



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Review of Teacher Education:
Departmental Briefing**

25 April 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 Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister
Ms Michelle Gildernew
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Fra McCann
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr David McIlveen
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Mrs Nuala Kerr	Department for Employment and Learning
Mr Billy Lyttle	Department for Employment and Learning
Mrs Patricia McVeigh	Department for Employment and Learning

The Chairperson: The Committee welcomes Billy, Patricia and Nuala, who will take us through the briefing. Over to you, Nuala.

Mrs Nuala Kerr (Department for Employment and Learning): Thanks for the opportunity to be here to provide an update on the teacher education review. You have our briefing note, which includes documentation that the Department of Education (DE) has made available to us.

As you are aware, the provision of initial teacher education (ITE) is the responsibility of the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). DEL is responsible for the funding and administration of initial teacher education establishments. The policy, including the determination of student intake numbers for the ITE providers, is the Department of Education's responsibility.

The Department of Education, in partnership with DEL, originally launched a review of teacher education in 2003. The purpose of the review was to ensure that the profession is best placed to cope with the changes facing the education sector in the years ahead. I am sure that we are all aware that quite a lot of time has passed since that review was announced. However, I understand that the Employment and Learning Committee was fully aware of this issue. In January 2009, it published a report on the subject for the purposes of promoting debate on the matter and indicating potential strategy and policy

options. The report expressed concern about the elongated framework for the review; the maintenance of ITE places available to the university colleges; the preservation of the distinct identity and ethos of each university college; future funding issues; sustainability; the work of the university colleges; and, indeed, the proposed merger of Queen's University and Stranmillis University College.

In drafting the consultation document, DE considered the Committee's comments. I can confirm that the document was forwarded to the then Employment and Learning Committee for its consideration in October 2009. Subsequently, the consultation document 'Teacher Education in a Climate of Change: The Way Forward' was launched in June 2010, and the consultation closed in November that year. DE officials recently presented a summary of the responses to the Education Committee, and I have included that in our briefing paper to members. The teacher education review document sets out the framework for the future policy development of teacher education in the post-Education and Skills Authority landscape. It also lays out the roles, functions and responsibilities of stakeholders in providing continuity of training and professional development for teachers.

DE officials are currently preparing a teacher education strategy document, which will be forwarded to our Minister once Minister O'Dowd's approval has been secured. The agreed intention of both Departments is to present the document to the Education Committee and this Committee for consideration and comment. I hope that the briefing material that we have given members provides a back-up and gives substance to the development of this strategy. I am happy to take questions.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you very much. I have quite a few comments to make. Before I get into them, I will invite members to go first.

Ms Gildernew: No; get it off your chest, Basil. It is therapeutic. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: It is always great to be at the home of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) because we get Michelle's full attention. I want to ask questions, but, Barry, do you want to come in?

Mr McElduff: I do not want to make a mistake about where responsibility lies, so correct me if I am wrong, but I believe that it lies somewhere between DE and DEL. I understand that this review has been going on for nine years now yet there are still no clear recommendations. First, in the course of the review, has international best practice, such as that in Finland, been looked at? Secondly, is there an intention to give a lead role in the training of teachers to higher education providers?

Mrs Kerr: As regards the division of responsibility, our Department is responsible for funding the activity that takes place in initial teacher education establishments, but DE has policy responsibility for the nature of the training and the numbers of trainee teachers recruited, based on schools' needs. So, they determine the numbers of student teachers who are recruited, but we fund the activity that takes place. We also monitor the quality of the performance of the teacher education establishments through the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and so on. We are responsible for the governance of the use of public money in that regard. So, the split is quite distinct, and it is unusual.

Mrs Patricia McVeigh (Department for Employment and Learning): As Nuala said, the Department of Education is responsible for the policy, so it will have looked at best practice elsewhere when considering the future needs of teachers. One of the main issues for the review was that the climate in which teachers are operating has significantly changed. There is a diverse community of schoolchildren, and that really is DE's responsibility. It is looking at the skills that teachers need to operate in today's climate. It is looking at not only initial teacher education but continuing professional development (CPD). Certainly, in the past, our previous Minister indicated that he would have preferred a role for existing teacher education providers. He felt that they were best placed to do the work because of their expertise. Equally, that would help their organisations to become more financially sustainable. However, how continuing professional development will be delivered will be a matter for DE.

Mr Buchanan: Are we confident that we have been providing teachers of the highest calibre? If not, will the review address that issue to ensure that we are? Has any work been done to see how many teachers will be needed in the future so that we do not train large numbers of people to be teachers when only x amount is required? Has anything been done to look forward on that basis, and is that issue addressed in this review?

Mrs McVeigh: I do not mean to be unhelpful, but teacher numbers and the future demand for teachers are the responsibility of the Department of Education. However, there is a recognition from the Department of Education that teachers need different skills sets now. The Department has indicated to us that it is looking at the initial recruitment of ITE students and, perhaps, at reviewing the ITE entry qualifications in terms of looking at what other skills sets people coming through ITE may need.

Mr Buchanan: You say that teacher numbers are a matter for the Department of Education. If DEL also has a role in this, what work are DEL and DE doing together, even on teacher numbers? Obviously, there should be some joined-up work between the two Departments, given that DE is responsible for the numbers but DEL also has a part to play.

Mrs Kerr: You have made an important point. The responsibility for determining the intake numbers each year lies with the Department of Education. Each year, it advises us of the intake that is required to support schools in Northern Ireland. We rely on its advice each year, as do the colleges, to determine what offers are made to students and what intake will result from that. So we are very heavily dependent on the Department of Education for its advice and assessment of what the requirements will be for schools in the foreseeable future. On the basis of that information, we provide the funding to the university colleges and, of course, to the students who are successful in securing places. So we are dependent on them very extensively in all that.

Mr P Ramsey: In annex A, one of the themes you highlight is "Getting the 'right' training". There seems to be a criticism of teacher training. It is very prominent. In total, 48 bodies or individuals responded to the consultation. In this evidence, you are suggesting that teachers are not getting the right training. How many people, of the 48 who responded, suggested that?

Mrs Kerr: DE has provided an analysis of the responses. You can see in table 1 the areas that the comments were grouped under. I do not have the specifics on that.

Mr P Ramsey: I would appreciate it, Nuala, if you could get back to me on that.

Mrs Kerr: Yes, certainly.

Mr P Ramsey: I am hearing concerns from people that there was not enough research or no evidence base for you to make that call or that criticism. You made reference earlier to all the programmes being inspected by ETI. One would presume that that inspection is rigorous and serious. There will be a concern about this criticism, albeit that the responses are being analysed. Also, what about the role of the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI)? It accredited all the programmes for teacher training. There is a deep and worrying concern at the language that is used here: "Getting the 'right' training". It is very critical of all teacher training colleges.

Mrs Kerr: This specific aspect of the training is completely within the domain of DE. It is its responsibility to determine the content of the courses and the responsiveness of the young people to the training that is on offer.

Mr P Ramsey: Who put together the summary of consultation responses?

Mrs Kerr: DE.

Mr P Ramsey: So you have no role in that?

Mrs Kerr: We do not have any role in determining the policy responsibility in those areas. What we have furnished you with in these annexes is the information that was furnished by DE to its Committee.

It provided that information to us to share with you. I am happy to take your question away and come back to you with a more detailed response. However, that area of responsibility lies firmly with DE.

Mr P Ramsey: So, DE has the responsibility for the adequate and appropriate training of teachers?

Mrs Kerr: Yes.

Mr P Ramsey: I would appreciate it if you could come back to me on that, and please come back to me on how many of the 48 who responded to the consultation were critical of the training. The criticism seems to be very harsh, given my understanding that most people who responded did not say that.

Mr Allister: I will make two points, if I might. How far, if at all, does what the Minister had to say in his statement yesterday impact upon any of your presentation?

Mrs Kerr: I do not think there is a direct correlation. I am not sure whether you are referring to education and the delivery of training or teaching within universities, which he raised yesterday. If that is the reference you are making, there is no direct link with this specifically, except to say that he was acknowledging yesterday that the quality of teaching is important in university institutions.

Mr Allister: So none of what is in your paper informs anything from yesterday?

Mrs McVeigh: No. This is particular to teachers in the schools sector. The Minister was talking yesterday about teaching in the higher education sector. They are different. Teachers in the schools sector have a professional teaching qualification, whereas lecturers in the higher education sector do not. However, what the Minister was saying yesterday was that it is important that those lecturers are supported in their professional development and that they will be through organisations that his Department funds, such as the Higher Education Academy, so that the impact that they have on students is one that supports a quality learning experience. So, those issues are separate.

Mr Allister: Secondly, you have referred several times to the differing responsibilities of the two Departments. We are told that we are moving towards DEL being disbanded, with its functions going elsewhere. Would there be a case, at that point, for realigning all the functions of which you have spoken into the one Department, whichever Department that might be?

Mrs Kerr: I do not know what the decision is about the realignment of the Department's responsibilities. I do not know whether that will be an issue that is up for consideration. I would have thought that there are a number of different opinions about how the realignment of the Department would take place and —

Mr Allister: But do you have a view from the perspective of someone who has to work between this split responsibility?

Mrs Kerr: It is not a view that I am in a position to express. The decisions on how the Department's activities are to be divided do not lie with me; they lie elsewhere.

Mr Allister: I appreciate that, but is it working as it is?

Mrs Kerr: Obviously, we are heavily reliant on DE for our understanding of what the numbers are likely to be. I suppose that, in any organisational structure in which activities are divided, anomalies are created. If the policy and funding were with DE, that might create a separation in relation to the management of the university/college relationships and, therefore, create an anomaly somewhere else. Discontinuities are always created when you divide activities. If one is removed, another is created in another part. There are pros and cons on all sides.

Mr Allister: That is a very good Civil Service answer.

Mrs Kerr: Thank you for the compliment. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: We have not finished yet.

Mr P Ramsey: If Jim is giving you a compliment, it must have been good.

Mr D McIlveen: Thank you for the information. I will return to the points raised by the Deputy Chair and a few others about the whole issue of the numbers going into teacher training. I want to have a clear understanding and will probably oversimplify the issue. However, are we in a position at the minute where the Department of Education sets the numbers and the Department for Employment and Learning pays for the training?

Mrs Kerr: Yes.

Mr D McIlveen: From a public accountability point of view, is that a satisfactory arrangement, bearing in mind that the Department of Education will not be too concerned about overestimating the numbers in the knowledge that it does not have to pay for the training? There are two possibilities. We could either have the two functions in one Department or some sort of mitigation if the Department of Education gets it wrong.

Even from debates on the oversupply of teachers that have taken place in the Assembly this year, it is clear that there has been a mismanagement of funds. I am not laying the blame for that at the door of the Department for Employment and Learning, because I accept that you fund the numbers that are recommended to you. However, surely it is not a very satisfactory arrangement if, on the recommendation of another Department, you are ultimately paying for something for which there is not a market requirement. That just seems a very dysfunctional way of doing it.

Mrs Kerr: I appreciate the points that you make. There cannot be a guarantee of jobs at the end of any process of training or making available higher education opportunities for young people. We train and fund people in other areas; for example, doctors, nurses and social workers. There is a whole range of activities for which we fund the universities to deliver higher education based on the understanding of the needs of areas of responsibility that are not specific to us. It is a specific situation, but what we do is not unusual. There are other examples of that. In many instances, young people have the opportunity to avail themselves of higher education courses in a particular subject area or discipline and then apply that learning to seek jobs in that area or in other areas. I do not think it is as unreasonable a position as it would seem to be. There are opportunities for people to secure jobs as teachers and to use the transferable skills in other areas to get jobs in other disciplines. I do not see it as necessarily a waste or misuse of money in the sense that you are suggesting.

Mr D McIlveen: The Department of Education is in the market position and knows the needs. It can even make projections based on the length of a course. It can project that far forward to work out what its requirements are going to be based on retirements and so on. If there were clear evidence that the Department of Education had got it wrong, had miscalculated or overestimated the number of teachers required and had ultimately cost the Department for Employment and Learning money, would it not be sensible for the Department for Employment and Learning to have some sort of mechanism in place whereby it could recoup some of those resources?

Mrs Kerr: My view is that what you ideally want to do is match, as far as humanly possible, the skills of the people who leave higher education institutions with the needs of the marketplace. To go back to what Mr Allister said, that is part of what the new higher education strategy is about; it is about developing that profile and better aligning those two areas. That is what we would wish for teacher education as well. I see the education that is provided to young people through teacher education as being capable of being used within schools, but they also acquire skills that can be used in other ways. Although there may not be an exact and timely match, those skills are sufficiently transferable to allow those students to find valuable and useful employment in other parts of the economy. I am not certain that there is an argument for recouping money from the Department of Education; rather, we should work with them to try to improve that alignment.

The Chairperson: You need to be careful there, Nuala; you almost expressed an opinion.

Mrs Kerr: That was regrettable, Chair. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: I will see whether we can get it redacted for you.

Mr D McIlveen: I suppose we are trying —

The Chairperson: Listen, we have got the point. This has been talked about over the past two or three Committee meetings: we did have to increase the number of teacher training places for Stranmillis and St Mary's University College in order to keep them viable. That is on the record. That has been put forward, and you have got an answer.

Mr D McIlveen: Would there be as much of an oversupply of trainee teachers if the Department of Education were paying for the training? Ultimately, that is what we need to know.

The Chairperson: I suspect that the answer would be yes, but that is a different thing. Is there anything else you want to ask?

Mr D McIlveen: No.

Mr C Lyttle: I apologise for arriving late this morning. This question may have been asked already. If it has, my apologies. The review of teacher education was in 2003 and the policy document was published in June 2010. Why did it take so long?

Mrs McVeigh: For us, the driver in taking the strategy forward is DE's responsibility, but I would say that that Department was looking at other changes, the potential establishment of the Education and Skills Authority, the delay with that and other factors that may have impacted on its ability to take that forward.

Mrs Kerr: I think that that was touched on in the previous Committee's report in 2009. I think that the Committee reflected on that issue at that stage.

Mr C Lyttle: The review obviously covers the ongoing professional development of teachers. I arrived at the Assembly slightly after the policy document was published and consulted on. Does it include an examination of how teachers offer careers guidance to pupils?

Mrs Kerr: I am not sure that that is specifically covered. It was more about the generalities, and it focused particularly on initial teacher education and the continuing development of teachers throughout their career.

Ms Gildernew: Rather than ask a question, I want to make an observation on the back of David's comments

The Chairperson: Can we have a tight observation?

Ms Gildernew: OK. No matter how many or how few teacher training places we have here, if school leavers want to do a teacher training course, they will do it, whether they do it through the Open University or at an institution elsewhere. The Committee needs to be mature enough to recognise that fact. That is it. Fire away, Basil.

The Chairperson: That it is actually a good point; maybe you want to go on about Liverpool.

Ms Gildernew: No; I am not going to mention anywhere in particular.

The Chairperson: I did not mean to cut you off. It is a point that I will raise, and I agree with you on it.

I want to say a few things. Nuala, you responded to Mr Allister with what I thought was a particularly professional Civil Service answer. That is maybe not the gold star that you might have expected. Which Department is responsible for numeracy and literacy?

Mrs Kerr: Responsibility for numeracy and literacy in schools lies with the Department of Education.

The Chairperson: Do we have any responsibility as a Department?

Mrs Kerr: As you know, through the Essential Skills agenda, we pick up on people after they leave school. In my view, that is essentially remedial activity for people who have failed to reach the numeracy and literacy standards that you would expect them to reach at school.

The Chairperson: The briefing document on the teacher education review that I have here has the Department for Employment and Learning's logo on it. This document is your briefing to us.

Mrs Kerr: We sent you a summary of the position plus —

The Chairperson: To return to Mr Ramsey's point about getting the training right, the appendix says:

"The current low and under-achieving performance of a significant proportion of our pupils, particularly in the key areas of literacy and numeracy, together with ETI evidence of incidences of poor lessons given by teachers, would suggest that we need to review the current provision of teacher development".

Is that a view that the Department for Employment and Learning supports?

Mrs Kerr: Sorry, Chair, the annexes are from the Department of Education.

The Chairperson: OK, but I am making the point that I have had a briefing document supplied by the Department for Employment and Learning, and it includes this information. I am now asking you whether you support or demur from the view expressed by the Department of Education. Do you agree or disagree with that point?

Mrs Kerr: If any young person leaves school without reaching the appropriate standard of literacy and numeracy, that would suggest to me that there is a need to reconsider how numeracy and literacy issues are being addressed. I think that that is acknowledged in the document. It is the Department of Education's area of responsibility, and in this document, it acknowledges that —

The Chairperson: I do not think that it is solely the responsibility of the Department of Education; the Department for Employment and Learning has responsibility for NEETs and the people who have fallen out of the system. The argument that is coming across here is that at least part of the problem is down to the fact that our teacher training is not up to the task. If you are responsible for the remedial action, I would expect you to have an input to this particular document. What I have heard from you so far is that this issue is firmly in the Department of Education's area of responsibility, that you are "heavily reliant" on that Department and that this is its document. I think that it is appalling that we have a document that says that the inspectorate has said that one in four of our primary school teachers and one in ten of our post-primary school teachers are not up to the task. We have had a very interesting report from the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) on our ability to deal with numeracy and literacy in the past. It is the Department for Employment and Learning's responsibility to deal with that, and I do not think that you can do what I think you are trying to do, which is wash your hands of this review.

Mrs Kerr: I am sorry, Chair, but I have to wash my hands of that because I do not have policy responsibility for teacher education or for the literacy and numeracy of school pupils. This Department has responsibility when those people leave school. We are trying to tackle the consequences of poor literacy and numeracy standards through our Essential Skills agenda, the work that we do with apprentices and the programmes that we fund that have literacy, numeracy and ICT as key elements, and we also work with NEETs and the NEETs agenda. That is where our responsibility begins.

The Chairperson: Do you ever have any discussions with the Department of Education, or do you just wait for a letter to come through saying that 200 teachers are needed? What communication do you have with the Department of Education about the quality and provision of teaching?

Mrs Kerr: We are required to fund the numbers that the Department of Education require —

The Chairperson: You are also responsible for the NEETs strategy, and I think you said that you are responsible for remedial action on numeracy and literacy. If evidence is being presented here that part of the issue is that our teachers are not getting the appropriate training or the appropriate continuous professional development — that has been argued by other people — the Department for Employment and Learning ought to be in a position to deal with that. I think that your Department has tried to wash its hands of that very important issue.

Mrs Kerr: I am very sorry if you feel that we are washing our hands of our responsibilities. We are fully conversant with our responsibilities, but there are distinctions between the areas of activity for which the Department of Education is responsible and the areas of activity for which this Department is responsible. We clearly have to discuss with the Department of Education the issues that you have raised because they impact on the work that we do with young people when they leave school.

The Chairperson: We will move on to some other points that I think are relevant to you. Michelle touched on the point that young people who really want to do teacher training and who cannot get into Stranmillis or St Mary's will go to study at an educational establishment in Liverpool or elsewhere and come back here to look for a job. We need to take a view on how we manage the issue of manpower planning, and David also raised that point.

Mrs Kerr: I hear what you are saying. At the moment, the Department does not place any restriction on the areas in which we fund young people to attend higher education institutes. We do not prescribe which subjects they should study or where they should study them. If their academic ability allows them to secure a place in a higher education institution, we provide the funding for that through our normal mechanisms. However, to date, we have not made a judgement about not funding young people to pursue their aspirations and abilities.

The Chairperson: Given that DEL is responsible for higher and further education and should have an impact, it seems strange that we are going to have a review of teacher education yet there is nothing in that review about the future of Stranmillis or St Mary's, which is a topic of real concern.

It is particularly interesting that we are not looking at how we should develop continuous professional development. I think Patricia mentioned that a previous Minister indicated that that is an area of interest. We have a genuine problem in this place with numeracy and literacy. The Department for Employment and Learning has at least some responsibility for that, and, according to ETI, a core part of how you address that is the provision of the appropriate level of teacher training. The Department should take a more proactive role in engaging with the Department of Education on that.

I do not wish to put words in Mr Allister's mouth, but I think that the point that he raised was that, if we are looking at a new strategy for higher education, and if we are going to have some form of relationship between students at universities and colleges with regard to the level of teaching that they might receive in the future, it is possible that we should be looking at the professionals in Stranmillis, St Mary's and other teaching colleges in respect of the technical skills in communicating information as opposed to expertise in a given topic. This seems to be an area in which the Department for Employment and Learning ought to be engaging with other parties, and it should be brought out in that point.

I am quite happy to give you an opportunity to respond, but I have come to the stage of putting it to you — with no denigration to the individuals in front of me — that the Department for Employment and Learning ought to have been doing more over the past number of years to influence teacher training and the way that we provide support to our young people. It is an area of responsibility, and you should be addressing that issue now.

Mrs Kerr: I can only note the points that you have made, Chair.

The Chairperson: I am glad that you have noted them, Nuala, and that is fine.

Mr Buchanan: It appears to me that DEL is doubly funding this. It is paying for teacher training, but the professional training that is required is not there. As a result, pupils are coming out of school without numeracy and literacy skills and are going into the NEET category, and, again, DEL picks up the tab for that. Therefore, DEL is paying twice. It would be much better to ensure that the teacher training is done properly in the first place. That could well cut out a huge number of the people who are NEET, for whom DEL picks up the payment the second time around. We talk about financial efficiencies; that is one way of looking at financial efficiencies.

The Chairperson: Absolutely; I take your point. I neglected to mention a point on your interaction with the Department of Education, and I would like you to consider it when you review the Hansard report. The Assembly has had many debates on the issue of a guaranteed year of training for teachers after qualifying. I would expect to see that in any discussion on this issue. As a Department, it is front and central for you to resolve that issue, and I really do not think that you can say firmly that this role is entirely a role for the Department of Education. We are stakeholders in this, and the Committee is extremely exercised by issues such as NEETs, unemployed teachers and manpower planning. We need to get that information brought forward in a way that will enable us to help to guide policy.

Mrs Kerr: Chair, I note your points, and I can understand your sense of frustration, but there is a legislative basis for where the areas of responsibility of this Department lie and where those of the Department of Education lie. We operate within that.

The Chairperson: Nuala, you are the consummate civil servant, and I mean that as a compliment. You have done a really good job of responding with a straight bat, but, let me tell you, as I understand it from my colleagues around here, we do not want to see silo-based management. You should be engaging with other Departments, even if they take the lead in different areas. You are not in a position to say that that is someone else's problem, because we are facing a crisis in numeracy and literacy in certain sections of our communities. According to the Education and Training Inspectorate, in certain schools we are having difficulties to do with leadership. These are issues that directly affect your other key performance indicators, and we would like to see you engage. We would support the Department in getting more fully engaged, and we look forward to having a joint Committee meeting on this. We expect you to be across the issues that my colleagues have raised, and you should be engaging with the Department of Education on those matters on our behalf.

Thank you very much indeed.

Mrs Kerr: Thank you, Chair.