



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

**Stranmillis University College and
Queen's University: Proposed Merger**

21 March 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Jim Allister

Mr Sammy Douglas

Mr Fra McCann

Mr Barry McElduff

Mr Pat Ramsey

Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Ms Doreen Bell

Stranmillis University College

Dr Anne Heaslett

Stranmillis University College

The Deputy Chairperson: I welcome Dr Anne Heaslett, the principal of Stranmillis University College, and Ms Doreen Bell, the vice-chairperson of the college's governing body. I hand over to you folk to give us your presentation, and then we will open up the meeting for questions.

Ms Doreen Bell (Stranmillis University College): The principal and I thank you for the invitation to come to the Employment and Learning Committee today. The principal will inform you about the life, work and achievements of the college, and I will focus on some of the current concerns that the board has, particularly about the financial situation in the college.

The Deputy Chairperson: Members would like to hear from both you, I suppose, and the principal on some of the issues around the merger. Members will be questioning both of you and seeking answers about the merger.

Ms D Bell: We are happy with that. Thank you. You have our annual report among the documentation. The principal will refer to it in her presentation.

Dr Anne Heaslett (Stranmillis University College): Thank you. It is useful, and I welcome the opportunity as principal, to, perhaps, spend a few minutes at the commencement of the session sharing some of the college's achievements and highlights. The Committee was furnished with our annual report some weeks ago. There are a number of points that, perhaps, it would be useful to clarify and flesh out slightly.

One thing that I hope comes across in our annual report is that at Stranmillis University College, we have an important relationship between our teacher education programmes and our diversified programmes. I know that there has been some comment in public debate about the relationship between non-teacher education and teacher education programmes. The point that I would like to share with the Committee is that within the college, those programmes work together to create a dynamic, multi-professional learning environment. I am very concerned that we do not lose sight of that in the debate surrounding teacher education and its future.

In particular, for example, Stranmillis has played an absolutely pioneering role in the Province in the field of early childhood studies. Technically, that is a diversified programme. However, we would not in any way describe it as subsidising teacher education, for example. We see it as strategically important in the whole 0-6 early years strategy, which is a central Government strategy in Northern Ireland. The same is true of our health and leisure programme. The report demonstrates in both words and pictures how we come together in important major themes, particularly in health and physical literacy. It is incredibly important to understand that the professional environment at Stranmillis is multi-professional, but complementary. Those programmes do not operate in isolation.

Our research and scholarly work at Stranmillis is also important. Again, that is documented. Recently, I even had occasion to remind our sponsoring Department, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), that Stranmillis University College actually successfully returned in the research assessment exercise in 2008, which was a remarkable achievement for a relatively small organisation. It is a measure of the calibre of work.

In our annual report, you will see a lot of references to our developments. In recent years, we have been very proactive in the field of professional development. Many of our short professional development programmes, for example, are linked to areas of scholarship and research work that we have been doing in the college. Therefore, as well as informing our teaching and learning with undergraduates, we also turn much of that work into very relevant professional development courses; short programmes for those who are currently practitioners in the field. That is incredibly important.

In our annual report this year, we have also documented another very important commitment that we have made at the college. It refers to the various groups that we have set up to work with our key stakeholders. That brings us into contact not only with members of the professions, but also colleagues in the Department of Education, the Education and Training Inspectorate, and so forth. That is a very public way in which Stranmillis shows that it wants to be at the cutting edge, contributing to professional development. It wants to engage with stakeholders and is not sitting in some kind of splendid isolation.

I will touch on these issues briefly, and I am happy to expand on them in response to any questions that you may have as a follow-up. On page 9 of our report, we talk about alternative placements. In light of the previous presentation around the issue of unemployment etc, one of the very important innovations that we have taken forward in Stranmillis is alternative placement. There is a danger. We, in Northern Ireland, are probably one of the few places in the UK that continues to operate a four-year BEd programme. As a professional, I feel deeply committed to that programme. It is a robust qualification that serves us well. However, alternative placements is an issue that we have been particularly keen to stress to our young people, all of whom have very strong academic profiles, are extremely committed and want to be teachers because of vocational choice. The number of organisations that we work with shows the potential to deliver teaching and learning outside the conventional classroom. It has been a real eye-opener even for our students, who are learning about how they can take their BEd and do a range of professional jobs. We are not defining them narrowly as qualified teachers in the conventional classroom setting.

One significant development, about which there is a substantial section in the report, is our international development. Ten years ago, Stranmillis started with a very small but enthusiastic commitment to student and staff mobility, essentially through work supported by the British Council, the ERASMUS programme, etc. That section of our report shows the journey that Stranmillis has taken in the last decade. We do not have just mobility but very significant international partnerships, and it is an area of our work that is growing. We in Northern Ireland are extremely proud of that.

For the past three years, we have sent lecturers from Stranmillis University College to Malaysia to deliver professional development for teachers through our partnership with Tenby Schools in Malaysia. A couple of years ago, we got funding to allow four of our students to go to Malaysia as part of their international experience. It was funded for two years. It is a measure of the esteem in which Stranmillis is held that, when that time-bound funding came to an end, Tenby Schools continued to fund placements for our students who go out there to work in their schools. They valued the relationship with Stranmillis and the experience with students and staff. It is important that we understand what that dimension means. We are increasingly working with partners. In our next report, we will tell the good news story of how our partnerships with American colleges have developed.

You will see a graph in our report that outlines our commitment to professional development in our short programmes. Hopefully, we will be reconfiguring that before our next annual report is published, because we are now at a stage when we are not just doing professional development for our local market in Northern Ireland. I already illustrated our relationship with Malaysia, and we will be doing further development internationally. We already have the example in this report of welcoming last year our colleagues from the Pudong region of China for professional development. We hope to continue with that in the next academic year. There are also other exciting partnerships.

My final point, which is, perhaps, also appropriate, is that this report throughout weaves the theme of collaboration in partnership with our community. We have metaphorically opened our gates at Stranmillis and invited a more diverse population through our lifelong learning programme. Increasingly, we are going outside those gates to support and work with our local communities. We have a very exciting scheme — and we are continuing with it — whereby our undergraduate teacher education students work with the Sandy Row community, helping with homework clubs and supporting those communities as well as gaining valuable experience. The word "volunteering" was mentioned in the previous session. You can read about our developments to create our certificate in volunteer tutoring. We are now being approached by other communities to do similar work.

We have made a major breakthrough in the past year through our International Fund for Ireland project in collaboration with St Mary's University College. That has been a really exciting project, again based around the professional development of teachers and where we have been sharing and developing that.

Those are just some examples but they show our commitment to collaborative working, working in partnership and not being narrowly confined to just local issues but having a local, national and dynamic international perspective. I am happy to take questions on any of those issues but I hope that that has fleshed out and given the Committee a feel for some of the work we are doing and what we have achieved in those fields in recent years.

Ms D Bell: It is important that the Committee recognise that throughout the past few challenging years, Stranmillis has continued to progress and develop in the many ways that the principal outlined.

Stranmillis University College is, as you are all aware, a non-denominational college. That is reflected in the makeup of the board. The governing body reflects that non-denominational nature. The current board was set up in August 2006 through public advertisement and appointed according to the Nolan principles. It comprises professionals from education, business, public service, a Church of Ireland minister who applied through the same process as everyone else, the principal, two Stranmillis staff representatives and the president of the Stranmillis students' union. All board members have a keen interest in education. The two primary principals are Stranmillis graduates. Most of my teaching career was in the grammar-school sector. I have also taught in secondary and further education, but I have at least 25 years' experience of having student teachers on teaching practice on a yearly basis.

Non-staff members of the board are unpaid but have the role of non-executive directors. As such, we are not permitted to let the college go into deficit. The principal, in her presentation, focused on the strengths and achievements of Stranmillis University College. She and senior management are rightly to be praised for their very prudent management of finances, the entrepreneurial skills demonstrated in the development of new, or the enhancement of existing, income streams and the extension of our well-established international programme, which has just been referred to, and the alternative placement programme to try to widen the job opportunities for young teaching graduates. At this point,

I must also mention that we have connections with Kent. Some of our students can go there on teaching practice to try and extend their job opportunities.

The research and scholarship within the college continues to build on its success, and Stranmillis is currently preparing for the next research assessment in 2014. Despite these many achievements, the board has concerns about the long-term sustainability of the college as follows.

First, I will focus on the estate. We have a 47-acre campus, with several listed buildings. There are 14 buildings in total, and several are in serious need of repair. Everyone will know the main building, which can be seen from the gates. It is a grade 1 listed building inside and out. At the moment, we have a serious problem in that there is asbestos in the main roof and top walls. Initially, it was estimated that that would cost between £800,000 and £1 million to repair, but experts were in recently, which is required because of the building's listed status, and there is now concern that the asbestos may have spread to the next floor. If that is the case, the removal and replacement of that, which has to be to listed standards, could cost up to £3.2 million.

The top floor of the building is currently closed off. When the asbestos is removed, the main building will have to be evacuated for about six months. However, as a board, we cannot begin that contract without the assurance from DEL that, if £3.2 million is required, the money will be provided to finish the job. You will all know that you cannot start to remove asbestos and then leave it if you cannot afford to do any more work. Once it is exposed, the entire asbestos area has to be removed. Therefore, that is a priority for this financial year, and we are currently preparing our bid to DEL for the entire funding of this project under health and safety.

Secondly, Stranmillis House is also a listed building in need of extensive refurbishment. Thirdly, the central building, our main teaching block, was in serious need of repair and refurbishment, including a new roof. The existing roof had been repaired so often that every time there was heavy rain, the water poured into the library causing considerable damage. The previous principal achieved the completion of the splendid new Orchard Building to house art, design, technology, health and sport. Our current principal has focused on the essential refurbishment and repair of our existing teaching areas and upgrading of heating to reduce costs in the longer term.

As I mentioned earlier, the roof on the central building has now been repaired, and the internal refurbishment of the building is close to completion. External repairs, including the replacement of windows with double glazing and improvements to the entrance, have still to be done. Progress thus far has been achieved through the board approving, when possible, the transfer of any surplus from the current budget to augment the capital budget. The Henry Garrett building is a listed building. It is currently unused; in fact, it is closed down.

The Deputy Chairperson: Doreen, can I stop you there for a moment? We already have this information, and members have had time to go through it. In the interests of time, I ask you move on to highlight some of the key drivers for the merger and then we will open it up for questions.

Ms D Bell: I am happy to do that, but, before I leave this, I will just say that the refurbishment work that I have mentioned so far comes to £3.6 million. That is in addition to the £3.2 million that we need for the removal of asbestos, if it takes that amount. Under the current spending review, we have been scheduled £1.6 million over that entire time in the capital budget. I think that that is important. The board is very proud of the Stranmillis brand, and it is well known, but I emphasise that we need to be able to plan for three-year or five-year cycles. At the moment, we are dependent each year on being told the number of students for the next year by April or May. We have not heard the figure for this year yet. Our income is very much dependent on the number of students that we have.

The drivers for merger were predominantly economic. In 2006, when this process started, the then Employment and Learning Minister, Sir Reg Empey, emphasised to the board that the number of students for the non-teaching courses would be restricted to 260 and that we would not be permitted to extend the current courses or develop new courses, as we had hoped to do, to make up for the reduction in the initial teacher education (ITE) places. The number of teacher training places had been reducing from 2003, when there were 150 places a year in the primary sector. The number was then reduced to 70.

We were informed in a letter from the Department on 8 February that the number of teacher training students would continue to drop because of the oversupply of teachers. It was also because, after the Bain report, we were told that there would be a lot of school closures and therefore less need for student teachers. I notice that the Minister of Education is saying that we have 85,000 empty places, and there will be further school closures, so that is a continuing problem. Furthermore, we are moving to formula funding, which is based on student numbers. That is different from the original, historical funding.

Despite representations, both the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning remained resolute that the college would have a predicted serious decline in full-time teacher training places and a freeze on the diversified courses, the non-teacher training courses. Each full-time student is worth £10,000 a year to the college, so it can take a huge effort and many short or part-time courses to make up the value of even a few full-time students.

That was the economic situation when the business case was drawn up in 2008. Since then, there have been some changes, partly through ministerial policy and partly through circumstance. The presentation details the changes that have taken place. I am happy to discuss any of them with you. The Minister in 2008 — again, it was Sir Reg Empey — raised the number of places that we originally had on diversified courses from 260 to 277, although he previously said that it would be frozen. However, we had that figure of 260 for three years. The Department for Employment and Learning gave some conversion funding in the years 2009-2011, which helped us to adjust to formula funding. The number of teacher training places has not declined as dramatically as indicated by the Department when the business case was drawn up, but the decline has still been substantial. We had 770 ITE places overall in 2006 and 552 in 2011.

Another change since that time was that, in 2009, we got a very unexpected windfall from a £400,000 rebate under financial reporting standard (FRS) 17, and that was to do with pensions. We have also heavily marketed our halls of residence in recent years. We do not have enough students to fill the halls ourselves, so we now have students from Queen's University, the University of Ulster and St Mary's University College staying there. As the principal emphasised in her presentation, we have also tried to develop additional income streams, for example, through short courses and specially funded projects such as the International Fund for Ireland. I would also like to emphasise that, while we have had no compulsory redundancies, since 2006, there has been a reduction in staff. Staff who leave or retire are generally not replaced, except in very exceptional circumstances.

The principal has moved to a holistic modular approach in the curriculum rather than the subject department approach that we used to have. That approach requires fewer staff, so it has also meant that staff have not had to be replaced when they leave. This year, we will have a voluntary severance package to meet the challenge of the current spending review. It is ongoing at the moment, so obviously I cannot go into the details. However, it is anticipated that around five staff will leave under the scheme in addition to the two staff who retired in January 2012. Of course, there comes a point at which you reach a critical mass, both in relation to student numbers and staffing. I would argue that we are very close to it at present.

The second driver is the educational vision of a merged school with Queen's University. I want to stress the complementarity of that. It is very important. If any merger is to be successful, it will happen more easily if it is complementary rather than if one part is a duplication of the other. Therefore, I ask you to look closely at that issue.

The Deputy Chairperson: I think that, as a Committee, we have got the drift. Time is moving on fairly swiftly. We have been very lenient with you in this case. As I say, we have the transcript in front of us. I need to be fair to the Committee and open the floor to members for questions on the issue.

Mr Allister: In the main, my questions are probably for Dr Heaslett. Could I begin by congratulating you, Dr Heaslett, on the achievements at Stranmillis, despite the cloud of uncertainty that has hung over it and despite the fact that that has been fed, in the main, by your own board of governors, which has talked down the college. In the face of that, the achievements have been quite remarkable. It cannot be an easy task to be the principal of a college when the chairman of its board of governors goes to the media and says, "It is dire — we are on life support", yet you are expected to keep the morale of

staff, students and yourself at an operative level. In light of the circumstances in which you have had to operate, you have done a remarkable job.

Of course, if I understand the situation correctly, you have confounded the predictions of the business case. Is it correct that the business case's prediction of your being in deficit by 2011, in fact, turned out to be grossly wrong? The £639,000 deficit that was forecast by 2011, in fact, turned into a £403,000 surplus. Is that factually correct?

Dr Heaslett: I cannot, as an individual, take any credit for achievements. I have to put it on public record that our achievements at Stranmillis have had the support of our governing body. All of the developments that we talked about have been made with the support of the governing body. The other point that I want to make is that, essentially, I lead a team at Stranmillis. With the board's support, a great many staff have helped to achieve what has been captured in our annual report. I want to put that on record.

Yes; your observation about the projected deficit and the actual figure is correct. The issue is that a business case is, essentially, a snapshot in time. If senior officials in a Department indicate to a governing body that the direction of travel is a further decline in numbers and there is a move to formula-based funding, which is based on numbers, that will automatically predict a decline in income. Therefore, that scenario was the snapshot in time and the starting point for the business case.

Mr Allister: But they got it wrong.

Dr Heaslett: No. I would respectfully suggest that they did not get it wrong. They worked on the information that they had at the time. What happened subsequently happened because we operate across two Departments. That is quite a challenge for the college. I am on record as saying elsewhere that, in some cases, you can fall between two stools. The Department of Education sets the numbers. The numbers did not go in the direction that was predicted and, in subsequent years, the Minister of Education made entirely different decisions about numbers. Consequently, that started to change our predicted income from DEL, which is our funding Department.

The third element is that Stranmillis has been proactive in looking for other sources of income. That is not peculiar to Stranmillis, because the higher education sector across the UK has become more entrepreneurial in looking for other business, and that trend is predicted to last over the next decade.

Mr Allister: And there will be more of that, I am sure.

Dr Heaslett: Those are the three factors. At the root of this problem, therefore, lies a policy context. If I may respectfully remind the Committee, against the whole background of the business case has been an ongoing review of teacher education, which has been in gestation for almost a decade. The purpose of a teacher education review was to set a strategic context at the Northern Ireland level. We have had draft papers and consultations but no outcome, so we have a policy vacuum. It is very important that Committee members understand how challenging the situation is from a policy context.

I want to add one other point, because, as a professional, I feel very strongly about this: that policy context is critical because all of us in Northern Ireland have to ask ourselves what provision for teacher education and its related professional courses we want. Even the Chilver report of the 1980s recognised that there is always a fluctuation in the requirement for teacher numbers because of demographics, etc. However, it recognised and pointed out, in that debate of that era, the importance of determining the level of infrastructure.

Part of the teacher education review must begin to address that at a Northern Ireland level. As we state in our report, infrastructure is important not just in the context of bringing undergraduate student teachers and other related professions through to qualification but in the context of the ongoing professional development that is required. Teacher education, in particular, has a distinctive commitment to postgraduate induction, early professional development and continuous professional development. Part of the debate over the past 20 years, which has, perhaps, not featured as it should

have in recent times, is about what sort of commitment those involved in education should have to not just the first stage but the whole stage and how that would change the business case.

Mr Allister: Your point about the policy vacuum is well made, and I think that it is understood by the Committee. That adds to the uncertainty under which you have been seeking to operate. In that context, however, I was just seeking to establish the bona fides of the business case, which was the premise for the merger proposal. Am I also right, factually, in saying that you are again anticipating a surplus of over £400,000 this July?

Dr Heaslett: With our governing body, we will look at how we make further investments in our estate.

Mr Allister: Yes, but it is of that order. As for investment in the estate, we have heard some talk of buildings needing attention, and I am sure that virtually every institution would say that about some of its buildings. However, there has been a significant plough-back of the surpluses into the buildings.

Dr Heaslett: There are two points about the estate strategy that we have pursued in recent years. One was DEL's policy decision to give St Mary's University College and Stranmillis a capital stream for the first time. That was in, I think, 2009-2010. Prior to that, the colleges had received a small and insignificant amount for capital, but, in the current spending review, for example, we received £1.6million. I know that that may not be the total sum of money that we need, but it is a significant policy issue. When you work in a capital stream, you can begin to plan strategy.

We worked through the planning process, and, in our end-of-year budget, the planned expenditure of that capital on building refurbishment was signed off by our governing body. Again, with the full approval and support of our governing body, we developed a consistent strategy whereby, if we have surpluses in-year, we do a re-forecasting exercise in January or February and add any surplus to the core funding that we get. That has enabled us to begin to make progress. As stated, the internal refurbishment of our central building, where we do most of our teaching and learning, will hopefully be completed by the summer.

That policy decision and the ability to generate in-year surpluses from other sources have enabled us to take that strategy forward and to make some progress. However, as has been well documented, there are still major issues.

Mr Allister: Chairman, I appreciate that some of the answers have necessarily been quite long, but I want to make another couple of points, if I might.

The Deputy Chairperson: Go ahead.

Mr Allister: Dr Heaslett, we were told that the second driver for the merger is the attainment of excellence. However, I read in the report that Stranmillis has already achieved excellence. Presumably, you would very much take the position that Stranmillis is already an achiever of excellence and is doing an excellent job in reaching out to the very things that you have talked about. Is that right?

Dr Heaslett: Stranmillis is committed to success and succeeding. I refer the Committee to the point in the introduction to the report about the complementarity in the vision for the new school, which was set out in the business case and related documents. Stranmillis is excellent at what it does, but there is another piece of the jigsaw, so to speak. For example, we are not large enough to do PhD work or research degrees. We cannot achieve that, and even our academic agreement with Queen's does not permit us to do so.

Mr Allister: That could be changed to allow that.

Dr Heaslett: No, not necessarily; it is to do with the size and scale of an organisation. We say in the report that we are excellent at what we do, but, if you were to build a world-class school, you would want a school of education that is able to do research degrees in its own right. Some of the research

projects that are referred to in the report, particularly those involving early childhood work, were done in collaboration with the school of education at Queen's.

Mr Allister: But collaboration does not require merger. You can have collaboration with St Mary's, and you already do. You could build on that. You can have collaboration with Queen's. You have the funding that you are presently sharing with St Mary's. There are all sorts of opportunities for collaboration, are there not?

Ms D Bell: The principal mentioned the importance of early professional development and continuous professional development. I would argue that, in Northern Ireland, that is quite fragmented because of the five different institutions. If you had a merged school, there would be the breadth and depth to provide the full range of early professional development and continuous professional development. I think that that is very important.

Mr Allister: But the full range would come from a merger of all schools, and you are not going to have that. St Mary's is not going to merge with Queen's, so you are still going to have a dysfunctional side to this, are you not?

Ms D Bell: Queen's and Stranmillis are the same size, each with about 800 students, so, if you had 1,600 students, you would be able to provide training from early years right through to primary, secondary, postdoctoral and adult education. You would have the breadth and depth that no institution at the moment has individually.

Mr Allister: I am sure that the staff have the interests of their students and the institution at heart, yet, strangely, the board of governors does not seem to have consulted the staff before coming up with this merger proposition. Is that right?

Dr Heaslett: No, there was a consultation.

Mr Allister: Was there?

Dr Heaslett: When I came into post in 2007, the Taylor report was on my desk, which had set a context. Most of that first year was taken up by internal discussions within Stranmillis, talking to St Mary's, Queen's and the University of Ulster and looking at and exploring options. Essentially, we —

Mr Allister: I am talking about the staff in Stranmillis. We have documents in front of us, one of which is from one of the unions. It states:

"the decision to seek a merger with QUB was taken by the Governing Body without consulting staff. This decision is in direct opposition to the views and wishes of the vast majority of the staff at SUC and was taken without the slightest consideration for their opinion."

Was there a formal consultation with the staff before the board embraced merger as a proposition?

Dr Heaslett: On the day that the board made the decision, I brought —

Mr Allister: That is on the day that the decision was made. I am talking about before the decision was made. When the board was discussing the possibility of moving to merger, was there any taking of the temperature or consultation with staff?

Dr Heaslett: At that stage, I was leading discussions with groups of staff across the college, looking at whether there was an alternative Stranmillis option. At that point in time, we could not come up with a concrete alternative business plan —

Mr Allister: Was there consultation with the staff on the proposition of merger?

Ms D Bell: There was discussion with the senior management team and the board of governors —

Mr Allister: I am not talking about the senior management team, I am talking about the staff.

Ms D Bell: There was also discussion with the middle management team and discussion with the union representatives.

Mr Allister: The unions are telling us that there was no consultation.

Ms D Bell: Well, that is not accurate. That is not true. There was discussion and, since then, the principal has had frequent meetings with the unions, and there has been a staff council, which meets.

Mr Allister: Either there was or there was not regular consultation with the staff. The unions are telling us that there was not. Are you disputing that?

Ms D Bell: I am not saying that there was regular —

Mr Allister: Are you disputing that, Dr Heaslett?

Dr Heaslett: The decision was made at the board meeting to explore the option of a full merger. That was the unanimous decision of the board.

Mr Allister: Yes, but, before that, they never spoke to the staff. Is that not right?

Ms D Bell: That is not true.

Mr Allister: They never consulted them.

Dr Heaslett: The staff were aware because there had been discussions.

Mr Allister: Has there ever been a secret ballot of the staff?

Dr Heaslett: No.

Mr Allister: Is it the case that the chairman of the board of governors has opposed a secret ballot of the staff?

Ms D Bell: A secret ballot would undermine all the negotiations with the different unions.

Mr Allister: It might give you the wrong answer; is that the problem?

Ms D Bell: That is not the case at all.

Mr Allister: There seems to be a great fear of consulting the staff, letting the staff have their say and consulting them through a secret ballot.

Ms D Bell: There was no fear whatsoever. There was a full meeting.

Dr Heaslett: It has to be put on public record that our chair is on public record as saying that, if our staff had determined that they wanted to have their opinions canvassed through secret ballot, it would have been supported. What has changed is that the context has changed yet again, because, as the Minister for Employment and Learning has said, he has created a new context through his two-part review. I think it is important to put on public record that, if staff had wanted a secret ballot, it would have been facilitated.

Mr Allister: It has not been.

Dr Heaslett: Because, in actual fact, we have seen no need to proceed in that way because of the further change of context. If it was made as a formal request, I think it is important to note —

Mr Allister: I have to say to you, Dr Heaslett, that you are giving us a different message from the message that a lot of staff gave when they talked to us.

Ms D Bell: Could I say that —

Mr Allister: I am quite happy to leave it there.

Dr Heaslett: Sorry —

The Deputy Chairperson: I think we need to move on. If there were regular consultations with staff, surely there should be minutes or notes of them.

Ms D Bell: There are minutes.

The Deputy Chairperson: Perhaps that is something that we as a Committee can get a hold of, if they were held on as regular a basis as has been alluded to today.

Ms D Bell: With the chair, the vice-chair and the principal, we attended the full staff council a month before any decision was taken by the board regarding the merger. The documentation was given out to the staff. We were open to questions, and they were able to have copies of the proposed mergers. That is fully documented.

The Deputy Chairperson: OK. I am going to move on. Jim can come back later, if he wishes.

Mr P Ramsey: You are both very welcome this morning, but I have to say that you are not convincing me about consultation with the staff. I have a letter in front of me that I received only yesterday. I will refer to it again later. Between St Mary's and your college, there are very strong traditions, values and ethos going forward. However, in St Mary's, they are fighting; they are challenging; they are resisting; they are making very clear to us their options going forward. However, with regard to Stranmillis, it appears from a number of pieces of information that I have, particularly from lecturers, senior lecturers and some senior managers, that options for working on shared services with St Mary's, for example, were not explored. Was that option explored?

As someone who has very strong Christian values, I hope that I would be part of the support for any group or organisation that wants to protect its Christian values, but I do not see that in either of your presentations today.

Dr Heaslett, you have referenced —

Ms D Bell: Can I come in for one moment?

Mr P Ramsey: No, you cannot.

Dr Heaslett, you said earlier that you were appointed in 2007. Is it fair to say that your contract in 2007 was to work to realise the merger?

Dr Heaslett: No.

Mr P Ramsey: So there was no engagement — and no reference by the previous chair of the board — around the possibility that, in going forward, you had to realise that merger. There were no discussions or deliberations with you personally on that.

Dr Heaslett: No.

Mr P Ramsey: That will be in the Hansard report of today's meeting.

Dr Heaslett: I am quite happy to say that. When I took up my post in Stranmillis, I knew about the Taylor report, which was about the issues faced by teacher education and the best ways to explore what the best long-term options are. Indeed, the wider context was that a teacher education review had already started a number of years previously. However, that was not part of my contractual agreement.

Mr P Ramsey: Was there a commitment between yourself and Steve Costello, the then chair, to deliver the merger?

Dr Heaslett: I am an experienced public servant. I have led other organisations. I am very clear that I came into Stranmillis as principal. However, I have worked to a number of governing bodies in my career, and I am also very clear that the governing body has the responsibility to set the strategic context. I, in my role as principal and chief executive, have the responsibility of planning and delivering the operations within that framework. All the details that you are suggesting now were not part of the so-called negotiations of my appointment, if that is what you are implying.

Ms D Bell: When the principal was appointed, there was no decision about merger. We had hoped, at that time, that the college might be able to diversify and develop. The appointment of the principal took place about a year before the merger.

Mr P Ramsey: I have listened to and met people here in Stormont who work in Stranmillis. The anger, frustration and tension towards the board of governors are real and live.

Ms D Bell: Can I say —

Mr P Ramsey: Sorry; I say, particularly to the principal, do you see that anger and frustration? Jim Allister tried to probe these questions. I think that you are clearly underestimating the strength of feeling among the staff at Stranmillis. Doreen, you can shake your head. This is the sort of language that I have read in letters:

"misguided attempts to bully staff into a merger".

That is the language that people are using in letters to me.

Jim made the point that all the projections from DEL were that you would be running a serious deficit now. So, you are to be commended, particularly the principal, for having a surplus. I acknowledge the contribution that Stranmillis is making. You are listening to me. I say, and other members will say as well, that we do not believe that an appropriate consultation with the staff has taken place. Chair, I ask the principal to give the undertaking today that an appropriate consultation will take place — not handing staff a document or suggesting that these are the options. A consultation should take place. We have seen the submissions on the Minister's review of the consultation. The vast majority of people who contributed submissions to that are in opposition to this merger. I think, genuinely, that you should reflect on that.

Ms D Bell: With permission, can I say something? First, Stranmillis is not a mirror image of St Mary's. We are a non-denominational college. We are not a faith-based college. The first college that we approached at the time that we were looking at the strategic options following the Taylor report was St Mary's. We met the chair and the principal. We have a good relationship with St Mary's. We continue to have that good relationship. However, at that meeting they made it plain that they would not consider a merger between the two colleges, because their mission is to protect the Catholic ethos and their position in west Belfast as a centre for cultural life —

Mr P Ramsey: Doreen, they are telling us that they would enter into discussions on shared services, for example.

Ms D Bell: Yes. There can be links, as there are with research or at postgraduate level. However, it is not possible to share classes or courses between a west Belfast campus and a south Belfast campus. You cannot move from one to the other in between classes. With the undergraduate programme, it would be difficult to share resources.

Mr P Ramsey: We are not talking about merging classes or sharing classes; we are talking about shared services, whether that be admin or —

Ms D Bell: That does not add the —

Mr P Ramsey: Was the option of collaboration on shared services to reduce costs examined?

Dr Heaslett: With respect, it is important to remember the dynamics of time and relationship-building and all the rest of it. In the initial consultation with St Mary's, after picking up the Taylor report and before moving into the formal business case that was presented, the suggestions that you are saying are on the table now were not part of the discussion. In fairness to our governing body, if those suggestions had been part of the language and the discussion at that stage, they would have been explored.

You could argue that, over time, the International Fund for Ireland project will give us a taste of what collaboration might look like. However, we have to be careful about taking a business case that was produced at a point in time, based on the information and on what was and was not coming forward in discussions. Perhaps some of the issues are being talked about now, but they were not offered as options in the early discussions.

Mr P Ramsey: They are there now.

I want to finish on this point: this is a hugely emotional, sensitive and delicate matter, and I do not think that that sensitivity has been reflected in the response of the board of the governors, particularly in relation to staff. The board of governors needs to do a serious bit of work, because many people are saying to us on the record that it has sold out the college, its traditions, its values and its ethos. That is what we have been told. I am not making that up; that is what we have been told.

Ms D Bell: Within the college, there are positive and negative views. We have never tried to hide that. However, there is a very vocal minority that has expressed its views very strongly. In the response to the consultation, many of those who responded were NIPSA staff —

Mr P Ramsey: Sorry, Doreen, but we are hearing that it is not a silent minority; it is a large majority of members.

Ms D Bell: That is not my understanding.

The Deputy Chairperson: I do not know, Doreen, how you can say that it is a minority if you have not consulted with them.

Ms D Bell: We have consulted with them.

The Deputy Chairperson: It is difficult for you to sit before the Committee and say that those against the merger in Stranmillis are a minority voice when proper consultation has not been carried out with them.

Ms D Bell: From the time of the decision in principle to merge, there was a project implementation committee set up, and there has been widespread consultation from that point on. I recognise that there are still issues to be addressed. However, there are three different groups of staff in the college. There are the academic staff and the support staff, who are represented by Unite and NIPSA. It is fair to say that, within the academic staff, those involved in early childhood studies and primary are more supportive of the merger than those involved in post-primary and the health and leisure.

The Deputy Chairperson: With respect, it appears to have been an ad hoc piece of work that was not given much thought, which is why we find ourselves in the situation that we are in today.

Mr Douglas: Thank you for your presentation. Dr Heaslett, you are the principal, but are you also a board member?

Dr Heaslett: Yes.

Mr Douglas: OK. I will direct this to Doreen, because it is a bit sensitive. My colleague Pat has talked about this being an emotional subject. We understand that it is a sensitive issue, and we have had debates about it in the Chamber. You are running a business and you will have lines to take about how you communicate with the public, so, to come back to Jim Allister's point, last November, Mr Costello, the chairman of the board, said publicly that the college was in a dire financial situation and on a life-support machine. Did the board agree with him at that time, four months ago? Think of that glowing report — congratulations on that excellent report — in the midst of that, was the college on a life-support machine? Did the rest of your board agree with that?

Ms D Bell: I take it you are referring to Eamonn Mallie's blog?

Mr Douglas: It was in 'The Irish News' as well.

Ms D Bell: I think it came from that. That was a blog that the chairman had. I do not know in what context the questions were asked, but if the focus was just financial, I think he was referring to the long-term future of the college. The concern that we have at the moment is that we need the funding for the estate; there is no getting away from that. I have already highlighted today what is necessary for our campus, and I cannot see any way in which the current Department is going to fund that. If you take it long term, that is a problem. The Grant Thornton update indicated that we could hit a deficit in 2015.

Mr Douglas: He also said that the college was on a life-support machine.

Ms D Bell: We are not currently on life support.

Mr Douglas: That is the here and now of four months ago; that is not a big —

Ms D Bell: I do not know whether that is exactly — it is not on life support at the moment.

Mr Douglas: Was this discussed at the board, and did you agree?

Ms D Bell: No, that was —

Mr Douglas: This was never raised at your board, about these public statements?

Ms D Bell: Not before, afterwards. Yes, there was discussion.

Mr Douglas: Did the board agree that this was the right thing to say at the time?

Ms D Bell: The board recognised that there are serious, long-term sustainability problems concerning the college, but in this current year the college is not on life support.

Mr Douglas: Going back to Jim Allister's point, the fact that staff were reading this report in 'The Irish News' would obviously have had a terribly negative impact on morale. All I am saying is that surely this was not just dismissed at the board meeting to say that this was about the long-term future?

Ms D Bell: If that statement is taken out of context, that does not reflect what Stranmillis is about. That is why I think it is very important that we were able to convey to you today what is happening in

the college, and that Stranmillis has managed to progress and develop even though it is a very challenging climate.

Mr Douglas: OK. Just quickly moving on —

The Deputy Chairperson: Before you move away from that, are you saying, Doreen, that this was a throwaway comment that had no support at all from the board of governors?

Ms D Bell: I was not present. As far as I understand, that was an interview with Eamonn Mallie; I am not aware of what the context was or what question was put. All of this has to be taken in context, and I am not sure whether —

The Deputy Chairperson: Are you saying, as vice-chair of the board of governors, that you do not stand over that particular comment that was made four months ago?

Mr Allister: It was made on 14 November.

The Deputy Chairperson: Are you saying, as vice-chair of the board of governors, that you do not agree with that particular statement?

Ms D Bell: What I am saying is that I think the chairman was emphasising the long-term problems that the college has. I am saying to you that there is a serious problem; we cannot hide it. There is a serious problem with the long-term sustainability of the college and the resources that we need, particularly for the campus and for the estate. However, that is not a full picture of the college by any means, and we have had the opportunity today to emphasise what is happening within the college in the more round picture, but there is no question that there is a long-term financial problem.

Mr Douglas: Again, just very quickly going back to Pat's notion about closer collaboration between Stranmillis and St Mary's; we have spoken with trade unions and a number of staff, and I agree with Pat that a lot of those people are very anxious and angry about how things have developed. We have met St Mary's, who were very keen. They said that they had a good relationship with you and that the International Fund for Ireland programme that you are involved in is an excellent programme. They would welcome, not necessarily a merger, but further contact to build relationships and develop a shared space for Northern Ireland. Do you agree that that could be a way forward?

Ms D Bell: We have no problems at all with close co-operation with St Mary's. We have already been involved with that over a number of years, and not just through the International Fund for Ireland. However, like us, St Mary's is a small college with financial problems. Like us, they are concerned about the future and whether collaboration alone will be able to bring about the sort of financing that we need.

I remind you that the Minister said that there was no more money for the colleges and that our funding in the current spending review for capital expenditure would be £1.6 million. We will have to go to the Department's emergency health and safety about our asbestos problem. We need £6.5 million, and it is not just for redecoration. If you came and saw some of the buildings, you would see the state that they are in.

Mr Douglas: The Minister and the Department also told us that there would be a £600,000 deficit. Dr Heaslett, well done to you and the rest of the team.

Ms D Bell: The business case was signed off by Mr Sammy Wilson and Sir Reg Empey.

Mr Douglas: Was that in a previous mandate?

Ms D Bell: Yes, but the seven points on page 4 of the presentation explain the changes between the business case and the current time.

Mr Douglas: Do you, on behalf of the board, accept when you listen to the Assembly debate that the merger is dead from a political point of view and that it is as simple as that?

Ms D Bell: No —

Mr Douglas: Just let me finish. Is it not time to accept that and move on? If that is the case, what is your plan B?

Ms D Bell: I put the question to the Committee. I do not accept that the merger is dead, but I do accept that, in the end, whether it happens is a political decision. The question that we would like to put to both Departments and to you is this: what future are you giving to both colleges? We live from year to year waiting to see what the student numbers are. In this academic year, we have still not got our numbers; they will probably not come until the end of the month or April. We can only plan from year to year. Colleges want some sort of sustainability so that they can do three-year or five-year planning cycles.

It is only with tremendous effort on the part of our senior staff that we have been able to come through these years. We have reduced staff and reduced staff. If we have further reductions in student numbers, what are you offering us? If, as we were told originally, student numbers will be reduced and we cannot diversify further, how can we have a plan B?

Mr P Ramsey: I posed a question to you. You have not tested it. Anne said that the business case was made some years ago and that it is a different climate now. You have not tested the market in terms of the reduction by bringing forward shared services in human resources, administration and various other elements. You have not tested it, so it is back in your court.

Ms D Bell: Are you talking about testing it between St Mary's and ourselves?

Mr P Ramsey: Who else would I be talking about, Doreen?

Ms D Bell: What we are saying is that the merger with Queen's would bring in £17 million for us. Not only that —

Mr Allister: Some £7 million of that is the cost of the merger. Let us not inflate figures.

Mr Douglas: Doreen, have you looked at other models? You say that Stranmillis is not faith-based but St Mary's is, and there is a recognition of that. However, there are also faith-based colleges in England that are doing very well, thank you. They also still operate right across the United States. I agree with Pat that there is a role for faith-based colleges.

Ms D Bell: We are not questioning that.

Mr Douglas: Maybe we need to look at plan B. Are you now saying that you do not have a plan B or that you are not looking at a plan B?

Ms D Bell: It is not a question of our not having a plan B.

Mr Douglas: But Doreen, you said yourself that there is no political agreement. If you watched the Assembly debate this, you would know that the Assembly will not agree to this. It will not happen, because the political agreement is not there.

Ms Bell: Well, then the Department is obliged to fund the college.

The Deputy Chairperson: We must move on.

Mr McElduff: I will forgo the question, because I think that Sammy and Pat were teasing out the natural synergy between Stranmillis and St Mary's that I was going to explore, so I feel that that has been adequately dealt with.

Ms D Bell: Can I also say that there is a natural synergy between Queen's and ourselves? Our students graduate from Queen's University, and we already have very good research programmes with Queen's.

Mr P Ramsey: But, Doreen, you are not listening. There is no political appetite for it; it is not going to happen.

Ms D Bell: Can I just say that there is a very good relationship between Queen's and Stranmillis. Within that there is a very good relationship between the staff of the school of education and our staff. Our staff have made it plain; they have no concerns about sharing a campus with the school of education. Some of them have concerns about some of the terms of the merger.

The Deputy Chairperson: You talk about a good relationship between Stranmillis and Queen's. Equally, there is a good relationship between St Mary's and Queen's.

Ms D Bell: Absolutely.

The Deputy Chairperson: Yet they are able to work together in a good relationship and still stay as their own individual college. We have been round the room on this; unless anyone else wants to —

Mr Allister: Can I ask one quick question? It is now a different climate and you have to raise money where you can. You have done quite well with your halls of residence and all that. There is one factual issue that I want to ask about. Is it correct that the Council for Integrated Education requested accommodation and was turned away from Stranmillis?

Dr Heaslett: No. It approached Stranmillis about that option. We had preliminary discussions about what we might be able to offer in accommodation, and then it did not come back to us. It made alternative arrangements.

Mr Allister: Where were those alternative arrangements? They were at Queen's University, were they not?

Dr Heaslett: That is my understanding, but that is not —

Mr Allister: Was there someone in Stranmillis who blocked the Council for Integrated Education from going onto the Stranmillis site?

Dr Heaslett: No. I was having discussions with the council's chief executive. We were looking at what an option might look like. If, for example, we had had a response from the council that it was happy with what we were proposing and we could work with it, it would have been worked up into a formal proposal.

Mr Allister: Just on the record, so that we are absolutely clear: was the proposal blocked by anyone in Stranmillis?

Dr Heaslett: No.. The proposal was explored. There was never a firm proposal, whereby the council was saying to us "We would like that suite of rooms and we would be happy with that." It never got to the stage where the proposal was firmed up to the point where it could have been taken as a proposal to our governing body. It was exploratory.

Mr Allister: So you are saying that the Council for Integrated Education backed off?

Dr Heaslett: Yes.

Mr Allister: You are quite clear about that?

Dr Heaslett: Absolutely, because I have it on record and my head of estates can confirm it. The proposal essentially went cold and the council did not come back to us.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you, folks. We have given this a good airing today and obviously, from the tone of the meeting, you will know that the Committee is not happy with the merger. There is no political agreement for it at the moment. I urge and implore you to look at a plan B, rather than to seek to continue to flog a dead horse that may not move anywhere.

Again, I thank you for coming along and giving of your time today. Thank you for your presentation and for answering our questions.

Ms D Bell: I stress that a plan B will depend upon DEL being willing to find the funding. I understand that this is a period of financial restraint, but we will wait and see.

Dr Heaslett: Chair, I would like to put this on public record, because I feel that it is important from all the staff at Stranmillis who have been working very hard to produce the results in our annual report. I would not like the members of the Committee or the public to miss the point that Stranmillis has demonstrated its willingness and, in fact, its ability to collaborate with St Mary's, Queen's and a great many organisations. I would not like our commitment or our ability to be collaborative partners to be missed in the debate.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you.