pursuing a coherent development of the sector, and that gives me a chance to answer the Chair's earlier question about referring back to 'Further Education Means Business'.

The reason we refer back to it is that it was the last strategic review of the FE sector and what it is about, so it is a reference point for us. That was the last major review of what the FE sector is for. All views can be revisited and changed in the light of changing circumstances. We do not have any difficulty or problem with that. The review gave us the three main objectives of supporting the economy, promoting access and promoting lifelong learning.

Returning to the specifics of your question, we do not want any slowing of momentum in the relationships that we have been able to build, particularly with business and industry, because they have had a significant influence on not just what we do but how we do it. We will be able to keep that momentum going if we are seen to be still aligned with the Department where economic priorities are defined. If we are saying that the key issue in the Programme for Government is support for the economy and economic development — we are getting the clear message that that is the overriding priority — we would want to be as closely aligned as possible with how that is achieved so that we can maximise our contribution to it.

Mr McElduff: Trevor dealt with the questions that I planned to ask about the linkages between schools and colleges. Joe also touched on that. Maybe my question should now be: is there an absence of coherence? You say that there is no problem interfacing with two Departments in respect of education and the colleges. However, is there an absence of coherence around the entitlement framework, in that, as Joe said, schools are not aware to the degree that they should be of the potential for better working with colleges in respect of that framework? Is that not driving you towards education?

Mr Neilands: I will clarify the point that I made earlier. This may have been an issue at previous Committee meetings, but certainly we have had discussions with DEL officials over the past two or three years about their interaction with the Department of Education and their work in trying to develop a policy framework document on 14-19 provision that would make clear what those relationships were and what the relevant contributions of the FE and schools sectors would be. That would not just be about covering the entitlement framework, because, as you know, we provide our own substantial 16-19 provision anyway for people who choose to leave the schools system and come to us. So it would be good if that were pulled together in a policy framework, and DEL officials have told us that they have been working with the Department of Education on that over a period of time. We would find that useful because you always have to have a combination of local initiatives, local developments and local partnerships. We have demonstrated that we have been good at developing those local relationships and partnerships. My college works with nine school learning communities in our area. However, we need to link the local developments with policy issues. As Joe said, funding tends to follow policies, so it is important that that element of it is sorted out. So could there be more coherence at policy level? Yes, and that would still be the case irrespective of there being any realignment of Departments.

Mr Martin: There is a need for coherence at policy level, and that has not happened to the extent that it should have. At the practical level, although there has been a lot of collaboration between schools and colleges, it has not developed to the extent that it needs to. We would argue that a lot of young people, particularly in the grammar school sector, are not getting the range of opportunities that they could get if they were able to avail themselves more freely of the range of facilities and expertise available in the FE sector.

Mr Gerard Campbell: Some of that goes back to the careers advice and guidance that young people get at an early stage in schooling and enabling them to see the range of choices and opportunities available. A vocational education is a real and tangible opportunity for many young people. Consider the amount of capital investment that has gone into the sector over the past 10 years. I would argue that we have world-class facilities and world-class lecturers, and we have proved that on the world stage in the world skills. So there is a very attractive career opportunity there. There is a range of issues in the mix that need to be dealt with.

Mr McElduff: Typically, is an advanced vocational certificate of education (AVCE) in construction and the built environment delivered by a grammar school or by a college?

Mr Neilands: It is rare, in my experience, for that to be delivered by a grammar school. The best way to answer your question is maybe through a specific example, and Joe referred earlier to Ballymena Academy, which is seen as a fairly traditional and well-regarded grammar school that is very jealous of its reputation and academic performance. However, GCSE construction is offered as part of the portfolio of GCSEs available to the pupils in that school, and part of our arrangement, in partnership with Ballymena Academy, is that our lecturers deliver GCE construction in the school. That is only one example of the partnership; Ballymena Academy pupils come to the college to do modules for a national certificate in engineering to supplement their A-level programmes and thus enhance the points for their Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) applications.

We could point to many examples from all six colleges of different types of partnership arrangements that either offer greater choice at the 14-16 level or enhance the programmes available in the sixth form. Traditionally, school/college links tended to be with the secondary schools and high schools, but the new aspect to school/college links, particularly over the past five years or so, has been that the colleges have engaged with an increasing number of grammar schools. That is very significant in the context of the overall provision, access to what is available and, as Joe says, what will be required under the legislation on the entitlement framework.

The Chairperson: Are you interested in a course, Barry?

Mr McElduff: I had a perception that, for example, Christian Brothers Grammar School in Omagh delivers an AVCE in construction and the built environment directly. Is that the case?

Mr Neilands: A number of schools offer vocational programmes. Maybe you were getting at that point earlier, but I wanted to come back on it anyway. You asked about coherence, and I talked about coherence at policy level between Departments. Of course, the other aspect of coherence is local area planning, which is about making the best use of local educational resources from the point of view of making the most effective use of increasingly scarce resources in the current economic climate. So there is a strong argument for sharing on that basis. The other argument for sharing is that we need to make the maximum opportunity and choice available to the pupils in an area learning community. If you take that a step further, the issue is that, if there is to be a rationalisation of the schools sector — that will be a major priority for the Department of Education — that raises the question of investment in facilities and accommodation and ensuring that there is no unnecessary competition for that capital investment and that there is coherence in what is provided in a locality so that we make the best use of resources and share between schools and, as we would argue, increasingly between schools and colleges.

The Chairperson: Trevor, it strikes me that we will have enough trouble taking over DETI without adding DE as well. We will see what happens.

Mr D McIlveen: I have a couple of questions that are somewhat unrelated. The only group in our mini consultation — if I can call it that; I do not mean to understate it — that seemed to take an on-the-fence approach to where it sees itself going was the adult learning group. Obviously, you have a connection with adult learning, and I am quite keen to gauge your opinion on where that should sit. Trevor, if you feel that you need to hold your tongue to avoid a family feud, I will forgive you, but I am curious to know your views on the issue.

Mr Neilands: I do have a view. The reference to family feuds is a reference to the fact that my brother works for the Workers' Educational Association, so I wonder whether I should clarify that and declare it as a conflict of interest. *[Laughter.]*

I have been involved in various kinds of adult education for a number of years and have various kinds of relationships, particularly with the community sector. It is my view that adult education — adult learning and access to adult learning — takes place in a variety of settings. Mr Ramsey referred to that earlier. A number of people who have been out of education or have had poor educational experiences in the past are more comfortable making their first steps back in a local, community-based setting rather than walking through the doors of a further education college, which can be a bit daunting.

That brings up the need for relationships between the colleges and local community organisations. I have always seen adult learning and lifelong learning taking place in a number of different locations: community settings; in the home, increasingly, through distance learning and e-learning; in the workplace, which is a very important component of lifelong learning; and in formal settings such as colleges and universities. The issue, and the approach that I like to promote in my college, is the development of local networks of providers.

I completely accept that a lot of people, particularly adult learners, will take their first steps back in a community setting, but the question is: how will they progress? The community organisations can be very good and very skilled at making people feel comfortable and at providing for the first steps back, but if those learners, having got the confidence that they can achieve, want to move on further, where do they go? That is where the colleges come in, because we have the progression routes. Last week, the Committee heard from DEL officials about the learner access and engagement programme. We have to work as closely as we can with community groups so that that transition is made as easy as possible rather than as difficult as possible. I have to admit that we have not always made it as easy as we should for people to access programmes.

The community and voluntary sector has a huge role, but the key is establishing the progression routes for learners who want to move on to something more formal. I seek to do that in our college by establishing local networks of people who can orientate towards the colleges for the progression routes for the learners that they work with.

Mr D McIlveen: Do you feel that they should, in theory, follow you?

Mr Neilands: Yes, but in a sense, the community groups will always get their funding from a variety of sources, primarily European. Essentially, the key is the local relationships between community organisations and the colleges, and not so much the setting, if you like, within Departments, because the community groups will access their funding wherever they can.

Mr D McIlveen: I have one final question. I am not a statistician, but I would say that, out of the 25 or 26 responses that we got, 90% are veering towards DETI. The one group that seems to be at the other end of the scale is the unions. I was curious to explore why you feel that might be. Was it an impulsive reaction? They were the first off the blocks when it came to publicly commenting on the dissolution of DEL. Following on from that, how much dialogue do you, as management, have with your staff on the ground about whether they are in tune with the unions or management? I suppose that, in trying to avoid problems further down the road, we do not want to lock horns with the unions.

Mr Neilands: We put the argument that we had looked at all the aspects of the various options and identified all the key relationships and that, on balance, we had come down on the side of wanting to be in a Department that is aligned to the economy. That is not to say that other conclusions are not legitimate, within the terms that other people might look at them.

It is very difficult. There are subtle differences between the union responses that I have seen. There is an issue on the lecturers' side with a desire to be more in tune with the conditions of teachers' service and pay. That has had an influence. That is a legitimate argument to put forward.

We would probably take issue with the idea that somehow there is some type of ideological conflict between education on the one hand and skills and training on the other hand. I would certainly argue against that. I honestly do not see how that is the case. Everything that we have tried to argue with you this morning is about saying that those are not two conflicting issues; they are part of the same thing. We deliver our support for the economy and our part in upskilling and reskilling the potential working population by offering a range of vocationally related educational programmes. That is what we do.

Maybe we need to talk to staff and unions a bit more about the implications of some of the changes that we are undertaking. If you increase the amount of work that you do with business and industry, the truth of the matter is that you have to be a bit more flexible than perhaps some in some of our traditional areas of delivery are. That brings up the question of change and the management of change. Not everybody is necessarily comfortable with some of the changes that we will, perhaps, be advocating.

If you are asking if there is an issue about internal communication and debate in the colleges, the answer is yes. In a sense, the question about the dissolution of DEL was flung on us. We did not have a huge amount of lead-up time. Certainly, in the internal communications and staff meetings that I have in my college, I am perfectly happy to raise these kinds of issues and promote some kind of discussion and dialogue. I will be discussing it in the college with our local union representatives; in fact, I have done so. I do not think that it is necessarily a surprise that people could come to different conclusions.

Mr P Ramsey: Do you fancy a trip to Derry to start that discussion?

Mr Neilands: All I can say to that is that I am fully engaged with the issues in my college. It absorbs all my energy.

The Chairperson: You were doing so well, Pat.

I have a couple of points to make in closing. I hope that Joe does not mind me putting this at his door, but it is interesting to note that the combined colleges' budget is bigger than DETI's budget. The issue has almost been looked at in terms of the removal of DEL and its being subsumed into another Department. I have no doubt that, wherever they go, the colleges will prosper and be central to our economic development and should take the lead. You said that you wished people would give greater recognition to that issue. That is, perhaps, one of the more worrying things. Within DEL, you were getting recognition, and it was a Department to which you were, at least, a major contributor. We need to make those arguments. The debate that has to take place, which you should be involved in and leading, is the debate that says that this is not an administrative exercise but a refocusing of Northern Ireland's economic strategic direction, and you are absolutely central to it.

Even Committee members will not necessarily be aware of the processes that you have in place in many colleges for ensuring the retention and attendance of people who were not the best attendees in the past. That is a really significant development, and the colleges should be applauded for it. However, you need to find a way of drawing that forward. It links in with social cohesion, attitudes to training and making people feel welcome when they return to training. I think that you should bring that forward.

The final issue — again, I do not think that it has come to the fore — is the fundamental change in the way that we provide higher and further education, with a focus on more part-time, locally based provision. I was not convinced when we heard about the strategy earlier. However, the more that I look at the cost issues and the need to react to the current situation, the more I think that it is a good way forward and that there are big strengths in it.

The issue about whether colleges can be separated from higher education should be viewed in the round and in the context of the question; why are we thinking about changing the current arrangements? It cannot just be that we have one Minister too many. We must take the opportunity to work out what we want to do, and other Departments may well need to be drawn in. If one were to combine DEL and DETI, one could argue that DCAL should also be in there because of its connection to tourism. There is a bigger debate to be had, and you should have the confidence of your sector to engage in a debate with government on that. I assure you that you have much to be proud of and that we will do our best to ensure that that comes to the fore.

Thank you all very much for your attendance. We look forward to further engagement with you, either formally or informally, on this debate.

Mr Neilands: Thank you very much. It was a very good and enjoyable discussion.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Having been encouraged by the thought of an early lunch, we may well just achieve it. I have some correspondence to go through. However, before we do that, as the staff from Hansard are still here, I want to return to some of the submissions that we have received.

The Committee Clerk: We need to discuss how you want to take this forward. You have received two briefings today. We have lined up representatives from Queen's University to come to see us on 29 February and have checked with the University of Ulster, but it has yet to come back to us. Alastair, you talked about having a one-day session that would be covered by Hansard. If that is to be the case, should we allocate a Wednesday to that? What way do you want to do it? Also, do you want everybody to come? Some of the submissions are very light.

The Chairperson: Any views?

Mr Ross: We could do it in this sort of format or through the speed dating-type events that we have had before, which would allow anyone who wants to come to come, and two or three members could move around the tables to talk to them. I do not really have a preference. I think that you can tease more issues out when you speak to people and ask them questions rather than reading their written submissions. I think that would be quite useful.

Mr F McCann: The Long Gallery events that have taken place in the past allowed people to focus on what they wanted to say in a short period rather than on prolonged discussions.

The Committee Clerk: If we want to have a stakeholder event in the Long Gallery, it would have to be organised through Hansard. Hansard would really need to be involved so that, at the end of the day, the Hansard report can go into the report. Can I be left to investigate with Hansard how we could do that and what dates are available in the Long Gallery?

The Chairperson: Yes.

The Committee Clerk: That would also give us time to write to the other stakeholders to get their responses.

The Chairperson: OK. I hope that members have had a chance to read the submissions. Pat asked for a synopsis of them. I will arrange to have that in next week's members' pack, so that members can get the general points. The problem is that some people took the opportunity to write expansively while others were more to the point. This stage was really a fact-finding exercise and an opportunity for groups to tell us what they want to talk about. As Pat suggested, we should have a two-page report at the next meeting for you to scan through. You will get the chance to read it, and we will write to the people whose names we have taken a note of today. We will have a proposal about a Long Gallery event or something of that ilk when we see what resources are available. That concludes that item of business, unless there is anything else.

Mr D McIlveen: The bigger debate that needs to take place is around teacher training. It seems to be the one area of ambiguity. Although I appreciate that comparisons were made with professionals such as lawyers, medics and so on, education is a bit different. DEL has only been the paymaster. The Department of Education has set the curriculum and been there to provide the jobs at the other side, and DEL has been in the middle, facilitating the training. It might not be as obvious as some of the other areas.

The Chairperson: I agree with that, but it is not only St Mary's University College and Stranmillis University College that carry out teacher training. There are other providers.

Mr D McIlveen: Absolutely. Everything needs to be looked at. There are other providers, and where Stranmillis goes, Jordanstown and Queen's teacher training have to go. Teacher training as a block has to stay together, but I am not 100% convinced that it is as straightforward as the other areas.

The Chairperson: We might be able to do teacher training as a separate issue then.

Mr D McIlveen: I think that would be worthwhile.

The Chairperson: Is that OK? We will look at that as a separate issue.

Mr Douglas: The speed dating-type event that Alastair suggested is a good idea. We need to be clear on what the format would be, because some groups — for example, St Mary's — are philosophical in their view that they should go into the Department of Education. I would not necessarily ask anyone to come and give a presentation, but I would give them the option. The Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) is strongly opposed to any change and wants to keep the situation as it is. We need to get the format right so that we are not there for six or seven hours, although I would be happy enough to go along with that. As you said, Chairman, we will have this grid, so we will know what people's line is.

The Chairperson: I agree, and I thank you for that, Sammy. The exercise was intended for us to hear what people had to say and to select the points that we want to pick up on. With the greatest respect, the aim is not to have everyone come along. It is your time for you to select who you want to hear from and talk to face to face.