



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Programme for the International Assessment
of Adult Competencies Report: DEL Briefing

16 October 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

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:

Mr Victor Dukelow	Department for Employment and Learning
Mrs Harriet Ferguson	Department for Employment and Learning
Mr Stephen McGonagle	Department for Employment and Learning
Mr Daryl Young	Department for Employment and Learning

The Deputy Chairperson: We welcome Victor Dukelow, Daryl Young, Harriet Ferguson and Stephen McGonagle to the table. We have the papers. I ask you to give us a short briefing, and we will then open it up for questions.

Mr Victor Dukelow (Department for Employment and Learning): Thank you very much, Chair. I appreciate the invitation to speak to you this morning about the results of the international survey of adult skills. It was an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) survey and the results were published last Tuesday, so they are really quite fresh.

I will start by formally introducing my colleagues: Daryl Young, the deputy director of the further education division; Harriet Ferguson, the head of the curriculum and essential skills branch in the Department, and Stephen McGonagle, a deputy principal statistician in the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). For my sins, I work as an economist in that grouping. We have provided an advance briefing note on the survey. If it pleases you, Chair, I propose to talk briefly about the key points that have emerged from the survey and that are included in the briefing note.

By way of background, this was an international survey of adult skills, led by the OECD. A total of 25 countries or subregions of countries took part in the survey, so it was a very large undertaking. Apart from us, the countries involved included Ireland and England. The survey was designed to interview a representative sample of 16- to 65-year olds — those of prime working age — and test their skills in the key areas of literacy, numeracy and problem-solving. It was not just any type of problem solving,

but problem solving in a technology-rich environment; so, those types of problems that you would face in a modern economy.

From a range of other research, we know that the cornerstones of success in a region, and the OECD is also very clear on this, are: economic success; success around the whole social inclusion agenda, and success for individuals in how they can operate in everyday life, whether it is reading bus timetables, looking after family budgets, reading and understanding medication labels and all those sorts of things. These are really critical skills for a region and internationally.

The survey had two aspects. The first was a background questionnaire that captured people's characteristics: whether they were male or female; what their parent's education levels were; what their education levels were; what their kind of employment was; whether they worked; and what sector they worked in. All that type of stuff was captured by the background questionnaire. That was followed by a set of cognitive tests, covering literacy, numeracy and the problem-solving element.

The work in Northern Ireland was led by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), which worked with our colleagues in the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) to conduct field work here in late 2011 and early 2012, and more than 3,700 adults in Northern Ireland took part in the survey.

The OECD looked at our survey results and response rate as well as those of all the other participants, and it regarded Northern Ireland's results and our response rate as robust, which is positive. I mentioned that the survey was published last week. The separate Northern Ireland report, which was published on the same day, is available on the DEL website, and an executive summary of that is included in your briefing pack, which I hope you have received.

We have prepared a range of slides showing the results. The slide numbers correspond to those in your briefing pack. One of the really critical issues that we wanted to assess was how our performance in Northern Ireland has changed over time. You are probably familiar with the international adult literacy survey (IALS) that was conducted in 1996 to measure literacy levels in Northern Ireland. The results of the latest survey have been compared with those from the IAL survey. You can see from figure 1, in which the bars for Northern Ireland are the only ones highlighted, that there has indeed been an improvement in literacy levels in Northern Ireland. On a 500-point scale, there has been a five-point improvement. Average adult literacy levels are ranked from zero to 500, and our average is demonstrated there. We have improved our average position by five points. This does not necessarily sound like a huge improvement, but it is statistically significant. It is quite notable in the context that the OECD advises that a seven-point increase is broadly equivalent to an extra year of education. So, it is certainly worthy of note.

The next slide sets Northern Ireland in the context of all the other participating countries. The OECD average — it is a bit difficult to read there; it is in the middle — of the countries that participated in both surveys has fallen back slightly. So, by improving its position, Northern Ireland has, in effect, closed the gap with the OECD average. We are still below the OECD average, and the gap is a statistically significant gap, but that gap on the 500-point scale has been closed from 11 points to four points in 2012. You will see that the averages of some countries — Sweden being one of them — have reduced quite significantly. Although a number of countries' averages have reduced from where they were in the 1996 IALS, other countries' averages have improved. Our rate of improvement has actually been quite progressive. It is maybe not as impressive as Poland's, the average for which, you can see, moved up from the bottom to be much closer to the OECD average.

Mr Buchanan: A member wants to ask you a question about the chart.

Mr P Ramsey: Clearly, there is something good here, and we are doing well. What is the reason for that? Have there been programmes, initiatives and targets that have enabled you to do that?

Mr Dukelow: The next slide shows what has caused the improvement in the Northern Ireland position. The previous slide showed the OECD average for adults overall. This slide sets it out slightly differently by showing the level of proficiency among adults in Northern Ireland. The OECD has ranked them into a range of groupings, from below level 1, which is at the bottom end of the scale, right up to level 5. The slide shows change between 1996 and 2012, with Northern Ireland improving its position at the lower end. We now have fewer people performing at the lowest levels of literacy than we had in 1996. The improvement has been focused very much at the lower end, and that is contributing to the improvement that we saw in the previous slide. It is improving the position of those

performing at the lower end, moving them from level 1 and below up to level 2, which has seen quite a significant increase for Northern Ireland and which has contributed to that improvement.

Mr Daryl Young (Department for Employment and Learning): It is probably worth saying that the Department's essential skills strategy is particularly focused on those with lower level of literacy and numeracy, as Victor has said. Over the past 10 years or so there have been 350,000-odd enrolments in essential skills provision by almost 150,000 people. Those have led to just under 200,000 qualifications in essential skills by just over 100,000 people. The improvements you can see on the left-hand side of the chart can, I think, be directly attributed to the essential skills strategy that has been implemented by the Department progressively over the past 10 years or so. You are right in pointing out that this is a good-news aspect of the report. There are other, more negative bits, but this is a very positive aspect, which shows that the essentials skills strategy has been making a significant impact in that area.

Mr Dukelow: I will move to the next slide and talk about some of the challenges. There is no question that the Northern Ireland position has improved, and it has improved more for those at the lower end of numeracy and literacy. However, as you can see from the slide, the green bar shows the proportions of OECD participants who fall into those levels. We still have not caught up with the OECD average. Things have been improving, but there is still a challenge ahead. That is the message coming from this. The OECD average performs better than Northern Ireland in having fewer people at levels 1 and 2 and more people at levels 3 and 4. I think the message is that we are on the right path, but we have got to continue along that path. There is still a challenge ahead if we are to close the gap further, or, indeed, overtake the OECD average.

The next slide — although you may be better looking at your notes —

Mr P Ramsey: I think you are right.

Mr Dukelow: — unless you have X-ray vision. It sets out the most recent survey, disregarding the previous IALS, and just looks at the International Survey of Adult Skills (ISAS) survey. It lists the countries and how they rank on performance in average adult literacy scores. It shows that, statistically, Northern Ireland is performing significantly above a number of countries, including France, Spain and Italy. It also shows that, statistically, we are on a par with a number of countries. Although the results are slightly different regarding numbers, we cannot say that, statistically, we are different from a number of countries. Effectively, we are on a par with the likes of England, Ireland, the US, Germany and a number of other countries. The survey also shows that there are a number of countries performing well ahead of Northern Ireland. We remain behind some of the world leaders. The top-ranking country is Japan, followed by Finland and the Netherlands. Their literacy scores are quite significantly ahead of Northern Ireland.

The next slide shows numeracy, and a similar picture emerges. There are a number of countries that perform below Northern Ireland — again, France, Italy and Spain, joined this time by the US. Northern Ireland's performance matches the likes of Ireland, England, Korea and Poland, but, again, we are behind some of the world-leading countries, with Japan, Finland, the Netherlands and the Flanders region of Belgium going to the top of the heap.

I do not have a slide for it, but we are behind the OECD average for problem-solving in a technology-rich environment. We are still assessing the results of that domain in the Department to fully understand them and make sure that we are comparing like with like. One thing that we want to get to the bottom of is that not every country took this aspect of the test, including France, Spain and Italy. Of the people who did participate in the test, not every participant took this element of it. In Japan, for instance, which does very well in problem-solving, one third of adults chose not to take the test, whereas, quite a high proportion of people here chose to do so. Half of the number in Japan refused to take it. We had people here who were more inclined to take the computer-based test, but we scored less than the likes of Japan. There is a job of work for us to do to make sure that we are comparing like with like on the problem-solving aspect.

The next slide looks at a very interesting aspect, which is age and how people are performing in literacy in their age band. One of the key issues that the OECD has pulled out, and it applies to Northern Ireland, is that the younger age groups tend to perform better in literacy than the older age groups. The OECD will say that that bodes well for the future because the flows coming into the workforce are performing better than those leaving, and that that, in itself, should improve performance going forward.

However, this is not the case for England, and you can see that younger cohorts in England perform behind the older ones there. That got quite a bit of media attention last week when the results were released. We can take some comfort from this picture, but when we move on again, here is the challenge, and you can see that the green bar is the OECD line, and their youngest cohorts are doing much better than our youngest cohorts or those in England, for that matter. There is quite a difference, particularly at the very early age of 16 to 18, between the Northern Ireland performance and that of the OECD average.

We will move to the next table, and you will be glad to hear that we are down to the last two tables. The OECD developed a statistical model based on the results because it wanted to look at adjusting for other things, or controlling for other things, what factors are most likely to predict that you are going to have low literacy levels. This is quite a powerful instrument. Again, the slide might be easier to read in your pack, but the two biggest influences — and maybe this is unsurprising — that can predict that you will perform low in literacy, numeracy and problem-solving, are qualification levels. Your own level of education is the biggest predictor. Interestingly, that is joined by the education levels of your parents, which shows the intergenerational aspect of all this. If your parents have done well in education, that is likely to be a good predictor that you are going to do well in literacy, numeracy and problem-solving issues.

I have not dwelt on some of the other aspects there, but we can return to them should you wish to do so. The final slide shows that literacy and numeracy skills are well rewarded in Northern Ireland. The grey line shows Northern Ireland. The scale compares the ratio of people with high literacy skills to those with low literacy skills. In Northern Ireland, if you have high literacy skills you are three-and-a-half times more likely to have good or excellent health compared to somebody with low literacy skills. You are also twice as likely to be in employment. When you are in employment, you are three-and-a-half times more likely to have a high wage than someone with lower literacy skills. So, there are some quite profound impacts in achieving high literacy and numeracy skills.

This fact is not presented in figure 4, but, returning to the intergenerational aspect, adults here with parents who did not achieve at least an upper secondary education are five times more likely to perform at the lowest levels of literacy than those with parents who achieved at least an upper secondary education. So, if your parents were better educated and achieved upper secondary level education, that predicts that you are more likely to have good, solid literacy and numeracy skills.

In conclusion, the survey has provided a wealth of information for Northern Ireland, and participation in it has been very worthwhile. It helps us, again, to compare our position internationally, and that is very important. Much analysis is still to be done, so we are giving you the high-level messages here, but a lot of analysis can still be done. We have only just got the results, and already we have plans in the Department's research agenda to see how we can exploit this information further. We have links to the OECD. We have good communication now with our colleagues in the South and with those in England to see how we might frame those further investigations.

We can say from the results that the Northern Ireland position has been improving over the past decade and a half. The gap between Northern Ireland and the OECD average has closed, and that is positive. Fewer Northern Ireland adults are performing at the lowest levels of literacy, and more are performing at level 2. Despite all those improvements, there is still a major challenge ahead if we are to further close the gap with the OECD average and with the best-performing countries.

I trust that this has been helpful, and we are happy to take any questions that you might have.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you very much for your presentation, Victor. There was a lot of food for thought there. Why are Scotland and Wales not part of this? Did they not take part?

Mr Dukelow: They chose not to do so. Part of it was down to cost for them. Also, they had been involved in looking at measures to assess their own performance. The difficulty is that it is very difficult to compare yourself with others internationally, which is why we were keen to engage in this process. It is really the only vehicle available to countries to be able to compare themselves with others internationally. From our perspective, it is a shame that Scotland and Wales did not participate, because it would have been very interesting to compare ourselves across the UK and not just with England. It is interesting that, on the same publication day, the EU has brought out its own report on the results of this, and it is suggesting that it will encourage member states to use structural funds to pay for this work. The EU sees the value of it, and considers that it is important for EU countries to participate. So, it may well be that the next time there is the opportunity to participate in this, Scotland and Wales will take up that offer and participate then.

Mr Buchanan: On the basis of what you have seen to date, how long will it take for Northern Ireland to close the gap with the OECD average?

Mr Dukelow: That is difficult to predict. We have moved from being 11 points behind to being four points behind in the past 15 or 16 years. If everyone were to continue on the same trajectory, you would expect that we would surpass the average in the next decade or so, but these things can change and other factors are at play.

One aspect worth drawing out in all of this is the importance of the supply side and ensuring that people have these skills. We have been focusing on the supply side and on trying to improve such skills. The essential skills strategy is one of our weapons to tackle that problem.

However, there is also an economic context to all of this. Having a stronger-performing economy in which people are employed, and where that employment is in higher-value activities, in itself, sustains improvement. So, I think that the economic strategy for Northern Ireland is important in all of this. Achieving the vision of a high-value, export-oriented economy, with success shared widely across the community — in tandem with the essential skills provision that we have and the work that is going on in DE — will, I think, have the best chance of success and moving us up that OECD ranking.

Ms McGahan: Thank you for your presentation. The agrifood sector employs 92,000 people in the North of Ireland. A key weakness in the food and drinks industry is that it has more people of working age with no qualifications. Your presentation states that the lowest scores of literacy and numeracy are in the food industry, along with others. Earlier this year, the Minister for Employment and Learning said that it was a priority area for skills provision. Will you explain why there is no improvement in that sector?

Mr Dukelow: I am not sure. It is difficult to say from the figures that we got, and remember that we are getting this quite fresh. We have not yet been able to compare 1996 with the current period at a sectoral level. I am not sure that we could say that they have not improved. They may still be performing at the bottom end, and I think that that is what the latest survey is showing. We would need to go back and have a further look at that.

Ms McGahan: That would be quite important because the industry is one of the largest employers.

Mr Dukelow: Yes.

Mr Young: This is a general point and it certainly does not identify the sector that you mentioned specifically, but it is interesting that of the 350,000-odd enrolments in essential skills that I mentioned, about 36% are people in employment. One of the focuses that we have had for essential skills is not just people who are unemployed or coming through FE programmes, it is also on people in work. Over a third of all enrolments to our essential skills programme are from people in work. That is one of the things that we will continue to want to do, and it will include people in the sector that you mentioned.

Mr F McCann: Thanks for the interesting presentation. Anything that shows an increase in people's literacy and numeracy has to be appreciated and commended. I am probably just adding to what Bronwyn said: there seems to be a clear indication from the geographical spread that the increase near-enough depends on where you come from. If you come from a family that is well educated, your children are going to be better educated. If you come from families that are high earners, you are liable to be in that bracket. We talk constantly about those not in education, employment or training (NEET) being heavily concentrated in working-class communities where there are high levels of deprivation. Do you have a geographical breakdown of concentrations of people with numeracy and literacy difficulties?

Mr Young: I am not sure whether Victor has that information. It is worth saying that, looking at enrolments in essential skills, if you break it down into the quintiles of the population then the lowest performing fifth is where 30% of the essential skills enrolments are. From the next 20% up, there is 23%. So, our figures are showing that we are focusing on, and hitting, those in the most deprived areas, and that would be consistent across Northern Ireland where we have access. It is an area in which there is more to be done. However, we have a very strong focus on enrolments in the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland.

Mr Dukelow: I will add to that. I mentioned our plans to exploit some of this data further. We have a research plan in our research agenda for this. The data gives us a great predictive capacity. If we know people's characteristics, we can very successfully predict whether they are going to have low or high literacy skills, and that model helps us on that basis. Recently, we got the census data for Northern Ireland. We are planning a micro-simulation model in which we can use the results from the data and the characteristics that we know from the census to identify where people with the lowest levels of literacy are likely to reside, at a very micro level, in Northern Ireland, right down to census output area.

Mr Stephen McGonagle (Department for Employment and Learning): Super output area.

Mr Dukelow: That work is planned and we will bring it back to you.

Mr F McCann: That is an essential element of the work. Sammy will tell you that parts of east Belfast have a problem. David will tell you that parts of Carrick have a problem, Bronwyn will tell you the same thing about Dungannon and I can talk about parts of Belfast. We can identify many areas where there are traditional problems in education, literacy and numeracy and in trying to obtain employment.

It is great to get reports showing that some of the problems are being solved, but when you are at the coalface, it just seems to get worse. You can look at attainment levels in schools; the schools that had problems 10 years ago are still having problems.

You talked about enrolments. Are your figures just on enrolments or are they on completions?

Mr Young: The figures are for enrolments. We do have some figures for retention and achievement. About 89% of enrolments complete the course. That is a fairly high retention rate. The achievement rate for those who finish the course — those who get their qualification — is about 62%. Therefore, of those who start, about 55% will get their qualification.

Some of those figures seem quite low, but when you set them beside the fact that we are dealing with people who have the most severe difficulties in this area, and that the figures are on a par with some of the figures coming out of the school system, where there is a complete mix of cohort, they are not too bad. Those are areas on which we would continue to press with our colleges and providers to try to further improve retention and achievement rates.

Mr F McCann: In the presentation you mentioned 360,000 enrolments, which gives the impression that we are moving forward, but, when you drill down into the figures, the situation is not as good as we may have seen.

Mr Young: Those 350,000 enrolments turn into almost 200,000 qualifications.

Mr F McCann: So 150,000 do not?

Mr Young: Indeed. I guess that there is more likelihood of a failure rate in that cohort.

We talked about the Department of Education (DE). It may be worth mentioning that, with DE, we are trying to pilot the use of essential skills in schools alongside GCSEs for young people who are at risk of not getting a grade C to see whether that might help them to get a grade C. If not, they might at least come out with an essential skills qualification rather than having to do that when they leave school. That is an interesting pilot that we hope to take forward next year.

The Deputy Chairperson: OK, thank you. No one else has indicated that they wish to comment further. Thank you for coming to the Committee to make your presentation and take questions.