



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

St Mary's University College

5 October 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

**COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

St Mary's University College

5 October 2011

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

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

Witnesses:

Professor Peter Finn)
Mr Brian McFall) St Mary's University College

The Chairperson:

We are very pleased to welcome Professor Peter Finn, who is the principal of St Mary's University College, and Brian McFall, who is the director of finance and administration. Gentlemen, you are both very welcome. We are very keen to hear what you have to say to us.

Professor Peter Finn (St Mary's University College):

Thank you very much. Chairman and members of the Committee, we were very pleased to receive an invitation to brief you on St Mary's University College. It is a pleasure for us to be

here with you this afternoon. I am joined by Brian McFall, who, as the Chair has indicated, is the director of finance and administration. Brian has attended Committee briefings with me on three other occasions. His attendance is particularly relevant as financial issues are never far away from the considerations of the higher education sector in these times.

Members will have received a high-level briefing paper around the four areas of mission, identity, strategic priorities and challenges. My approach will be to pick up on some of the points that have been made in the paper and provide further information that will elaborate on what you asked for in the invitation, which was information on the work of St Mary's. I will then set out the college's views and current issues in higher education as requested, and conclude with reference to the college's plans for the future.

St Mary's has a history going back over 110 years. In that time, it has demonstrated an ability to evolve and adapt to new and changing circumstances. Some people refer to St Mary's as a teacher training college. It is very important that I point out that that was the case decades ago, but it is not today. St Mary's is a university college designated by the Privy Council. It is academically integrated with Queen's University, which is one of two excellent universities in Northern Ireland. Our status as a university college facilitated academic integration. In 2000, St Mary's introduced a liberal arts degree in addition to its teacher education provision. It is important that I clarify our status as a university college and university institution.

It is important to appreciate that academic integration, which was established as far back as 1998, represents a mutually beneficial partnership and the kind of sharing that is being promoted as the way forward today. The facilities and services that St Mary's has access to at Queen's are the world-class McClay library, the student information system, information technology, the physical education centre, the students' union and the Elms accommodation village. In return for a validation fee, the students at St Mary's can avail themselves of those facilities. That is sharing in action. It has been going on since 1998. St Mary's has signed a memorandum of agreement with Queen's that provides for the college's academic activity to be integrated into the university while the college retains its independent legal status and an appropriate level of autonomy.

That brings me to the concept of autonomy, and, more specifically, to the purpose of autonomy. Although St Mary's is academically integrated with Queen's, it has, nevertheless, a distinctive vision of education in the Catholic tradition and a mission that reflects its identity or

ethos. From the perspective of St Mary's, a high level of autonomy must be retained to enable the institution to advance its mission. A merger with Queen's, for example, would involve the complete handover of autonomy, so it has not been contemplated.

Student formation, through teacher education or the liberal arts, is at the core of the St Mary's mission. It is a fact that, in that regard, the college truly excels. The Committee has received briefings from the vice chancellors of the two universities, who described the institutions that they lead as world-class and excellent. I have no hesitation in echoing their words in relation to the quality of teaching and learning at St Mary's. Whether it is in the form of inspection reports by the Education and Training Inspectorate, external examiners' reports from other universities, validation reports or student surveys, there is a large body of externally generated evidence that places St Mary's in the highest category of educational provision in these islands.

The briefing paper illustrates how our students ranked the education that they receive at St Mary's in the national student survey. I ask members to pay particular attention to 'The Times' higher education ranking. The survey, which is under the auspices of the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and involves Northern Ireland, shows that St Mary's is ranked third with other universities, including the University of Oxford and the University of St Andrews, with 93% student satisfaction. 'The Times' higher education ranking puts St Mary's top in regard to a different way in which those grades are worked out. The company that we are keeping in the second table is indicative of our quality.

The student satisfaction rating of 93% that was achieved at St Mary's is achieved for a socially inclusive university college in which at least 45% of students come from a low-income background. It is an institution that has a good record in retention, is high performing with respect to graduate employability and has an extremely high level of student international mobility. It is no wonder, then, that St Mary's is an extremely popular choice for students of this jurisdiction.

Let me illustrate the popularity of our main courses. Our Bachelor of Education degree (BEd) for primary teacher education had 96 places allocated for 2011. We received 1,494 applications, which is a ratio of 15:1. For our BA honours degree, which started in 2000, there were 1,094 applications for 94 places — a ratio of 12:1. That is the core argument in the case for St Mary's:

the right of students to choose a particular form of higher education that best suits their needs. In our case, that is faith-based in the Catholic tradition.

We know that some people are articulating a case against the continued existence of St Mary's. I ask them to reflect on and properly consider the role of St Mary's in society, its quality, its provision of choice, its record on participation of students from low-income backgrounds and its location in an area of challenging economic and social circumstances. Our institution stands alongside the independent colleges of education in Southern Ireland and our peer English institutions in membership of GuildHE. We all represent diversity in higher education and quality provision in a world where student choice matters.

There are, of course, significant challenges in protecting autonomy and continuing to offer choice. The decision of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) to introduce a new funding model for university colleges in 2008 and reductions in approved intakes of students represented a significant challenge for us. The college responded to that challenge effectively, as we have made significant cost reductions over the past three years. St Mary's now faces the 12% efficiency savings that DEL requires to be made in the whole university sector in the modern era. We understand that that amounts to approximately 22% net savings over four years. We are part of the university sector, and we recognise that we, too, have to contribute to the savings and public expenditure funds. We will deliver on our proportion of the cuts.

In 2008, when Lord Empey of Shandon was the Minister for Employment and Learning, he asked St Mary's to consider its options for the future. The college has done just that. With the professional support of the PA Consulting Group and the Strategic Investment Board, the college now has an institutional plan for sustainability. It is called strategy 21 and involves a set of 18 actions built around three broad themes: securing our core business; enabling high-performing and efficient operations; and developing income generation opportunities. We have a plan.

I will now comment on teacher education. St Mary's is a specialist provider and offers courses of initial teacher education (ITE) through the concurrent route, which is the BEd, and the consecutive route, which is the postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE). It also provides courses of continuing professional development for teachers at masters degree level.

The education of teachers is a very important matter. The 2007 McKinsey report on how the

world's best-performing schools systems came out on top highlights the critical role of quality classroom teaching in school system performance. In that context, let me set out some of the information that you may want on the work of St Mary's with respect to teacher education. The college is a member of the Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET), which is a UK organisation. It works collaboratively in that regard with Queen's, the University of Ulster, Stranmillis University College and the Open University on teacher education issues. St Mary's recruits some of the brightest people in the land to our ITE courses, both the BEd and the PGCE.

We provide a broad and balanced curriculum that is informed by educational research. The curriculum emphasises numeracy; literacy; science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM); special educational needs; and enterprise. In the case of the primary teacher training programme, it also enables students to specialise in an academic discipline alongside that, such as science or mathematics. Students can elect to undertake particular linguistic and pedagogic preparation for teaching in Irish-medium schools. Great emphasis is placed on practical teaching experience, and St Mary's has partnerships with over 300 schools to facilitate student placements. The staff in those schools provide excellent support for students. Students are offered the opportunity to take a course in religious education, which leads to the award of a certificate.

Initial teacher education is a very demanding course academically, professionally and physically. At St Mary's we place great emphasis on meeting the holistic needs of our students through a student support service. Each of our ITE courses has been inspected by the Education and Training Inspectorate in recent years, and the published evaluation of each stated that they were very good. Through the process of annual self-evaluation, we work continually to improve the education that we offer our students. Ninety-seven per cent of the BEd graduates in 2011 reported satisfaction with our four-year programme through the national student survey. Our graduates are highly competitive in the marketplace for employment in Northern Ireland, Britain and further afield.

I refer to the data provided by the Higher Education Statistics Agency on the destination of leavers from higher education. I will outline the graduate employment figures for St Mary's that were published by the state. For the graduates who left in the 2007-08 academic year, the employment figure is 91.3%. For 2008-09 leavers, it is 85.1%, and the most recent data for those who left in 2009-2010 gives a figure of 82.4%. The equivalent figures for the PGCE are 100%, 86.7% and 82.4%.

In Northern Ireland, for 2011-12, the Department of Education (DE) approved 663 places in initial teacher education, and the number allocated to St Mary's amounted to 24.8% of the total intake. So, our student entry numbers to initial teacher education make up about one quarter of the annual intake to Northern Ireland providers. However, members should note that there is no control on the number of Northern Ireland students taking up teacher education places in England, where there are dozens of providers. In fact, UCET has informed us that there are 27 routes into teaching. There is no control into that particular marketplace.

Hopefully, that will give you a flavour of the work of St Mary's, particularly its mission, its ethos, its work on teacher education and where we see our place in the higher education sector. The college's views on the current issues in higher education have been expressed through the public consultation exercises and, therefore, are on the record.

We support the vision that is set out for the development of the higher education strategy for Northern Ireland, which is a vital area of the Northern Ireland economy. We also support proposals for development and, in particular, further internationalisation of the sector. We are very disappointed with the outcome of the joint DEL/DE review of teacher education, which started in 2003 and, in our view, is still not concluded. The absence of clarity on the strategic framework for teacher education means that developments are piecemeal and that our opportunities for enhanced provision in, for example, continuing professional development (CPD) are being lost.

We support measures that will continue to prioritise widening access and increased participation in higher education. That is critical in advancing social mobility in this society, and, in challenging economic times, it could drop down the list of priorities if not attended to. I will have something to say about that in a moment.

On the proposal for a merger of Stranmillis University College and Queen's University, it is our view that traditions, values and ethos are highly significant factors in a society that values diversity and pluralism. Stranmillis and Queen's are academic partners at present, but we respect their right to take forward a proposal for merger.

In response to proposals in January 2011 to reduce expenditure for DEL, we strongly argued

that a £68 million reduction in higher education was disproportionate. We accepted the case for £28 million efficiency savings across the sector, and we are getting on with managing our share of the cuts involved. St Mary's will adjust to the new funding environment as it has always done. Our view is the same as that of the other institutions in Northern Ireland in that we believe that any further funding reductions beyond the £28 million would have catastrophic consequences for the whole sector. So, we were pleased to note that Dr Farry indicated in his announcement on fees that no further reductions beyond the £28 million efficiency savings were planned.

Finally, our position on tuition fees is the one that was finally agreed by the Executive. Therefore, we welcome the outcome. However, the likely consequences of the decision will have to be considered. The difference in fees between Northern Ireland institutions and English institutions will, in all likelihood, mean that demand for places in Northern Ireland will increase significantly. It is likely then, from the perspective of St Mary's, that we will face unprecedented demand for the limited places on the BEd and liberal arts programmes. The increased competition is also likely to have a negative impact on participation in higher education by students from lower-income families, and we will address that issue only by increasing places in Northern Ireland.

I will conclude. At the start of my presentation, I informed you that St Mary's has a history that goes back over 110 years. Winston Churchill commented in 1944 that the longer you can look back, the farther you can look forward. In that regard, St Mary's looks forward with confidence based on a highly relevant mission, an identity that is underpinned by enduring values, an extremely high demand for its courses and a coherent plan for its sustainability. St Mary's plans to remain a small, specialist, distinctive and high-performing independent institution of higher education but one which is academically integrated and works in partnership with a range of stakeholders in a spirit consistent with a shared future for our society. So, on behalf of thousands of students in these times and in the future who will wish to have the opportunity to choose St Mary's for courses in either teacher education or the liberal arts, I seek members' support for an enabling public policy environment that supports our strategy 21, which is an institutional plan for sustainability in the twenty-first century.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much. Members, before we get into questions, I will point out that that was a lengthy presentation, so we are a little bit pressed for time. It was important that St Mary's had

the opportunity to put its case forward, and that is why I let it go. However, I will have to deal with some bits of business after the submissions, and you can look at the clocks yourselves. So, if we could have succinct questions, and, Peter and Brian, do your best to be succinct in answering as I want to give all members a chance.

Mr McElduff:

I welcome Peter and Brian. You made reference to a development strategy prepared by St Mary's in association with the Strategic Investment Board and PA Consulting Group. Can you tell us about the Department's response to that strategy, the level of engagement from the Department on it and any support that you are receiving for its implementation?

Professor Finn:

I cannot tell you too much. We had an open consultation process with a great range of institutions and organisations. We received feedback from many, and we worked with them. To be absolutely frank, we received a one-page letter from the permanent secretary of the Department for Employment and Learning noting that he was pleased to have sight of the report. That has been, I am afraid, the level of engagement. We had hoped for much more, and we hope that we can rectify that and engage more positively with the Department on that very important report. However, in a straightforward answer to a straightforward question, the level of engagement with St Mary's on our strategic planning and our way forward based around the PA Consulting Group report has been limited.

Mr McElduff:

I am interested in learning more about the liberal arts degree courses. What subjects do they cover and how important are they to the contribution of St Mary's to higher education?

Professor Finn:

I appreciate what Basil said about succinct answers, but that question is huge. What is a degree programme? What is its purpose? What is it about? Who attends it? What do they study? It is next to impossible to give a succinct answer but, although I appreciate that time is limited, I will say that, first, this emerged from our new academic status. We could not —

The Chairperson:

If it makes it easier, I am quite sure that you could make an invitation to us to go to learn more

about the liberal arts. So, you can say roughly what it is, and we will pick it up in a better environment.

Professor Finn:

I would be delighted, Chair — in fact, you could lead this — to invite members to come to St Mary's for a session about a very innovative degree programme. We were given the opportunity to diversify our academic provision in the late 1990s as a consequence of our new status. We looked at institutions of monotechnic teacher education like ourselves in England and in the South of Ireland at that time, and they were diversifying into different forms of academic provision. We chose liberal arts because a couple of colleagues and I studied that programme in the United States, where about 45% of undergraduate students take liberal arts degrees.

We studied the Dearing report, which was very critical at the time. We engaged with people such as Sir George Quigley, who came in to assist and guide us in our thinking. We also developed, with Queen's University's agreement, a programme with three broad elements: the study of what we call human development; a compulsory study on Europe; and a range of subject disciplines, such as business studies, English, physical education, history, geography, religious studies and Irish. We built in a big emphasis on transferable skills, including writing skills and work-related learning, as well as on careers education.

Figures indicate that the course is very popular. To be succinct, nowadays, fee-paying students whose parents often have to support them want to know the outcomes of degree programmes. The outcomes from this degree programme are outstanding as far as we are concerned, because we take in people who have, let us say, slightly lower grades than perhaps would be required for an equivalent course in Queen's. However, that requirement is catching up with, and getting close to, the Queen's entry standard.

As happens in the United States, students take a broadly based educational programme, which I just outlined. Invariably, those students go to graduate schools. In our case, that amounts to taking post-graduate courses in Queen's, the University of Ulster or other universities on the island of Ireland or in England. From there, those students move into employment.

I have pulled out a raft of information from the first students to attend that degree programme and who have gone on to professional diplomas in marketing, graduate diplomas in accounting,

master's in town planning, MSc in environmental planning, a marketing and entrepreneurship master's, international business, social work and physical education courses, and so on —

The Chairperson:

Peter, we have got the general idea.

Professor Finn:

What I want to say, Chair, is that the employment is the key, because people who did undergraduate degrees in St Mary's in liberal arts and who went into graduate schools or universities have ended up in outstanding employment. That is the key point that I want to make.

The Chairperson:

I understand. I heard the Minister of Education talk about employability. You are invited to give us a separate paper on that, because I think that it is an issue. We will organise a trip to help us to understand what "liberal arts" actually means. As you know, I have had the privilege of having been there, and I have a little bit of an understanding, so I think that it would be —

Mr McElduff:

Chair, can we get a copy of DEL's response to the St Mary's development plan?

The Chairperson:

I was going to ask whether we wanted to write to the Department about that. We will get a copy, and —

Mr McElduff:

Thanks very much, Chair.

The Chairperson:

Is it OK to move on?

Mr McElduff:

Yes. Thank you.

The Chairperson:

I always like to check with you.

Mr McElduff:

You are going well.

Mr Buchanan:

You seem to have a difficulty about the proposed merger with Queen's possibly eroding St Mary's ethos. Why would that be? What percentage of students who are interested in going to St Mary's is from those outside the Catholic faith or tradition? What percentage of those students is taken in, and what is St Mary's doing to encourage applications from students in that sector?

Professor Finn:

May I call you Thomas?

Mr Buchanan:

Yes.

Professor Finn:

Thank you very much for what are for two very important questions.

The issue of the merger is one of autonomy. Ultimately, any organisation, in particular a higher education institution, must have a certain level of autonomy to enable it to fulfil its function. We have a particular function and a particular mission. We are aware that merger means that autonomy goes. At the moment, our view on autonomy is elastic, because we already share some of it with Queen's. We have agreed to go down the road of academic integration and to share autonomy, but there are a number of things that we believe an institution of higher education cannot share if it wants to be distinctive and to have a particular vision of education. Those include, for example, your legal entity; your ownership of land and buildings; the power and authority of your trustees and board of management; and the power to recruit your staff. They also include the power to control your finances, to have a separate management structure, to determine your own research and learning teaching strategies, to maintain your own admissions policy and to have your own access agreements and bursaries for students from low-income backgrounds. Those are all matters of autonomy. We believe that, in a merger situation, which,

quite frankly, we have not considered, St Mary's would lose those aspects of autonomy and would consequently be unable to deliver the mission on which the college was established 110 years ago and that it wishes to continue to fulfil.

On the second matter, Thomas, the percentage of students at St Mary's who are from faiths other than Catholic is very low. However, I want to make it clear that I wish that that number was much higher, and I also make it absolutely clear that we have an open-door policy. Small numbers of students register as members of the Protestant community; in fact, the figures are in the region of six in one year, four in the next year and two or three in another year. Those are the type of numbers that we are talking about. We also have students from other faiths. The Baha'i faith comes to mind, and we have one or two students from that faith.

Thomas, our comprehension, understanding and delivery of faith-based education is akin to what goes on in the United States. I will personalise it slightly. My son is a Catholic, and he is currently studying in a Methodist college in Shreveport, Louisiana. He loves it, and he is getting on extremely well. That is my vision of where St Mary's needs to go. It needs to become a distinctive and different institution that offers people of faith the opportunity to choose to go there over somewhere else. Our difficulty has been that we are challenged to communicate that message beyond those who are Catholic. However, we have clearly communicated it to some people, because they have come along, enjoyed the experience, have done very well and have graduated with degrees from St Mary's.

We have a particular post in St Mary's that is responsible for widening access and participation. That member of staff has a very clear job to do to engage with schools in the controlled sector and the grammar schools on the Protestant side —

The Chairperson:

Peter —

Professor Finn:

— to assist them to understand our courses and to encourage students to apply and to attend. Within the short period that I have, Thomas, that is all that I can say to you.

The Chairperson:

It is not that I want to stop you, Peter, but a number of members want to ask questions. I realise that you have lots to tell us, and we are very keen to hear it. I would just remind you —

Professor Finn:

Chair, the questions are complex, so the answers are necessarily complex.

The Chairperson:

I in no way demur from what you are saying, but I am trying to guide folk through. Thomas, do you wish to add anything?

Mr Buchanan:

No, that will do. I could ask more, but the answer would take a long time in coming.

The Chairperson:

We might have another go at this when there is more time.

Mr Ross:

On the back of that answer, are those from the Protestant faith who are at St Mary's doing teaching courses or liberal arts courses? Do you not have that information to hand?

Professor Finn:

It is across both, Alastair. Students from a Protestant faith background have undertaken BEd degrees in St Mary's. I know that for a fact. Protestant students have also undertaken liberal arts degrees.

The Chairperson:

Will you write to us with the specifics of that breakdown?

Professor Finn:

Yes; we will do that.

Ms Gildernew:

It is good to hear someone who is so passionate about teacher training and further and higher

education. I think that Peter's contribution has been very valuable, and he and Brian are both welcome here today.

It is important to try to tease out St Mary's relationship with Stranmillis, how important that is to St Mary's and whether you value it. I have raised concerns at the Committee before about the proposed takeover of Stranmillis by Queen's and about the consultation paper that DEL issued. That paper was issued in the month of the Assembly elections, and it glossed over the equality implications of that move. Peter, can you furnish us with the equality considerations that you have raised with the Department or with those who are involved in that takeover? This may require further correspondence, but will you also highlight issues that you think that the Committee could usefully examine as we consider the takeover of Stranmillis College and its land by Queen's?

Professor Finn:

Michelle, perhaps I was not clear in my presentation, but I indicated that St Mary's is involved, under academic integration, in a tripartite relationship with Queen's and Stranmillis. We respect the right of our two academic partners to come forward with a proposal to merge. We are academic partners, and we work together, and it is not for St Mary's to get involved in what that is about. That is the choice of those two institutions, and we fully and absolutely respect it.

The core of the question is about our relationship with Stranmillis. I have a very good and strong formal relationship with Queen's. For example, I am a member of the academic council. My colleagues are members of the academic board or the education committee. We work as a quasi-school of Queen's, so there is not a great difference between how both the school of law at Queen's and St Mary's work through the system. It is a formal relationship. It ends up at graduation, and, as far as I am concerned, it is a really excellent relationship. Queen's has openly welcomed me, my colleagues and the university college into its academic life.

The situation with Stranmillis is different, because, in a sense, it is more active on the ground. St Mary's and Stranmillis share many interests at a less formal but much more grounded level. For example, we have joint student learning on the theme of diversity and mutual understanding. That is a joint programme that runs across the college for the BEd students in both colleges. We have a wonderful international project with Stranmillis that is tied up with David Yellin Academic College of Education in Jerusalem, where the Stranmillis, St Mary's, Jewish and Arab

students work together in Jerusalem on issues of conflict, conflict resolution and challenges in that area.

Members will be delighted to know that St Mary's and Stranmillis have just received a €1 million grant from the International Fund for Ireland to develop a credit programme to train classroom teachers on the whole area of diversity. We also work together at UCET. We work very closely, because our interests are so interconnected. Our work is very closely aligned. We have a strong relationship, and we value it.

Ms Gildernew:

I am keen, then, to tease out whether you see that relationship continuing in the same vein or on the same level if the merger goes ahead.

Professor Finn:

The relationship will change, Michelle, because what is being proposed is a merger of the school of education at Stranmillis University College into another school at the university. The people will change. I do not know; it is something that we will have to work out with Queen's. If the merger goes ahead, we will have to sit down with Queen's and work out the nature of a relationship. We have a relationship with Queen's at the moment and one with Stranmillis. Both are very good. If the merger comes together, we will of course wish to engage in positive relationships. However, you would be starting with a new body or new form of body. We also have great relationships with the University of Ulster and universities all over Great Britain and Europe. We will, of course, have a very good relationship with the merged entity, if that is what is decided on.

Mr D McIlveen:

Thank you very much, gentlemen, for your presentation. You mentioned that the college has, in the past, demonstrated its ability to adapt to the evolving challenges in the sector. I accept that that is probably in the context of the academic sector, but it is probably fair to say that, politically, things have evolved quite rapidly in the past 10 to 15 years, particularly on issues to do with cohesion, integration and so on. In that context, I want to ask a very simple question. What is the modern rationale for the Catholic Certificate in Religious Studies (CCRS)? I understand that there is certainly a place for religious education and its teaching. I accept that; I have no issues with it whatsoever. However, at the risk of sounding a little facetious, I am not sure what

Catholic maths, Catholic physics or Catholic science looks like. It seems very difficult to justify in this day and age, particularly when it puts a lot of teachers from a Protestant background, who are struggling to find employment, at a considerable competitive disadvantage. How can that be justified?

Professor Finn:

David, I do not want to challenge in this environment the comment that you made about Catholic maths and so on. I fundamentally and totally disagree with your statement. That interpretation is completely invalid. So often, there are good outcomes of such meetings, so I would very much like to meet you, David, in St Mary's to answer your question comprehensively and give you a well-rounded response.

There are two elements to that. You talked about St Mary's adapting to new circumstances, etc. The new circumstances are pluralism. I look to the United States as the classic model of pluralism in the democratic world. In the United States, there are Catholic liberal arts colleges, Methodist liberal arts colleges and Baptist liberal arts colleges that we maintain relations with. There is a very clear and undeniable rationale for the existence of a Catholic institution of higher education in a pluralist society such as the United States or, indeed, England, where, at meetings of GuildHE, I regularly meet the principals and vice-chancellors of Church of England or Catholic institutions. So, I do not think that there is any issue there at all.

You asked specifically about the certificate in religious education. That is a matter for the employing authorities; it is not a matter for St Mary's. St Mary's offers the certificate for two reasons, David. First, we offer it because it is a required qualification. The employing authorities in primary schools in the Catholic maintained sector in the North of Ireland require a particular qualification. We offer it, it is offered through the University of Ulster in one way or another, and it is offered at the University of Glasgow. Those students in St Mary's who put their hand up and volunteer to take the course can do so.

Secondly, we do it for reasons that are more to do with faith formation and the very nature of religious faith and belief in the twenty-first century. We believe that that has to be nurtured and developed in an educational process, as well as in every other aspect of life. The rationale for it goes back to Catholic schools and their employers. At this moment, they have a rationale for it, but they do not see it in terms of teaching Catholic maths or any other type of maths. What they

do is very clearly part and parcel of the broader educational environment within which Catholic children are educated in those schools about the totality of religious faith. It is not about the teaching of any one particular subject.

The certificate in religious education is one of absolute excellence. I will take you through it in detail. It is an excellent piece of work. The students are very satisfied with the course. From our point of view, there is ultimately no issue with offering a course that students want to take and that employing authorities say is necessary. We offer that service, and students decide whether or not to take the course.

I want to make the point that the religious education certificate does not define the nature of St Mary's as an institute of higher education in the Catholic tradition. It is but a tiny part of it. It is one course that is part of a much broader philosophical position that is shared with institutions in other parts of the world.

Mr D McIlveen:

I am obviously looking at this from a Protestant/unionist perspective. Could provision of the certificate not be perceived as fuelling inequality?

Professor Finn:

Provision of it? No. In this country, it is absolutely lawful for the employing authority — the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) — of the Catholic primary schools to require a certain qualification. We provide the qualification that is required, as does the University of Glasgow. DEL pays for students of other institutions to take the course. The answer is no: I do not see it as having any impact on equality.

Mr Douglas:

I have a quick question to ask, but it may require a long answer, so I will direct it to Peter in a different way. I also thank Brian for coming.

In the national student survey and the 'Times' higher education rankings, your figures are very impressive. You are, as the Bible states, hiding your light under a bushel. I am very interested in the figure that you quoted that 40-odd per cent of your students are from low-income families. In the Protestant community, we have been struggling to raise awareness of higher education and to

encourage people from low-income families into it. I do not want you to go into it now, but if we visit St Mary's, perhaps you will give us an idea then of just how you achieved that and of the initiatives that you have taken to encourage people from low-income and working-class families to get involved at university level.

The Chairperson:

We acknowledge that Sammy has recognised those results.

Professor Finn:

That is what I want to say. I want to very much thank Sammy for his comment commending the institution on the outcome in the national student survey. I most certainly want that to be on the record, and I am delighted, Sammy, that you said it.

Given Sammy's constituency and his community work, I know that he has a great interest in students from low-income backgrounds. Sammy, the issue is about attracting those students to apply and enabling them to get in with very high marks. However, more importantly we must retain them, keep them in the institutions and assist them to get jobs. From our point of view, that is the best job that a university can do. It is about taking someone from where they were to where they end up. That is called providing added value. I would very much like to engage with you on that. My argument would be that a small faith-based institution, which has a big caring heart and which provides pastoral care and support for students, has a big advantage in outreaching to the disadvantaged.

The Chairperson:

We will pick up on that when we go on our visit.

Mrs Overend:

Thank you very much for your presentation. Some of my questions have been answered. Why is St Mary's not connected to the UCAS system? The —

The Chairperson:

Just hold on. You can think about your next question, but we will deal with that question first. We would like to know the answer to that.

Professor Finn:

Quite frankly, it does not work for us. Last week, I was at a presentation by the chief executive of UCAS, who told the members of GuildHE that the UCAS system does not work at all and needs to be reformed. The problem is that it is a system of entry into universities that is based on predicted grades. We are a small institution with a very small number of places, and it has proved impossible for us to get the figures absolutely right. Sandra, if we get the figures wrong for our intake, we are penalised by DEL and DE, so we cannot make that type of mistake. For the small numbers that we have, we operate a system whereby decisions are made after the students receive their results. We rank and order the results, and we make offers on the basis of what the students actually achieve.

In a large university, it is possible to go on the basis of predicted grades, because if you make errors or miscalculations in one area, students can be shifted to another and you can maintain your numbers. As a small institution with a tiny number of students — we put perhaps six students into a BEd art course — we found it impossible for the UCAS system to help us to deliver what is right and proper, which is a good admissions system that gets the right people into the institution. Sandra, the reality is that UCAS itself knows that its system is seriously flawed.

The Chairperson:

Stranmillis faces similar problems.

Professor Finn:

It does.

The Chairperson:

Yet it is a member of UCAS.

Professor Finn:

It is, but the next question is about whether Stranmillis overshoots.

The Chairperson:

I am just saying that there is a question that we need to address. I understand the response that you gave to Sandra, but there must be a way of addressing the issue of smaller intakes making things more difficult. The implication and knock-on effect for Stranmillis is quite severe. Many

people apply for both institutions, but they would prefer to go to St Mary's if they were offered a place. That, therefore, creates huge problems.

Professor Finn:

I am aware of that, Basil. That is what autonomy is all about, and it is exactly why we want to hang on to ours. We have to make the decisions that are right for our mission and for what we are trying to do, which is to get the right and the best students in, both in their level of qualifications and their desire to do the particular courses. By the way, not all higher education institutions in the UK are members of UCAS. I make that quite clear: we are not a unique phenomenon in that regard.

The Chairperson:

Peter, I respect the case that you are putting forward. However, on the wider education issue, I smile gently at the thought of the argument that you might put to the Minister of Education about the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) and things like that. The idea of having autonomy is great, but there also needs to be some central planning to make sure that we get the proper resources across the area.

I know that I have interrupted myself, so I am not going to go on. Instead, I am going to go back to Sandra and allow her to deal with her next question.

Mrs Overend:

Thanks, Basil.

The Chairperson:

On that particular point, however, I think that it would be —

Mr Allister:

Not yet.

Mrs Overend:

Give me a chance. You took the last question from me.

The Chairperson:

I have got a very unruly Committee.

Mr Lyttle:

And an unruly Chair.

The Chairperson:

Are you back in the room?

On the point that you brought up, it would be useful if you could give us a written answer to explain the issues. That is an area that comes up repeatedly. Sandra, back to you.

Mrs Overend:

Do you still share classes and the provision of smaller classes with Stranmillis?

Professor Finn:

No. Stranmillis has gone down a different road with its BEd. We used to have a BEd that looked more or less the same. Stranmillis revised the nature of its BEd programme. Ours has stayed more or less the same, with an emphasis on the connectivity of the professional side, as well as academic development. Stranmillis has gone for a BEd that is broadly in the professional domain. In the past, where we shared classes, it was in the subjects, and we shared external examiners in history, geography, maths and so on. We have gone off in different trajectories. Stranmillis has taken a road that means that, in that particular respect, we have gone our separate ways.

Mrs Overend:

I am sorry to change the subject, but shared education seems to be the way forward. Do you not feel that it is your responsibility to lead in that regard, rather than letting it be put forward by the primary schools and what they want to bring in? What would you propose to bring forward for shared education?

Professor Finn:

Sandra, we have been sharing since 1998. I made it quite clear in my presentation that we have been sharing before people talked about the shared vision and the shared way of doing things.

We share with Queen's University. We are not fully autonomous.

Mrs Overend:

What about feeding into shared schools and the shared education provision? You are sharing in your provision, but what about feeding into the delivery of a shared education for primary-school children?

Professor Finn:

Sandra, I do not understand the question. We are a higher education institution that produces outstanding results. We are excellent, and we offer choice in a pluralistic system. I have said that we are committed to sharing, and we do so with other institutions of higher education. We educate our students on the principles of social cohesion and social mobility. We educate them with Stranmillis in that regard. As far as I am concerned, we are making our contribution to the vision of a shared society.

The Chairperson:

There is an elephant in the room. You are absolutely at liberty to decide what your ethos is, but perhaps you could have more of an intake, such as a number that approaches that of Stranmillis, from other faiths. Perhaps you could help people to get a certificate in religious education that would allow teachers from other teacher training schools to enter the CCMS arena. Given the pivotal role that St Mary's plays, it might do more for its leadership if it gets a more integrated form of education. That is the question that Sandra is putting to you.

Professor Finn:

The integration of education is the integration of people. That is what it comes down to. It does not come down to structures. It comes down to people making decisions to change their attitudes and values, to become more amenable to sharing and to having a greater understanding of those who hold a different political view, irrespective of what that view is. I have made it quite clear that our vision of St Mary's going forward is that of a United States liberal arts college where people will choose to go because it is right for them in a pluralistic society. That model exists in, for example, the college where my son is studying in Louisiana. I do not really understand the question, Basil.

The Chairperson:

Well, we will tease that out at another time. The perception is that St Mary's is set up as a Catholic institution for Roman Catholics to attend. I know that you are open and welcoming to others, but that may not be the perception, and that is what we need to address at some stage.

Professor Finn:

I totally agree, which is why I said that change is about changing people's attitudes, values and behaviours. We want to change that perception. I know how we could change it, Basil. We could change it if the likes of you came to St Mary's more often and were more actively engaged with us. That would get the message out to the community. There is a way around it.

Ms Gildernew:

We would agree with that.

Mr McElduff:

We would propose it. *[Laughter.]*

Professor Finn:

There is another proposal. Come to St Mary's more often, Basil.

The Chairperson:

First of all, I would be delighted. There is no problem.

Professor Finn:

Super.

The Chairperson:

In fact, you have had the Committee's support. We are very open to looking at all centres of excellence to see what we can learn. The point is that you have had the opportunity to say as much as possible. It still comes down to the fact that a debate is going on in the Assembly and perhaps the wider electorate about how we manage education given the falling number of students, which the Minister of Education goes on about, and perhaps the need to rationalise. Peter, you put the argument most eloquently, but the reason why liberal Catholic colleges work in the United States is that it is a really big country and that sector represents only a percentage of

provision. In Northern Ireland, we are dealing with a relatively small pool of teacher vacancies and five institutions that provide teachers. We just need to work out in our minds what is the right thing to do for everybody. We need to have that dialogue and debate.

Professor Finn:

Dialogue is good, and debate is good. I welcome everything that you say. I will debate with you at any stage. However, I will say to you that the reason why pluralism works in the United States is that it has had over 150 years or 200 years to develop. This society has had about 10 years to develop. We are part of that. To somehow remove St Mary's from the picture is not the way to go about it. The way to go about it is to bring us into the debate and to be part of that future. I can assure you of what I have just said, Basil: we intend to be part of that future.

The Chairperson:

I agree; we need to have the debate. It needs to win over society. That has to happen. I am not prejudging it. I am sorry; that is my bit of the questioning. Two more members wish to ask questions. Are you finished, Sandra?

Mrs Overend:

Yes. Thank you very much. I think that there is a perception.

Mr Lyttle:

I realise that we have gone through much of the detail already, so I will try to be brief. I also recognise the great satisfaction with the average score results. I look forward to an opportunity to visit St Mary's. The paper sets out the principles of inclusion and working in partnership. It refers to working in partnership with Stranmillis University College, particularly with regard to the delivery of education and diversity classes. Previously, was there shared delivery of degree programmes? Why is that not possible to a greater extent?

Why do you think that the attendance of students from a non-Catholic background is so low? How do you think that it could be raised?

Ms Gildernew:

Can I ask a supplementary question? Is it low because the equivalent institution is Stranmillis and students from a non-Catholic background feel that their faith-based education is being dealt

with there?

Professor Finn:

I will answer Chris first. It is the same answer that I gave to Sandra. It is true that, in the past, there was much more sharing. In the past, as a lecturer, I taught joint classes at St Mary's and Stranmillis. You may be interested to know that I was the person who took Stranmillis students on tours around the plantation of Tyrone because my area of understanding is the historical geography of the plantation of Ireland. That was interesting. I had a tremendous experience with those students.

The difficulty is that we have gone down different roads as regards the nature of our Bachelor of Education degrees. St Mary's has held on to what might be regarded as a more traditional view of teacher education, which is that students study professional studies as well as an academic study or discipline through a concurrent route. Stranmillis has moved towards a fully professional degree. Therefore, the connectivity has been diminished by the change in the nature of academic provision, and that is just by the nature of decisions that people have taken about what we understand to be the most appropriate method of teacher education.

As to why we are unable to attract more people from a Protestant background, other religious background or those who have no religious background whatsoever, I totally agree with Sandra: in this society, there is a perception that St Mary's is overwhelmingly Catholic and that it should stay that way. That is not our position. We are having difficulty communicating that message. Those to whom we do communicate the message have an outstanding experience, but we have a hard battle to fight the perceptions that exist.

We are staying at the location on the Falls Road. That is where our mission is and where we have been since 1900. However, that also acts as a challenge in breaking down some people's understanding, and we want more and more people to come to the Falls Road to a vibrant community that is growing and developing as part of a broader shared future in every respect.

The Committee has been very supportive and helpful to St Mary's and continues to be so. Basil, I want to note that, and you were party to that three or four years ago. The Committee can help us to break down the barriers of perception and help to bring about what we want to bring about, which is a more inclusive student body. We are up for that.

I do not know about the Stranmillis issue, Michelle. I have not considered that one. We go out to recruit students for the BEd and liberal arts programmes to the best of our ability. We send staff to as many schools as we can and to all types of schools systems to recruit students, and we take in the people who want to come to us. I want people of other faiths to come to us.

The Chairperson:

It is a good question. The point has been made.

Mr Allister:

Professor, you are quite unabashed in defending and promoting the Catholic ethos of St Mary's, and there is nothing wrong with that. You are a bit equivocal in the follow-through about whether that means that it is a Catholic higher education institution. However, you have labelled it that in the document that you presented to us; under the "Identity" heading, the very first declaration is that St Mary's is a Catholic higher education institution. So, that is how you see yourself, and that is how the world sees you.

In light of that and your doggedness and determination to maintain that ethos, can I ask a number of factual questions? Does the Catholic Church contribute at all to the funding of St Mary's? What is its involvement, if any, in the governance of St Mary's? I have some other questions, but I would like to get quick, factual answers to those two questions first.

Mr Brian McFall (St Mary's University College):

I will come in on the specifics of the finances and the governance arrangements. The Catholic Church does not contribute directly to our recurrent funding. St Mary's receives 85% capital funding from the Department for capital developments. Over the past number of years, the Church and the trustees have contributed to the building of the actual estate. So, that is their contribution. There is no recurrent element of that funding.

We were established by a charitable trust deed, and our scheme of management sets out the membership of the board. I do not happen to have the exact figures here, but a number of members are ex officio members. For example, the Bishop of Down and Connor is the chair of the board of governors.

Mr Allister:

By accident or design?

Mr McFall:

By design. These are ex officio members of the board. So, the bishop is the chair, and his vicar general is also on our board. The head of the Dominican Sisters is on our board by virtue of the fact that the Dominican Sisters set the college up 110 years ago. The trustees, namely the bishop and a number of other senior clergy, have the ability to appoint and nominate other members of the board — I think it is six members. So, a number of board members would be, as you would see it —

Mr Allister:

Are any board members non-Catholic?

Mr McFall:

We do not record that.

Mr Allister:

Well, I am sure you know.

Mr McFall:

No. I would not be asking them.

Mr Allister:

You cannot help me on that?

Mr McFall:

I would not make a judgement call on that; I am sorry. I do not know their religion.

Mr Allister:

You do not know.

Given your enthusiasm about defending the ethos, I take it that the answer to the question about any merger with Stranmillis is a very firm no?

Professor Finn:

You cannot take that. A merger is an issue, Jim. I want to differentiate between merging and sharing.

Mr Allister:

Yes, I understand that.

Professor Finn:

If you are asking a question about the end of our autonomy and the merging of that autonomy into something else, the answer is that St Mary's has set out its vision for the future as an autonomous institution. However, I want to move you on from there to say that, in the context of sharing — and a high level of sharing — we would rule out nothing.

Mr Allister:

I understand the difference, but are you saying that there is no prospect of St Mary's agreeing to surrender its autonomy to merge with Stranmillis or anywhere else?

Professor Finn:

St Mary's will guard its autonomy for a purpose. In doing that, it will secure its mission. That is the answer to your question.

Mr Allister:

We have had some discussion about this. We have all heard what the First Minister has said, whatever it means, about the future of education, for example, be it good or bad, but, if that vision were to come to fruition, St Mary's would at that stage be an anachronism, would it not?

Professor Finn:

I am not quite clear what the First Minister is saying about the future of education. If he is saying — I am only surmising — that he wishes to have as the final outcome one system of education called “the state”, thereby denying pluralism and diversity, then that would be something akin to the system in France, which is control from the centre of all school education, and with that goes secularism. If that is what the First Minister has in mind, and there are no Catholic schools, your line of argument would lead to a situation where the mission and purpose of St Mary's would be

invalid with regard to its relationship to the schools system. That is because, unlike what would exist in England and Southern Ireland, namely pluralism, there would not be a reason or purpose for an institution doing what St Mary's does. That is if that is where the argument goes, but that is based on the assumption that I have got what the First Minister is saying right. I am not quite clear on that, but if the logic follows through —

Mr Allister:

You may not be alone on that. Thank you.

The Chairperson:

Thank very much. I hope the session was useful. I am sorry that you had so little time to deal with such big issues, but we will try to organise a meeting at the college, if you invite us to visit.

Professor Finn:

Chair, once again, on behalf of Brian and myself, I would like to say that the experience of coming to the Committee has been very positive. We have thoroughly gained from the engagement with all the MLAs who have asked us questions, and we greatly appreciate the opportunity to brief you.