



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Careers Education, Information,
Advice and Guidance in Northern Ireland:
NUS-USI Briefing

17 April 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Employment and Learning

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Robin Swann (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Sammy Douglas
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Miss Claire Flanagan	National Union of Students — Union of Students in Ireland
Ms Hannah McNamara	National Union of Students — Union of Students in Ireland
Miss Adrienne Peltz	National Union of Students — Union of Students in Ireland

The Chairperson: We now move to the briefing from the National Union of Students and Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI). With us are Adrienne Peltz, president of the NUS-USI; Hannah McNamara, a member of the students' union secretariat at the South Eastern Regional College (SERC) Bangor campus; and Claire Flanagan, the president of the University of Ulster students' union. You are very welcome. Thank you very much for coming along to present to the Committee.

You provided the Committee with a written submission, and we assume that Committee members will have read and understood that. The purpose of this session is really just to give you the opportunity to provide further information and to take questions from members.

Miss Adrienne Peltz (National Union of Students — Union of Students in Ireland): I would like to thank the Committee for inviting us to come here today. Obviously, we feel that this issue is very important not only for students, but the economy. I will start by giving a broad outline of the issue and where we feel we need to concentrate on developing things. I will then hand over to Claire to talk about higher education (HE) experiences and then to Hannah to talk about further education (FE). Hopefully, we can then answer some questions.

Careers advice and information should be seen as one of the key foundations for the Northern Ireland economy. A standardised system that provides the most up-to-date careers information and that is tailored to the precise needs, aims and abilities of everyone in Northern Ireland is essential in delivering a sound structure in which the strongest and most dynamic economy possible in Northern

Ireland can be built. Quite often, careers advice at schools starts far too late and does not deliver the kind of tailored specific options or solutions that people, as individuals, need.

Careers advice should be seen as natural and present in the everyday life of any school. At an early stage, people should be able to think about what qualifications and skills they need to be able to follow the career they wish to pursue. It is also crucial that careers advice in schools places a greater emphasis on the importance of further education, vocational skills and training. That can sometimes be overlooked, and my colleague Hannah will talk a little bit about that later. That is absolutely integral to the entire economy and the sector in Northern Ireland.

Our careers advice should also be highly integrated into Invest NI and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) economic strategy so that we can work to ensure that our future workforce meets the needs and demand of businesses to help realise Northern Ireland's potential, and particularly to support inward investment. Careers advice should take into account areas of future economic development related to the Government's economic strategy to ensure that opportunities are delivered in areas such as the green economy, if, for example, a new green deal strategy is implemented by the Executive. Also, the prevailing move towards more STEM — science, technology, engineering and mathematics — based jobs needs to form the basis of advice that careers advisers provide to people who have such careers ambitions.

The Government need to provide far more resources for careers advice information and guidance in further education colleges and universities, and that advice service should be fully integrated into all student support services. Careers advice should also be presented on regular occasions, such as in lectures and tutorials, maybe even with specific days set aside for it in schedules. Students should be able to discuss career options in specific tutorials and take the opportunity to book individual careers advice meetings with careers services in institutions.

I want to emphasise the value of paid placements and sandwich courses. We have seen a steady decline in paid placements and a move towards unpaid internships, which we feel are really detrimental to students. We absolutely recognise the value of paid internships, which are really the key way to develop students and to ensure that they have the capabilities to meet the demands of future jobs. The careers advice service should also place more of an emphasis on relevant careers information at the earliest stage possible in somebody's educational pathway.

Another concern is the need for expert careers support for students who have graduated or finished training courses, but who have not been able to secure a job. The unemployment statistics are out today, and again we see a gaping hole in youth unemployment. Young people are just not able to find employment. To fill that huge gap, we hope that the Government will provide some kind of tailored offering for these young people, in line with jobs and benefits, and create a one-stop shop that offers young people, particularly those in the 16 to 25 age group, tailored careers advice.

It is very worrying that young people do not have the opportunities or the ability to learn how to apply for jobs. That is one of the key areas of feedback that we hear from employers. They tell us that young people just do not know how to sell themselves, write simple things like CVs or conduct themselves in interviews. That is critical in helping young people gain employment.

We also have concerns about access to careers advice for those who are involved in more flexible education courses such as night classes, evening classes or who learn with the Open University. Certain services are potentially not open at the times when those people are on campus. This is a particular issue in further education, where a huge proportion of provision is delivered part time in the evenings when none of those services is available. Essentially, that cuts out those people and prevents them from gaining valuable careers advice. Consideration should absolutely be given to those individuals so that they can meet the needs of flexible study.

Careers guidance should be made more readily available in workplaces to help people progress in their careers. Statistically, if given the choice, young people are more likely to take an employment opportunity and work their way up the career ladder once they are in an organisation. We think that that is quite sensible in many cases, but there needs to be specific careers advice for young people, or any individual, to enable them to enhance and improve their opportunities in employment. We think that that could have positive results, not only for individuals but for companies.

One potential change in the delivery of careers advice that we would like to see examined would be the creation of one-stop shops in which careers advice is provided in tandem with benefits, local housing and local government services in the same location. That is about ease of access, and

proximity to other services is crucial in reaching out to as many people as possible and encouraging them into education and training. Information about careers advice and the promotion of where it can be accessed is incredibly important. Greater outreach into and interaction with civic society could also help and, for example, many areas could benefit from the provision of a mobile careers service.

On point 2 of the inquiry's terms of reference, given the increase in the use of social media and websites for accessing information, the Careers Service could examine new interactive ways of communicating with as many people as possible. We need to respond to the changing shape of society and to the way in which people communicate with each other. Social media could be a huge tool in helping to provide advice and assistance quicker and to responding rapidly instead of taking time to visit careers centres. That is particularly so for those who have demanding extracurricular activities or who are in flexible learning.

As a foundation for delivering improved careers advice, it is absolutely essential that up-to-date and standardised training is provided to all careers advisers to ensure that they are aware of the latest available careers opportunities and initiatives. My two colleagues will touch on the logistics of that, and how it has affected them and the students they represent. Any cuts in careers advice services could have a hugely significant impact on the lives of people in the most marginalised sections of the community and could have a detrimental impact on the economy at a time when we should be upskilling and preparing for economic recovery.

In our submission to the inquiry, we emphasised the importance of financial advice and student support as a key area of the wider careers advice network. We focused on an important project that helped co-ordinate the work of student finance officers and that trained them and kept them up to date on the latest advice and information. We feel that the recent closure of the Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA), which I am sure everybody on the Committee is fully aware of, has left a huge and significant gap in education and advice provision. EGSA obviously played a hugely important role in wider society in Northern Ireland, and in assisting students in particular. It was hugely instrumental in widening participation and outreach, and in encouraging lifelong learning. We recognise that there will be a void and we hope that another agency, or us, will be able to step up, provided that there is some funding, and fill that gap. It was so vital for so many people who had very few avenues to turn to for educational advice.

Schemes such as the previous adult learner finance project, on which we worked in conjunction with EGSA and other departmental bodies, are really critical in delivering advice for all learners of any age. We recognise that student finance advice is critical in helping anybody in education to plan their next steps. We know that student finance is one of the key factors that determines what people do next with their lives and their outcomes. We would love to have a more in-depth chat about that at some point.

We recognise that there is a massive disparity in the advice that is given about further education and higher education. There seems to be a lack of parity of esteem between FE qualifications and HE qualifications. It seems that higher education is often given greater importance when young people get advice in schools.

That is all that I would like to say for now, from the broader perspective. I will hand over to my colleague Claire Flanagan to give an HE perspective and, particularly, an Ulster perspective.

Miss Claire Flanagan (National Union of Students — Union of Students in Ireland): I will talk about the difficulties faced in higher education and careers advice to even get as far as that and, in doing so, give some personal experiences and those of other students. I came from a grammar school where we were very much channelled towards higher education. If you were considering going to study in FE, there was an element of segregation and you were taken off to a separate careers class. Even though we were all strong enough to make our own decisions, you did not want to be taken to a separate class and away from everyone else. Therefore, people went for HE almost for no reason other than that you did not want to be pulled out of the class and away from your friends. That is just one of the pressures that students face at quite a young age and that could impact on their whole future.

There is a lot of careers guidance available in HE at the moment. However, it is very much left to the student to go looking for it. It is not really brought to the student or promoted among the student population as well as it could be. As Adrienne mentioned, it is important to integrate and embed that advice in their studying so that they know that, at the end of the day, the aim of study is to find a career. There are some excellent examples of that already, but it is not happening across all courses

or in all HE. For instance, there are preparation modules for courses that have a placement year. Students take a full module throughout the year, which takes them through where to look for a job, how to build a CV, how to write a cover letter and how to engage at interviews. However, not every course includes that. It is really only the second year of courses that have a full year's placement. I think that all students would benefit from that at any stage of their study.

I did a degree in construction engineering management. I went to an all-girls school. My RE teacher was my careers teacher. I was probably the first girl in the school who wanted to become a builder, as they called it. My school took the initiative to bring in an organisation called Women in Construction, and that really inspired me — my school recognised the gap. It is really excellent to work with external organisations. Rather than just putting the pressure on the careers guidance service in the school or institution, it is good to work with other organisations to promote areas of various job gaps. Your careers teacher might not necessarily be a professional in STEM subjects, for instance, but it is excellent if they can focus on that and bring in the best advice.

I turn to widening the participation of students. In all universities in Ulster, there is a bit of a gap with the bit in between. A lot of work is invested in making sure that they see their potential, are valued and have a place in university education. However, I think that there is a wee bit of a breakdown between their study and their reaching their goal at the end, namely achieving a career. More work could definitely be done in that area to keep it focused and to keep students in university.

Miss Peltz: Thank you very much, Claire. I will now hand over to Hannah McNamara who is an actual real-life student; not just a student representative. Hannah will talk us through some of the further education experiences.

Ms Hannah McNamara (National Union of Students — Union of Students in Ireland): I want to expand on a few of the points that Adrienne and Claire made. From experience, I think that advice that schools give about FE colleges and universities needs to be balanced and accurate. When I was at school, the focus was heavily on going to university, regardless of what you wanted to do. That was the case regardless of whether you were at a grammar school or a secondary school. I went to a grammar school, but friends on my course who went to a secondary school said that it was very similar for them. Once students achieved a place in the A-level year, the school was very focused on their going to university. Every student was encouraged, if not expected, to go through the UCAS process, which costs each student £30 — something that they do not tell you at the start of the year.

I was aware of FE colleges when I started my A levels, but I was not entirely aware of the vast range of courses from BTECs to HNDs, which is what I am studying now, and even some degrees. Owing to a technicality, four of my five UCAS applications were rendered useless. The school left me to my own devices after those UCAS applications were closed. There was no back-up information or help to go through an FE application. You were basically left on your own. There were probably no teachers who understood the process of applying to an FE college or who had the information to back that up.

I found an HND course at SERC in Bangor that suited my needs and interests more than any of the universities that I had applied to. I felt that the lack of balance of information from universities and FE colleges was a disadvantage. I had wasted time and money going through the UCAS application only to then, on my own, find a course that suited me better. A lot of places see FE colleges as a plan B or somewhere where people go when they fail. If accurate advice were given at A level and GCSE stage, students would see that it is not a place to go when you fail. Depending on what you want to do, it might benefit you more to travel to an FE college rather than to a university.

Miss Peltz: Thank you, Hannah. We were hoping to be able to take some questions, but we made some key recommendations in the response that we sent through to you, and I want to go through those quickly. One of our recommendations is that the Executive need to provide greater resourcing provision for careers advice and guidance that focuses particularly on vocational qualifications. As Hannah said, further education is often viewed as the dustbin pile or rubbish heap for students who have not gained entry to higher education. We know that that is an inaccurate reflection of FE provision. FE means business. The flexibility in the way that courses are offered suits young people's needs and enables them to work and study closer to home. We would like a careers advice and guidance service that matches the parity of esteem between further and higher education qualifications.

As regards investment in the staff who offer careers advice and guidance, there needs to be standardisation in both the advice that the service providers give and their qualifications. As Claire

said, the person who advised her on her career options was her RE teacher. If we are to give accurate advice to students who are making decisions that will essentially affect them for the rest of their lives, it needs to be professionalised. There also needs to be greater buy-in from industry experts, particularly around the STEM subjects. The Programme for Government ring-fences millions of pounds worth of investment in job creation in the STEM sector. Young people need to be guided into the right STEM areas. As Claire mentioned, young women tend to fall off from studying those subjects at undergraduate level. They are interested at GCSE and A level, but there is somehow a disconnect between that and studying those subjects at university and gaining employment in them. That is something that should be addressed in a proper, holistic, standardised careers and advice service.

We also think that the careers services should be delivered alongside other Departments: the kind of one-stop shops that we said would be so important. We also think that there should be city-wide careers fairs. Northern Ireland is a relatively small geographical area in comparison with some other areas of the UK. That is a huge benefit for Northern Ireland because you can have city-wide careers fairs that offer students from all backgrounds information on career opportunities, instead of having certain institutions excelling in certain areas of providing careers information. We need to recognise that, just because students do not go to a particular institution, it does not mean that they are not a part of the future of Northern Ireland, and they should be given every opportunity to excel. Part of that, obviously, is about the kind of advice that we are giving them.

The second thing, and building on that, is to recognise that careers advice and guidance requires a two-pronged approach. The advice that is given to students during high school, grammar school or even in primary school is to open up options. It is pre-formal education or tertiary education. The kind of advice and guidance that students get as they are about to graduate or leave focuses on actual employment. We have seen that the kind of careers advice and guidance that is offered does not really differentiate between what decisions you need to take before you enter tertiary education and those that you need to take at the end of it.

That was a whistle-stop tour of our opinions on careers advice and guidance. A lot of information is contained in the briefing that we sent you. I hope that we can have an honest discussion about it now, and we are happy to answer any questions.

The Chairperson: Thank you for your written and oral submissions. You are guaranteed an honest discussion from some of the members on this Committee.

Adrienne, you mentioned involvement in primary school. What do you consider to be the earliest opportunity for careers guidance or advice to be brought into the student's life?

Miss Peltz: It can be a nuanced approach at a much younger stage. I have a seven-year-old daughter. I know that this is personal experience, but she goes to an integrated school that has an excellent part of the curriculum where they talk about different careers in a non-gendered way. They talk about the opportunities that you can have as an adult, and it is really great for a seven-year-old to be thinking about what is possible, thinking big and thinking, "I can be an astronaut one day." From about the age of 12, young people should be given more tailored advice, which picks up on their key skills and the areas that they excel in. A completely different approach should be taken prior to tertiary education and to the advice that you get both during tertiary education and when you come to the end of it. We would like to see a careers and advice service that offers people lifelong career advice, regardless of what institution they have gone to. You should be able to access the careers service from any institution across Northern Ireland, even if you did not graduate from it.

The Chairperson: You mentioned that careers guidance is not available for evening or part-time courses. Are you aware of any of the universities offering careers guidance outside normal office hours — for want of a better phrase?

Miss C Flanagan: Not particularly. They are willing to offer appointments based on what works for you, but those appointments will be for during the day. They are trying to increase their online presence. That is something that Queen's and the University of Ulster are working on. They are trying to make their services more interactive. However, it is hard to beat face-to-face advice in talking about your career. That is not available at the moment.

The Chairperson: With regard to the basics, you mentioned CVs and interview skills, which are the building blocks of careers. If you cannot get to the job interview and through it, you are not going to progress your career. Is there any role for you in that?

Miss Peltz: Absolutely. Given that we have probably a better relationship with students than the parent institutions — indeed, we are the representative organisation for them — we are best placed to go out to deliver those tailored workshops on how to prepare CVs and manage yourself during assessment centres and interviews. We have found competition to be incredibly fierce, particularly between undergraduates who are about to graduate. The market is quite cannibalistic at the moment. Young people are so concerned about who their competition is that they are not getting the opportunities to further themselves. Assessment centres and interview processes have been turned into huge cattle markets, with hundreds of young people being interviewed at once. The days of having small panels for candidates no longer exist because we have a huge supply of undergrads and few available jobs. It is, again, about how we respond to that and make sure that young people, indeed any students, have the capability and skill to show themselves off and sell themselves to any potential employer.

Miss C Flanagan: The students' union continually faces the issue of students' preparedness and readiness; they come back and tell us, "I didn't get that job" or, "I didn't get through to interview". Students face such a harsh market when they go to look for a job that they must be prepared to be turned away. Gone are the days when getting a degree pretty much guaranteed a job. It may not have been with the company that you really wanted to work for, but you were going to get a job regardless. I think that there is still a wee bit of haziness about that and that students still think that doing a course will get them a job. The reality is that, unless you are really willing to work hard and to broaden your university or college experience, it will be very difficult.

Miss Peltz: The National Union of Students, which operates across the UK, did some research into the experiences of undergraduates and the careers advice that they get. When asked what the single most helpful career or employability service was for any student, the overwhelming response was that it was CV checks, advice and interview workshops. That is where we should absolutely step up government investment and resources, particularly staffing. From a further education perspective, sometimes only one person in a college offers such advice and guidance, and FE services a huge array of different kinds of learners who all have very different needs. It also has a big proportion of students, about 100,000 versus 50,000 in higher education in universities. Given the diversity in its campuses, FE needs greater investment in its careers and advice guidance offering.

Ms McGahan: Thank you for your presentation, particularly Hannah. I think it brave of you to talk about your experiences. I am a mother whose 16-year-old is going through all this at the moment. Adrienne, you talked about EGSA, which went into voluntary liquidation in February this year and was contracted to continue its services until May. I understand that support is now provided through a collaboration innovation fund and the Local Employment Intermediary Service (LEMIS), and those are only two examples. What is your assessment of such services, in comparison with those provided by EGSA? Has the change improved and enhanced opportunities for employment or not?

Miss Peltz: It would be difficult to know whether it has enhanced opportunities, given that the interim arrangements have been operating for only a short time. The feedback that we are getting from adult learners is that there is a gaping hole there, particularly because EGSA was an umbrella, one-stop service provider. The issue for learners now is that the known brand of where to get information has been dissolved and they are no longer sure how to access that information. In my opinion, two things should be happening: the services should again be centralised instead of having service providers in silos; and there needs to be a better awareness campaign to let people know how things have changed and where they can access that information. I am sure that we have all been in the situation of needing to look for something online and just not knowing where to start because it is like finding a needle in a haystack. EGSA's beauty was to be such a well-recognised name in the education sector. Indeed, Citizens Advice Bureaux and all the voluntary and community organisations were able to direct learners to EGSA. That is what the problem is: there is a lack of awareness about where to go to. I cannot answer about service delivery, but, hopefully, we will be able to look at the outcomes in a couple of months.

Mr Hilditch: Thanks for the presentation. I was interested in the age access to careers guidance, and you have answered that for us. You said that there should be further development on the internet and social media side of things. Is there anyone who has a good way with that?

Miss Peltz: Certain individual employers are targeting it, but, sector-wide, no one is doing anything to capitalise, certainly not in Northern Ireland. Some of the jobcentres in Scotland and Wales in some of the more deprived areas rely a lot more on social media, and a lot of that is also about proximity to service delivery. The Valleys are quite difficult to negotiate by public transport, so job shops in those areas rely more on social media. Some of the larger corporations such as Coca-Cola and Google are using social media really effectively, but they are individual employers, and I would like to see a more broad-ranging centralised government service doing that.

Mr Hilditch: I get the feeling that there is a lot of work to be done on that side of things.

Miss Peltz: Absolutely, and, with the advent of Twitter and the fact that everybody of a certain age has a smartphone and access to social media, it is about speediness of information, particularly given that the market is very competitive. The difference of an hour in finding out that there is a job opportunity can make the difference between gaining successful employment or not. So, it is quite a cost-effective way for the Department to invest.

Mr Hilditch: You did say that the student has to go looking for the service, so that would be a good way of getting it.

Miss Peltz: Absolutely.

Miss C Flanagan: It is in the nature of young people today to Google something before they open their mouth. I do it myself. I try to be one of those people who does not, but I definitely do. You can get some really good, solid, interactive information. It is one thing reading a page full of where to go, but, if it is a bit interactive, you can dig through it a bit better. I know that our careers department is working on how to engage with that, and it is difficult to do so. It is about how we can make it more effective.

Miss Peltz: The potential to engage with businesses through social media is quite exciting. There are businesses that have Q and As with industry experts to answer questions from jobseekers about what it means to be a quantum physicist. We do not expect that every careers advice teacher in a primary school or a high school will know what exactly it takes to be a quantum physicist, which is why we absolutely need to get industry experts in to impart their wisdom and to give young people the tools to be able to pursue their careers.

Mr Hilditch: Thank you. Finally, you state in your presentation that the reintroduction of the adult learner finance project would have a profoundly positive impact. Is there anything else that you want to develop on that?

Miss Peltz: Yes, and thank you for asking about that. The adult learner finance project that we had was absolutely incredible, and it was funded with the Department and with EGSA. We were able to go out into communities and work with some of the most impoverished students who had really got a bit of a second break into education. It was really about skills for life, such as how to manage budgets while in a job or not in a job, and we would absolutely love to be able to discuss more closely with the Department how we could reignite that, because it has left a bit of hole again, and I have to come back to issue about EGSA being gone. It was a huge link with communities, and we certainly see ourselves as one of the best links with students, not just the typical student aged 18 to 21 at a Russell Group institution. We do a lot of work with students from FE backgrounds who, prior to education, were probably illiterate or innumerate. This kind of project really takes those people to the next level and gives them the kind of advice that they need to improve their employability, which is crucial in Northern Ireland for us to deliver the kind of economy that we need to maintain our buoyancy. Thank you for asking that.

Mr Douglas: Thanks very much for your presentation. I think that Claire mentioned that the further and higher education sector was the poor relation in many ways, although you said that there is some provision there, but there are gaps. I think that you alluded to it as well, Adrienne. Can you expand a bit on that?

Miss C Flanagan: The assumption that seems to be made by careers advisers and society in general is that, if you do your A levels, you are going to go to university. Now, more than ever, more importance is placed on apprenticeships and the range of education. University is not the be-all and end-all; there are alternative routes. Some people who I studied with went to university because that

is what you do. It was not necessarily because that is what they wanted to do, and, needless to say, a year or a year and a half later, with a couple of grand of a student loan built up, they dropped out and went back to FE on their own initiative and studied something that they really wanted to do. It is about breaking down that barrier and opening up opportunities. It is not just university that you can go into if you have done your A levels, there is so much more.

Miss Peltz: Absolutely. Hannah may want to add to that.

Ms McNamara: I did my A levels, and as I said before, I went through the UCAS application with no real understanding of the opportunities that I could have had if I had applied directly to an FE college. I do HND computing, and I would not have got the vast amount of practical experience that I have had this year alone if I had gone to university. This may not be true for all HND courses or courses in FE colleges, but we have a business skills module, and we were given the tools to make our own CVs and practice interviews and business pitches, which is very helpful, and our teachers are very supportive. That is from our tutors directly rather than from a network of careers advisers in the college, so I am not sure whether that is delivered through every course. I would need to find out more information on that, but there definitely is a need.

The Chairperson: All right, folks. Thank you very much for your presentation and submission. We look forward to further engagement with the Committee.

Miss Peltz: Thank you very much for having us.