



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Careers Education, Information,  
Advice and Guidance in Northern Ireland:  
Belfast Metropolitan College

5 December 2012

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## Committee for Employment and Learning

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Belfast Metropolitan College

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

**The Chairperson:** I remind members that this session is being recorded by Hansard. Back to you again.

**Mr Justin Edwards (Belfast Metropolitan College):** Thank you very much, Chair. I will give a succinct overview of the college's submission to the inquiry about careers advice and guidance.

**The Chairperson:** Before you get into it, we have had a number of papers from you, Colleges NI and whatever it is. There is a fair amount of repetition, not that that is necessarily a problem. I am not interested in the usual blurb about the good stuff; I really want you to tell us about the messages that we need to get across about careers. Is careers advice working? Who is taking the strategic lead and telling our people what they should be looking at? I really want you to focus. By all means, make your opening statement, but, when I get into it, I want to know more than just the normal talk about what you do. I want you to talk to me rather than lecture me.

**Mr Edwards:** I will make four brief points. To answer your opening question, careers advice is working but probably not well enough. My four points will unpick that. There is a duty of care to make sure that young people who make decisions at 14 have independent advice from all the sources that they seek and that that advice is linked to where the economy is today and, importantly, what qualifications and skills pathways lead to it. There are challenges in working with the post-primary sector. I would like to make the Committee aware of something that we are trying to do. I invited all the schools from the greater Belfast area to come to this campus on Friday to participate in a round table with their teachers, particularly their STEM teachers, industry and our industry links. I was expecting a few; I now have 40 schools, 100 teachers and 70 companies —

**The Chairperson:** When is that?

**Mr Edwards:** This Friday in this building. I invite anybody from the Committee to see that in action. We have termed it "speed dating". In other words, it is getting science, technology, engineering and maths teachers to talk to industry about its skill requirements, what industry needs, how career progression happens, and the kind of skills gaps that they are seeking. This afternoon, after leaving the Committee, I will talk to careers education advisers in schools to make them aware of vocational qualifications and pathways, including foundation degrees. The college is trying to do its part to raise awareness with school teachers so that young people are better informed.

The second thing is about the integration and better use of data. The best way I can describe it is that there are data chasms between different areas of the education community that make it harder to lead young people in particular and adults easily through current labour market information. A website called Skills Development Scotland is a very interesting portal that provides local labour market information in real time linked with course opportunities. You can search for computing by city, and it will bring up all the courses offered by community colleges, further education (FE) providers, higher education providers and training providers in that region. It links to the employment opportunities and employment dataset that come through. I would love a tool like that in Northern Ireland; it would be a great help to the college, my careers advisers and the young people and adults who study my courses.

Third is the professionalisation of the careers service. In our college, we have a highly professional workforce, the MATRIX award, and people trained to postgraduate level qualifications. That should be standard across Northern Ireland: careers advisers who are able and skilled at providing careers advice and guidance to young people and adults in their progression, with a full awareness of what is going on with qualifications.

If you look at the NI Direct website, for example, in the careers advice section, if you click on the higher education link, it tells you nothing about the entry of higher education into the FE colleges or about foundation degrees directly on the front page. Our services there perhaps are not as joined up in providing advice and qualification.

My fourth and final point is about the entitlement framework moneys. I am sure that the Committee is aware that the money for the entitlement framework will be withdrawn. We have a significant engagement with schools, particularly with 14- to 16-year-olds, which brings them into the colleges and exposes them to the curriculum and to teachers. Remember that college lecturers have to, by policy, have at least three years' industry experience. That is some of the best careers advice; when they come in, have a hands-on experience of the area and also get talking to a lecturer who has had industry experience and who can give the reality of what it is like to work in industry, what skills are required and what relationships you need. That is a risk with potentially unintended consequences. I am trying to keep relationships with schools alive so that we share information about what qualifications lead to employment in this economic time.

Those are my four points.

**The Chairperson:** That is really useful, Justin.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Your initial comments were about the duty of care towards young people. Many would argue that 13 to 14 years is a very vulnerable age. What engagement is there with the parents of pupils at that age? We listen to various presentations, and much of the time, parents make a choice for children that may be wrong.

**The Chairperson:** Good point, Pat.

**Mr Edwards:** I can tell you what we are doing in the college and then what we plan to do. I will give some examples as well, which are important.

On the second Saturday in February, we invite parents, students and potential applicants into the college to understand what qualifications we have. That is having a certain impact, but we are not getting right out there in promoting awareness among parents, particularly of level-3 qualifications, of what the options are.

For example, the college offers 200 fast-track A-level places every year. That is, A-level places specifically for students who perhaps did not obtain the grades for entry into university or who are

changing their pathway in their A-level options. Those 200 places are limited, and this year, we received 1,012 applications for them. In that very high demand situation, I personally brought the parents in. I invited parents and students in and I felt that I was giving careers advice on the fly. I was giving the options about progression to foundation degree and national diplomas as alternative routes. Leaving the hall that day, 60% of the parents and young people chose alternative options rather than going forward to A levels.

The advice is not there and marketing does not do it; you have to get in front of those people. We go out into schools; we meet in schools. However, we do not get out into every school; we do not get out into every home about what the options are, particularly for choices at 16.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Does the Department of Education or the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) send careers guidance people to the colleges? Do they give up-to-date advice?

**Mr Edwards:** It is my understanding that careers advice from DEL is available. Impartial advice is available through the centres and awareness materials, and information and people are sent to the schools on its behalf.

Although that is very useful, sometimes parents want to talk to the subject specialist; they want to talk to the person who will teach the course and who understands it. It is beyond basic careers advice; it is understanding the subject as well. As a college, it is important for us to get our lecturers out there and say what is relevant to the industry; here are the things that you study and the things that you should get involved with.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Surely there has to be a much more coherent and consistent approach on careers advice rather than you, seemingly, giving it on the hoof.

**Mr Edwards:** I agree. There are gaps in the coherence and availability of information, particularly with regard to 14- to 16-year-olds.

**Mr Paul O'Connor (Belfast Metropolitan College):** That is a critical issue. To build on the information that Justin has given, operationally, as part of our admissions process, we have pre-entry information, advice and guidance sessions for all students who apply for courses in the college. Those sessions are open to parents and to anyone who wishes to accompany the students. They are specifically designed to give individual students information, advice and guidance on a course and its modules, where a course will take people and the progression routes.

In addition, the college is very proactive across many of its curriculum areas in inviting parents for parents' evenings. We have realigned some of our open days. For example, last year, we had an open day in Titanic Quarter on a Saturday, which gave parents the facility to attend.

We are very focused on careers information and on advice and guidance in setting up systems and procedures that are open and deliverable not only to students but to parents.

**Mr Allister:** You unfavourably contrast what we offer with what Skills Development Scotland offers. Tell us a little more about that. Who hosts it?

**Mr Edwards:** It is a government initiative and service. I believe that Skills Development Scotland is an independent body; it may have been set up as a non-departmental public body. I do not know the fine details; I just know of the service from having accessed and used it. On the web portal, it links to the labour market national statistics database and it feeds through. However, it is very user-friendly, so it also has career-planning tools. It has sector information, so it has the latest information about skills needs in the energy sector or the creative service industries sector. You can also filter information from colleges and universities. I could type in "computing, Dundee", and it will bring up all the courses in the Dundee area within a 10-mile radius offered by the universities of Dundee and Abertay and the colleges — Dundee College and Angus College, for example — which supply, at what level and entry, and it gives future contacts. It is through a single portal.

**Mr Allister:** Have we nothing like that?

**Mr Edwards:** I have nothing like that for accessing Northern Ireland information. That single portal is very useful.

**Mr Allister:** Is that a model that we could adopt?

**Mr Edwards:** It is the model that we should look at.

**Mr Allister:** Presumably it is funded by the Scottish equivalent of DEL.

**Mr Edwards:** Yes. It is funded by the Scottish Executive.

**The Chairperson:** We will have a look at that. I have a couple of points with regard to your paper, which is on page 47 of the members' pack.

*"Industry in Northern Ireland is based on a small business economy; small employers are willing to provide placements but are increasingly reluctant to do so because of the ... costs of funding the required insurance cover"*

or the economic circumstances.

*"Creative methods of supporting employers with this increased cost need to be found"*

Can you tell us a wee bit about that?

**Mr Edwards:** Certainly. The paper was submitted with the Youth Employment Scheme (YES) clearly on the horizon and the opportunities that it presents. We recognise the value of that programme for engaging with employers in future. We are challenged in finding suitable paid work places in certain industries. For example, the IT industry will not pay for work places for internships in our careers academy, whereas the business and finance industry will.

**The Chairperson:** Run that past me again slowly.

**Mr Edwards:** The careers academy is a scheme that the college operates to get 16-year-olds with level 3 qualifications in particular placed on a summer internship in industry. We have the business and finance one here, where we work with Santander, Citibank, etc, and they will fund internships; they will fund those places and pay the students a wage for that summer work experience. However, the ICT industry is not so forthcoming with paid opportunities. It offers voluntary work opportunities in some cases; in others, it is really challenging to find work placements, particularly in small, innovative, niche IT companies where we are trying to get that exposure. Certainly, with economic —

**The Chairperson:** I understand that there is a problem, but you now have the YES programme.

**Mr Edwards:** Yes.

**The Chairperson:** Does that not provide some support?

**Mr Edwards:** The dawn of the YES programme was timely, so, yes, the YES programme does.

**The Chairperson:** What is the college's engagement with YES?

**Mr Edwards:** The Department has invited all the colleges to discuss with it how to operate the YES programme, which I think is in its very early days. However, the £5,000 employer support element of it has received a great deal of interest, particularly from small industries that are innovative and front-leading and may not be able to afford that initial outlay to scale up their staffing. This is a new opportunity for them to draw down funding and to work with colleges to provide the skills base. It provides a new opportunity for young people in particular to enter the IT and STEM industries.

**The Chairperson:** You might consider writing to us on that separately so that we can have your input on it. Given your links with industry, I do not think that the Department on its own can do the YES programme. I am also not sure whether it can be done at the £5,000 mark. What is the one before that?

**The Committee Clerk:** Was it £750?

**The Chairperson:** There is a work taster placement payment and then there is one —

**Mr Edwards:** There is a skills experience one, as well.

**The Chairperson:** Skills experience is really interesting from a careers point of view. Anyway, should you feel so minded, the Committee would be pleased to take a focused paper from you. I do not need all the background stuff; I just need to know what you think we should be doing on it. I would be really interested in that.

You answered Mr Allister's question about the Scottish portal, but you also state in your paper:

*"Belfast Met has purchased a 'state of the art' planning system as part of its virtual learning platform".*

What is that if not what the Scots have?

**Mr Edwards:** That is our internal focus. It deals with what we are doing with our own students and their progression pathways to the next level of their education. Unlike the Scottish model, ours does not link to other careers opportunities because we do not have that data set. Therefore —

**The Chairperson:** You also state that you believe that your approach:

*"could be explored as a shared service for the sector".*

**Mr Edwards:** Potentially, yes.

**Mr O'Connor:** Yes.

**The Chairperson:** OK; so, we will maybe deal with that in the Scottish thing. It may be useful to get that information in black and white, but members who are interested may need a little demonstration of what it looks like. You may want to talk us through that at a time that is convenient.

**Mr Edwards:** I am happy to do that.

**The Chairperson:** I guess that my final point is, I suppose, on a similar vein. In your submission, you state:

*"While the Careers Service NI online CEIAG resources are useful they are also limited. Greater attention needs to be given to the presentation format".*

Would you care to hit the nail on the head for me and tell me what you mean?

**Mr Edwards:** The full availability of options, particularly for those at higher education entry or at age 16 to 19, are not clearly spelt out. The further education offers, such as foundation degrees, do not feature as strongly as UCAS applications for higher education. That portal promotes higher education entry through UCAS. You do not enter FE colleges to do foundation degrees through UCAS; you apply directly to us. It is not clear; access to it could be better.

**The Chairperson:** On the three points that I have raised, or on anything else in the Hansard report, I invite you — as I have all the other people who have given evidence — to revisit your submission and give us focused information. I do not want to be unkind, but I do not need the guff; I just need you to talk to us and tell us what we should be doing.

Unless members have any other points to raise —

**Mr P Ramsey:** No.

**The Chairperson:** — my one final point is that the recurring theme in all this is that you are doing a lot of "how to". You are teaching students how to do CVs or how to do this, that or whatever. However,

there seems to be less emphasis on why or on the strategic vision for Northern Ireland. Nobody is really saying: here is where the future is, and you should be positioning yourself to get that degree. The best way I can characterise it is by saying that it is a bit like somebody coming to you to say that they do not know what to do. You would ask what they were interested in and they would tell you. They might be interested in this; they might be interested in that. You could tell them that they could do this or that. We need a more strategic overview to say: this is the Programme for Government or the economic strategy, and these are the skills shortages. It is not enough just to put the labour information out there and let the students work it out for themselves; you need to be more proactive. I realise that there is a certain amount of heresy in that. We say that you will provide a service to the students. I think that, from time to time, you need to just tell people where the opportunities are. Do you have any views on that?

**Mr Edwards:** I welcome that. It attaches back to a point made in Damian's presentation. The college does have a curriculum strategy; it is on our website. We have identified only seven areas that will be our growth areas; everything else will either be stabilised or not taken forward. At the forefront of those areas is digital media, ICT and creative digital. Through our marketing and the information coming from the college, we are taking a lead in the seven areas where we want growth. We are actively promoting that. Those seven areas link to the Programme for Government and the economic strategy. That all links back —

**The Chairperson:** The trouble is, we could talk all day about this, but we have other people to come in. Would you care to reflect on the point that I made and try to find a way of directing us in a succinct paper? I am looking for more joined-up and/or strategic leadership. It is good that you are responsive, but I want you, or somebody, to lead. You are as good a set of people as any. Will you have a look at that and see what you can do for me?

Paul, you have been sitting there nodding. Is there anything you need to add or want to say in conclusion?

**Mr O'Connor:** To touch on your comments, we have realigned the college's careers information, advice and guidance. There are four elements to it, and we have realigned that with our employability strategy. You will see evidence in the building of what we are trying to do to bring young people in and align them to career opportunities in relation to what is happening in the wider world. I fully take the point that we could be more strategic in what we are doing and take a lead. However, with its information, advice and guidance strategy, the college is being proactive in dealing with the upcoming challenges.

**The Chairperson:** That is great; I am not being critical.

**Mr O'Connor:** I accept that.

**The Chairperson:** I am just saying that we have to wade through all these papers; we got them from everybody. To be honest with you, you get repetition and the statement of the obvious. That is not what we are about. We really just want you to tell us what your frustrations are, what we should be doing about it and how you would do it if you were in charge. We just need to get straight to it. I want meat on the bones. I am giving you the opportunity to come back and do that. Understand that the Committee, and the entire society, would be very grateful if you would do a bit of plain speaking to us.

Thank you very much indeed for your submission.