



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

School Employer Connections

12 June 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Pat Ramsey (Acting Chairperson)
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Mr Owen Crozier	School Employer Connections
Mr Derek Hanway	School Employer Connections

The Acting Chairperson: I remind members and those in the public gallery to switch off any electronic devices that may affect Hansard's recording of the meeting. I give a very warm welcome to Derek Hanway, director of School Employer Connections, and Owen Crozier, work experience programme manager in School Employer Connections. You are very welcome to the Employment and Learning Committee this morning. Please proceed.

Mr Derek Hanway (School Employer Connections): Good morning, members. Thanks for inviting us. As Pat said, I am Derek Hanway, the director of School Employer Connections, and I have been in post for about a year or so. Owen Crozier is the programme manager for our work experience programme. You will have a copy of our two-page summary, so I do not envisage taking you through that word by word. I will just give you a couple of key points about what we do, where we are coming from and what relevance to your ongoing work we have for you here this morning. The focus will be on our core business and what we do day to day in working with students and employers; what is relevant to you as members of the Committee for Employment and Learning; and how we can inform you and stimulate some questions for discussion.

I will give a quick background. We are a small team that was founded back in 1999 as a pilot programme in the north-west. We really kicked off in 2001 with funding from the Department of Education (DE) and, at the time, from the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). However, from about 2003 or 2004, we have relied on what is still considered pilot funding from DE, although, at this stage, we consider that to be our core funding. We are still highly reliant on that, although we draw in funding from local businesses and from other trust funds and sources such as that. Essentially, although we are not funded by DEL, we do not see a high split or a big gap in what we do day to day. Even though we are funded by DE, we consider ourselves to be very relevant and important to the work of DEL, particularly in our common goal of building the future workforce and encouraging our students who are in school today to think of careers that are important in the economy. The link that we provide with employers is also important through bringing them into a

school to discuss those types of careers with teachers. As you will find out from part of the work, we also bring students into the workplace to meet employers. They normally bring their teachers with them, and, therefore, it informs the teachers as much as the students.

You will see quotations at the beginning of the paper. To be honest, I could have pulled out numerous quotations from reports over the past year to 18 months or two years from anywhere on the island of Ireland, the UK or worldwide. You could have picked a quote from Barack Obama, who is quite a proponent of work experience, and STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) in particular. I thought that this was a relevant quote from Valerie Todd, a member of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, last year. The commission launched an excellent report called 'Scaling the Youth Employment Challenge' in March. She said:

"Work experience is a vital stepping stone to help young people on the path towards employment. At its best, work experience can inform career choices and open young people's eyes to careers they'd not previously considered, or didn't even know existed."

That is essentially what we are about.

We were founded 10 years ago. Operationally, we see upwards of around 1,200 to 1,500 students into work experience. Other aspects of our work are our class programmes, which are taking classes in schools, whether it is a science class, an economics class or whatever, out into the workforce; and events, a big area where we help schools. Schools can ordinarily find it quite difficult to organise 10, 15 or 20 employers to come into a school together. It can be a bit of a waste of resources and it is a bit of a waste of the capacity that is there for employers to just do that for one school. For instance, at the end of last October, we organised a careers event in Oakgrove College that brought 600 students from across the north-west, from schools as far as Claudy and schools within the city and Limavady, to Oakgrove College to meet with upwards of 30 or 35 employers. We are the jam in the sandwich; we make it happen by co-ordinating that type of event.

Just this year, because of the year that is in it, we have at our disposal the venue in Ebrington. I do not know whether you have been in it or have seen it, but it is a massive marquee-type structure. We are organising a big careers event in September. Actually, it is partly careers and partly something like the BT Young Scientist exhibition that goes on in Dublin or the Big Bang event that happens in London. For three days in September, we will have upwards of 2,000 students going through that venue each day, meeting some of the leading, cutting-edge employers on the island of Ireland and in the UK. We have companies such as Samsung and JVC coming from London, we have Intel coming from Kildare down South, but we also have our local employers — Seagate, E&I Engineering and Nuprint. All those employers will be engaging in a very interactive way with students and encouraging them into those types of careers. That is a big event that just would not happen without School Employer Connections. That has given you a flavour of the type of things that we do.

I will just bring you quickly through the key points that we are raising about the role that we have. The major thing for us at the moment is that we know that it is really competitive for any young person coming out of school to enter the economy, whether that is through finding an apprenticeship or going into a foundation degree where you have to find work experience as part of that. It was difficult when we started off 10 years ago; it is even more difficult for many young people now. It is really important that we provide that service for young people who are most distanced from the labour market.

The other aspect, and I know it is part of your brief in the Committee, is around the strategy for young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs). There are an estimated 46,000 of those across the North. Schools increasingly tell us that they let go upwards of 50 or 60 young people — and that is a conservative number — each year who either do not sit their GCSE exams or get a very poor GCSE mark and do not come back. If you take that across 15 schools in this city, you are looking at hundreds of young people that are completely lost. Largely, they are lost when they are 16, 17 or 18, and they may engage with a NEET programme to go back into employment or an education programme.

We have a programme in development with DEL through the skills director here in the city. Mervyn Langtry from DEL has met us. We want to pilot a preventing-NEETs programme, using the trust that we have with employers so that we can engage a very intensive programme for young people to give them the hope that there is a job there and so that we can provide mentorship from employers. A number of employers are saying that, largely, they are up for this, but it is more intensive and more challenging for employers to do something like that. So, when I am finished, we can talk about how we can engage with something like a preventing-NEETs programme.

The main thing is that the evidence also shows that you can take any particular quote, such as the one that I mentioned, from an employer who will tell you that young people leaving school and young graduates, largely and commonly, do not have the skills that they require for entering the labour market. So, sometimes, where we might provide work experience for someone at 16 or 17, even if they go on to college and enter the labour market at 22 or 23, they sometimes go back to that contact that they made in their work experience or to the particular type of skill that they developed.

I am sure that you are familiar with the statistics that come out of the Department of Education each year. Those show that our students are, largely, still studying the traditional subjects and are entering degree courses in those traditional subjects. We have the dilemma that we have employers crying out for students who have computer science at A level or GCSE and good ICT qualifications. Employers are saying to us that the ICT GCSE and A level is seen as quite a common qualification, while employers want something that is more specific for them and which will better equip students for entry into their companies. Part of what we do is trying not just to encourage students into those non-traditional subject areas but to encourage the parents as well. Too often, we hear of students who want to go into those employment areas but whose parents are pushing them into medicine or law. You will not get a job in medicine or law. You might as well pack your bags and leave the island. It is very difficult.

Owen will bring you through the best practice that we have developed in School Employer Connections. The problem that we have is that, with the resources that we have, we are working with 1,200 to 1,300 students a year. We should be working with a minimum of about 4,000 or 5,000 students in the north-west. In the north-west, there are 14,000 students who are at second level. Those who are eligible for work experience number around 5,000 or 6,000. If we are to encourage more students through work experience and events and class visits into these areas of the labour market, we have got to work out a way — and this is where we would like to engage with you, individually or collectively — of how the type of best practice and programmes that we have developed could be brought Northern Ireland-wide. There are good models in the South of Ireland and in the UK that look at areas such as more online or web-based technology where students can find placements, get information, and so on. We are increasingly looking at that, but we do not have the money to do it. Our pitch today is more about informing you about our work and is not about looking at particular funding, but the reality is that the investment that is needed in careers to make our students not only informed about STEMworks, Bring It On, and so on, but integrating that with work experience and where employers can engage in that space, where they can maybe post up a placement or engage with students on an individual level through an online course or whatever.

If there is time, I will hand over to Owen to bring you through some of the best practice.

Mr Owen Crozier (School Employer Connections): I am the work experience programme manager in the city and the north-west and have been for 12 years. I will focus on the careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) inquiry. Your focus was, essentially, first, the model and models of best practice, and I wanted to lead you into that. Secondly, it was on statistics that you may be interested in locally and in the north-west, and thirdly, on CEIAG inconsistencies — basically, the focus there again with particular reference to work-related learning. I have some booklets here. I would love to take you back to the classroom for five minutes. Am I allowed to do that?

The Acting Chairperson: Fairly quickly, Owen, yes.

Mr Crozier: I will pass the booklets around while I am talking, just for reference. This takes you back into the classroom. This will show you —

The Acting Chairperson: Continue using the mike, because it is being recorded. Do not walk away.

Mr Crozier: Why is the School Employer Connections work experience programme a model of best practice? Based on 12 years of experience, I have placed over 12,000 students and developed a strong track record not only with schools and stakeholders but with employers. We work with over 200 employers from all sectors — private, public and voluntary. We have consistent, positive evaluated feedback from stakeholders, and we have had a BDO Stoy Hayward evaluation on behalf of the Department of Education. Again, if you had time, I would like to leave those for you to have a look at at some stage.

I have brought my previous experience from industry back into this organisation and the public sector, including quality assurance and ISO 9001 standards. During that time, I also followed educational best practice in the UK. We can be accused of being Irish and not liking the English. I love the English; they started their education system 30 years ahead of us with regard to business education — away back in the 1970s. We are only catching up. We got on the ground around 2001. Great work has been done by the likes of the Centre for Education and Industry in the University of Warwick. We have taken best practice right across the world and put it into our model. The work experience programme is modelled on our vision, which is to prepare the future workforce. We are very customer service focused. We believe that we are the only organisation in Northern Ireland to provide support material that enhances the learning and knowledge of students. That is why I wanted to give you a flavour of the packs, which is what the students get before they go on work experience to prepare them for work experience.

All the CEIAG components of work-related learning experiences are achieved in the programme. The process incorporates key employability requirements. We fulfil all the purposes of work experience — the aims and objectives as required by the Department of Education — and we provide the students with the 10 educational outcomes that they should expect while on work experience. There is a plethora of information there to support that and to prove to you that we have a model of best practice. Obviously, you understand what work experience is. Up until the age of 16, it is work experience, then they can go into work shadowing and then move on to work placements. Therefore, there are different types of work experience placements.

I will move on quickly, as I know time is limited. I would love to have all day with you to go through this in detail. Twelve years of work has gone into this, and 12 minutes does not do it justice. In terms of some things that you might query, all the resources that we get are aimed at operations and not at providing a suitable management information system, which could have given you a deeper and varied provision of information. With regard to NEETs, for example, we have identified through the programme that about 13% of the students that we have dealt with this year are possible NEETs and could end up in DEL figures in the years ahead. From my experience, I would say that 6% will probably end up as NEETs, because they are doing certain programmes in schools called certificate of personal effectiveness programmes, which are pure vocational programmes but not academic.

The gender split in a programme of 1,000 students is 50:50 male and female. We have done a lot of work outside the area. About 15% of our work goes on outside the Derry/Londonderry area, and that brings in schools from Strabane and Limavady. We work as far as Coleraine and Enniskillen. Therefore, if students want to come to our large employers in the city, they have to come through us. That is basically why we work with them.

I may be asked a question about rural or urban. Nine per cent of our work is carried out with rural schools, particularly St Patrick's and St Brigid's in Claudy. We are just after placing 110 of its students. With regard to disadvantage, 66% of our work is with secondary schools. We also work with special schools, and 3% of our work is carried out there. That sounds like a very minimal percentage, but the work ratio with special schools is 5:1. You have to take extra care, because health and safety issues and child protection come into play.

We have some employer feedback on those 1,000 placements; 20% of our employers fed back. Ninety five per cent considered students to be employable. That proves that work experience is working on the ground. We got feedback from rural students at St Patrick's and St Brigid's. They said that 93% of the students' expectations were met, so the programme is working. They said that they would recommend their placements to other students. Sixty eight per cent of those students' choice of career was affected by work experience. The figures are here to support all that.

I will move quickly to the CEIAG inconsistencies brief. The Costello report has seven guiding principles. I do not have to tell you what they are. There is equality, access and choice. A lot of our students are not getting that, because we have only a small pot of funding aimed at us. I would like to roll our work experience model out right across Northern Ireland and the world if I could, but I can only start here in Northern Ireland. I can only start from this city. Your influence could be carried back to the other Department, which could maybe fund us more in that respect. We have all the experience and knowledge; we just need to roll it out. We need to give more young people that experience.

Action point 5 of the preparing for success implementation plan is about maintaining funding. We see ourselves as being on the periphery rather than being at the core. Again, that is another inconsistency in CEIAG. Work-related learning should be brought into the core and not sit on the periphery. You could argue that we are not on the periphery; we are, because our funding is on a year-to-year basis.

I would love to meet you again at another time.

The Acting Chairperson: Thanks very much. We are on a tight schedule, and not just for the presentations; there is a stakeholder event at lunchtime that all the groups are invited to so that they have an opportunity to engage individually with MLAs. There are six Statutory Committees in Derry today.

Thanks very much for the presentation. It certainly has all the hallmarks of a model of good practice in terms of rolling it out. I am sure that members who represent other areas will be interested to see how it could be rolled out in and around the Belfast model, for example. We had a very extensive Committee inquiry into NEETs, which progressed to a stage where we now have the Programme for Government rolling out various elements of the NEETs programme. We have almost finished an inquiry into careers and guidance. We want to see where it can be done much better and smarter. We take your point about medicine and law, and teaching as well. Parents want their sons and daughters on that career path, but, unfortunately, that career path is not good for the future. Where do you change the mindsets? Where is your organisation linked up with the formal careers system so that a single message is going out to young people, and also their parents, who have a huge influence on their children's careers?

Mr Crozier: We are invited into the schools. We are not core or central. They will invite us in, and we will prepare and support them properly. You will see the employability map. A picture paints 1,000 words. We will do intensive training over a short period of time. We will support what is already there in the curriculum. Their curriculum is based over two years. When we ask young people what things employers are looking for, you will see on the very front page of your booklet that they cannot even tell us what the six things are. We focus very intensively on that and prepare them properly for it. That is how we do it: we focus very intensively on the things that employers require.

Mr Hanway: You have hit the key problem. The system as it is promotes types of careers as concepts. Sometimes, they will encourage students to do job profiles and maybe interview somebody in industry. Perhaps you have been interviewed by students about your own type of career choice that you have made. We have two pilot programmes that we are talking about to the skills director here in the city through Ilex, which has been very supportive. One is on NEETs, which you referred to earlier. The second is a model that is operating in the South of Ireland through the careers portal. I encourage you to look at www.careersportal.ie. Any student who wishes to find a work experience placement can find that on the website, but they first have to go through a careers planning tool that acts as a guide for the careers teacher. It actually trains the careers teachers as much as it provides a service to students. When that profiling is done and a student has carried out that investigation, you have clips of interviews that people from industry provide that teachers can upload from the website into the classroom. The developers from the Department of Education in the South who did that are coming to us next Monday.

Mr Lyttle: Who operates the portal?

Mr Hanway: It is operated by a company contracted by the Department of Education in the South. It started only in September. It is for transition year students; as you may know, in the South, there is a transition year. I would encourage you to look at having that, and I heard the Minister of Education talk about the possibility of introducing some sort of phase that enables students to do more project work and to go on work experience. In their transition year in the South, students are mandated to go on work experience. We do not have that; it is voluntary under the system that we operate.

So, the portal is rolling out in the South and involves companies such as Google, PayPal and McDonald's. It is not necessarily always looking at the key growth sectors, because, by doing a week's work experience in McDonald's, students can learn a lot about customer service, communication skills, and so on. I was in Dublin just two or three weeks ago when the senior vice-president of McDonald's gave a presentation on the portal, and he knew more about it than I would. There is a great opportunity in this city to pilot something like that, where we have the trusting relationships at home that we have had over the past 12 years. That is one model that we need to look at.

To answer your question, it would integrate in a real way the type of career planning that students do in school with companies and employers, as well as work experience. At the moment, students do it in a way that is kind of divorced from work experience, if you get me. So, that is something that we

need to explore. Not only would doing that change the work that we do but it would open up capacity in numbers. A lot of what we do is labour-intensive; it relies a lot on Owen physically being in place and on the two or three people who work alongside him. So, I would like to think that, if we could get that model going in the city, in 12 months' time, you would see something that could become Northern-Ireland wide.

I covered in my presentation the importance of preventing NEETs. I know of organisations behind me here, as well as others, that work with young people out of school and in school. We also have to look at where companies come in and at where employers can come in to provide that.

The Acting Chairperson: A number of members want to ask questions. Is there a funding stream or mechanism to enable you to secure funding to advance the preventing NEETs programme that you outlined?

Mr Hanway: Yes. Colin Jack in DEL is the head of the NEETs strategy —

Mr Lyttle: May I supplement that, Chair?

The Acting Chairperson: Yes; you are next anyway.

Mr Lyttle: There is a DEL innovation and collaboration fund; have you applied for that or do you —
[Inaudible.]

Mr Hanway: We did. Our colleagues in Derry City Council have a good chunk of that funding for an important and good programme.

Mr P Ramsey: We were made of aware of that.

Mr Hanway: You were made aware of that. The issue, I suppose, is that much of the work with NEETs is happening when the pupils have left school. Good voluntary organisations do some of that work while students are in school. The difficulty with that — this is important — is that it does not particularly link in with career planning and people's going into work experience. I mean no disrespect to careers teachers, but they tend to be ignored and forgotten about in schools. So, we are turning that completely on its head and saying, "These are the students in the school into whom you need to put more time and planning". That pilot is with us, the Prince's Trust and a couple of others, including the Western Education and Library Board. Over the summer, we will submit it to DEL, and we have already had some discussions about it with the Department.

The Acting Chairperson: A number of members want to ask a question. Chris, you are next.

Mr Lyttle: I will try to be as concise as I can. I think that I agree significantly with you, if I understand you right. First, learning is not adequately work related, and, secondly, careers guidance is concernedly inconsistent. It is for those reasons that I proposed the Committee for Employment and Learning's inquiry into careers. So, I think that I am on a similar page to you, and I am keen to meet with you personally to talk about things in a bit more detail.

I will try to ask you a few questions, and I may exaggerate them to try to get to the point slightly. You seem to be saying that schools are falling short of being able to link students with well-organised work experience. In what way are they falling short? How are you able to do it better or differently?

Mr Crozier: I will give you one specific example in the work experience programme. We see ourselves as the big retail shop, such as the Sainsbury's or the Tesco. Schools are the corner shops, and they cannot have connections. We are employed full time to go to connect with employers, and we are skilled to go out to check the health and safety. Teachers are not qualified to deliver health and safety checks; they are not fully competent in delivering that. That is one aspect of it. We get to meet all the employers on behalf of all the schools. The schools will go out individually, on their own behalf, and, sometimes, protect their contacts, but other people cannot share that. We are sharing all those experiences and all those contacts with all schools. Again, that goes back to disadvantage. We share with the grammar and the secondary schools, so everybody gets a fair opportunity. I hope that that answers your question.

Mr Lyttle: Again, I think that I agree with you on that. I think that it may be unrealistic to expect teachers to be able to access the information and the extent of information that is needed to provide young people with an informed choice. So, that is also interesting.

I will move now to the pilot for preventing NEETs. Our inquiry recommendations isolated the need for early intervention, which seems to correlate with what you are saying about a preventative pilot. I would be keen to explore that with you further. One of the questions is: why is it just for the north-west? I presume that it is a resource issue, as you said.

Mr Crozier: Yes.

Mr Lyttle: Fair enough.

You answered the question, to a certain extent, about the online careers portal. I think that you have already answered this question, but I will ask it again. How do we engage better with parents to help their involvement in the decision-making process?

Mr Hanway: I will give you an example. We will have the schools in the Venue on 12 and 13 September, and 14 September will be a family day. We will have 35 key companies present, and we will send each of those students back with a pack or a goody bag with flyers telling them to come back on Saturday. All schools will get flyers informing them that 30 to 35 of the key companies on the island of Ireland or the UK will be coming to the Venue on 14 September, and they will be invited to come along to meet and talk to them.

Mr Lyttle: Is that an invite to the parents?

Mr Hanway: That is an invite to the parents. That is stuff that we do not get enough of in this part of the country. A lot of that can happen in the Odyssey Arena, such as the Young Innovators event that is taking place there next Monday, and it happens in Dublin. If you have ever been down to Dublin in January to the BT Young Scientist exhibition, you cannot but drive back up the road enthused that those are the types of careers that our young people need to get involved in. So, it is a bit of a battle of hearts and minds with some of our students.

I want to go back to one point that you made, Chris, about the work experience and the difficulties with that. You would like to think that the days of teachers sending their students out on a Friday afternoon to find themselves work experience and to walk around the town dropping in to shops are gone. They are not. Each day, we put a lot of our young people at risk by sending them out in that model. We also get employers ringing us up. Some employers use School Employer Connections. Sometimes, when a student turns up, they think that they have been sent by School Employer Connections, but they have not got the pack. We would, obviously, do a lot of the pre-work. The student will ring up the office and say, "Have you got a set of overalls and a pair of boots?" That could be a garage or a tyre centre. A young guy going into a garage wearing a pair of jeans and sneakers is sending out the wrong message about being prepared for work. We have a cupboard full of all that stuff. However, that is still going on. In the same way as sometimes happens in the health and other systems, until there is a crisis and some young guy or girl is sent out in that way unprepared, and, God forbid, there is a complete tragedy, we end up saying, "What the bloody hell were we doing?" As an organisation —

Mr Lyttle: Chair, I know that we have to move on, but there is a crisis. We do not have enough young people getting jobs.

Mr Hanway: That is a crisis, but there is also a very high-risk crisis. The type of work that we do ensures that that is minimised. There will always be an element of —

Mr Lyttle: I want to make a closing comment rather than ask a question. I really like the interview competency material, because I still think that graduates are coming out unable to navigate interviews, SMART or STAR models, and so forth.

Mr F McCann: Chris touched on a number of issues that I wanted to ask about, but I have a couple of points to make. Thanks for the presentation; it was very interesting. Obviously, the success rate of the programme is measured on how many jobs the young people go into. Do you have information on how many people you have taken from the information and help stage right through to employment?

Secondly, running through a lot of the inquiry is that students are being guided by teachers into traditional notions of education, as Derek said, but there are those who may not want to go down the academic road. How do you work with parents? Parents and teachers are big influences in young people's lives, and I know that you can try to encourage people to go to events. Is there any group work or one-to-one work with parents to try to convince them that their children may not be going down the right road educationally?

Mr Crozier: It is a resource issue. We get parents landing at our door, but if you spent 10 to 15 minutes with every parent of a young person whom we place, you would not get any other operations delivered. We would love to meet every parent, and we would like to have it built into our resource and process that we do that.

On the earlier question about whether we measure it, like anything with DE and DEL, we have a cut-off point, and we do not measure beyond that. However, we are confident that we are preparing young people better for the world of work, and they are employable because that is measured in our statistics.

Mr Hanway: Owen mentioned earlier that, through the likes of SurveyMonkey and others, we measure the success in the current year. I think that you have hit on a very good point, which is that it can be quite difficult to provide that longitudinal measure. So, for instance, if somebody goes into Seagate on work experience as a 15- or 16-year-old, does that influence their chosen degree or apprenticeship, or do they end up working in Seagate? The answer is that, largely, we do not know, but the anecdotal feedback that we get is that it is working through influencing. I think that a common problem that our organisation, Sentinus, Business in the Community and others that are in this space see is that there is much more evidence, particularly in the South of Ireland, that students are choosing STEM-based degree courses. There was a 20% increase last year in the South in students choosing engineering.

The corner is not turning for us. Engineering companies and others are still saying that they are not getting enough graduates in that area, so the evidence will be when we see more students choosing those types of careers. However, we also have one hand behind our backs, as we do not have enough of those courses at that level in this university that you are sitting in. Also, with the different inquiries that we have had, the type of image that some of our colleges have of being up for feeding industry, and some of the image that industry has of those colleges, might not be the best. So, we are getting there, but our evaluation happens more year to year.

The Acting Chairperson: Our time is up, and we have another delegation to make a presentation. Derek and Owen, thanks very much for coming along this morning.