



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Belfast Metropolitan College: E3 Campus

5 December 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 David Hilditch
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr Pat Ramsey

Witnesses:

Mr Damian Duffy	Belfast Metropolitan College
Mr Justin Edwards	Belfast Metropolitan College
Mr Paul O'Connor	Belfast Metropolitan College

The Chairperson: We will go straight into the first session, which is a briefing from Belfast Metropolitan College. I invite the witnesses from the college to the table. We have Justin Edwards, Damian Duffy and Paul O'Connor. Thank you very much for having us. We are very eager to hear what you have to say. Justin, perhaps you will introduce the team.

Mr Justin Edwards (Belfast Metropolitan College): Thank you very much, Chair. I would like to personally welcome the Committee to the e3 campus. It is a great pleasure to have you here. I am the assistant chief executive. I am representing Marie-Thérèse McGivern, who is in London at a skills competition and passes on her regards to the Committee. Damian Duffy is our director of business development and learner services, and Paul O'Connor is our head of learner services. In the later session, Paul and I will take the lead on the careers inquiry. First, Damian will give the Committee an overview of the e3 facility and campus.

Mr Damian Duffy (Belfast Metropolitan College): I will give you a brief presentation on e3, its background and the types of activities that we carry out. E3 is a unique educational facility. We think that it offers an insight into the shape of things to come in education, learning and skills development. I will outline the college's core strategic directions. Putting the learner at the centre of everything that we do is very important to us. Delivering quality outputs, investing in our people and continuous innovation are key to everything that we do. We are also focused on economic impacts. So e3 is an educational resource and a resource for wider workforce and economic development.

E3 represents the culmination of a significant capital investment in the estates of Belfast Metropolitan College over the past number of years. Last August, we completed and opened our new TQ campus at a cost of just over £44 million.

The Chairperson: What does TQ stand for?

Mr Duffy: Titanic Quarter. The TQ campus is part of the larger master plan for the development of the whole Titanic Quarter site. Almost as soon as it opened, it won an award for sustainable building of the year. It has been described by the chief executive of City and Guilds as an iconic centre of learning. Anyone who has visited it, and I think that some of the Committee members have, will agree that it is quite a special location and facility.

At a cost of just over £15 million, e3 is a follow-up to that investment. We officially opened in September, but the site has had a long journey. Some of you will remember that, at one stage, we had plans to try to develop a university campus on this site. On a journey lasting just over 15 years, we have delivered a community learning centre and e3, which is a state-of-the-art facility for furthering and developing innovative curriculum areas and areas of particular interest in industrial development and renewables.

What does e3 stand for? The aims of e3 are to enhance the employability and skills of learners; support enterprise through incubation and small business programmes; and foster innovative approaches to economic development. Essentially, the three Es are employability, enterprise and economic development. E3, as part of Belfast Met, which is one of the largest further education (FE) and higher education (HE) colleges in the UK, offers unique facilities to enhance our education and skills offer.

E3 fits in with the broader capability of Belfast Met as a large educational institution. We feel that we have a unique resource that can contribute to the delivery of the economic agenda. The college has been the lead college in the FE sector in a number of areas, including the Accelerating Enterprise programme that was funded by the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). We are now Northern Ireland's lead college in the bioscience sector under the employer support programme. We are also making strides to be Northern Ireland's lead college in developments in the offshore energy sector. We work very closely with DONG Energy and a number of other partners in that respect. With the good grace of DEL and your support over the years, we have completed this major capital investment programme, but we have more work to do.

We have a commitment to educational and vocational skills and employability. Employability is the key to us. This building is testament to the way in which we think that investment in continued development and employability needs to be moved forward. Justin will pick up on some of these issues in his presentation. The building also enhances our capability for creativity and innovation, which we think are the key to the successful future competitiveness of Northern Ireland.

The services that we offer from this facility and across the colleges include customer training programmes and support for enterprise development. We have been consistently the most successful FE sector college in the UK in respect of knowledge transfer partnerships. We deliver innovation voucher programmes with the support of Invest NI; product development; and, of course, apprenticeships. We operate across a range of sectors. This building is one of the most sophisticated in the North of Ireland in respect of renewable energies and sustainability. We also offer support across other sectors, including composites, financial services, tourism, retail, health and life sciences, and digital and ICT. So it is a very sophisticated offer. In fact, over the past number of years, the shape of the FE sector and what it has to offer have changed significantly in line with the FE Means Business strategy.

Our Springvale campus brings together e3 and a community learning centre. Our plan is to integrate the operation of our community learning centre, which is a building just across the way from e3. We see the community learning centre in e3 as a focal point for our efforts in essential skills. In the college, we talk about the entry threshold. The focus is on trying to offer students at all levels an entry point to the further education system. The community learning centre is the focal point of our efforts in that regard. We already have a programme in place that takes students from an entry level 2 programme across to a national community programme through our threshold approach. So it is a mix of linking into community and essential skills learning and then offering a pathway into a facility such as e3.

If Committee members are interested, we will happily give a tour of the facility at the end of the presentation. The building has different components and different zones. It is a digital building — it is highly digitally enabled with lots of technology. Many of the students who come here have access to laptops and the latest hardware and software. We are working on a proposal to develop a cloud computing facility, working from e3. We have a renewable energies capability and a demonstration facility for the technology. A house has been built to demonstrate digital technology in the use of

renewable heating systems. We have advanced engineering capability in a composites autoclave, which is state of the art and the largest of its kind on the island of Ireland. We have a £2 million digital media creative industries facility in the basement of the building. We have business incubation facilities for students and small businesses to come and interact with the college. We also use the facility for schools partnership engagement. As mentioned earlier, the facility itself is also connected to the community learning centre.

One of the key component building parts and innovations in e3 is FRESH, the project-based learning approach that we have piloted. That is a new approach that is embedded in the curriculum and is focused on enhancing students' creativity and innovation skills within their curriculum and across all higher education programmes.

I hope that you have had a chance to see some of the facilities. Essentially, you will find that no expense has been spared in the creation of a centre of excellence with a capability across a range of areas. More importantly, e3 also fits into the broader macroeconomic fabric in Northern Ireland through its contribution to research, development and innovation. So the level of facilities and technology that we have allows us to engage better with business and enterprise and to find the space to offer support for research, development and innovation. All those components — enterprise, skills, investment in infrastructure and educational resource — need to fit together for the innovation ecosystem to work effectively.

We mentioned FRESH, which is our own approach that we have developed over a number of years. It is a unique approach, and having tried and tested the approach with our students, we have started to roll it out to small businesses and community organisations. FRESH is an approach that helps people to think outside the box and in a new, innovative and creative way. When it comes to the future competitiveness of our region, it is the type of approach on which we need to focus more.

E3 is, as I said, one of the more recent pieces of the jigsaw in the broader development of a centre of business excellence. E3 will be the focus of our small business efforts. In the Titanic Quarter, we are working on larger-scale business engagement, looking at offshore energy and a bioskills academy. The community learning centre looks at social enterprise and youth enterprise programmes and addressing the young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) issue. To make the infrastructure work across the college, we have made a significant investment in special sectoral advisers and business mentors who are specialists in the particular fields of renewables, bioscience, the creative industries, advanced engineering and materials.

The types of programmes and projects that we have in the pipeline and are working on — in and around the building and outside it — include a proposal that we have developed for a sales and export marketing academy. We are also delivering the employer support programme, which is funded by DEL, and we are the bioscience lead for the sector across Northern Ireland. We are considering the development of a virtual enterprise platform. We have made a significant commitment to developing our capabilities in offshore energy, and we are working with Invest NI on developing a new cluster called the energy skills training network. On the ICT side, we have been working very closely with Belfast City Council on Super-connected Belfast, a broadband programme, and we have put forward ideas for a digital community, including animation programmes for NEETs and a software development course. As for future research and development, we are working on a seventh framework programme (FP7) application relating to water oxidisation. Those are some of the aspirations and projects that we have in the pipeline that further the development of e3.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. Do members have any questions?

Mr P Ramsey: It is certainly a very impressive building. This is my first visit, and I wish you, all the students and the teaching staff well.

On links with the business community, clearly there is an emphasis on incubation units. Is there a formal forum with the business community to meet its future needs in that area?

Mr Edwards: The number of sectors that we deal with means that we need to link through either sector skills councils or recognised bodies. So, in the ICT space, we will give a presentation on Friday morning to Momentum to make it aware of the work that we do with the industry. Momentum likes our work, particularly on cloud technology and data distribution. That meeting is also to raise Momentum's awareness of how it can give back by shaping our curriculum. I am very keen to get Momentum and

Whisple Cloud Services talking to us and shaping what we do here, particularly with the incubations. We already have three ICT digital media companies in the incubation centre and more in the pipeline.

Mr P Ramsey: Are there any formal links with higher education on sharing ideas or future collaboration?

Mr Duffy: Yes, we are very closely involved with higher education through the DEL-funded Connected programme. We have a number of joint projects on advanced materials and composites and ICT. In those, we partner Queen's and the University of Ulster to jointly develop and deliver solutions to industry.

Mr McElduff: Damian mentioned a major European funding application. What is that for? Does the Department assist you in trying to access that money? As we found out, the Department for Employment and Learning has a thematic desk officer based in Brussels. A big theme in the Assembly is doing more to draw down European funding. Is DEL helping you? What is the nature of your application, and what are you trying to achieve?

Mr Duffy: We have a number of European funding applications on different fronts. One of the areas in which we have been very successful is the various EU lifelong learning programmes. We try to facilitate student and staff exchanges through the Leonardo and Erasmus programmes. We have a long track record in that regard. More recently, we have tried to get involved with some of the institutes of technology in cross-border programmes funded through INTERREG. We await the final decisions on some of those programmes. As part of our role in engagement in EU funding, Colleges Northern Ireland now sits on the Department of Finance and Personnel working group on the future of EU funds. One of the recommendations that we made was that DEL, as an accountable Department, should be involved more closely in looking at and shaping the future funds, particularly the cross-border funds, and in looking at the opportunities for education and skills.

The last piece of the jigsaw is FP7 and Horizon 2020. Given the work that we are doing, which is funded by DEL through the employer support programme, we are absolutely convinced that the FE sector's capability in innovation and R&D is very well matched to the needs of small businesses. Historically, FP7 has been more within the realm of high-level research and development for universities. Horizon 2020, the new EU-funded programme, is more within our reach. Recently, we had an interaction financed by InterTradeIreland, whereby we went to Brussels and connected with a number of the institutes of technology to look at cross-border collaborations and to position ourselves for future EU funding programmes. We, in this sector, would happily engage more actively with those programmes. Recently, DEL set aside some funding to increase the number of contact points across the university sector. We, in the FE sector, are trying to explore whether we can get involved in that programme and play our part in its delivery.

Mr Buchanan: It is a very impressive programme. There is no doubt that you have your finger on the pulse as far as innovation is concerned. Do you find it difficult to get small businesses to participate and get their employees involved in retraining, R&D, and so on? How do you make small enterprises aware of what you deliver?

Mr Duffy: We have a dedicated business development team and a number of advisers who specialise in their particular sectors. Their whole remit is to engage with employers, go out and seek employers, and be active in sector skills bodies through the Confederation of British Industry and the Federation of Small Businesses. We connect with all the various representative bodies to ensure that businesses are aware of our capability.

In the current economic environment, it is a challenge to get small businesses to take up even subsidised programmes such as the customised training programme. However, it is a challenge on which we continually try to move forward. We try to be creative in our offer in, for example, tourism, ICT or cloud computing. We try to keep abreast of the development and needs of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and respond in a flexible manner.

One approach or technique that has worked very well is the financial instrument of innovation vouchers delivered through Invest NI. They are small and quite flexible, and businesses seem to respond very well to the type of support available. It can be a challenge to get businesses to engage, commit and invest in broader retraining and reskilling opportunities. That is just a factor of the economic situation that we find ourselves in.

Mr Edwards: We find that one feature of small and medium-sized enterprises is the importance of online learning. The challenge of releasing staff, or even of directors getting away from the office, is greater in the current economic environment. E-learning is a way of reaching out to them. We have been working with the likes of HMRC and will have its portal on our main website as a free resource for small companies. It will advise them on business start-ups, tax returns and financial planning. To me, that is very much the future.

We are also investing in a new virtual learning environment (VLE) and are in the beta stages of testing that. By the time that we have finished it, it will be the largest cloud-based VLE of any FE college in the UK. Although we have these wonderful buildings, there is another future that is online, and that future will engage with SMEs.

Mr Duffy: I would like to make a point about the nature of the requirements for small businesses in Northern Ireland. Sometimes, we get hung up on the focus on R&D and the need to significantly increase spend on it. In fact, 90% of the spend on R&D in Northern Ireland is by about nine large companies, whereas 90% of small businesses are microenterprises. When I talked earlier about the innovation ecosystem, I was trying to say that the FE sector has a role to play in micro-level innovation. Our sector and our capability have a role to play in the innovative aspects of the ecosystem through working with small businesses on niche projects. Very small issues can make a difference. Given the significant investment that DEL has made and continues to make in the sector, we would like to try to balance that out and have the Committee understand the contribution that the FE sector can make. It is just a question of trying to find our niche.

The Chairperson: That is just another way of saying that there is not necessarily a clear strategic focus.

Mr Duffy: When talking about an innovation ecosystem, we need to clearly understand the contributions that different pieces of that ecosystem make. The university sector has a clear role and massive capability in internationally competitive high-level research and development. Equally, however, there has to be an understanding of the realistic needs of small business in Northern Ireland, which are sometimes more to do with applied innovation than research and development.

How do we get the component parts of that ecosystem to work together? How does the science park in the Titanic Quarter connect with Belfast Met in the Titanic Quarter? How do we work together on innovative projects? How does the FE sector get increasingly involved in FP7 and Horizon 2020 when we think that we have a capability? It is about putting together the different pieces of that jigsaw.

The Chairperson: We have a full agenda today, so we cannot deal with all the issues here and now. You talked about your interaction with Brussels. When we were in Brussels, we were told that a recent meeting of the colleges there had opened up a number of opportunities. Part of the process seemed to be that before you can get programmes started, you need to develop relationships. First, you have to invest, and then you can take the opportunities when they arise. Where are you on that?

Mr Duffy: We have had ongoing discussions with a number of institutes of technology about FP7. A key component of the EU research programmes is having a number of member states involved. We have already reached a solution on cross-border partnerships with the institutes of technology. Individual colleges in the sector are already partnering with institutes in the Republic of Ireland on INTERREG and other programmes. Our discussions in Brussels were, essentially, part of a match-making event to bring us together and showcase our capability. We are now moving forward on different individual strands of those discussions to try to identify —

The Chairperson: Give me an example.

Mr Duffy: We had a conversation with the Institute of Technology, Tralee, which is the centre of excellence in Ireland for tourism and hospitality. Its focus is on rural tourism. We have a project that is of interest to us, which is developing a capability in urban tourism. The conversation between Tralee and us is about whether we can engage in a European-level rural-urban tourism collaboration project and share capability and expertise. That is a direct result of the discussions that we had in Brussels.

The Chairperson: OK, but your presentation stated that the college — I am not sure whether it referred to e3 per se — was taking the lead on offshore energy.

Mr Duffy: Yes.

The Chairperson: When we were in Brussels, we met Danish companies who were making loads of employees redundant because all the wind turbine manufacturing is shifting to China. In the States, such companies say that they are going bust because of the production of shale gas. Yet, people round here say that we are investing in a big facility involving DONG Energy. Who is taking the lead on telling us whether investing in wind energy is the right thing for Northern Ireland plc to be doing?

Mr Duffy: Invest Northern Ireland has done a significant amount of research on potential in the renewables sector, and that includes offshore energy. As a college, we have taken the lead in initiating the establishment of an energy skills training network. It includes businesses, such as the Belfast Harbour Commission and B9 Energy, which are interested in opportunities in the offshore energy sector. Our response is to try to ensure that the skills are here to capitalise on the opportunity. So —

The Chairperson: Pardon me, but I think that somebody needs to do a bit more than that. Everybody is being a supplier rather than a leader. Generally, Northern Ireland appears to be reluctant, because of the administration overheads, to take the lead in EU programmes, whether FP7 or Horizon 2020. I would like a centre of excellence, whoever or whatever that may be, to take the lead rather than just tagging on. We do not have time to explore that now. I am not being critical of you, by the way. Everybody is the same. Given the resource of Belfast Met, the investment that you have had and your declared aim of being interested in offshore energy, I would like to see somebody take the lead, and I think that you might be at least one of those to do so. I do not just mean saying that you will do your bit; I mean that somebody has to grab it by the scruff of the neck and tell us that they will do it.

Finally, my colleagues may be interested in the close relationship between the community and the high-tech work that you do here. Why do you think that that is a good thing and how might it work? There is a tendency, particularly in contested spaces such as this, for people to think that education is for somebody else. Do you want to brief us on that?

Mr Edwards: Yes, we identified, particularly in ICT, that there would be significant opportunities over the next three years from the economic programme, etc. We identified that as an issue, and this is where the threshold comes in. I talk about how we can bring young people in particular across the threshold of these wonderful new buildings when, in the first instance, they feel that it is not for them. We have been working with training providers and community providers who take people in with no qualifications and low skills and give them an introduction programme, which, if they pass, gives them guaranteed entry. We have a first cohort of 16 people who had no qualifications 18 months ago and are now doing a level 3 that will lead to higher education — *[Interruption.]*

The Chairperson: Excuse me, guys. I think that you will find this particular bit really interesting, and I know that you have expressed an opinion on it in the past. So, Justin, will you just repeat that?

Mr Edwards: Certainly. As I said, along with community groups, we identified that people were fearful of crossing our threshold. They see a shiny building and think that it is a high-level academic institute that is not for them. So we worked with community providers and private training organisations to identify young people with no qualifications. They ran an ICT start-off programme at level 2. If those young people, having come in with no qualifications, pass that programme, I guarantee them entry. The 16 students in our first cohort started 18 months ago and are now progressing. They are today studying a level 3 ICT qualification. In two years' time, I hope that they will progress to our higher education, particularly our foundation degree offer. Suddenly, we are turning people with no skills capability into people with real employment opportunities at the end point in the market. It is challenging, and a couple of technical issues are among the barriers to be overcome. We also have to work with a vast array of community groups with different reaches and agendas. However, if we can come together on these kinds of agendas, we can really make a difference.

Mr Paul O'Connor (Belfast Metropolitan College): I will build on what Justin said. The college received the Frank Buttle award for its community outreach work. That award is for outreach work with care leavers and young people who traditionally would not necessarily enter an educational institution. So we are very aware of and focused on that issue. It forms part of the college's outreach activities, which bring people in to take a raft of academic and vocational courses.

The Chairperson: What you are doing is really interesting, although we do not have time to do it justice now. It might be something that we do after our careers thing, so we are talking six months or whatever down the line. There is a danger about a lack of focus. You do so many things; I am not actually sure what you really do. You are dealing with community engagement, but you are also dealing with the digital media bit and then you are doing this, that and the other. There is a really challenging communication message that you have to get out. You need to work out whether you are the sector that leads in a particular area or whether you are community people or whatever. That is something that we will have to deal with at a later time.

Thank you all very much for the overview. The building is wonderful. We look forward to seeing how much utilisation you get out of it. I realise that that is a bit of a challenge, but I wish you well with that.

Are the same people staying for the next briefing?

Mr Edwards: Just Paul and I.

The Chairperson: So, you get away, Damian. That was a good move; you did that well.