



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Programme-led Apprenticeships:
Colleges NI and Unite

5 February 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Employment and Learning

Programme-led Apprenticeships: Colleges NI and Unite

5 February 2014

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
Mr Fra McCann
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Ms Karen Lennon	Colleges NI
Mr Liam Gallagher	Irish Region, Unite
Mr Michael Melaugh	North West Regional College
Mr Brian Doran	Southern Regional College

The Chairperson: I welcome Brian Doran, the chief executive of the Southern Regional College; Michael Melaugh, head of the school of construction and engineering craft in the North West Regional College; Liam Gallagher, chairman of the Irish Region of Unite the union; and Karen Lennon, policy and public affairs manager, Colleges NI. You are very welcome this morning. I will hand over to you. Karen, I take it that you are leading.

Ms Karen Lennon (Colleges NI): Absolutely. Thank you, Robin. Colleges NI welcomes the opportunity to set out the views of the further education sector in Northern Ireland on the programme-led apprenticeships (PLAs) in electrotechnical. This is in response to points that SummitSkills raised during its presentation to the Committee in May 2013. That presentation specifically challenged the programme-led apprenticeships as a training programme suitable for the electrical industry. In particular, it challenged the fact that PLA was being used to train electricians up to NVQ level 2. As colleges, we fundamentally recognise that, to be a fully trained electrician, a level 3 qualification is required. We see the PLA as acting as a pathway of progression to that level 3 qualification. Recognising our time limitations this morning, we have set out our views in a paper that was submitted to the Committee, and today I will simply summarise our four key points.

First, programme-led apprenticeships were an interim solution only, which operated alongside the main ApprenticeshipsNI programme in Northern Ireland. They were introduced in 2009 by the then Minister for Employment and Learning, Reg Empey, during the economic downturn, as a temporary intervention. PLAs were aimed at providing young people who were either unable to find employment

as an apprentice or had been made redundant as a result of the downturn with the opportunity to gain an industry-approved level 2 qualification in their chosen area and then to progress to level 3.

A programme-led apprenticeship framework was developed in conjunction with the Electrical Training Trust (ETT) and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) to allow a seamless progression to the level 3 framework. The PLAs were delivered to the same standard as the ApprenticeshipsNI programme that was contracted by ETT. So, for example, the students who were undertaking a PLA were taught in the same class as the students undertaking the main ApprenticeshipsNI framework. The colleges, I should say, were never permitted under DEL guidelines to market the PLAs as a programme in their own right. PLAs were just a fallback for when all efforts to secure an employer-led apprenticeship for those young people had been exhausted. ETT was the sole contracted provider for level 3 apprenticeships in the electrotechnical apprenticeship framework.

Furthermore, ETT had subcontracted delivery to five of our six regional FE colleges across Northern Ireland. The colleges worked very closely together to develop the PLA framework, including the entrance criteria to get on to a PLA in the first instance — for example, covering the health and safety requirements that were needed to enter the PLA scheme.

Secondly, despite PLAs being an interim solution, I want to share some of the significant outcomes that were in place for our learners. I will set the numbers in context. Over the three-year period 2009-2010 to 2011-12, in Northern Ireland, just over 11,000 individuals were involved in programme-led apprenticeships. Today, we are talking about those individuals who were enrolled in an electrotechnical PLA, which was a total of 454 individuals over that three-year period. In context, we are talking about 4% of all PLAs over the three-year period. Look at some of the outcomes that those individuals achieved: 172 individuals progressed to level 3 in electrotechnical apprenticeships, and a further 174 individuals progressed to another FE course, another apprenticeship or employment. Those figures by themselves demonstrate the important role that the PLA scheme played during the economic downturn in ensuring that young people could pursue a training route with clear progression pathways into an apprenticeship at level 3 or other training and employment outcomes.

I should also say that PLA students have been very successful in achieving regional and national recognition in a variety of arenas. Recently, our Minister stated that skills competition is vital in raising the standards of our training and upskilling our workforce. Accolades and achievements from some of our PLAs are as follows. The WorldSkills event is held globally every two years. In 2011, the event was held in London, and one of our electrotechnical PLAs represented the UK squad. This year, we are working towards the WorldSkills event in Brazil, which takes place in 2015. We are delighted to say that five of our PLAs in electrotechnical training have been selected for the UK squad pool, which is recognition of the progress that those individuals have made and the level of skill that they have achieved.

My third point is that programme-led apprenticeships have resulted in a significant contribution to the Northern Ireland economy during very difficult times, and the colleges have played an intrinsic role in that. As I stated, 76% of our trainees have gone on to become electricians, with a level 3 apprenticeship qualification, have completed an FE course or have gone straight into employment.

The opportunity cost of not introducing the PLA scheme in 2009, during the recession, would have been the loss of those individuals. We have a rising problem with young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) in Northern Ireland, and the PLA scheme was introduced in 2009 and helped us to avoid an increase in the number of people who were not in education, employment or training. So the PLA was pragmatic when it was introduced in 2009.

The final point is about the current contracting arrangements for electrotechnical commissioning, and I will pass over to Brian to cover that.

Mr Brian Doran (Southern Regional College): I will close by highlighting the points that Karen raised. The PLA scheme, though not without its difficulties or flaws, produced, for many young people, opportunities for progression to the apprenticeship for electricians. That is borne out by the figures that we presented.

The PLA scheme has gone, and we are into new contracting arrangements under Training for Success and the new apprenticeship contracts. As a group of six colleges, we are mindful that two reviews are under way: the review of apprenticeships and the review of youth training. It is important that a training option exists for a young person who does not necessarily have the requisite

qualification for progressing directly to an electrotechnical level 3 apprenticeship or is unable to gain employment through the apprenticeship scheme.

Under the Training for Success contracted provision, there is only a level 3 apprenticeship framework for electrotechnical training; there is no level 2. We must ensure that there is an appropriate training programme under the new youth training, whatever recommendations flow from the youth training and apprenticeship reviews.

The details behind our points are provided in our more detailed paper to the Committee.

Mr Liam Gallagher (Irish Region, Unite): Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence. I represent the Unite trade union, which is one of the largest trade unions in Ireland.

Probably the greatest problem — all MLAs would recognise this — is the plight of 18- to 24-year-olds in getting employment and the need to address the huge numbers of people in Northern Ireland who are described as "economically inactive".

The PLA scheme was a proper and timely intervention by DEL when it was introduced. In areas of the north-west and Belfast, employers were very thin on the ground, which unfortunately is still the case. In an ideal world, there would be full employment. Employment-led apprenticeships are definitely the way to go. However, we find it absolutely necessary that, when you have periods of high unemployment in the current economic downturn, there must be remedial measures. That is exactly what the PLA scheme was. Nobody ever claimed that the PLA scheme was an alternative to an apprenticeship route; it was a remedial measure by the colleges.

We have many members in the colleges who are highly skilled at delivering such programmes. The PLA scheme was delivered efficiently and was open to scrutiny by DEL and by auditors. We have clearly stated the outcomes of the scheme. It was not perfect, and no scheme is immune from abuse, but there were clear checks and balances in how it was reviewed.

Some of this is academic in so far as we are moving into a review of apprenticeships. However, the point that Brian made, which our colleagues in the colleges are also making, is that there has to be a collaborative approach. We do not want a situation in which one set of interests is competing against another. We have one common aim, which is to get young people upskilled, which is badly needed at this time. It should be done collaboratively, but there should be clear, definite and demonstrably fair routes of progressing from one scheme to another.

The Chairperson: Thank you, folks, for your presentation. I do not think that you have said anything that the Committee could disagree with. That is the point. You asked for the right to reply, and I think that you have done that very ably and fairly. I do not think anybody ever said that the PLAs were not needed when they were introduced in 2009, because they served a purpose.

What has been your involvement, so far, in the review of apprenticeships?

Mr Doran: As individual colleges, we are engaging in that. I, along with two other principals, sat on the expert panel representing colleges in Northern Ireland. Colleges NI will be collating and putting together a Colleges NI response, and individual colleges may be doing so in the coming weeks. Having read through the recommendations, I think that it is fair to say that I welcome much of the paper's content. Again, I reiterate the point that we have the ongoing youth training review, and we should not necessarily look at these two issues in isolation. Both are very closely linked in respect of the training route that will offer good progression opportunities for young people. Hopefully, the Committee will agree with that. That is important, but we need to get it right. It repeats Liam's point: this is about our working with the sector skills councils and employers. As six colleges, we believe that, in the context of electrotechnical, we have a strong day-to-day engagement across Northern Ireland with electrical contractors, and long may that remain.

Ms Lennon: We are responding to the consultation that ends in April this year. We also responded to the original October 2013 consultation. As college representatives, we also went to some of the DEL workshops for the review of apprenticeships. As Brian said, we are raising some points here today that will feed into our youth training submission, which will go in this Thursday, and to our apprenticeship submission for April.

The Chairperson: Liam talked about a collaborative approach. Are you finding that through the stakeholder forum? Are you getting a collaborative approach, or are individual interests being raised?

Mr Doran: There will always be competing interests. It is important that all stakeholders park their prejudices and interests to ensure that we come up with appropriate programmes of training and apprenticeship training that are right for Northern Ireland. That is the bottom line. It is not an easy task, as I am sure you will appreciate. There has to be that willingness on the part of all stakeholders.

The Chairperson: Karen, you gave us the numbers. I think that it was 454.

Ms Lennon: Yes.

The Chairperson: Where did the 106 who did not follow through go to? Do you have that data?

Ms Lennon: The data that we collated was based on information on learners who were with the colleges, so it is information that was held by the colleges. That is the information on progression that we could get easily. We do not have all the information to hand on the remaining ones that you mention, Robin.

Mr Doran: It would also be fair to say that the figures that we present are the worst-case scenario. That does not mean that we do not know where or what they have gone to. We suspect that a significant number have ended up in employment or, for that matter, apprenticeship training, potentially with other private training organisations. The figures are the collation of figures from the six regional colleges.

Mr P Ramsey: Good morning, Colleges Northern Ireland. It is good to see you here. As the Chair made clear, you are putting the record straight, and you have had the opportunity to do that. We welcome that. We all know the contribution that Colleges Northern Ireland makes in preparing young people for the big bad world.

The Chair, in particular, is constantly reminding the Department and the Minister that there is a swathe of strategies out there. Maybe everyone is getting a different strategy, which is good, because it has been making people think and be more creative. We have a new apprenticeship model looking at intermediate and higher-level apprenticeships. We also have the economic inactivity strategy, which has just been launched. I believe that Colleges Northern Ireland has an immense contribution to make. I asked the Minister about traditional apprenticeships, as we know them — electrical or mechanical and the normal trades. It is important that they are retained. I want to see what Colleges Northern Ireland will do. We are only as good as the information that we have, but we want to support Colleges Northern Ireland. Karen, you made the point that it is not only about NEETs but the raft of people in our community who have no work or are trying to secure work and the difference that the colleges can make in affording them the opportunity to advance into a formal apprenticeship or education. I am keen to hear about that.

Ms Lennon: Pat, we would be very happy to present to the Committee in due course about the role of the colleges, the range of offers that we have across the sectors in Northern Ireland and how we can contribute to the Northern Ireland economy.

Mr Doran: If it is appropriate, Chair, we would be happy to come back to share with you our thinking on both reviews in due course.

Mr P Ramsey: Traditional apprenticeships are also important.

Mr Doran: Absolutely.

Mr P Ramsey: Liam and Michael are here from the north-west, and you talked about engagement with the business community or industry. Maybe they could use the occasion and the programme-led apprenticeships. There has been dialogue, partnership and collaboration, and there is an expectation that much more must happen if we are to make a difference.

Mr Doran: May I make one further point? I totally agree with you. Our understanding, in the broadest sense, is based on the apprenticeships that currently exist. This is a real opportunity for us to

introduce new and exciting apprenticeships, right through to higher level apprenticeships, as a real alternative to the more traditional academic university —

Mr P Ramsey: As well.

Mr Doran: — provision. Of course, as well. We are developing apprenticeships that are fit for purpose and meet employers' needs.

Mr P Ramsey: Agreed.

Mr Gallagher: Pat is absolutely right, and I am delighted that he raised that point. In the north-west, Pat and his colleagues have insisted that the colleges buy into a regeneration strategy. In other words, you have to show us what you will do in the economy locally, what skills you will provide, what the skills deficits are and how you will address that. That is absolutely essential. That type of information should be forthcoming.

Mr Buchanan: I welcome you here today. You talked about the absence of a level 2 framework for electrical trainees. What difficulties do you see and what concerns do you have about the future for training electricians in the absence of a level 2 qualification? Brian, you said that you sat on the panel for the review of apprenticeships. Did you raise any concerns about the absence of a level 2 framework at that forum?

Mr Doran: I will take the latter point first, Tom. No, because it fell outside the apprenticeship review. That matter falls under training and, therefore, the Training for Success contract. It is fair to say that we engaged with the Department. I will put it in some context. Since last September, the colleges are contracted to deliver full electrotechnical apprenticeships. That was not the case previously, and, therefore, five of the six colleges, as Karen said, were subcontracted to deliver the underpinning knowledge requirement from ETT. The consequence of parking the PLA scheme is that, in the Training for Success Skills for Work level 2 options, there must be an appropriate level 2 apprenticeship framework that you work towards. That is not the case in electrotechnical because there is only a level 3 apprenticeship. We raised the issue and have brokered what we view as an interim arrangement; Michael might want to comment on that. It is not necessarily meeting the full requirements, as we see it, of a trainee who does not get employment from day one as an apprentice, but it is a programme that we hope will enable those young people to progress, as the PLAs did under the previous scheme, if they gain employment. Remember that the colleges are proactively engaging with employers and trying to encourage them to take trainees on as full apprentices. That is our objective and goal, and that will remain the case. Mickey, you may want to comment on qualifications.

Mr Michael Melaugh (North West Regional College): The problem is that there is no level 2 technical qualification within a framework. Therefore, under the existing contract, there could not be a level 2 Skills for Work provision to enable a seamless progression in electrical installation. As a consequence of that, Brian and I had meetings with the Department to come up with an interim arrangement.

We are of the view that it is important to have a level 2 qualification in any training programme that enables progression to level 2 and level 3. That is not the case in electrical installation and electrotechnical commissioning, and that is an inhibitor to anybody who aspires to follow an electrical career pathway. That has been a problem this year, but we have worked with the Department to try to resolve it.

Mr Buchanan: Do you feel that you are making any progress in getting the Department to come forward with a level 2 qualification?

Mr Melaugh: Yes, we have made progress in that respect. The existing agreed arrangement is that any young person who aspired to access a level 3 apprenticeship framework in electrotechnical or electrical in general could, through the Skills for Work provision, do an engineering programme with an electrical bias. However, that does not have a distinct electrical installation qualification. That is not ideal for us or the participants who wish to progress to an electrotechnical apprenticeship.

We have made significant progress, and we hope that that will improve as the new youth training scheme is rolled out in the near future.

Mr Douglas: Thanks very much for your presentation. You highlighted the mechanical and electrical industry. Pat mentioned other trades, an example of which is coded welders. There are major difficulties in that area, and yet there is a huge demand in many industries for coded welders. Karen, would some of the issues that you raised apply to other sectors such as welding?

Mr Melaugh: I will answer that. The engineering frameworks have a level 2 pathway that is catered for in the existing Skills for Work arrangements, and a young person who wishes to access an apprenticeship at level 3 in the general engineering sector can access that through a level 2 learning pathway. Therefore, the problem of accessing an apprenticeship in engineering does not exist.

Mr Douglas: Is there a need to take it up to level 3? That is certainly what I have been told. Some in the industry have told me that we should have a European standard and that there is a difficulty in accessing level 3. Is that right, Brian?

Mr Doran: There are a number of points. It goes back to effective careers education and guidance. You used the example of welding and, for some reason and despite the demands and need, our young people are not aware of the opportunities that exist. Dare I say that it is one of those trade areas in which the hands get a little bit dirty, so perhaps it is not as attractive as, say, becoming an electrician. There is a block there, and it is very difficult to identify the reasons for it.

To reiterate Mickey's point: in some areas, such as fabrication welding, a level 2 provision exists. If we follow through on the recommendation that falls out of the apprenticeship review and start to see apprentices starting at level 3, the issue in electrotechnical that we highlighted and the need for a level 2 training option will apply across the spectrum. That is the point that we are trying to make. We need to get that right. The connect must be there in the youth training review and the apprenticeship review to ensure that young people have flexibility by means of progression. That progression may not ultimately lead to an apprenticeship but to an FE programme or some other provision.

Mr Lyttle: I want to make a brief comment. The Committee receives a lot of evidence, and I found Karen's presentation and the follow-up remarks to be extremely effective. It was a really useful and well-delivered presentation. Thank you.

The Chairperson: OK, folks. Thank you for your time and for coming along.