



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Careers Education, Information,
Advice and Guidance in Northern Ireland:
Queen's University Belfast

21 November 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister
Mr Sydney Anderson
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Fra McCann
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr Pat Ramsey

Witnesses:

Professor Ellen Douglas-Cowie	Queen's University Belfast
Ms Wilma Fee	Queen's University Belfast
Ms Maria Lee	Queen's University Belfast

The Chairperson: We have a briefing from Queen's University Belfast (QUB) on the Committee's inquiry into careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG). We have Hansard staff here; good to see you back. I remind members to switch off electronic devices. I invite the Queen's delegation to come forward and address us.

You are all very welcome. Ellen, you might want to introduce your team.

Professor Ellen Douglas-Cowie (Queen's University Belfast): Yes, I would like to do that, thank you. I am Ellen Douglas-Cowie, and I am pro-vice chancellor at Queen's, with responsibility for education and students. With me are Wilma Fee, who is the director of academic and student affairs, and Maria Lee, who is the head of educational and skills development. All three of us work together, and careers employability is very central to all that we do together.

The Chairperson: Thank you. Are you going to make an opening statement?

Professor Douglas-Cowie: Yes. I will make a very short presentation, if I may. You have our written submission. I very much welcome the opportunity to say something about CEIAG. Of course, from a Queen's perspective, we are qualified to talk about careers and employment in higher education. Employability is central to us at Queen's and to our image of the student experience. We have it embedded in our corporate plan and education strategy.

I would like to try for a few moments to bring to life what we are doing on the points that we made in our written submission. The first thing is that our approach to employability at Queen's has a focus on working in partnership with other bodies that are relevant to making our students employable. That involves working with students, parents, employers, government and other agencies, such as the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and Invest NI. So, partnership is key, as is a dynamic and changing approach. We recognise that there is a fast-changing job market here in Northern Ireland, as there is in other places, and we need to be responsive to that. The third key issue is that, as you might expect, we are focused on graduate employment and on the relevant skills for graduate jobs. So, I just want to bring each of those elements — partnership, dynamic approach, and graduate employment and skills — to life with a couple of examples.

Where partnership is concerned, we believe that making all our students employable rests on our seeing education as a continuum that starts in the early days and goes right through to the employment market. That is part of our partnership. So, for example, we have held a lot of events in the past couple of years that reflect that and that tried to bring the partners together for the good of our students and Northern Ireland. Just last week, we had a very successful maths event that started with us working with the employers in the community who tell us that we need a lot of students coming through with A-level maths to be able to fill the relevant graduate jobs, particularly in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) sector. So, we held a maths event, and we brought together the further education colleges and the heads of maths in all the schools that offer that A level in some degree or other. We had representatives from the Department of Education, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), CCEA, the inspectorate, our own academic staff, who have some interest in students coming in with the relevant level of maths, and a large group of employers. It was a joint event with Invest NI. We explored how we would raise ambition in schools for people to take A-level maths and how we could deliver on that, and we also discussed some actions that we might take. That is an example of the sort of thing that we are doing. I could go on.

Similarly, in March, we had a careers teachers event that tried to bring together all our careers teachers, our academic staff and other bodies to demonstrate the nature of graduate jobs in Northern Ireland at this moment in time, particularly in the STEM sector. In fact, Invest NI made a special video as a result of communicating with us about that. That went down really well with the careers teachers because it was a real educational tool. Then, last week, we had a parents' evening for potential engineering students because parents also need to be involved in understanding the nature of graduate jobs. So, those examples are about partnership.

We are dynamic and responsive. In the past year, we have responded to employer needs, particularly in the STEM sector. We introduced very quickly to the books a new degree in maths with finance, which is very relevant to a number of the corporate companies that have come into Northern Ireland. In fact, employers are involved in delivering a lot of the soft skills that are relevant to that course. We introduced a new master's degree in software development, where we know that there is a shortage of people to fill the graduate jobs. We brought 50 new people on to that course this year. We revamped all our undergraduate computer science degrees in line with employers' needs and comments. We did that all in 2012. We brought another 70 additional places in to our computer science degrees over and above what we had the previous year. If you add those to the 50 software engineering places at master's level, that means that another 100-plus places are being filled.

We are always responsive to employers' needs. We work through an employers' forum and a head teachers' forum to help us to join the pieces together. In fact, those two groups are coming together with us in January to discuss the continuum. Finally, in preparing our students for graduate jobs and with the graduate skills that they need, we firmly believe that one of the key things is giving them experiential learning. That means learning in the workplace as part of their degree, although it does not always need to be learning in the workplace. Just finding opportunities to send them out of university to experience another culture, through, for example, the US StudyAbroad programme, really improves their ambition and understanding, and it can be brought back in to their academic course to improve their skills for graduate employment.

Through our alumni, we are seeking out all the opportunities that we can for work placements and experience not only in Northern Ireland but internationally. We also have a degree-plus programme, which develops soft skills outside the curriculum. There are 2,500 students on that. So, that is part of how we are trying to develop the graduate skills that employers are looking for.

Finally, we would like to see continuing support from wherever we can get it for work placements and external opportunities, which are really valuable to our students to create the graduate skills. We would like to see productive engagement from DEL careers advisers. We would also like to see

parental support. We are trying to do that with some of our parents' evenings, but there is a real need to ensure that not only our careers teachers and teachers in schools but the body of people in Northern Ireland understand what graduate jobs are nowadays and what kinds of skills their children and young people need. That is really the context.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much for those opening remarks. I am going to bring in colleagues first. I have a few points that I would like to pick up on, but we will see whether you can deal with them first.

Mr Buchanan: Does engagement with schools take you right down to primary school level or are you engaging only at high school level?

Professor Douglas-Cowie: To be fair, at the minute, most of our engagement is aimed at people in post-primary school, but we are engaged at a very young age there. In fact, we produced a new junior prospectus that was aimed especially at younger people. We are also engaged with primary schools in some specific areas. For example, we have a medicine in primary school programme, which we run with Sentinus, and a pharmacy programme, which is very popular. A lot of our conversations with post-primary teachers, of course, show that the need to get engaged even earlier is very important. So, I take the point. We do a limited amount at that level, but we try.

Mr Buchanan: Again, you spoke about the response to employer need. I have no doubt that you deal with the response to employer need in Northern Ireland. However, what about wider afield, which you mentioned? Companies from the United States of America, for instance, want to come here, but there is not the right skills base. If a company wants to come here, what engagement do you have with them to ensure that a service is delivered that equips our students for that?

Ms Maria Lee (Queen's University Belfast): There is wider engagement at a number of levels. First, we deal with a reasonable number of companies here that are international/global. Although we engage with those companies locally, we think about their wider operations because that creates opportunities for our students.

In partnership with our development and alumni, we engage with a lot of employers in the United States and wider afield, focusing particularly on alumni. We work quite closely in support of Invest NI, and, as a result, companies looking at inward investment will often come to visit us to find out more about our graduates, the range of opportunities in the programmes, and the number of graduates who stay on in Northern Ireland. So, quite a range of things happen. Last year, for example, we met 20-plus companies that were exploring Northern Ireland as an opportunity. Companies exploring here will often come to talk to us. Through our links with Northern Ireland-based international companies and our alumni networks, we absolutely look all the time for opportunities for our graduates. In that way, we find out about those groups' needs and then feed them information about our graduates.

Professor Douglas-Cowie: Of course, our research links also open up connections for us way beyond Northern Ireland, and that involves companies and people in other countries.

Mr Buchanan: I have one other issue to ask about. In your opening remarks, if I picked you up right, you said that you would like to see more productive engagement from DEL. Is that right?

Professor Douglas-Cowie: Yes; the DEL Careers Service.

Mr Buchanan: What is the difficulty there?

Ms Lee: I would not say that there is a difficulty. However, in the same way that we have developed the relationship with careers teachers over the past number of years, I think that we are getting more sophisticated in our thinking about what the interactions need to be and information sharing.

In the past, say, 18 months, I have had more discussions with the likes of Judith Shaw, and I am involved in the steering group that is overseeing the strategy. So, it is about looking at what it is trying to do and at what we are trying to do by sharing our practices and experiences. It is about building up that relationship more. We have also tried to do that with careers teachers in schools. I have dedicated staff to support that area in the university. We are looking at it from the graduate end. We are aware of those things, and we are trying to share those sorts of experiences. At this point, I would

not say that it is a difficulty; rather, I would say that we not have developed the relationship on both sides as much as we perhaps should have.

Mr Buchanan: I would have thought that that area should have been well developed and that, whatever one was doing, all information would have been shared. I was a wee bit taken aback when I heard that there needs to be more productive engagement between the two.

The Chairperson: We are finely tuned to the nuances of the phrase "more productive". When you say such things, you have to understand that our purpose is to find out where things are not going as well as they should, without it being a propaganda exercise. We understand that you have to work with and be nice and friendly to people. However, we need to get to the bottom of things.

Mr Lyttle: I declare an interest as a graduate of Queen's University. I may even be a former pupil of Professor Douglas-Cowie's as well.

Professor Douglas-Cowie: That is really worrying. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Lyttle: I found that the presentation showed a refreshingly holistic understanding and approach to careers. You package it well when you say that education has to be a partnership and a continuum from early years right through to employment. My main concern is that that is not quite the case, or it is not as good as it should be. That is what we are here for. As the Chairperson says, we are working to progress and improve things.

Especially the work that you are doing at higher-education level seems to be quite well developed, with the study abroad programmes, the connection with the Washington Ireland Program, the head teachers' forum and the employers' forum. However, it is almost slightly too late by that stage, if the careers guidance has not been sufficiently robust at GCSE level and before. Therefore, I am interested in how the head teachers' forum is helping the expertise and vision that you have to drill down to school level.

You also mentioned the need for parental engagement and support. One of the key outcomes of the inquiry might well be that there is a huge need to engage more with parents. I am keen to hear how you think we can do that.

Ms Wilma Fee (Queen's University Belfast): One lesson that we have learnt is that you cannot wait for the students to come to you and you must be much more interventionist. We probably know now that you have to be interventionist at every stage: primary; post-primary; university; and post-university. For that reason, the head teachers' forum and the employers' forum have been brought together to discuss the issues. What has emerged from those discussions is a realisation, within both forums, that everything is connected. It is not just about giving students advice but about intervening to bring them to see the employment opportunities. I agree with you that it is too late for students to arrive at university and start to think, in stage 3 or stage 4, about what they might do for a career. That realisation — that career planning — starts at a very early age. It has to start not just with the schools but with pupils and parents. We are trying to get that debate going so that everyone is aware of it at an early stage. Moreover, it is long term.

The Chairperson: Two more members have indicated that they want to ask questions. I ask that you be snappy with your questions.

Mr P Ramsey: I accept Chris Lyttle's point. Parental engagement in the process is hugely important, especially in these difficult times, when young people are less likely to cross over to Britain.

How would you audit the performance levels of the particular engagement that you are doing with primary schools? Is there a way or methodology of appraising it for previous years?

Have you data or information from the colleges in Northern Ireland that shows whether students who opt for a foundation course in college then go on to university? Have you any information or statistics on that?

Ms Fee: We are talking about foundation degrees, yes? Those students count as our students once they come to us, so they would be included in our figures. The figures are measured in particular ways. They are measured across the UK through the destination of leavers from higher education

survey, which is taken six months after a student graduates from a university. The surveys are not always very revealing. Sometimes it is not for a few years that the career destination becomes much more meaningful.

Therefore, in answer to your question, yes, we monitor those students who come to us via different routes. Our students do come from a variety of routes. Although we have a predominantly A-level intake, we have a wide range of other qualifications and other —

Mr P Ramsey: Can you share that information with us at some stage?

Ms Fee: Yes, I can certainly —

Professor Douglas-Cowie: We have all that data. We look at it very carefully and are very interested to see how it works.

Mr Anderson: You touched on parents and parental support. A lot of students and children come under pressure from parents, who may direct them in ways that may not be conducive to the degrees that they should be going for. How do you feed more into that system so that the parents are more engaged with it? I note from your initial remarks that you held a couple of events — a maths event and a careers teachers event — but I am really interested in how much you touch base with parents and how big a job you view that as.

Professor Douglas-Cowie: We have been touching base with parents in a number of ways. Certainly in the past three to five years, there has been a concerted effort on our part. For example, a lot of our recruitment activities involve us going out to schools where parents are present, so that is an opportunity to engage with parents, school by school. When we are recruiting, one of the things that we have in mind is always to have data available on what you would do with a certain degree if you did it and what kinds of jobs those who have graduated with that degree have gone into. That is a policy at Queen's. When we go out to schools, we have that data, and we are getting better and better at collecting it.

We then have much bigger events, one of which I referred to. For the past four or five years, we have been running an engineering parents' event, for which we fill the Whitla Hall at Queen's. I do not know whether you know what size that is, but we are talking about 1,000 to 1,200 people. We fill that every year with parents who want to know what their son or daughter can do with engineering. At that event, we obviously have an academic presentation on engineering degrees, but we also involve a key employer or employers to talk to the parents and tell them about the jobs in Northern Ireland in that area. Employers try to get the parents to see that those jobs pay well and that they have just as much kudos as some other jobs that parents might think that they want their son or daughter to do. Last year, for the first time, we extended that and ran a humanities parents' evening, because a lot of people ask what you can do with a degree in English or history. They have no idea.

The Chairperson: Have you got an answer to that yet?

Professor Douglas-Cowie: Quite a lot of answers, and we are doing even more on that. We need to get better data, because sometimes if you take a humanities degree, you will be slower to get a graduate job — that is shown nationally — but you will get that graduate job. It just takes a little bit longer.

Ms Lee: On the choices and judgements that people make, we often say to students — particularly those in the arts and humanities — that, at national level, over 50% of the jobs that are there to take do not require a specific discipline, so you can do extremely well with your English, history or anthropology degree. It is the engagement with what the opportunities are very broadly and the building of the broader skills and experience that is really important throughout the degree. That early engagement is quite important, perhaps more so than for someone who has come in with an engineering, computer science, law or medicine-type qualification. There are great opportunities, but it is about getting the students engaged in where the opportunities might be and what they need to do, along with getting a good qualification.

Mr Anderson: You certainly have touched on the issues, such as that some degrees are unsuitable and parental engagement. Do you see yourselves expanding the parental engagement from where you are at present? There is a big issue there to expand.

Professor Douglas-Cowie: We do, and we will try our best to take some sort of leadership role in doing that. We have to think about exactly how we do it, but every year we are expanding our engagement with parents. It is not just about going out to the schools to recruit students. At the point at which, for example, students are holding an offer from us, all our individual academic schools or subject areas now also have events to which they bring parents so that people know what their son or daughter is going to be doing at Queen's and what it leads to out the other end.

Mr F McCann: Some of my questions follow on from what Sydney was saying. We live in an ever-changing world, certainly in the provision of employment and different skills. Does Queen's tap into the changes that are taking place in that world? Are you able to adapt to the different skills? How do you encourage people to go into those skill areas? One of the issues that we have dealt with over the past couple of months is that of meeting the shortage in skills in the new type of employment that may come in.

Professor Douglas-Cowie: There are two levels to approaching that. One is the shortages that we currently have, and I gave you some examples of how we have been responsive, dynamic and quick on the uptake in introducing new courses where they are needed. In addition, the fact is that, as we move forward, we do not know what jobs there will be in 10, 15 or 20 years' time. Therefore, as educators, we have to be thinking about educating people to a level at which they will be able to adapt to the new jobs. That is about some of the underlying graduate skills that we have been talking about, such as being able to solve problems, to analyse and to communicate. People probably will need specific training as they move through their life to adapt to different forms of jobs, so we are conscious of doing both these things: responding to the short-term issue but educating for a long-term employment market as well.

Mr F McCann: If you are looking at the market now, you can say that we have come through a whole period in which the skills with which we trained people will no longer work in a new society or in a new way of doing things. You can certainly look five or 10 years down the line, perhaps even 15, and identify a set of skills that people may need or will need to adapt. That is the important thing.

It is interesting that you said that you do outreach to encourage pupils at post-primary level into pharmacy and medicine. How do you choose which schools to go to and what geographical spread is there? I know that there —

The Chairperson: OK. We have got that question.

Professor Douglas-Cowie: On the geographical spread of schools, let me start with start with the head teachers' group, which I mentioned several times. That was chosen deliberately to have a wide geographical spread. It goes right across Northern Ireland. It was also chosen to have a wide spread in the nature of post-primary schools. Our whole focus is always to have a wide geographical spread and a wide spread in the types of schools. The bottom line is that, of course, we want to get into schools where there is some chance of us being able to bring people through to university. We have a list of 180-odd schools and colleges that offer some form of A level or higher qualification that allows us to say that we can accept a student into Queen's. It is a very wide spread of schools.

The Chairperson: OK. We have got that.

Mr F McCann: As I have raised before, I am very conscious that 36,000 young people left school without any qualifications at all. Across the North, there are schools that struggle. You keep talking about schools that show some possibility of pupils leaving with A levels, but I am interested, as I am sure the Committee is, in getting the people who may not have the possibility or the ability to reach that level.

Ms Fee: We have a long tradition in two areas in particular. Through our access programmes, we attract a very large number of students who were over the age of 21. That is widely established across Northern Ireland. In addition, we have a very active Discovering Queen's programme. You talked about primary schools. That programme very actively encourages pupils from primary schools and post-primary schools that are not traditionally the schools that would send pupils to Queen's. We bring them into Queen's to expose them to higher education, give them classes and give them skills training to nourish actively their ambition to go further.

Mr F McCann: Do you have a record of the schools that you visit? Can that be provided?

Ms Fee: Yes.

The Chairperson: It would be useful if you were to give us a list of the schools that you engage with in the headmasters' and headmistresses' forum. Some details on access would be good as well.

I want to ask you about a couple of points. You are producing too many lawyers, and they are not getting jobs. What are you going to do about that?

Professor Douglas-Cowie: Let me start by saying that law is good training. The skills that people learn doing a law degree are good graduate skills. However, nationally, something like only one third of people who take a law degree go on to practise in law. They go into all sorts of other jobs. We probably have a little bit of a job to do to ensure that some of our students who take a law degree are open to looking at professions and jobs outside the specific legal profession. We are working on that. In fact, some of the companies that have moved into Northern Ireland, such as Citigroup, have jobs that, although not down the legal profession route, welcome people with a law degree to operate in a different kind of context. That is my answer to that.

The second way of dealing with it is, of course, to ensure that careers advice in schools is aware of the whole range of graduate jobs other than being a lawyer that are available to people.

The Chairperson: You take on board the demand created by potential students and their parents. You also take on board the industry demands. How do you reconcile the two?

Ms Fee: In Queen's, we have a very detailed academic planning model. It takes account of student demand, but we also set targets in line with rising A-level grades. We have pitched our corporate plan at improving the quality of intake to Queen's. We take account of demand. I will be honest and say that we have not factored employability into that planning model. However, it is a factor that we take account of in our corporate plan.

The Chairperson: There has been a step change in the number of people applying for STEM subjects over the past four or five years. What was the decision-making process that brought that about? Was it because there was huge demand? Was it in response to the Programme for Government?

Professor Douglas-Cowie: It is all those things, but the Programme for Government is very central for us. We are well aware of the need to up the number of graduates in the STEM area. We have taken a conscious decision to increase numbers in STEM schools. Of course, we are also conscious of quality. We are looking for quality students who will complete the degree and fill jobs when they come out the other end.

The Chairperson: You have drop-out rates in first year of around 10%.

Professor Douglas-Cowie: No, it is now 6%. We have worked very hard on our retention rates. We are very proud to say that the drop-out rate is now 6%.

The Chairperson: If you go back to the point about filling the funnel in STEM subjects, the issue is that many of the decisions that impact on where you end up are taken when people are aged 14. When you look at what is in the pipeline, do you have any concerns about whether the current increase in STEM subjects is sustainable? Do you take a view on, for example, the enriched curriculum in primary school, where there is now more concentration on humanities than on the science subjects?

Professor Douglas-Cowie: The maths event that I mentioned at the start is central to a lot of STEM. We are very much of a mind that we need to push for more maths, and more high-level maths, right through the schooling system to bring through the appropriately high-quality students that we need to complete STEM subjects and to go out into the marketplace in the way that employers need them to. That is the one thing that I would highlight.

The Chairperson: We probably cannot do justice to all this in the time that we have available, but there are some points that I want to put to you, which is why I am rattling through.

Looking at your submission, I see that quite a lot of careers advice for people who are going to university tends to be the provision of information about what the job market looks like and how you fill in a CV. It is not clear, although I suspect that you will say that you do it in other areas, where you talk about employability skills such as problem-solving, team-working and, in particular, mapping of individual personality traits to ideal jobs.

It is self-evident that not every engineer will be the same as all the other engineers. Some will be more suited to going into rigorous engineering while others may be more interested in project management. Where is the focus on the individual attributes of the students and how they might develop as people?

Ms Lee: If the submission has given the impression that it is very focused on information, I apologise, because that is only an element of it. There are school-based programmes in which students who study English, for example, will do English at work and engineering students will do professional practice modules.

There are periods in students' programmes that are linked to personal development planning. They will reflect on where they are and what their skills are, and then think about what they need to do, either to improve academic performance or to think about future jobs.

We try to embed elements of that within students' programmes. There is a degree of variation depending on what the curriculum will allow, but that is a commitment there. The careers advisers run a lot of extra-curricular workshops, often with alumni and employers, and take students through programmes reflecting that kind of thing.

The Chairperson: Where does it say to a student who is an engineer but who also likes talking that he or she should look at a certain part of the engineering profession? The head of the BBC in Northern Ireland is an engineer, although I do not suppose that he is let near the cameras.

Ms Fee: Every student at Queen's University has a personal tutor. We schedule up to six personal tutor meetings throughout the year, or more if the student requires them. Students are also encouraged to have a personal development plan, and the personal tutor helps to guide the student through that plan. The plan will take account of not just the sorts of skills that they might pick up in their degree but the co-curriculum that we offer at Queen's University, which is known as Degree Plus. That allows students to engage in a wide variety of activities, including sport and volunteering, gain credit through their personal development plan and achieve a Degree Plus award. The personal tutor is key to that.

Ms Lee: There will be large group activity in the programme that will be picked up by the personal tutor and supported by the careers advisers. We offer different levels of guidance interviews depending on what the student is looking for at that time. Students can avail themselves of a 45-minute further exploration. There are different models in different departments, depending on what is happening in their programmes, but any student can get one-to-one advice from a careers adviser. They are getting support through their personal tutors.

The Chairperson: I have two more questions. Is it one-to-one advice? You say in your paper that you have done 1,948 one-to-one guidance interviews. Is that guidance on how to get a job or how to fill in a CV, or is someone telling students what they are good at? There will be people on an engineering course who should not be there. I am not picking on engineers; I am just saying that there are people who will say that they made the wrong career choice early in life and that they should perhaps be somewhere else. Is anyone doing that? Is anyone saying to a student, "I know you as a person, and this is where you should be going."?

Ms Lee: There is a nuance here. We would say that we are trying to help the student to get to the position at which they can see things, based on the evidence and through discussion with us. We are very careful. We offer advice and guidance, so we are supporting students to make that kind of decision based on information and taking them through a process. However, we are not telling them, "This is who you are and this is what you need to be doing." We are working on the basis that if we have the right process of information and discussion, they can come to that decision themselves.

The Chairperson: I will bring this meeting to a conclusion. I have invited the Department, and I will also invite people making submissions today, to review the Hansard reports, not just of your

contribution but of the other evidence sessions. You may wish to provide us with some additional information but focused on the areas on which we have been asking questions.

I have two final questions. Do you do any other work with higher and further education colleges? The University of Ulster and the Open University will be with us afterwards, and their submissions are subtly different. Is there an attempt to get best practice and a unified position for Northern Ireland?

Ms Lee: We work with the University of Ulster and run jointly the annual Northern Ireland graduate recruitment fair. We share it back and forth. Colleagues work together and share practices, and we are part of a wider framework and network of careers services, so we are linked in not just locally but nationally.

The Chairperson: I have given you an opportunity to say, "We do this as well", and I am aware that you do some really good work with access. We will have a look at that as well. However, the University of Ulster's submission, brief though it was, pointed me in different directions, such as the ability to set up online portals where people do video testimonials about what their industry looks like. It seems to me that if we want to reach parents or potential students, we need to use online resources to get them to understand. I would have thought that, with the Open University, which is an expert on that issue, there ought to be an integration of the issues. Do you do anything beyond the traditional talk? Ellen is looking at me now as if I have lost my marbles.

Professor Douglas-Cowie: I am not at all. I understand what you are saying.

The Chairperson: How do you communicate with young people today? It is done through the internet and through Facebook. How much of that work do you do?

Ms Lee: We use social media, including Facebook and Twitter, and we have a lot of materials online. Some of it is done through our virtual learning environment, and, for example, we take students away to London on study tours to explore and visit companies. Those students come back and do a dissemination event. We video it; they produce materials; we bring students in and put it online. We do quite a lot of that.

The Chairperson: I want to see some direction on how you might do it.

I have a final question. The Committee is doing an inquiry into careers, partly in response to the fact that employers tell us that they do not have enough graduates with skills and because students tell us that they have invested a lot of money in their education and cannot get a job. Is there a problem with careers advice?

Professor Douglas-Cowie: We need to get better at it, and that brings me back to the issue of partnership. If there is one problem, it is that we have not worked in the past in a partnership and have not had a model of a continuum the whole way through. At Queen's, we have taken a leadership role and have made huge progress in the past few years. For example, when we started our parents' evening for engineering, specifically in response to the apparent lack of graduates to fill the IT sector jobs, we brought together employers, parents and others, and the numbers of applications in those areas and the quality subsequently went up. That is an example of how it can work. We just need to do more.

The Chairperson: We will finish on this point. I understand that we all have to be careful when talking with other colleagues. Nobody wants to say bad things. However, it is our belief that the careers advice available to our young people is not working despite the best efforts of really good people who are trying to do things. When you review what you have said, we want practical, hard-hitting solutions. With respect — it is not just you, for we all do it — we do not need flimflam. I know that you are doing really good things. We need to disseminate that more widely, and you also need to tell us where things are going wrong and what we might do better.

Thank you very much indeed for your submission and thank you for the good work that you are doing, but I would like you to consider and come back to us on the points that we have raised.