



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Initial Teacher Education Review: DEL
Briefing

23 October 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Robin Swann (Chairperson)
Mr Sammy Douglas
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Fra McCann
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Mrs Nuala Kerr	Department for Employment and Learning
Mrs Carol McCabe	Department for Employment and Learning

The Chairperson: I welcome Nuala Kerr, director of higher education, and Carol McCabe, head of quality and the initial teacher education branch. Ladies, you are very welcome. Over to you.

Mrs Nuala Kerr (Department for Employment and Learning): Chair, thank you for the opportunity to brief the Committee on the review of initial teacher education infrastructure.

The Committee will be aware that this is stage two of a review that we have been undertaking. The stage one study was published earlier this year, and the Minister made a statement to the Assembly on 28 May. A report was compiled by the consultants Grant Thornton and, on foot of that, Grant Thornton appeared before the Committee at its meeting in July.

On 16 September, the Minister announced his appointment of Dr Pasi Sahlberg as the chair of the review panel for the second stage of the review. Dr Sahlberg is the director-general of the national Centre for International Mobility and cooperation in Finland. He is joined by four panel members from outside Northern Ireland. They are Professor Patricia Broadfoot, Professor John Coolahan, Professor John Furlong and Professor Gordon Kirk. The Committee was provided with details of the panel members at the time of their appointment

It is important for us that all the panel members have an international reputation and a recognised level of expertise working in international development in the field of education, particularly at a policy development level. They are independent of government in Northern Ireland and generally.

The Committee has received the background paper that sets out the scope of this stage of the review. Since we issued the paper to the Committee, we have engaged with the panel. Lately we have asked for submissions from the higher education institutions and invited them to submit opinion papers to the panel. We also plan to place an advertisement in the local press to extend that invitation to the widest possible audience of stakeholders. The intention is that once those papers have been received from

the high education institutions, the panel will have the opportunity for detailed discussions with each of them to consider the proposals that they have put forward.

I am happy to take any questions that you might have.

The Chairperson: With regards to the terms of reference of the group, how will they be influenced by the Grant Thornton report? What information will they be given from it?

Mrs Kerr: The Grant Thornton report sets the scene for us. It essential sets the baseline information about the cost structures relating to the infrastructure associated with initial teacher education. The focus of this group is really to look at international best practice for the structuring of the delivery of initial teacher education. I think that it is at the end of the panel's view of the situation that we will bring stage one and stage two together and look at where we go from there.

The Chairperson: So they are not going to be influenced by the cost structures? The intention of their review is about practice solely, rather than cost?

Mrs Kerr: I cannot say that they will be completely uninfluenced by it, because that information is available. However, the focus of their work is to look at international best practice, to see how that is relevant to the Northern Ireland situation and to take the views of the institutions into account. Carol, did you want to say something?

Mrs Carol McCabe (Department for Employment and Learning): One of the things that they will be doing at the third stage is to look at an overview of what is happening with teacher education internationally and across the UK and the Republic of Ireland. The panel will then engage with the sector as much as possible — the people that Nuala has just talked about. It will then enter a stage that will bring all that information together with what we have drawn from stage one. So, part of their role will be to bring as much information together as possible. Stage one will play its part in that, but it is as well as all the information that has been gathered from meetings with the sector, papers from the sector and the panel's international experience. It will form a part of it, but it will also be part of a much bigger engagement.

The Chairperson: The panel is going to be responsible?

Mrs McCabe: The panel will bring all that together.

The Chairperson: They will use the Grant Thornton information?

Mrs McCabe: Yes. The panel will bring all that together as part of the terms of reference.

Mr P Ramsey: There are a number of areas that I am duly concerned about; I have shared them previously and will share them again. The scoping that you talked about, and even the terms of reference, indicate preferred options. I am reading from paragraph 6, which is about international panels:

"Teacher education elsewhere in Europe and further afield has moved away from small, specialist teacher education institutions."

You are steering the independent panel in a direction that may not be politically what the parties in Stormont might wish. I think you know exactly what I am getting at. We then go on to the terms of reference. Nuala, during your presentation, you placed great emphasis on saying that we are waiting on higher education's participation this year, but I failed to hear you say that another Department that should have a huge involvement in this collaboratively is the Department of Education. There is not one word in this document or in your presentation to say that there is a need for that strong collaboration. That Department has a fundamental role in the provision of teachers.

I am worried, and I make it again about shared future and everything else. There has to be a place in the context of Northern Ireland for organisations such as Stranmillis and St Mary's, which have a strong Christian ethos. That is not reflected in anything that I have seen here, and it should be. The Department should be looking at that instead of steering with these two documents. Anything that I have seen in front of me is steering. The panel may be independent, but I wonder how independent they are when they are being steered very clearly in a direction, which is clearly the Minister's

direction. The Minister has very strong passions on this front, in terms of the closure of St Mary's and Stranmillis.

Sorry for going on, Chair. There are circumstances in which we can have greater shared services. There is absolutely no doubt that that can happen between St Mary's and Stranmillis. The appetite is there. The question is whether, fundamentally, you take away the proud governance that there has been in the past to do it. On behalf of the SDLP, I make the point that the report will not be independent in its structure. It will be prefaced and led by the preferred options that the Department is leading on through the Minister.

Mrs Kerr: I am disappointed that you feel that we would go into this without an open mind on the issues. We have done our best to find a panel of international standing that can bring independent views. What we said about what is happening in international best practice is a matter of fact; it does not prejudge the outcome of the situation. We have asked that exact question to the higher education providers for initial teacher education. We have posed the question to them. That is their view of what is happening as representing international best practice and its applicability to Northern Ireland.

Mr P Ramsey: Why is there no collaboration with the Department of Education?

Mrs Kerr: We are in discussion with the Department of Education on this. In an ideal world, we would already have the Department of Education's review of the content of teacher education, but we are running the structural review alongside that as far as we can, and we are in close contact with officials.

Mr P Ramsey: Before the terms of reference were sent out with all these bullet points that you referred to, was the Department of Education consulted?

Mrs Kerr: We have shared those with the Department of Education.

Mr P Ramsey: Can you share what its responses were?

Mrs McCabe: We have made it quite clear that we, as a Department, are responsible for the infrastructure, and the terms of reference for this particular review focus on the terms of reference. We have shared it with the Department of Education, but we have been quite clear that our focus in the review is on —

Mr P Ramsey: That is the dilemma that I have, because I do not believe that your focus is the focus that the political parties in Northern Ireland desire.

Mrs Kerr: I want to make it clear that, when we talk about the focus, we mean what is within the vires of our Department to influence. The authority of our Department relates to the funding of the structures of teacher education. That is our remit and our authority to operate. When we talk about the focus, we are talking about that aspect of it, not in terms of determining the outcome of the review before it begins.

Mr F McCann: Pat has covered a lot of what I was going to say. In response to a question by Sammy Douglas to the Minister last week, it was very clear that the Minister believes that there is no future for either Stranmillis or St Mary's in teacher training. Does that not make what we are about to go through a charade, because there are predetermined decisions made about the future of it?

Mrs Kerr: I am sorry that you formed that view. The Minister has already stated his belief that, for example, Stranmillis ought to merge with Queen's University, but, within that context, the review will take into account the cost issues. The evidence from the stage one review is that the institutions as they stand are funded at a premium — we estimate, some 40% higher than the institutions for teacher training are funded in GB. So we are paying a premium for the teacher education and the other students who attend those teacher education institutions, because those institutions require to be sustained at that level where we pay a premium and have additional students, for whom we also pay a premium, to allow them to be financially sustainable. That is a situation that our Minister has to take into account in terms of the funding. That is one issue that emerges from stage one.

What we need to know, irrespective of the funding issue, is: what is the best structure that teacher education needs to operate in? That is a question that the panel is primarily focused on. What should the best structure look like? It is only as a third question that we bring the funding issues and the

recommendations together to see what the possible options are for the future. I do not believe that there is a predetermined view about what that ought to be.

Mr F McCann: Even from listening to your answer there, it seems that the vast majority of it is around cost, and that goes back to exactly what the Chair asked. That will lead everybody, because what the Minister believes is not necessarily what the rest of the Assembly believes. Cost will have an impact on the outcome of this, not the high-quality level of training that the educationalists provide.

Mrs Kerr: I do not believe that those are two irreconcilable objectives.

Mr F McCann: They are if we are making a decision on the future of two universities.

Mrs Kerr: The primary objective is to ensure that we have high-quality provision there. Our responsibility is to provide the structures that allow that to take place, in that we fund the institutions, but we also have to take into account the cost of achieving that objective. That also has to be a consideration.

Mr F McCann: Through your presentation and answers you often quoted the Minister, but would you not agree that the Minister's belief is that there is no place in the future for Stranmillis or St Mary's as they are at present?

Mrs Kerr: I think the Minister has made his view clear in relation to Stranmillis — that merger with Queen's is his preferred option. His view is that we need to achieve high-quality facilities that respect cost and the issue of a shared future agenda. We need to be able to achieve both of those. The Minister is asking the panel to provide him with an international perspective on what the best result would be in terms of the structures that will allow the highest-quality training for initial teacher provision. Cost is a consideration in all of that.

Mr Douglas: I have a few questions. From looking at the terms of reference, there seems to be a focus on larger universities and institutions. Yet we have Dr John Coolahan from the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, which is the smallest university in the Republic of Ireland — although, from what I know, it is also the fastest-growing. Why is there such an emphasis on large institutions? I have said this before in Committee: when I look at some of the faith-based universities in the UK and the USA, I see that they are doing very well. So will that be part of the consideration — looking at other faith-based universities, and going back to the point that Pat made?

Mrs Kerr: We are relying on the esteemed panel of experts to bring their expertise from across the broad spectrum of what represents the best possible structure. We hope that they will take into account the full range of international experience that is out there and be able to draw on that. We also expect our local institutions to be aware of those developments internationally and to be able to present those arguments in the material that they present to the panel for consideration. So, we expect this to be a two-way discussion. As well as that, there is the opportunity for third parties who are neither the institutions nor the panel to be able to make representations. So, when we invite representations to be made, we expect all those issues to be drawn in and the panel to have the opportunity to give them full consideration.

Mr Douglas: Will the panel also look at other aspects of provision? Let me give you an example. It is certainly not in my area, but St Mary's is based on the Falls Road in west Belfast, and it has a huge impact on that community and is a force for good. My fear is that we go down this route without taking into consideration the employment, the culture and the confidence in those communities. Belfast Met in east Belfast is very important to that area, but if you just look at the structures — so will they be looking at other factors? This could be a slippery slope to other major developments that provide employment and confidence in areas that have suffered so much as a result of the Troubles.

Mrs Kerr: These are educational experts, and the primary focus of what we are asking them to do is examine the structures that will allow initial teacher education to take place in the best possible environment.

Mr Douglas: Surely if they are looking at an institution in, say, Chicago, London, Glasgow or wherever, they will look at the environment as well. It is not just about the institution. It is about the placement, the impact and the focus of that institution in the community. Surely you cannot divorce the two.

Mrs Kerr: At this stage of the report, what we are asking the panel to examine are the educational aspects. If any issues emerge that involve impacts on individual institutions, those will be addressed in the following stage, where wider considerations can be taken into account. The people on the panel are being asked to bring their educational expertise to bear on our situation and to advise on a range of options for how we can achieve the best possible initial teacher education opportunities for Northern Ireland.

Mr Douglas: So, at this point in time, Nuala, you are saying that these people are experts in their field but that they will look at other aspects.

Mrs Kerr: Yes.

Mr Douglas: Finally, what is the timescale for the process and for St Mary's and whoever to get back to you?

Mrs McCabe: The timescale for the whole process is that we want the panel to produce a report for the Minister during 2014. We are aiming for spring/summer.

Mr Douglas: I am asking about the process.

Mrs McCabe: Leading up to that, we have sent out letters to the institutions asking them to come back to us with a paper submission within the next month or so.

Mr Douglas: Is that not a very short timescale?

Mrs McCabe: We are working flexibly with them. We are gathering as much information from the institutions as we can to inform the meetings that the panel will have with them. So, there is a bit of flexibility in that, yes, we need submissions from them, but we also want to make sure that the panel is sufficiently informed before it has its discussions. If possible, we would like all of that to happen by the end of this calendar year. That would allow time after Christmas to look at the information that we have gathered and what we still need to gather.

Mrs Kerr: It is probably worth recording that we alerted the institutions earlier in the year about what we were likely to be doing in this process, and we have already received a submission from the University of Ulster, for example. Therefore, they will have been working on possible submissions and their thoughts about this already, and they will advise us accordingly. Although it looks like quite a tight timetable, most of the institutions involved will have been working on this already.

Mr P Ramsey: There is no question. Nuala talked at length about financial stability, which is a reasonable point. However, there was no acknowledgement that both colleges — Stranmillis and St Mary's — are making enormous efforts to reduce that deficit. I want to ask you again. This is my opinion: this is all prefaced to getting an end result. You state in your submission:

"Stage Two – Options Study

... Northern Ireland will set out options for a more shared, integrated and financially sustainable landscape".

Do you not think that that is steering an independent panel down a route that does not, in any way, acknowledge the tremendous contribution of Christian and faith-based organisations in Northern Ireland? There is not one single mention of that in these documents. It is all about setting out options for a more shared — forcing the independent panel down a road — integrated and financially sustainable landscape. Therefore, according to you, going forward in Northern Ireland there is no place for those organisations that have played such a tremendous role for previous generations.

Mrs Kerr: Chair, I do not think that that is an interpretation that I would wish you to place on those terms of reference. All of the institutions will have the opportunity to make the case and to explain how they fit into how international best practice operates. In our terms of reference, we have set out how we see what international best practice may or may not look like. However, the panel will bring its expertise and experience of those issues from other places.

Mr P Ramsey: We are not going to fall out about it, but Northern Ireland is in a unique position because of where we are and what we have done. Not once — to date or during this meeting — have you used the terminology to acknowledge that yes, Pat, St Mary's and Stranmillis have made an enormous contribution to Northern Ireland and to the education system. You have not done that.

Mrs Kerr: With respect, Chair, my task here is to talk about the structures that are required to deliver initial teacher education. We fund these institutions — St Mary's and Stranmillis — for that purpose. Therefore, it goes without saying that we acknowledge that they are there and that we fund them, at a premium, for that purpose. They are critical to this review, and their participation in the review is critical. Their influence and the views that they present to the panel will help us to end up with the best structures that will allow the best opportunities for young people in Northern Ireland in the future.

Mr P Ramsey: I am sure that we will come back to it.

The Chairperson: Nuala, you said that they are critical, and it comes back to that exactly: their input is critical, because, whatever way the review goes, their future is at stake. Their input is critical, and I am concerned, as Sammy pointed out, that we are maybe not giving them enough time to involve with the panel of experts. Are they being given enough open access to the panel of experts?

Mrs Kerr: Our view is that there will be ample time for their engagement. Initially, we are asking for a written submission from them that will set out their perspective on this. They will have already been alerted to the fact that we will be asking for that, and I think that that has been well advanced in a number of institutions before the formal request has gone out to them. They are due to submit that submission towards the end of November.

The Chairperson: Will they have an opportunity to engage with the panel on a one-to-one basis, on a board-of-governors basis and on a staff basis?

Mrs Kerr: That is a preamble. The written reports are a preamble to their engagement with the panel. After that, they will have the opportunities that you talked about for in-depth discussions with the panel members to flesh out what they have said and for that engagement to be as meaningful as it can be.

The Chairperson: Nuala and Carol, thank you very much for your time. I think that you are fully aware of the feelings of the members and the parties on this. I think that the Minister is well aware of it also, and I am sure that he will look into this afternoon's session.

Mrs Kerr: Can I just record, Chair, that we will write to you formally, because we are keen to hear the Committee's perspective on this.

The Chairperson: Thank you.