



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Graduating to Success, Access to Success  
and the Qualification Framework: Briefing  
from DEL

18 September 2013

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Employment and Learning

Graduating to Success, Access to Success and the Qualification Framework:  
Briefing from DEL

18 September 2013

**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

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

**Witnesses:**

Mrs Nuala Kerr	Department for Employment and Learning
Mr Kieran Mannion	Department for Employment and Learning

**The Chairperson:** We will now have a departmental one on Graduating to Success and Access to Success. I welcome Nuala Kerr, director of higher education, and Mr Kieran Mannion, head of the higher education widening participation branch.

**Mrs Nuala Kerr (Department for Employment and Learning):** Good morning, Chair. Thank you for the opportunity to talk to you all this morning. We are here to give you an update on the implementation of the two strategies that relate to higher education. First is the Graduating to Success strategy, which is the higher education strategy for Northern Ireland; the second is Access to Success, which is the regional strategy for widening participation in higher education. I will make a few opening remarks and talk about Graduating to Success and then Kieran will pick up on the Access to success strategy.

The Department provided the Committee with a written progress report on the first phase of the implementation back in April 2013, which summarised the progress since the launch of the two projects to that date. The report that the Committee received in September covers the period from April until that date. It is that second aspect that I want to bring you up to date on today.

I will outline how we got to this point and give some background to the two strategies. First, higher education is widely recognised as playing a central role in the Executive's plans for economic growth, investment and social inclusion. It was important, therefore, that we had a strategic vision for the future so that we can build on the achievements that undoubtedly will emerge from the higher education sector here and to help us face the difficult challenges ahead, including those of global competition and the challenging financial environment that we are operating in.

Against that background, the Minister published the Graduating to Success strategy in April 2012. It provided a long-term vision for the higher education sector and set out the direction of travel for our higher education policy right through to 2020, which involves the implementation of 16 projects. The vision for higher education outlined in the Graduating to Success strategy is one of a sector that is vibrant; is of international calibre; pursues excellence in teaching and research; plays a pivotal role in the development of a modern, sustainable, knowledge-based economy; and supports a confident, shared society that recognises and values diversity. That is the crux of the strategy and vision.

The publication of 'Access to Success', which is an integrated regional strategy for widening participation, followed in September 2012. That sits alongside and complements the higher education strategy. Access to Success has 11 key actions designed to address the disadvantage being experienced by some people in Northern Ireland. Six of the key actions make up four distinct projects in their own right. That means that, between the 16 projects in the higher education strategy and the four in the widening participation strategy, we are documenting 20 projects overall. They cover a broad spectrum of higher education (HE) activity delivered by our higher education and further education (FE) institutions. We have a number of outcomes that are aimed at further developing the quality and international standing of the higher education sector. Those are time-bound and qualified objectives.

I want to turn first to the programme management structures that we have in place so that you have an idea of how the oversight of the implementation of the two strategies operates. The top level is an implementation committee that comprises senior officials from various Departments and stakeholders. Queen's, the University of Ulster and the Open University are represented on it, as well as Colleges NI, which covers the FE sector. We have the Institute of Directors, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA). Also represented are the lecturers' University and College Union and the National Union of Students and Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI). From our external interests, we have the Higher Education Funding Council for England and representatives from the Irish Higher Education Authority. We have a broad spectrum of relevant interests overseeing it, as well as directors from our Department and others, particularly the Department of Education (DE) and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), both of which have a key interest in the area. We have that top-level implementation committee. At the next level, we have a steering group that comprises the departmental directors. That group is responsible to the implementation committee and is responsible for driving the implementation of the strategy. Each of the projects is led by a project manager, the majority of whom are from the higher education and further education divisions in the Department. Those project managers are responsible for pulling together their own project management board. They form the project management board, and I chair that level. They are responsible for pulling together project teams that take forward those projects. They mostly draw from the kind of organisations that are on the implementation committee. As well as that, they are supplemented by people with relevant expertise locally and nationally so that we make sure that we have the best possible information on the development and implementation of the projects.

Obviously, we are covering a long period up to 2020. Not all the projects start at the same time, but all will be completed by 2020. Some of them have much earlier completion dates. We have projects that have early completion dates, which are, of course, much further advanced than the ones with later dates, which will kick in and report later.

We have given you written documentation about all 20 projects. I thought that I would pick a few to describe to you where we are with those. I will then pass over to Kieran to pick up on the widening access projects.

Project 1 is about increasing the number of learners undertaking higher education courses in economically relevant areas. In this project, through the funding package for student support and funding from the jobs and economy initiative, we sourced funding for 2013-14 that will allow STEM — science, technology, engineering and mathematics — undergraduate places to increase to 1,350 by 2015. That is against an original target of 700 and represents an increase of almost 12% in the STEM places available when we consider 2011-12 as a baseline.

The universities submitted plans to the Department showing how they will rebalance the profile of their courses so that the qualifications that they offer most closely reflect the needs of the economy. We are able to support that with additional STEM places. Presentations will be made to the Minister by the University of Ulster in October and by Queen's in November.

Project 2 aims to support internationally excellent and world-leading research and development. We secured an extra £1 million, which has been added to the research funding budget, in support of STEM areas and areas of wider economic relevance. We are working towards a new research funding model to ensure that the Department's mainstream research rewards world-leading and internationally excellent research while taking account of the needs of the local economy. So that budget will increase by £1 million to £45 million.

Through the higher education strategy funding, the jobs and economy initiative and the funding identified through the normal 2013-14 budget allocation process, we pulled together an additional 350 PhD places, which will be in the system by 2015. That will bring the number of postgraduate awards fully funded by the Department to 845 by 2015-16, a 70% increase on the current 495. Our target is to provide 1,000 fully funded places by 2020, so we are well on the way to achieving that. Within those overall figures, the Department is co-funding 20 aerospace MScs from 2013-14. The main industrial partner in that initiative will be Bombardier.

Work is also progressing well and on target on a new UK-wide research excellence framework, which will be in place by 2014, with the Department fully engaged in that development process. Work is also progressing well on this project's longer-term target of the universities significantly increasing their drawdown of European funds by 2020, with a target to draw down €50 million under framework programme 7 by the end of December 2013. We passed that with €55.7 million having been secured by March 2013.

Additionally, six of the seven contact points roles, which we are supporting under the higher education EU support fund, have been filled. Those are individuals in the two universities who will support other research and development activity and help them to access European funds.

Across the board, as you can see in those elements of project 2, we have additional funding to support STEM, additional funding on PhD places and good progress being made on drawdown against European structural funds. So we have progress to report in all three areas.

Project 3 focuses on building —

**The Chairperson:** Nuala, you are not going to go through all 20 projects here.

**Mrs Kerr:** No. I am sorry, Chair. I am happy to wait for questions rather than go through them all. I just wanted to highlight a few of them.

**The Chairperson:** I think that members are happy enough. I am not cutting you short, but I think that members have read the report in detail. It would be more beneficial if we went through questions.

**Mrs Kerr:** That is no problem, Chair.

**Mr Kieran Mannion (Department for Employment and Learning):** Good morning. Widening participation in higher education among students from those groups that are currently under-represented — in particular, students from disadvantaged backgrounds or those with a disability or learning difficulties — is one of the Department's key strategic goals.

The Department's vision for widening participation is that any qualified individual should be able to gain access to higher education that is right for them, irrespective of their personal or social background. At around 50%, we now have the highest participation rates of any area in the UK, and we also have the best record of attracting students from low-income backgrounds into higher education. That said, although we have had success in achieving our objectives of raising the motivations, aspirations and, indeed, performance of students who otherwise might not have considered going into higher education, there remain some stubborn pockets of under-representation, including from socio-economic group classifications 5 and 7 and from areas of high economic deprivation.

Against that background, last year, the Department published 'Access to Success', the integrated regional strategy for widening participation. The thrust of the strategy is to focus as much as possible on individual students, but it also has an overarching aim of trying to help our education providers to work to common definitions of widening participation and measurements for widening participation while, of course, developing their own unique approaches within a common framework.

As Nuala said, Access to Success contains 11 actions that are either distinct projects in their own right or which contribute to one of the 20 projects in the higher education strategy. I will take members very briefly through the progress of each of the 11 actions.

Key action 1 relates to a Northern Ireland longitudinal study of educational attainment. We are trying to identify patterns of disadvantage when applying to higher education and to get some long-term data on educational attainment.

Key action 1, along with actions 2 and 3, is about getting better data on participation. It is being taken forward as project 17 in the HE strategy. We are using the baseline of the qualification levels that were attained in the 2001 census. Key action 1 will track the subsequent movements of multiple subgroups in that, try to identify under-represented population groups and examine any subsequent behaviour in those groups.

Key action 2 will build on that by working in conjunction with key stakeholders, including the HE institutions, to look at all pre- and post-entry data that we gather on participation. The aim is to identify any gaps and fill them.

Key action 3 is about how we better identify individuals who are in need of support. We are trying to develop an approach that will recognise the personal circumstances of individual applicants to higher education. Hopefully, that will result in a system that should be able to recognise and take account of multiple disadvantages to determine the correct package of assistance for individuals.

Key action 4 is about the development of a single integrated regional awareness-raising programme. Again, working with all the education providers, we want to develop and implement a centralised campaign on the awareness of the potential value and accessibility of higher education in all the community, not just for young people. A business case has been put together for the appointment of an advertising agency with a view to having a contract in place by early November.

The awareness-raising campaign will be augmented by key action 5, which is the expansion of the aspiration and attainment-raising programmes. The key is that that will be not only in schools and colleges but in communities and workplaces. That is all about reducing barriers. We have had initial meetings with all 12 education providers and outlined to them the key requirements for our future outreach programmes in communities. The first phase of that will be implemented through key action 11, about which I will say a little more in a moment.

Key action 6 relates to the expansion of foundation degrees. We have made very good progress on that. The ultimate aim of this project is to have 2,500 people engaged in foundation degrees from a baseline of about 1,100 people in 2010. We are well on our way to that, and the indications are that, unofficially, we are at around 2,200 people engaged in foundation degrees at present.

Key action 7 aims to encourage higher education to develop sets of parameters across all providers that will define the precise circumstances in which institutions will give additional consideration to an application for admission due to extraordinary circumstances surrounding that application. Essentially, what I am saying is that, in exceptional circumstances, places on higher education courses may be offered to the most disadvantaged students or students with disabilities on a reduced-points basis, provided always they can demonstrate that they have the ability to benefit from and, indeed, succeed in that higher education course. So, we have held discussions with the institutions, and the Department is also engaging with an organisation called Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA). That is to do with implementation. However, the implementation of this action depends on the development of a first-class information system under project 3, so detailed work will not begin until 2014. We need to get a few other things in line first.

Key action 8 is around the monitoring of all students in receipt of widening participation support. We have taken early discussions on that, and, indeed, some of the institutions are rolling out pilot schemes this year.

Key action 9 relates to the development of additional support measures for students to sustain their continuing participation in higher education. Clearly, that is a big issue for us. When we get these young people in, we need to ensure that they are able to complete. The action aims to recognise the additional costs associated with the recruitment and retention of students from disadvantaged backgrounds through the payment of premiums. This action places a clear expectation on the higher education institutions that they will provide supplementary support systems for such students as they enter into and progress through higher education, and the support should be tailored to individual

needs and be based on identifying multiple disadvantages. With the emphasis being on value for money for each support initiative rather than just large cash bursaries for individuals, all HE providers will outline their plans. Again, that comes through key action 11, which is the introduction of the widening access and participation plan.

Key action 10 is around the development of philanthropic bursaries. At this point, I stress that these are community bursaries rather than departmental bursaries, but we have seen good progress on that with the launch of programmes in Belfast and Omagh and the potential for another one to be launched in the north-west. As a Department, we are working with local interest groups to try to develop more local bursary programmes for disadvantaged communities.

Finally, key action 11 will see the current access agreement arrangements and the widening participation strategic assessment arrangements — these are reporting structures — being amalgamated into a single widening access and participation plan. The plan will be submitted to the Department annually by all fee-charging institutions and will be agreed by the Department 12 to 18 months in advance of the proposed fee year. In fact, a number of institutions that we do not fund have also asked to become part of this, so we will cover all HE providers. That agreed plan will be published and will include a summary of the institution's widening participation strategy, observations about its past achievement against benchmarks and a detailed programme of anticipated progress each year. A steering group has been established, which includes representatives of all the HE providers in Northern Ireland, and they have now devised a new framework for this document. All the institutions are now involved in a pilot of the new procedures, and they will be required to submit a draft plan for their institution to the Department by the end of September.

Good progress has been made across all the key actions that flow from Access to Success. The Department remains committed to a future vision of a sector in which the people who are the most able but the least likely to participate in higher education are given every encouragement and support to achieve the necessary qualifications to apply to and benefit from higher education.

**Mrs Kerr:** We are open to take any questions, Chair.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Kieran and Nuala. Sorry to have cut you short from going through all the projects. Project 1 is the rebalancing of the universities' profiles and their presentations to the Minister. I am slightly concerned that these presentations or proposals to change are only being made. We continually hear from employer representatives that we need universities and higher education institutions to move more quickly to meet the needs of the economy. We get reassurances that they are. Can you reassure us that higher education is moving more quickly than simply making presentations to the Minister on proposals for change?

**Mrs Kerr:** We have seen a period of quite significant change with the higher education institutions. We have two pressures, one of which is from the Department. We get additional funding and additional places available to us, whether undergraduate or postgraduate. The Minister is insisting that those extra places go to STEM or economically relevant subjects. So, we have pressure from the Department to make sure that any additional resources go in that direction. The universities have continued to look at what is delivered inside their courses to make sure that they respond more effectively to the needs of employers. We also have the overall strategy of the direction for the universities, so there is a three-pronged approach. As an example of how they are responding to the ICT sector, the Committee will be aware of the work with industry representatives, with the universities at the table, hearing and responding to the needs of that sector. That is happening across a number of fronts in certain subject areas.

The Minister is keen to hear about the strategic approach, and the meetings in October and November will provide information on exactly how that is rolling out and operating. He wishes to be informed at first hand about how the universities are responding to that challenge, and they have been working in that direction.

**The Chairperson:** I take it that you can also keep the Committee updated on how that progresses because we have received a number of representations on the issue.

**Mrs Kerr:** Certainly, Chair.

**The Chairperson:** In project 3, which refers to your Connected 2 programme, an independent external evaluation will now be taken forward. Who will do that, and what is the timeline for completion?

**Mrs Kerr:** The Connected 2 programme is being assessed independently, and we expect the results to be available in the next couple of months. The review is well advanced.

**The Chairperson:** You will be aware, from listening to the earlier session, that the Committee is concerned about that. We are rolling out projects, but we are not getting the evaluations back quickly enough to see whether they are working and producing what they are meant to do. Can we also be kept up to date on that?

**Mrs Kerr:** OK.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I want to home in on the widening of access to participate. You referred to under-represented groups. The Department did reasonably well over the holidays; in fact, it did well by announcing increased student support for disabled students. Can you define further who the under-represented groups are that you are trying to target?

**Mr Mannion:** We undertook work in preparation for Access to Success, and we have defined a few groups in the paper. Essentially, we are looking at socio-economic groups 5 and 7, which are particularly under-represented. Oddly enough, group 6 seems to attend university in proportion to the numbers in society. We are looking at low-participation neighbourhoods, young Protestant males and people with disabilities. When the institutions review their participation rates, they may have other groups that they will want to add to that, or they may identify a need that is higher in one group than another.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Are families with children part of that under-represented group? Are single parents part of it? Are kinship carers part of it?

**Mr Mannion:** All those groups are covered in the initiatives that we are trying to put in place. They are not specific groups that we are looking at that suggest that they are under-represented, but they are groups that we would be concerned should receive support.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Do you not accept that in neighbourhood renewal areas, there are high numbers of single parents? Will those people not be seen as a disadvantaged or marginalised group?

**Mr Mannion:** We need to make a distinction between where we have been able to demonstrate that a particular group or cohort of individuals has been significantly under-represented in higher education and those groups that we would wish to help in any case, whether or not we can demonstrate under-representation. Perhaps the best way that I can answer your question is to say that there is no evidence to suggest that disabled people are under-represented in higher education, given their numbers in that age group. However, that does not mean that they do not have particular needs and requirements for the support that we will put in place. Under-representation is not the be-all and end-all. There are other reasons why we want to help groups, and we want to help the group to which you refer.

**Mr P Ramsey:** It is a fair point, and I have to accept that. When you are trying to encourage and motivate single parents, and there is a huge and increasing number of kinship carers, you need to provide the incentive and motivation to participate in higher education. What role does the Department have with universities in the provision of childcare and crèche facilities to try to encourage and stimulate those same groups?

**Mr Mannion:** Each year, the institutions are required to submit an access agreement. We are required to examine that agreement and approve it for the coming year. We look at the provision that they make for all the target groups.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Can you suggest, even with respect to equality proofing, how the Department can approve, endorse or support the closure of two crèche facilities, one at Jordanstown and one at Magee?

**Mr Mannion:** I was just about to say that I do not think that the Department has either approved or endorsed the closure of either. We have looked at their access agreements and the provision that they have made for parents and childcare.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Do you not accept that, for single parents and kinship carers, the removal of crèches or childcare provision is now a barrier to widening participation in education?

**Mr Mannion:** The evidence suggests that, if no support were available, that would be a barrier to entering higher education. However, our evidence indicates that the majority of people with childcare needs prefer to have those needs met closer to their homes rather than specifically within an institution.

**Mr P Ramsey:** If that evidence was there, Queen's University would close its crèche as well, as would Coleraine.

**Mr Mannion:** We do not dictate, and we are not prescriptive with the organisations as to how they address those needs.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Was any comment made to the University of Ulster about its proposals to close crèche provision in Jordanstown and Magee?

**Mr Mannion:** Yes. We had a lot of discussions with the university.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Can you share that with us?

**Mr Mannion:** We talked to the institutions to find out their plans and timescales, and their reasons for doing that. The institutions indicated to us that, in the use of crèche facilities in the University of Ulster, student parents are in the minority. The greater number of parents who use the crèche are either lecturers in the university or in the local community around the campus.

**Mr P Ramsey:** There is something wrong with that.

**Mr Mannion:** It is not my issue to make support available for a local community or the lecturers. I am simply concerned about the students and widening participation.

**Mrs Kerr:** The evidence is that there are sufficient childcare facilities in the vicinities of the two institutions. The evidence was provided by a third party, independent of the Department, and it suggested that sufficient care is available. As Kieran says, students often prefer to source their care needs closer to their homes than the institution.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Chair, perhaps the Department will share that information and correspondence with us?

**Mr Douglas:** You talked about improving learning information and enhancing engagement between the higher education sector, the community and the Government. At a recent meeting, people from Sandy Row said that they had a very positive engagement with Queen's University. Can you elaborate further on that community engagement? What does it mean?

**Mrs Kerr:** We see it as an important relationship. Higher education institutions should offer a certain engagement with the local community. We seek to encourage universities to engage with communities in their immediate vicinities and contribute to development opportunities there. We can see that through university outreach to engage with communities and to encourage people who could benefit from higher education to do so. We have also seen it in the actions that universities have taken to encourage schools in disadvantaged areas to be aware of the opportunities that higher education presents and the available pathways for those young people. So there are a number of beneficial factors.

We also think that universities offer opportunities to support the Government in various aspects of our work. We want to ensure that universities are recognised as a source of knowledge and expertise that we can all draw on. Primarily, communities can take advantage of the pathways to higher education for people who would not otherwise have that opportunity or aspiration. It will help them to understand



that they, too, can and should expect to pursue learning opportunities in higher education institutions throughout their lives.

**Mr Buchanan:** What mechanism have you in place to ensure that this will deliver what it sets out to deliver? In other words, what is there to scrutinise it and ensure that it will deliver what it is meant to deliver?

**Mrs Kerr:** I assume that you mean across the board — across all the projects?

**Mr Buchanan:** Yes.

**Mrs Kerr:** As I explained, each project has a project group and a reporting structure. For each project, there are targets, measurable outcomes and a reporting mechanism. At each level, we expect the projects to meet the targets set out for them in the strategy. The oversight groups will pursue those targets and ensure that, individually, each project completes the work that it is tasked with. The oversight groups will also ensure that the connections between the various projects work. Kieran has described, particularly for widening participation, how a number of the actions are interdependent and require information to be able to target actions. The oversight groups help to ensure those connections. We also have the implementation committee, which will look at the targets to see whether they are being stretched enough. If there is more to be gained from the work that is done, and we set more challenging targets, we will be able to use the advice and expertise of the implementation committee to state whether what we are doing is at international standards and is what the community needs. We will use the expertise of the people on the oversight committees to ensure that the whole lot fits together.

A key element is to get the resources that we need, and we have been successful in a couple of projects. I have described how we got extra places, and we are working our way towards the longer-term targets. In between, we have milestone targets to make sure that we are going in the right direction. Between the people involved, the expertise that is being drawn into the projects and those who oversee them, we should be able to get the best out of the strategy overall.

**Mr Buchanan:** Hopefully.

**Mrs Kerr:** Yes.

**The Chairperson:** Nuala and Kieran, thank you very much for your time. It is much appreciated.