



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

**Committee for Employment and Learning**

**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

**Graduating to Success: Higher Education  
Strategy for Northern Ireland**

**2 May 2012**

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Employment and Learning

### Graduating to Success: Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)  
Mr Jim Allister  
Ms Michelle Gildernew  
Mr Chris Lyttle  
Mr Fra McCann  
Mr Barry McElduff  
Mr Pat Ramsey

**Witnesses:**

Mrs Nuala Kerr	Department for Employment and Learning
Mrs Patricia McVeigh	Department for Employment and Learning

**The Chairperson:** We are very pleased to have with us Nuala Kerr, director of higher education; and Patricia McVeigh, head of higher education policy and strategic development. You are very welcome. You probably gathered that we got a little bit waylaid by the enthusiastic young people, but we are very pleased to have you here.

**Mrs Nuala Kerr (Department for Employment and Learning):** Thank you, Chairperson. We are here this morning to discuss Graduating to Success, the higher education strategy that was launched last Tuesday. You should have received a copy of the strategy document and the ministerial statement that accompanies it. Throughout the process, my colleagues have kept the Committee informed of the development process and the emerging issues.

Today, I want to capture briefly the issues that emerged in the strategy. There will be a separate strategy on widening participation, which we discussed relatively recently. As you are aware, the development process for Graduating to Success began in late summer 2009 when the then Minister, Lord Empey, appointed Sir Graeme Davies to oversee the development of the steering group; a project group and five expert groups were established to support the development of the strategy. Those groups encompassed a wide range of key stakeholders from higher education, the community and voluntary sectors, further education, schools, business, and student representatives.

The expert groups considered and made recommendations on five key themes: learning, the economy, international issues, society and people, and finance and governance; their reports informed the development of the consultation document on the future of higher education, which was published in January 2011. Forty responses were received by the Department. Stakeholder engagement events

were also held throughout Northern Ireland to give stakeholders the opportunity to express their views on higher education. The consultation responses from the engagement events and the steering and expert groups report formed the basis of the strategy.

The vision for higher education is set out in the strategy. It is of a sector that is vibrant and of international calibre, which pursues excellence in teaching and research, which plays a pivotal role in the development of a modern, sustainable, knowledge-based economy, which supports a confident, shared society, and which recognises and values diversity.

The strategy reflects the priorities of the Programme for Government and the economic strategy; it is closely aligned with the Department's existing strategies on skills, the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects, further education, and, as I mentioned, the forthcoming strategy on widening participation. The key strategic messages within the document are that higher education must support economic development through supplying highly qualified and skilled graduates by upskilling and reskilling the workforce, particularly at levels 4 and 5, by its excellence in research and knowledge transfer, and by aligning its course provision with economic priorities. All students in that process must have a high-quality learning experience. They must graduate not only with a degree but with a distinctive portfolio of skills and attributes that stands them apart in a competitive global workplace. All students must have the opportunity to avail themselves of a work placement.

The sector must engage effectively with communities and with government, and the institutions must strengthen and broaden their links across the whole island of Ireland and further afield. Students must have the opportunity to undertake international mobility programmes. Learning must be flexible, enabling students to learn at a time, pace and place that suits them, with a view to creating a modular learning system. Funding must be flexible enough to support flexible learning, and efficiency savings must be achieved wherever possible. The final point is that governance and accountability must strike a balance between institutional autonomy and the need to ensure value for money for taxpayers.

The strategy itself captures a number of aspects of those various strategic messages. The implementation and delivery of the strategy is our next step. There are 16 initial projects that have been identified to support the first phase of the implementation of the strategy, and those will be managed in the normal manner that we would expect, through project management that will ultimately report to an implementation committee, chaired by a senior departmental official. The project managers and committee members have yet to be identified, but it is intended that they will be drawn from a wide range of stakeholders, particularly from the institutions in the process. Oversight reporting and communication arrangements will be arranged by the implementation committee when it is established, which, we hope, will take place before the end of June. The initial stage is to set that up.

The strategy overall will be financed through a balanced programme of redeployment, efficiency improvements and additional funds, subject, of course, to the availability of resources. Those aspects of the strategy that depend on new additional funding will be subject to the normal affordability considerations and the outcome of future government spending reviews.

**Mr Allister:** Who wrote the strategy?

**Mrs Kerr:** Various individuals wrote it, but Patricia led the team that developed it.

**Mr Allister:** Why does it not refer at all to addressing one of the deficiencies in higher education — namely, the failure to attract sufficient Protestant students to some of our universities? Why is that reality totally ignored? There is no vision to address it and no attempt to produce a strategy to reverse it; let us just sweep it away and forget about it. Why is that the tenor of the report?

**Mrs Patricia McVeigh (Department for Employment and Learning):** I think that there have been questions before about the potential under-representation from some sectors of the communities and some individual groups. Under-representation will be addressed in the widening participation strategy, which will look at it in the wider sense, whether it is disabled students or students from particular locations.

**Mr Allister:** Where in this strategy is it identified that there is a problem in attracting Protestant students to some campuses?

**Mrs Kerr:** It is not specifically —

**Mr Allister:** It is not. The Magee campus has 20% Protestants and the campus at Jordanstown is disproportionate, yet there is no attempt to address that. There is blatantly no desire to address it.

**Mrs McVeigh:** That is an issue on which we have answered questions before. Students will choose what campus they go to. The overall population of university applicants reflects the school leaving-age population. That is what applicants to universities —

**Mr Allister:** The Jordanstown campus reflects the school-leaving age composition?

**Mrs McVeigh:** No. I am talking about —

**Mr Allister:** You know that it does not.

**The Chairperson:** Jim.

**Mrs McVeigh:** I am talking about students who access higher education. Jordanstown is one campus. We look at higher education and students' choice. Previously —

**Mr Allister:** But —

**The Chairperson:** Jim, let folk answer.

**Mrs McVeigh:** Bob Osborne undertook research into those issues. It was about students' choice; we are very clear about that. We recognise that some particular pockets of society are not reflected in the higher education sector. Those will be addressed through the widening participation strategy.

**Mr Allister:** I read in the report very determined strategies to increase student mobility on the island of Ireland; however, I read nothing in the strategy about increasing student mobility from GB to Northern Ireland. Why is that? We know that the Jordanstown campus as a whole has attracted almost five times as many students from the Republic as it has from GB. The thrust of this report is, "Let's get even greater student mobility on the island of Ireland. Let's totally ignore and forget about the fact that we have no student mobility of any worth between GB and Northern Ireland." Why is that?

**Mrs Kerr:** I am sorry if you did not see that represented in the strategy. It is certainly our —

**Mr Allister:** Where is it?

**Mrs Kerr:** It is certainly our intention —

**Mr Allister:** Where is it in the strategy?

**Mrs Kerr:** It is our intention to maximise the mobility of our students and to attract students from outside Northern Ireland to the universities here, whether from GB or beyond. We wish to create as diverse and dynamic a sector as we can. We are certainly keen to attract the highest-calibre students to our institutions, irrespective of where they come from. I think that we have signalled in various parts of the strategy that our intention is to do so. We also wish our students who are at the universities here to take the opportunities to avail themselves of international experience, wherever that might be relevant to them. We have signalled that in the document. We want to create a climate that attracts the best students from wherever they may be and to make sure, through our widening participation strategy, that those who have the capacity to benefit from higher education have the opportunity to do so. As Patricia said, that will be captured in the widening participation strategy.

**Mr Allister:** The report has no such balance. It has a special project to facilitate cross-border co-operation and student mobility, despite the statistics for Jordanstown that I have quoted to you and despite the fact that the deficit in mobility is with the rest of the United Kingdom. There is no reflection of that at all, but there is an attempt to involve ourselves in more career fairs in the Irish Republic and to get more Irish Republic students up here. There is no parallel with getting people from our own country — the United Kingdom — to come to some of our primary universities. There is no regard to that; there is no mention in the document of our role as a UK university. GB gets one mention in the report, from what I can see, so do not try to tell me that this is a balanced report. It is utterly skewed to perpetuate the imbalance that already exists in our education system. It seems that whoever wrote this has an agenda to do exactly that and perpetuate it. If no one else disagrees, I disagree.

**Mrs Kerr:** I note your comments, but it is not the case that our Department has an agenda in that regard. We have already explained our wish to internationalise the experience of our students and draw students from the widest possible base. We wish to encourage students who have the highest ability to come to the universities here.

**Mr Allister:** Where is the project to match project 11 for the rest of the UK? Where is it?

**The Chairperson:** Mr Allister has raised a genuine point of concern. There has been talk about the differential effects of tuition fees, and there are stories about EU transfers and so on. There is a concern that, through the brain drain, we may lose 30% of our people to across the water, and they may not come back. You have made your point, Jim.

**Mr Allister:** I am happy that I have made my point. I am not happy with the answers.

**The Chairperson:** That is recognised. You have made your point, and the officials have done their level best to respond to it. However, because you have responded does not mean that we have closed the gap. There is an issue that perhaps needs a bit of balance, and we might reflect on how we will deal with that.

**Mrs McVeigh:** The document reflects Sir Graeme Davies's view. He chaired the steering group, which was made up of all stakeholders. In particular, Sir Graeme Davies spoke last week to endorse this.

**Mr Allister:** I do not care who you blame; someone has got it wrong.

**Mrs Kerr:** We are not indicating blame. We have an endorsement from an autonomous and independent individual.

**The Chairperson:** He is highly respected, and he dealt with the issues. That is OK. However, there are still some issues on which he does not have a particular locus of expertise, given that he comes from certain areas. Mr Allister, as he is absolutely entitled to, is highlighting areas where he thinks there is a potential deficiency. We need to look at whether there is or not, but the purpose of the consultation is to engage, and he has brought up a point of view. Without trying to stray into areas that others have raised, we need to make sure that our universities and higher education facilities are open to all. We need to have a look at that. Jim, you have made your point that there is no balance in the other areas, and I am not sure that we need to labour it. It will have been noted, and you will take whatever action you think is appropriate, but it should be fed back to the Minister and the Department that there is some concern about that.

**Mr F McCann:** I have a couple of questions. I thought that, having gone through the strategy, I would pick some questions to ask. However, it concerns me that, at the very start of the conversation about the strategy, a member has chosen to sectarianise the whole debate about further education. He may have the right to do that, but it distorts what is going on. I live in a community — *[Interruption.]* You had your right to speak; you wait until I finish now.

**The Chairperson:** Hold on a second, folks. If you do not mind, I will chair the meeting. Fra, you have the floor.

**Mr F McCann:** It concerns me that it started the debate and the session off on the wrong foot.

However, I have two points, one of which is about languages. In today's society, languages play a major role, and many people who come out of further education and travel abroad are seen as ambassadors for people here. However, I do not see any mention in the document of how languages will be pushed. In some European countries, most people have one, two, three or four languages, and it holds them in good stead. Is there any push to encourage people to take another language? Secondly, there is a part about how to encourage communities into further education. How will you do that? The last session was with young people, many of whom were NEETs. How do you reach out to encourage people to go into further education?

**Mrs Kerr:** We recognise the value of language skills; it is an important aspect. This complements the other strategies in the Department. The skills strategy, for example, highlights the need for skills in the economic life of Northern Ireland, and that is part of all the agenda; we need to ensure that we achieve the right kind of balance of what is on offer in our higher educational institutes, and that is implicit, if not explicit, in the document. There are a number of aspects to community linkages and what the strategy says about them. First, it stresses the importance of people learning at a time, at a pace and in a place that suits them. We have signalled our intention to pilot higher education bases in further education colleges, particularly in rural areas, so that people can find their higher education accessible in a way that, perhaps, they may not have found it until now.

We also have an indication of the need for people to pursue their education through lifelong learning, both while people are in work and when they are not in work. We want to see change in higher education so that people can learn as it suits them and their personal circumstances, and we want our funding regime to be able to support that kind of development.

Our widening participation strategy will detail our intentions, and when it is published, hopefully in June, it will show in more detail how we plan to get to people who have the ability to benefit from higher education but whose personal circumstances do not allow them to do that.

**Mr F McCann:** It is interesting that Sammy Douglas asked a number of times about the partnership that has been built up between Queen's and Sandy Row, which seems to be working well. Is there any way that that partnership with universities can be extended to other communities? I am not just thinking of some of the more socially deprived areas of Belfast, such as Sandy Row, but the rural areas, where staff can go to encourage people. Some years ago when the Ulster Orchestra was, by and large, funded by Belfast City Council, I remember that it had an outreach problem, especially outside what was seen as middle-class areas, and Tom Hartley encouraged it to go into communities. The orchestra went into community centres and youth and church settings to give people a better understanding of what an orchestra was about and the music that it played. That is the type of thing that you need to do, especially if you are trying to encourage people who have no aspirations of going on to further education and who have difficulty in maintaining their level of education or their participation in education at all.

**Mrs McVeigh:** We talk in the document about community engagement strategies. Our universities are working with communities, and you have outlined one example of what we are saying should be embedded in their infrastructure; they should strengthen their community engagement strategies at all levels, not only in schools but in the wider community. The importance of that is reflected, and, as Nuala said, raising aspirations for our young people will be reflected strongly in the widening participation strategy.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Good morning, Nuala and Patricia. You are very welcome. A great deal of effort has been put into this, and I will come back later to some of the points that Jim raised. With regard to future-proofing the higher education strategy, a huge amount of investment and time have been placed in the relevant STEM subjects and the relevant economic subjects. However, we should also look at

important growth areas such as the creative industries and agrifood, as those are the sustainable jobs for the future in the local economy, and I would welcome a response on that.

I want to mention a point that I did not see in the report. I attended some of the meetings that Sir Graeme organised across Northern Ireland as part of the public engagement in the consultation process; he was always responsive to me and said that regional disparity will be looked at in the higher education strategy. If that is right, the regional strategy for disparity should be looking at the smaller campuses across Northern Ireland so that we can increase their capacity.

I will get on to my hobby horse of the University of Ulster at Magee; I am sure that you would be surprised if I did not.

**The Chairperson:** They might not, but I would.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I have questioned the Minister on this; it is the economic driver for the One Plan endorsed by the Executive and OFMDFM. Where do you see that fitting now? I am going to ask all my questions at once.

**The Chairperson:** You do not have to, Pat; give them a chance to answer and then come back in. Go ahead, folks.

**Mrs Kerr:** The key points that you were making were the need to have locations where people can access higher education. As I said, the intention is to consider how place as well as time and other issues affect individuals. The pilot suggests that the establishment of bases in further education colleges will help to inform that discussion.

We have not addressed Magee specifically in the way that you suggest, but the strategy implies that we are trying to ensure that people have access to courses as and when they need them and in the places that they need them. We will see what the outworking of that will be as we work through the implementation of the strategy.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I have raised this previously with the Minister and officials, but we have two very important sides of the higher education and the widening participation strategies. They have to be joined up; we have to synchronise them to maximise their potential.

I want to go back to some of the points that Jim Allister made. We accept that we have under-representation of Protestant students on some of our campuses, and Magee is no different; however, we all have responsibility to try to overturn that. It is not just for Nuala Kerr or Patricia to do that, or the Minister. I have spoken to grammar school representatives in my area, encouraged the principals there to motivate and encourage their young people and told them that the campus at Magee is worthwhile. That is where I get back to the point about regional disparity. If we increase the capacity and competency of degrees in the Magee campus, there is a higher likelihood of young Protestants, who, in the past, may have gone to universities particularly in Scotland, of opting for a home course. I say that very deliberately. It is not just about looking after your own in Derry; it is about making a political message there as well.

There was an opportunity for us all to speak during the consultation by Sir Graeme Davis; I made a presentation to him. I made a presentation to him at this Committee. I ask Jim Allister to share with us any submission that he made to the higher education strategy or any submission he may have made at some of the consultation meetings. I accept that it is right to be critical of departmental officials coming in here, but unless you have walked the walk and made a contribution —

**The Chairperson:** Hold on, Pat, I am not going down this road. We are here to take evidence from —

**Mr P Ramsey:** No; you cannot come in here and cross-examine, quite aggressively, departmental officials. In the same context, why is it not included in the final document? Have you not made a submission of some —

**The Chairperson:** I will chair the meeting, if you do not mind. I will decide what way we are going. He can ask questions, and I will let him ask questions. You are now talking to the officials.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I have every right to respond when there is particular —

**The Chairperson:** You can respond as well, as long as —

**Mr P Ramsey:** I have every right to challenge members of Committee.

**The Chairperson:** Yes, but I do not think that you want to challenge the Chair, because he is trying to guide you in a way of having a productive discussion. That is all I am trying to do here. There is a lot of really important stuff to come back in, certain comments were made, opinions are held, whether right or wrong, you have made your point, but, please, our officials are here to talk to the paper. I am just trying to guide you.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I appreciate your point, and I am trying to be as constructive and positive as I am about the issue that was raised earlier about the sense of Protestant alienation that is not enabling young students to go to college in Northern Ireland. You have a job in hand, as Chair of the Employment and Learning Committee, to act responsibly in trying to do that, to be a motivator and to encourage. That is the statement I am making. I accept the responsibility, as a Catholic, nationalist politician, to try to do that in my own city. I will put my hand up and say it as it is.

You referred to work placements, which are clearly part of the higher education strategy. Will you ensure that there is active recording and tracking of that experience to ensure that lessons can be learned going forward? On the skills gained and recorded, the report talks about the higher education achievement report (HEAR) and what it will look like. Have you worked alongside the business community in developing that type of approach to make that difference?

**Mrs McVeigh:** On the work placements, yes, we have; there is a specific target against placements, so the placements will have to be monitored. When we look at developing the project, one of the things we will look at will be how we measure whether we have achieved particular targets on work placements. The HEAR is a recognised way of recording that, and it should be well known in the business community. It sits alongside the diploma, which is reflected in the rest of Europe, so it is a strong way of reflecting graduates' other important skills and activities that will supplement their degree. We are confident that that will be applicable to all our students, and we are working very closely with our universities on that.

**Mr P Ramsey:** The important player in that is clearly the business community, especially when it comes to earmarking specialist areas and growth areas of the economy that may require placements.

**Mr McElduff:** Section 5.7 of the report deals with cross-border co-operation and student mobility. That is a really important area that was identified by the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) and the Confederation of British Industry (CBI). I am glad to see that that has found its way into the strategy. It is very good that there are those types of commitments because, where I come from, trying to find out what courses might be available in Galway university, University College Dublin or Trinity College is like going on a treasure hunt, and that needs to change. The same goes for the mobility of students coming north. It needs to be made easy for people. The lack of equivalence between A-level results and leaving cert results needs to be addressed. I am glad that that issue is in the report. I really hope that they are not mere words and that there is a commitment to addressing the barriers to mobility that have been identified.

I also welcome the reference to the fact that, inside FE colleges, there will be greater concentration on a university presence. In places such as Omagh, Dungannon, Cookstown and Enniskillen, the area I am most familiar with, it is becoming increasingly important to enable young people to do two years of a degree in their local town and perhaps finish that degree in Belfast. We want a commitment to that as well, and not just in words — it needs to show how to do it. That seems to be contradicted by the distribution of maximum student number (MaSN) places, even in the recent past. Some efforts are



being made to reward colleges in Tyrone and Fermanagh that have best practice, but I would like to see more of that.

Finally, on a general macro issue, we want to ensure that our local universities are in a position to maximise the drawdown of European funding for research and development. I have raised two or three themes, Chair.

**Mrs Kerr:** I am grateful for the recognition of the various aspects of the report that you have noted. The distribution of places to further education colleges has been announced, and the process of distributing the places will continue. The work on the North/South IBEC/CBI work will also continue. We will take up with our colleagues the issues that you have raised about the recognition of A-level qualifications and so on to ensure that people have the maximum opportunity to avail themselves of higher education wherever they choose to pursue it.

Finally, you mentioned research and development. We are in discussions with the two institutions to see how best we can support their actions to maximise on the drawdown under the next round of European-funded research and development. We are working closely with the universities to see what more we can do to assist them in that work.

**Mr McElduff:** What is your assessment of the success, or otherwise, of Queen's University and the University of Ulster in that area? Are they meeting the targets? Are they drawing down sufficient funding?

**Mrs Kerr:** I think they have had some success to date. We believe that there is greater scope for all of the interested parties to draw down more, and we want to position ourselves so that we can maximise the opportunity in the next round. We are talking to them to see what we can do to help them do what they do best.

**Mr McElduff:** Is that an area of work for the Department for Employment and Learning desk officer in Brussels?

**Mrs Kerr:** That would be part of that scenario. The people in the universities who have the expertise and the knowledge of particular areas of research and development are the people who are best placed to exploit that. Part of the process is about making sure that they have the right understanding and the right connections. A desk officer can play a role in that. We also need to see what the universities need to do to position themselves and the researchers to take advantage of opportunities and to make bids that are successful. We think there is further scope for work there.

**Mr Lyttle:** My understanding is that the role of a Statutory Committee is to scrutinise and support the work of Departments. I recognise that we have to critically examine the strategy, but I also welcome the fact that the strategy reflects a lot of the work and input that the Committee has had throughout the process. To say that there is nothing in here for widening participation for all groups in society, when the key issue of freezing tuition fees is front and centre to ensure that people can access university based on their ability to benefit rather than their ability to pay, is, unfortunately, misleading. I am taking the opportunity to say that because that was something that all parties on the Committee had made clear that they wanted to see as part of higher education going forward.

**The Chairperson:** Do not put words in the mouth of every member of the Committee.

**Mr Lyttle:** That is fair enough. I would be keen to hear —

**The Chairperson:** I took a different position on it.

**Mr Lyttle:** To clarify, it was the previous Committee.

**The Chairperson:** I am just making it clear that statutory rules came through, and we took a position that was reflected in a recorded vote.

**Mr Lyttle:** OK. On a point of clarification, it was the previous Committee.

How will the widening participation strategy be linked with the higher education strategy? Will very successful programmes, such as the University of Ulster's Step Up programme, be further developed? The Step Up programme seems to have had brilliant success in accessing people who would not normally go to university and bringing them through degree programmes, and it has a good retention rate. I also welcome the inclusion of specific requirements for work experience opportunities because that, obviously, has been recognised as an issue. It would be good to hear a bit more about that. I also want to know how part-time study is going to be further increased. That was a key issue raised by Sir Graeme Davies. As well as giving our young people skills —

**The Chairperson:** Chris, have you a few more points? Perhaps I should let them deal with what you have just said. You are more than welcome to make more points.

**Mr Lyttle:** That was my last one. How will part-time degree study be factored into giving our young people skills and upskilling people in the workplace?

**Mrs Kerr:** A few weeks ago, we briefed the Committee on the intended content of the widening participation strategy that we expect to develop. We originally envisaged the strategy as being integral to the higher education strategy, but the substance of the widening participation strategy was such that we believed that it warranted a separate document. There is certainly reference to the widening participation strategy in the higher education strategy, but integral to everything that we do is the need to make sure that everybody who has the ability to benefit from a university education gets the chance to get one. We need to put in place mechanisms to allow that to happen. We want to examine the capacity to extend the success that has been achieved through the Step Up programme. We also want to examine other activities that would have the same effect of drawing young people through and that would inform their expectations of what university life will be like, allow them to go to university and stay there, and impact favourably on drop-out rates. We will see more of that in the widening participation strategy, which we hope to have published next month.

Part-time study is very important. We are talking about the importance of the response of the higher education institutions to the needs of individuals and the economy. Much of that is driven by a lifelong learning agenda that allows people to acquire and have recognised parts of qualifications that they will have achieved at various institutions. It also allows people to study in one place and then come back home to study locally and so on. The scope for the transferability of all that should be maximised. Integral to the strategy is the need to develop as far as possible the capacity for part-time study of different kinds and different modes of study to be integrated fully to allow people to pursue their academic career in whatever way their personal circumstances dictate. That will allow scope for people who are in work and are not in work to continue their skills and learning experience in different ways.

**Mrs McVeigh:** As Nuala said, the qualifications credit framework that we propose to develop in one of the projects will facilitate that progression. We have referenced the need to increase part-time provision. Just recently, the further education colleges have been given additional funding to increase their part-time provision and intermediary qualifications. So we are committed to increasing part-time provision.

**The Chairperson:** I have a few modest questions. There is not much meat on the bones of project 9.

**Mrs Kerr:** This is a preliminary outline of the project that we believe needs to be developed in that area.

**The Chairperson:** I agree, Nuala, that it is a preliminary outline. That is what I said; there is not much detail. A number of people have said that we ought to find ways of getting social and community engagement. I think that Fra made that point. Where is the plan? It is just a statement of aspiration; it needs a bit more meat on the bones. We will not waste too much time on it, but there are a number of issues.

You talk about the STEM-related disciplines, and I am interested in your analysis that states:

*"Interestingly, medicine, dentistry and subjects allied to medicine account for 41% of overall STEM enrolments here".*

That seems like an awful lot of doctors and dentists. Are we saying that half of our industry is made up of doctors and dentists?

**Mrs Kerr:** No. We are saying that our statistics on the uptake of STEM-related subjects suggest a very robust picture. However, when you take the health-related aspects out of that, you see that there are gaps and that there is an indication of a greater capacity to enhance the study of STEM-related subjects. The global figures might disguise that.

**The Chairperson:** We will not have time to go into all of this, but there are two or three points that I want to mention. If Daisy Hill Hospital in Newry does not have the requisite support to be a teaching hospital, how can you get places for the junior doctors that you are churning out? They will not go there because they will not get sufficient training. We are hearing that there are not enough junior doctors in our health system — at least that is what the Minister has said. Where is the joined-up vision for that particular part of the strategy?

**Mrs McVeigh:** The Department works with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and it will look in detail at the workforce planning in relation to health and health-related occupations. It funds places in our universities.

**The Chairperson:** What do you call those people who tell junior doctors where they are going to? Is it NIMPS or NIMTY or something like that? They tell junior doctors where they are going to be placed. What interaction do we have with them? The whole idea is not that junior doctors take a view on what hospital they do or do not want to go to; they are told where there is a vacancy and that they are going there. From what I can see, as a politician having to deal with the issues, we have a mismatch. We seem to be producing lots of doctor-types, if you will forgive me, yet we are being told that we do not have enough junior doctors and consultants. There is a manpower planning issue that I do not think is being addressed. I do not want to take too long on this point; I just want to raise it with you.

Teacher training provision is an area that we are perhaps a wee bit more familiar with, and you could look at it. I know that Nuala made the argument previously that you can train as a teacher but that does not necessarily mean that you will end up teaching. You can put that forward as an argument. However, I get concerned because it is, arguably, the top 10% or 15% of any distribution curve that makes the cutting-edge difference, and that is not dealt with in this document. All the STEM people are saying to me, "We are after the brightest people; we want them to study STEM subjects." They do not have a problem with the numbers but with getting the brightest or the most adept. I do not think that we have reconfigured society's expectation. We should be saying, "This is where you should be going because this is where the economic opportunity is." Frankly, we are producing too many doctors, too many lawyers and, arguably, too many teachers and not enough computer scientists, or whatever. Where do you plan to address that?

**Mrs Kerr:** The figures are exactly reinforcing that point. We are saying that we want to enhance STEM-related developments. When we fund additional places, they will not be in the area of medicine or be health-related, specifically. Rather, additional PhDs, and so on, will be in STEM-related and economically relevant subjects, and those are aside from medicine.

**The Chairperson:** I have another couple of points. We will not have time to do everything here. Depending on how much time we have left as a Committee, I suggest that we select individual projects that we would like to drill down into and get a bit more of an understanding of. For example, there is an issue around getting more research and a greater drawdown of funding. You have to ask why it is that we are not able to draw down funding. Is it because we are not putting in sufficiently robust research proposals? It could be that. Is there a strategy for investing in world-renowned professors to

come along? I would like to see a bit more detail. A real strategy is about how you plan to deal with those issues. I suppose that my feedback to the Minister and the Department is that, although I understand that this is a very broad document and that, therefore, you cannot possibly put all the detail into it that you would like to, we need to concentrate more on those areas. Some of the projects could do with being beefed up to explain what they mean in reality.

Sir Graeme Davies made much of the flexible funding package. He thought that it would be a really innovative step for Northern Ireland, over and above all other parts. Do you share that view, or can you explain to us why he was so excited about it?

**Mrs McVeigh:** It is in the document. We use the word "flexibility". It means that people can do modules that can then be banked and reflected in the credit framework. It allows that fluidity between the time that it takes an individual to obtain a qualification and, equally, the financial support that a university, higher education college or whatever can offer that type of individual. We realise that the issue is complex. We have to look at it, work it out and ensure that, at the same time, that fluidity does not destabilise the institutions.

**The Chairperson:** You are going to review the MaSN. How will that work if you are going to take a modular approach? If you are going for more part-time study at local colleges, how does that impact the MaSN? There is a hugely innovative section in the document, but it has not yet been fully worked out. It may make some of the other issues redundant or, at least, peripheral. Is that a fair comment?

**Mrs McVeigh:** It is an incremental approach. The work on MaSN will be the first step, but it will be a review of how we fund higher education.

**Mrs Kerr:** All your points are completely relevant. At this stage of the projects, we are setting out our intentions and what we plan to examine. The areas that you mention are the relevant areas that we will need to investigate. We need to establish what needs to be done to respond to the challenges that those areas present.

**The Chairperson:** There is just too much work to do in the time that we have. You look for the sector to make further efficiencies. That is fairly draconian, especially at a time when the economic concern should maybe be to enhance our higher education provision. We need to know the detail of that. Obviously, we want things to be more efficient, but perhaps we could look at putting in place bursaries so as to encourage the uptake of STEM subjects. We need a bit more detail on what this really means in practice.

This is like an initial sighting shot. We have had a chance to ask a few questions. It may well be that the Committee will want to write to you with a few observations about areas on which we would like particular briefings, rather than trying to cover every one in one meeting. The funding model is one such area. I am not saying that we are ready to do that now; it would be at a time of your choosing. We need to work out how we are going to deal with STEM. There is an issue about research funding. We cannot be just aspirational; we have to see how we put that back in.

**Mr McElduff:** Can I add one area in which I have spotted a gap?

**The Chairperson:** You are always good at that.

**Mr McElduff:** Constituents have brought it to my attention that, very often, education and library boards or the education authorities decide that courses in the performing arts, often in England, do not give young people an academic step up, even though they would definitely increase their employability. They are fairly important courses. I want to know about arts and performing arts bursaries.

**The Chairperson:** I agree, but time is running on.

**Mr McElduff:** Can we look at the performing arts in a future briefing?

**The Chairperson:** We certainly can. We will ask the Committee Clerk to start to pull together some of the issues that we need to look at. She does not need to do that for next week, but we do need to do that. Even though we had a fractious bit at the start of the discussion, it would be worth looking at this. The Minister said that these were the initial projects, and, given that there is some emphasis on project 11, it might be possible to look at a project that enhances the east-west dimension. We could also look at some of the other terms of reference that Pat mentioned to see how we can tackle the imbalance in some areas. Those are just some of the areas that are worthy of discussion so that we can get balance on these issues.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Yes. That is fair.

**The Chairperson:** I am quite happy for you to respond to my final points, if you want to. However, my general suggestion is that we write to the Department on the core issues that people have identified and ask what would be the best way to drill down into them and have a bit more genuine and positive engagement on how to deliver on them. Would that be appropriate?

**Mrs Kerr:** We welcome the opportunity to brief you as we develop the various projects. As you said, some of the projects are further advanced than others and some are preliminary outlines of what we would expect. We would welcome the opportunity to brief the Committee on the various aspects that are of interest to members as we work our way through them.

**The Chairperson:** If the Committee is content, that is what we will do.

**Mrs Kerr:** I want to make a final point in response to the first question that was posed. I want to stress that the content of this document is not the personal view of the civil servants involved. We led on the writing of it, but it is our Minister's strategy in the various areas —

**Mr Allister:** Shame on him.

**Mrs Kerr:** — and not the personal views of the civil servants involved. I have to record my extreme disappointment that we could be considered to be biased in how we deliver our Minister's strategy.

**The Chairperson:** I understand the point that you are making, and nobody doubts your personal impartiality. In fact, on previous occasions when we may have had a few words about other issues, I have stressed that it is not the individuals in front of us who are responsible for the strategy; we hold the Minister to account for that. I ask you for a little forbearance. When we talk about certain issues that are very important to people, sometimes there will be narrow viewpoints and other times there will be broader viewpoints. However, the whole point of us having a process of dialogue and engagement is so that the issues can be aired and addressed. It is a conversation that has to happen, and even though people get passionate, we do not put any blame on or make any assertions about the civil servants in front of us. I hope that that is satisfactory.

**Mrs Kerr:** Thank you, Chair.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much for your forbearance. We look forward to helping you to develop some of the strategies.