



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Careers Education, Information,
Advice and Guidance in Northern Ireland:
The Open University

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 Sydney Anderson
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Fra McCann
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr Pat Ramsey

Witnesses:

Mr Simon Gregg	The Open University
Ms Heather Laird	The Open University
Ms Marina Lennon	The Open University
Dr Frances Morton	The Open University

The Chairperson: Our final presentation is from the Open University (OU). I welcome Heather Laird, assistant director of student services in the Open University, and her colleagues. Heather, will you introduce members of the college to the Committee?

Ms Heather Laird (The Open University): I will hand over to Frances, who works in the policy and public affairs area. We will let her do the introductions.

The Chairperson: I beg your pardon. All I do is read from the top of the list, so apologies if I got it the wrong way round.

Dr Frances Morton (The Open University): As you already know, Heather Laird is assistant director of student services at the Open University; Marina Lennon is student services manager in education, advice and careers; and Simon Gregg is manager of student services, student recruitment and learner support.

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

Dr Morton: It will be brief.

The Chairperson: That is excellent news.

Dr Morton: I want to thank the Committee for inviting us to give evidence. Rather than repeat what we have already put into a response document, we have highlighted three key areas that we would like to share with you, and we are prepared to discuss them further as you see fit around your questions.

The first is the importance that the Open University places on information, advice and guidance as an overarching framework in which careers, education, advice, information and guidance would sit. We have a wide range of inquirers and students with very differing levels of skills and qualifications, and, to an extent, we deal with a different demographic of student and student profile. In that category, we also do training provision, and we have many links with professional bodies in career development and employability.

Secondly, I would like to highlight our practices and procedures, which, as you said, I would like to share with Queen's and with the University of Ulster, and highlight some of the things that we already do, such as our careers service and flexibility, accessibility, distance learning and part-time aspects, which require us to have a different focus. We have online forums for accessibility, and we are running an employability project in the careers service. I emphasise again the spectrum of different ages and qualifications and how our practices and procedures vary to fit it. I appreciate that you may have questions and examples around that.

Thirdly, I want to let you know about recent successes and partnerships. We had a very successful careers event earlier in the month, at which I am told people were queuing outside the door, so the Open University is obviously growing in popularity. We have also been working closely with the Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA) and informing it and raising awareness about the Open University as a viable opportunity for students. We have been invited to speak to the service again.

We have ongoing engagement with the post-primary sector on UCAS and OU events where we go into communities throughout Northern Ireland and offer advice, information and guidance. Moreover, the 'OU anywhere' app will be launched in the first quarter of 2013, which will allow students to access course materials, student and tutor profiles and information online anywhere from mobile devices. That is the next learning milestone that we will be launching early next year.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you for your presentation. Your submission references a new qualification strategy in England for the provision of careers guidance qualifications. How important or how much of an issue is it that we need to get properly qualified advisers and professional development for teachers in schools for careers guidance?

Ms Laird: Marina is one of our qualified careers advisers. One of the things that we have been trying to do recently is to work more closely with careers advisers in schools because some of them can be a little blinkered in their approach to careers advice. I am aware of that, having had the experience of my son coming through that system recently. In working with EGSA, we have tried to work with careers advisers in schools here to provide them with the knowledge that they need to share with young people about what is perceived as an unconventional route into higher education for them.

Ms Marina Lennon (The Open University): England drives much of what the Open University does because it has such a large population. The new academic framework was probably acknowledging the fact that students from a demographic different from what we have been used to may look to the Open University as an alternative way of achieving a higher education qualification. They may wish to study at a full-time speed, but the flexibility of the OU means that they can combine study and work experience, whether paid or unpaid. Therefore, it is introducing a different dynamic to a new cohort of students.

We had an event in our office a few weeks ago with careers teachers from schools in Northern Ireland, and I was taken aback by their reaction when we started talking about the OU. It was almost as if a light went on in their head and they realised that this was a different approach that they had not really thought about traditionally, but now, because of the cost of study, whether you send your child to Scotland or the north-east of England where they have to pay hall fees, the cost of learning is coming home to them. We also feel that the meshing of learning and, potentially, working is a strand at which some people are looking. Traditionally, we have always had in our student base people who have chosen to work and to pick up their higher education qualifications once they have become more established and know what they want.

The Chairperson: It is probably worth saying that you are the Open University of Ireland. I say that in case I have to deal with any of my Committee.

Ms Laird: Yes.

The Chairperson: You do it on an all-Ireland basis.

Dr Morton: Yes, but we have different funding regimes for the North and the South.

Mr Buchanan: I note from your written presentation, which came in some time ago, that you organised an information and networking event on 3 October. How successful was that event, first, in attendance, and, secondly, in the recruitment of school leavers and such hard-to-reach individuals as those with disabilities?

Ms Laird: The event was attended by some of the careers advisers from the service in Northern Ireland and some schools. On the back of it, a couple of my colleagues gave a presentation to EGSA so that all its staff could be briefed on what the Open University has to offer and how it operates. As for attendance, we would have liked to see more people there from the Careers Service and from the schools. We still need to do work in schools to encourage engagement with us. By attending events such as the UCAS one, which runs annually, we have managed to engage with some of the careers staff there. We also go to the Options event, which is run in Methodist College every year, to engage with the teachers who come with the pupils and to get them to think of alternative options.

We are looking to organise a further event at a different time of day. Teachers are sometimes reluctant to attend events outside of hours, and the timing of our event perhaps did not work as well as it might have. We will try something else. Today, in fact, one of our colleagues is at the South Eastern Regional College and sharing information with them.

Mr Simon Gregg (The Open University): We have been out and about in schools as well. We have been at events in Ballyclare High School, Banbridge Academy and Dungannon college, and we will be represented at the Northern Ireland Schools and Colleges Careers Association conference next week at the La Mon Hotel. We are always out talking to people and trying to raise awareness of the OU as a viable option.

Ms Laird: During September and October, we had 18 library events in all six counties in Northern Ireland; we have hit them all at some point.

The Chairperson: Nevertheless, the image of the OU is not as strong as it ought to be. As Marina said, when people know what you do, they say how fantastic it is. You are ahead of the game in many respects. I meant what I said when I was talking to the other two universities that I would like to see engagement between the three of you. I do not think that we are getting a strong enough message out there yet — a point that the Deputy Chairman made.

Ms Laird: One of the ways in which we might be able to move forward on that is through work with the higher education strategy and the widening participation strategy, because I think that we are all going to be pulled in there to work together. There is a tremendous opportunity in the widening participation to access strategy if the Department is looking to raise aspirations across the board as a higher education focus, as opposed to a Queen's/UU/OU focus.

The Chairperson: I do not want to interrupt with my colleagues coming back in, but I am just strengthening the point that Tom made. It is no criticism, but there is work to be done and we need to do a wee bit of communication.

Mr F McCann: Like yourself, Chair, most of what you read and hear about the Open University is good, but I ask that you look at the geographical spread when you are holding meetings because not many people from where I live will go to Banbridge or the north coast to take part in conferences. That is the key in trying to convince people to go.

How many people from the North tap into the Open University for courses? I think that there was a clear difference in the first two —

The Chairperson: Fra, you are still on board, but what sort of numbers are you dealing with in Northern Ireland?

Ms Laird: Our out-turn in Northern Ireland last year was just over 4,000.

The Chairperson: That is excellent.

Mr F McCann: The second question was — I forget. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: I can interrupt, and you can think about it for a week, Fra.

Mr F McCann: Just remember that in the Assembly some day. You heard both presentations, and there was a clear difference in how each came across. In one, it seemed as if we were being lectured on how things were being done; the other was a conversational process. However, each laid out where they are with careers. Picking up on that, where do you see yourselves as different in offering careers advice?

Ms Laird: The difference for us is the different student cohort. About 7% of our students are sponsored by their employers. Therefore, they are up-skilling in some way and perhaps do not have a higher education qualification to start with. They are doing something that is linked to their professional development and employment.

At the other side, we have people who are unemployed or low earners. Therefore, about 47% of students get some form of support with their fees; some because they are on a low income and some because they are on benefit and not earning. That enables people who perhaps did not have an opportunity at an earlier stage in their lives to engage with higher education and to move forward. However, I think that, at the moment, 17% of our students are between the ages of 18 and 25. That is a bit of a swing from where it would have been when we started, which, again, is about awareness raising with younger people.

The Chairperson: If Fra will forgive me for interrupting, you do a lot more on telephone support for careers advice and you have an expertise in that. You also do things for people looking for guidance and module choice. There is a much more interactive bit, and I think you are better developed in that than maybe other folk. I think that was the point that Fra was making. Tell us a bit more about that.

Ms Laird: There are a lot of online resources now for enquirers to engage with to see where they are going. Once they have gone through that, they can engage in a dialogue. Their location does not matter, although in some cases, we do need to get out to engage with them to make them aware that we exist. Once they do that, however, there are so many resources online that they can engage with; they can then talk to the likes of Marina or Simon to get advice on a pathway forward.

Ms Lennon: An enquirer who rings the office in Belfast will get somebody at the end of the phone who may not be a qualified careers adviser but who will have enough skill and understanding to steer them on the information that they need now or on whether they need to make a referral. In other words, in other universities, you possibly do not get that at admission stage. However, because we work differently and have a more holistic view and a broad range of students, we approach things differently. You are right: the telephone is probably the main way in which we communicate, although, increasingly, when students are on courses, we e-mail and have online guidance tools. At present, we are running a careers forum on work experience and volunteering. That is part of the Open University world in the UK as a whole. However, all the nation regions, as we call them in the OU — Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland — will have inputs into that. Specific advice is given to students who might come forward. We are using ways to interact with our students that are very different from going down to the student guidance centre at Queen's University, where there may be a higher presence of staff than we have.

Mr F McCann: There are a number of neighbourhood renewal partnerships across the North, whereby groups of people come together from the business, education and community sectors to deal with areas of high deprivation and poverty. Many of them view education as being the best way to take people out of poverty and deprivation. Do you approach those partnerships? Does the Greater Falls Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership Board, for example, feature high on the list for the Open University? Does the Open University explain its work and what it has to offer?

Ms Laird: We have a community partnerships programme. In fact, a cohort of students has gone through one of our access modules in the Falls Women's Centre. We have done similar things in Ballybeen, to which you referred earlier. It has just clicked with us why you specifically picked on that. For a few years, we worked with a group of students in St Gemma's High School in Belfast, but sadly St Gemma's is no longer there. We have just received some donor funding to support a similar programme to replicate what we did with those young ladies in St Gemma's.

Mr F McCann: It may be that you need to go to those neighbourhood renewal partnership boards because they can open up many of the areas that you are talking about.

Ms Laird: I hope that that will be picked up through the implementation of the Access to Success strategy.

Mr P Ramsey: I agree with the Chair that this gives the Committee a different perspective on how to approach various issues. Some of Fra's points are also relevant. Will you share with us the stats on the number of students who are enrolled, by constituency, in Northern Ireland? I would like to see the enrolment mapped.

It is interesting that 47% of students receive support. Who subsidises the subvention to students? I am very keen —

The Chairperson: Please answer that question, and please state what fees you are talking about.

Dr Morton: I will deal with the constituency numbers that you asked for. Unfortunately, we do not have enrolment numbers by constituency at present. However, I am working on that in collaboration with our information office in Milton Keynes. We have enrolment numbers by postcode, but that would require an entire mapping exercise to take account of political boundaries. We hope to have numbers by the start of December, and I will pass them on.

The Chairperson: That will do fine. Now there is the issue of fees and support.

Ms Laird: Currently, the Open University in Northern Ireland is still funded directly through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and through the university centrally. A process is under way to transfer the funding so that the Open University in Northern Ireland will be funded in the same way as the other universities here, which is through the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). However, financial support for students currently comes through HEFCE.

The Chairperson: So the funding does not come out of the Northern Ireland block grant. It does not come from DEL.

Dr Morton: No, but by September 2013, it will be transferred to DEL and will come directly to us rather than going through England.

The Chairperson: So that is the funding mechanism. What level of fees are we talking about?

Mr Gregg: For a 60-credit module, which is the equivalent of half a full-time year at a brick university, it costs £735.

The Chairperson: What does that work out at?

Ms Lennon: The full-time equivalent is about £1,500 a year in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson: To benchmark the figure, that is as opposed to £3,500, if you were a student in Northern Ireland.

Mr P Ramsey: This is an inquiry into careers to ensure that the right information is given future generations. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will say that, in the greater Belfast area, for example, the next generation should work in financial services and banking, and it is trying to focus on inward investment on that area in particular. In the north-west, it could be said that the focus is on IT and knowledge-based industries. If an employee comes to you and says that he or she is

struggling but wants to enter third-level education, what do you suggest to that individual? How do you kick-start a conversation?

Ms Lennon: You are talking about someone at pre-entry stage who wants to engage in higher education but has no career focus. We do not undertake much pre-entry guidance at present because we simply do not have the resource. We try to help such people as best we can and explain our range of study. Such students tend to fall into certain areas. Usually, we would look at areas such as science and technology, and also business and computing, where we understand that there is a clear vocational and skills need in the economy. Many students who come to us without previous higher education experience are aspirational. They want to improve their education levels, and sometimes they need that support. We should probably build greater links with the Careers Service until the OU gets the resource to offer pre-entry guidance. Students need that service because we cannot currently offer it in depth.

Mr P Ramsey: Is there a formal link with the Careers Service whereby you work collaboratively to achieve goals?

Mr Gregg: We would like that to happen.

Mr P Ramsey: Is it not happening at present?

Ms Lennon: Perhaps it is not articulated as specifically as that. We would like to be able to make referrals. As Heather mentioned, the younger students will typically be 20-plus by the time they come to us, so they will have been out of education for a few years and perhaps realising that they might want to avail themselves of it again. They have no idea about where to go and how to proceed on the matter of where their study might lead them. Once they are studying a course with us, our services kick in, but, pre-entry, we are not resourced to be able to deliver anything at the moment.

Ms Laird: We can give them educational advice that is not specifically linked to careers.

Mr P Ramsey: You are an all-Ireland body, but you are a sister body of the Open University in Britain. Are there any models of good practice on careers advice in Wales or Scotland that could assist the Committee in its inquiry?

Ms Laird: There is a good network of careers advisers throughout the university. They meet and work together, including with their professional colleagues.

Mr P Ramsey: I am happy for you to reflect on the question. If you think of something, you could put it through the system.

The Chairperson: I was struck that you list, as part of the services that you provide:

"an individual careers interview by phone, email or face to face".

I am wondering whether you are getting close to videoconferencing now that people have face-to-face facilities on their iPhones, and so on. There is a benefit to face-to-face contact, but with technology, you do not have to be in the same physical location. How effective is distance engagement for giving people advice?

Ms Lennon: When students talk about studying in general, they say that it would be great to go to a tutorial. Sometimes, that does not fit into their lives, and they do not even turn up. Geographically, we cannot offer face-to-face contact to everyone, but we can usually offer a 30-minute conversation. That could be at lunchtime when an individual is at work, or it could be in the evening. We are trying to meet students when they are available. Many of our students have other commitments. Some might prefer face-to-face meetings, and I do those occasionally in the Belfast office if somebody requests it. However, if somebody is 30 or 40 miles down the road, I tell them that we can offer some help and support by phone just as easily as face to face. It is the same sort of conversation. The student will not see me, but I can still map out what the guidance and intervention are seeking to do, explore issues with the student and give pointers to him or her on how to move forward. Some of our students go to residential schools, which are not —

The Chairperson: You have expertise that needs to be shared, such as telesupport and online forums. In the future, all universities will be like the Open University. You may have to consider that for your future, but given the costs and the need to engage with people, you can do it only in electronic format and by distance learning. You have much to offer. Your response refers to a more detailed explanation of services and their limitations for prospective students, led by the head of the careers advisory service. Do you know what I am talking about?

Dr Morton: Yes, that is the careers advisory service in Milton Keynes.

The Chairperson: When will we see that study experience programme? Will that give us some insight into what we are trying to do here?

Ms Laird: Are you looking at the work that we are doing centrally?

The Chairperson: I am reading from the response at paragraph 2.1.1:

"Prospective students and students on The Open University-validated courses are entitled to selected services."

Ms Laird: A new study experience programme is being developed at present. The university has had to change its approach because of changes in the English funding regime to enable students in England to qualify for a loan for part-time study. So there is quite a focus now on qualifications, but, linked to all that, a study experience programme is being developed —

The Chairperson: What is a study experience programme?

Ms Laird: It looks at the entire student journey, the interventions that we make during that journey and how the students are supported from start to finish.

The Chairperson: Do you know when that will be concluded?

Ms Laird: I am going to a briefing on Friday morning.

The Chairperson: Time is of the essence, but the Committee is interested in that. You might let us know what that looks like, because the student experience is important.

Your response mentions an employer showcase on your website and an online vacancy service. Tell me a wee bit about engagement with employers.

Ms Lennon: We could probably have more in Northern Ireland. The central focus is that employer engagement in the OU comes in many different ways. We have corporate people who look at developing personnel in companies, and we need more joined-up thinking in the way we approach employer engagement because we are coming at employers from different angles all the time. Perhaps we need to go in with one conversation and mention the other aspects of what we are doing with, for example, students, vacancies, and so on. As an institution, we need to work on that more and —

The Chairperson: You need to do more with your online facilities. The witnesses from the University of Ulster and Queen's talked about employers showcasing their jobs through videos. I am convinced that that is where people go, but you need more focus on it, or at least I want to see more from you on it. If it is not inappropriate to ask you to do that, I want you to reflect on it.

I am interested in your careers advice. Your response states:

"Registered students can request information, advice and guidance covering all aspects of career planning and job seeking, including help to recognise and develop skills valued by employers."

What employers look for is vital. How do you tell students what employers are looking for? Is it a training module or something?

Ms Lennon: At the moment, the employability strategy and the careers dimension to it works more specifically with the faculties. We have to have a conversation. The faculties have the key to how they deliver their courses, the materials to embed in them and the way that students work through the courses from the employability perspective. We need to talk to the faculties to find out how they want to approach that. The faculties — such as health and social care, which is very popular in Northern Ireland, and our foundation, or level 1, health and social care module is one of the most popular that we offer — may decide that they want to embed a lot of employability issues and that sort of agenda in that module. That is how we work at the moment. As a service, we cannot go off on our own; we have to work with the academic areas to see what buy-in they want to bring and how they want to target their resources. Heather may want to add to the curriculum support service —

The Chairperson: She can deal with this point as well then. Your response states:

"The Graduating to Success strategy emphasises the need to direct enrolment activity at those already in the workplace".

There is material there that Fra and others will have picked up on. You are teasing me with a load of good things that you may want to do here, but I need to know how it works in practice.

Ms Laird: Marina referred to health and social care. We have a partnership with UNISON under which some students study the health and social care foundation module. Some of those students move on. They may be healthcare assistants or work in the health sector in some shape or form, but some of them will progress to do the pre-registration nursing programme. There are practice-based modules in that type of qualification, whereby while those students engage with the academic side, they also develop the workplace skills that they need. That is its work-based aspect.

The engineering programme is topped and tailed by the professional skills that engineers need. It is recognised that some of them will, as you say, go down different routes to project management, finite elements analysis or crawling up ducts of fans or whatever. As the faculties write their modules, they will look at the requirements of the professional bodies and the skills that people need to work in those professions, as well as the academic knowledge that they need. Much of it is about the outcomes from the learning in some of the different modules.

The Chairperson: We could talk about the creation of attractive subject areas, but the real focus of our inquiry is careers and career choices. I will conclude on this point. It seems to me that the Open University's perspective is different and useful because of the demography of those who are applying to it. Were we to seek to change activity around here, we can look to things such as Open University online forums that are moderated by careers advisers. How does that work? You talked about the Educational Guidance Service for Adults and wanting to tie up with it more. How much influence does EGSA have, and how does that work? Your overall approach is to try to get salient information to people so that they consider education to be a good thing — not just general education but relevant education that may also lead someone to a job. We could learn more from what you are keeping as a well-guarded secret. I am offering you a forum to come back to tell us what it is. Will you deal with those final points, please?

I mentioned something to Frances, which she might want to consider. We have held a forum in the Long Gallery for other universities. People come along to try to explain what they actually do. With the Committee's agreement, we could have a forum for you, when there is a suitable time for you to do it. I am quite sure that members would be in agreement with that.

Mr P Ramsey: Very much so.

The Chairperson: We will book the Long Gallery and host it for you, but you need to come along and explain what you do. It provides a good opportunity for us to learn because we do not have the time when we are in a formal setting. We can only ask you questions. You need to show us what you do.

Ms Lennon: We would like to do that.

The Chairperson: That would be one of the outcomes of this session. Finally, I would like you to deal with the online forums moderated by careers advisers and your relationship with EGSA.

Ms Lennon: Do you want us to come back to you with that?

The Chairperson: It is up to you. We have got through a fair bit today. I invite everyone here to review the Hansard report and to select the elements that the Committee was interested in and perhaps give us a genuine, more focused approach on what we should do next. I do not mean this unkindly, but we do not need a regurgitation of the strategy or the prospectus, and all the rest of it; we will take those as read. This is genuine. Tell us what we should be doing for our young people and, indeed, all our people. We need to be able to give them the advice that they need, tell them what they should do in a job and the skills that they should learn. Will you tell us how to do that and how to have an input? I will leave it at that.

Thank you for your interaction. I hope that we did not ask too many questions that you were not expecting. We would like to hear back from you on some of the points.