



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Youth Training: Colleges NI Briefing

7 May 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Employment and Learning

Youth Training: Colleges NI Briefing

7 May 2014

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Robin Swann (Chairperson)
Mr Sammy Douglas
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Mr Justin Edwards	Belfast Metropolitan College
Mr Gerard Campbell	Colleges NI
Ms Karen Lennon	Colleges NI
Mr Brian Doran	Southern Regional College

The Chairperson: Good morning, folks; you are very welcome to the Committee. I welcome Mr Gerard Campbell, chief executive of Colleges NI; Mr Brian Doran, chief executive of the Southern Regional College; Mr Justin Edwards, the assistant chief executive officer and director of curriculum at the Belfast Metropolitan College; and Ms Karen Lennon, the policy and public affairs manager at Colleges NI. You have two briefings for us this morning; the next one will be on the review of apprenticeships. We will take the first briefing now, and then move to questions. Following that, we will move to the second briefing.

Mr Gerard Campbell (Colleges NI): Thank you very much for the opportunity to come along this morning and brief the Committee on the review of youth training and the review of apprenticeships. There will probably be some elements that will have a crossover. We have been here quite a few times over the past number of months. I propose that we move pretty swiftly into a brief update on the review of youth training. My colleague Brian Doran will make some points, and then we will open it up to questions. Thereafter, Karen and Justin will give some information on the review of apprenticeships.

Mr Brian Doran (Southern Regional College): Thank you very much, Chairman. Colleges NI welcomes the Department's review into youth training. It is very much pertinent to the needs of further education. I will set that in the context of our current provision, before going into some of the comments around the review.

Almost 9,200 young people currently attend further education colleges. That represents 56% of the full-time cohort within the sector who are attending further education or training at level 2 or below. Of

that, 63% — 5,700 — are attending further education programmes at level 2 or below, and a further 3,400 are attending different strands of Training for Success. So, we are dealing with a sizeable cohort of young people who leave school at 16, and for whom the colleges are making provision. Whilst the colleges' preference is to be very much focused on provision at level 3 and above, we clearly have an identified need here — the young people who are exiting schools, many of whom do not have what we might deem to be the minimum requirements for progression to level 3, five GCSEs at grade C or above. Their needs are complex and quite challenging in relation to the provision in further education colleges.

We will examine some of the characteristics of the young people coming into further education and training in the colleges. Many of those young people have not met the requisite standard or entrant requirements for provision at level 3 in further education. Many of them have not secured apprenticeships and, therefore, are opting to undertake study and Skills for Work level 2. Many are undecided on a future career path. We also have a significant number of young people who progress from level 1 provision in FE, and the level 2 provision that we offer provides an opportunity of progression for them. If we set that in the context of the cohort of young people who we are addressing and, indeed, the context of the youth training review, we see that many challenges lie ahead. I will highlight some key points in the Colleges NI submission.

First, I come back to the issue of complexity and the challenges we all face. We believe that any training offer at level 3 must be truly vocational. By that I mean that we must look very closely at the qualifications issue. My colleague Justin will probably refer to qualifications that are central to the youth training review.

We are also conscious that we need to ensure that delivery is in the right environment and where resources — human or physical — are appropriate, so that individuals who are delivering are very much from an industry background and are able, therefore, to commit to programmes that are relevant to the future economy here in Northern Ireland. We would also advocate broader provision to ensure that literacy and numeracy needs are addressed, because many of those 9,000 young people to whom I referred do not have the level 2 equivalent at GCSE in literacy, numeracy or, indeed, ICT. Also, an important feature of any future provision will be work placements in industry. That, in itself, leads to further challenges. Placement opportunities must be well-structured and have the buy-in and involvement of employers. That, in itself, points us towards a greater level of partnership between the Sector Skills Councils, employers and, indeed, providers, including the colleges.

We also advocate project work being the fundamental component of any future level 2 provision to ensure that applied and contextualised learning is very much based in project work. So, as I mentioned, employer engagement is a critical issue here. If we look at what the academic pathway is through GCSEs and A levels, we see that we have a simplified route that is well understood and well accepted by employers, parents and young people. However, we have to say that we do not have such a clear and simplified progression route when it comes to vocational education and training.

One of the points that we make in our submission to the Department is about the creation of what we refer to as a technical vocational educational and training (TVET) model. This model is about creating a pathway that provides a simplified approach to ensuring that vocational provision at level 2 offers progression opportunities through apprenticeships and further education at level 3 and, indeed, above. Again, my colleagues Justin and Karen will comment on apprenticeships.

Careers education, advice and guidance is very much a core need in any future youth training provision. We, therefore, welcome the fact that an expert panel has been established to look at that very matter. I would like to make one further point, which is that careers education, advice and guidance is about pre-entry advice and guidance. Therefore, we need to ensure that young people and parents are aware of the opportunities that are open to them through the youth training programme. Equally important is the fact that careers education, advice and guidance is a continuum. It must not stop at the point of entry. It must be “part and parcel” of any future youth training provision.

I wish to make one further point on progression, which is that we must ensure that provision at level 2 offers clear progression pathways through to apprenticeships and, indeed, further education at level 3.

Chairman, you will recall from our previous submission, for example, on the electrical industry, that there are some areas where the framework for apprenticeships does not exist at level 2. Therefore, we must ensure that, under the youth training programme, that cohort of young people is catered for.

My last point is that the colleges are proactively engaged in supporting local schools in the delivery of the entitlement framework. If we look at the performance of colleges in that regard and at the retention and success rates over recent years of the provision offered by colleges, we see that, for the over 10,000 young people who attend colleges on a day-release basis to undertake vocational provision, there are retention rates of 98% and achievement rates of 90%-plus. That shows that something is working here, and it is that young people for whom the academic route is not necessarily the best route do respond when offered the opportunity to undertake vocational education and training at key stage 4, between the ages of 14 and 16. That is important in the context of youth training.

Although this review is looking at provision for school leavers between 16 and 18 — and this comes back to Gerry's point — I think that we have to look at it in the context of other reviews, including the reviews of GCSEs and A levels and apprenticeships. We firmly believe that if we can expand and increase that engagement with young people at 14 to 16 the numbers of young people coming through without the requisite qualifications will reduce over time. We, therefore, encourage the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education to look at that issue, which points to a real need for a joined-up 14-to-19 strategy when it comes to education and training.

Chair, that concludes the main points that I wanted to present to the Committee. I am happy to take and field any questions at this point.

The Chairperson: OK. Thanks, Brian. You touched on careers education, information and guidance, which this Committee has spent a long time on, as I am sure you are aware. We have seen the value in that. Are colleges succeeding in giving the correct careers education, advice and guidance to their students as they enter the door, never mind when they leave it?

Mr Doran: That is a good question. Certainly, the colleges represented here, and I am speaking for my own college, work to ensure that every single full-time student that enters the doors of the Southern Regional College will undergo what we call a pre-entry advice and guidance interview process. That is about sharing information with the young person and informing them about the programme of study to which they have applied. We will look at issues around progression and employment opportunity before that young person takes up a place at the college. We believe that and we demonstrate it through, for example, the standards of careers education and guidance.

Our college holds the Matrix Award, and we very much favour that type of improved quality of careers education, advice and guidance. Of course, like any organisation, we can improve in that regard, but what is increasingly important to us is ensuring that that careers education, the information that is provided to the young person, is with that young person well in advance of their even considering applying to a further education college or, for that matter, any other training provider. That remains the challenge; that independence and impartiality in relation to careers education, advice and guidance.

The Chairperson: I appreciate that you have given us the Southern Regional College's view, but you as here representing Colleges NI. Is there a collaborative approach?

Mr Doran: What I can share is, and again it comes through the collaborative network that exists across Colleges NI, the fact that all of our careers managers are meeting and sharing best practice. A level of collaboration and best practice is imparted across the six regional colleges.

Mr Justin Edwards (Belfast Metropolitan College): I was just going to mention that the Matrix accreditation is important. It is an external accreditation that looks at the independence and the value of what the colleges offer. Certainly, the colleges represented here today have their Matrix qualifications in place and I think that it is an external validation across the board that could be used with other organisations to make sure that they are also providing independent advice and guidance.

The Chairperson: The caveat being that that refers to those colleges represented here today. Is that a reflection on the other four?

Mr Edwards: Certainly, we can come back to you with information as to whether they all have that status. They may be being reassessed at the moment.

The Chairperson: Just to finish this point, our primary goal was to achieve a model of 14-to-19 education that serves as an alternative to the traditional academic route with an emphasis on quality education with labour market relevance. How do you ensure that?

Mr Doran: There are two points that I would make in relation to that, Chair. First, qualifications must be fit for purpose. One of our concerns is to look at what is happening in England presently, and there is a danger that policy in Northern Ireland will ultimately be dictated, dare I say, by Westminster policy. I am sure that that is not something that members want to see happening.

We have seen changes in the provision of vocational education following the Wolf report in England and that has implications for us by way of awarding bodies responding to what is happening in England. That has consequences for us in the context of what might fall out of the youth training review and the apprenticeship review. We are very conscious of that and we need to ensure that, when it comes to the qualifications, that they are fit for purpose — and fit for purpose for the needs of the Northern Ireland economy.

With that, we must also ensure that engagement with local employers is improved. We are the first to acknowledge that. Qualifications are one aspect of that, and we must have employer engagement. The fact that apprenticeships will ultimately be driven by the demands or needs of the economy is by itself an indicator that young people will make choices on the basis of what they see by way of opportunity across the economy.

Mr P Ramsey: Good morning. You are very welcome. I think that the Chair's comments were appropriate, given that we have just gone through a fairly intensive inquiry into careers guidance. For young people at 16 years of age, particularly when they come to a college with no academic qualifications, there is a level of uncertainty about their future. Many are persuaded by their peers or parents, in particular, to stay in education. What type of discussion takes place with the parents to guide them along a road or journey for their child?

Mr Doran: I will start off on that one, Pat, and, again, I go back to the pre-entry activities that colleges are undertaking. We strongly encourage parental involvement at that early stage, and very many parents respond to that. That is about communicating. We also need to improve how we communicate while students and young people are on our programmes of study. We use various tools. Parent-lecturer engagement midway through programmes provides progression opportunities, and we also keep them updated on future progression opportunities once the young people are on programmes. There is variation in practice across colleges, but I come back to the point that we collaborate on a number of fronts. We look at best practice in FE so that we can try to share that and create a level of consistency in the pre-entry and ongoing careers advice and guidance in colleges.

Mr Gerard Campbell: It is very important that there is close engagement between schools and the FE colleges at an earlier stage, maybe when pupils are aged 14 and beginning to make choices. They need to have a range of information about what career options, pathways and progression routes will be available in the future, as opposed to those decisions being taken at the age of 16. A plethora of different options and progression routes is available for young people aged 14, 15 and 16, and careers advice is particularly pertinent at that stage. It requires collaboration and partnership between the various agencies and partners involved.

Mr P Ramsey: The progression route is hugely important. Too often, I hear of young people in my constituency going into hairdressing but not having a career at the end of it because there are no jobs. There seems to be an over-capacity of that type of course, with young people not being pointed in the right direction. I encourage you to refocus and have a targeted resource to ensure that young people have personalised, tailor-made careers guidance. A key element of our lengthy inquiry was that young people are getting the wrong guidance at the wrong time, and that could end up being a life-destroying exercise for many.

Mr Doran: I will make one further point. In youth training and level 2 provision, it will not be a case of one size fits all. Earlier, I made points about the diverse needs of young people at the point of entry at 16 years of age. Some know exactly what career path they want, so that will have to be facilitated through a training programme. Others will have to be provided with an opportunity to look at and sample a range of provision to make a more informed choice. It comes back to Gerry's point that one of the main benefits of engagement with schools when young people are aged between 14 and 16 is that, having sampled a range of vocational areas in the six regional colleges, they make more informed decisions when they leave school after taking their GCSEs.

Ms Karen Lennon (Colleges NI): Pat, I would like to add a wee point on the careers side. I sit on a marketing managers working group. The marketing managers from each of the six colleges meet monthly to discuss different ways of marketing what we do and how to attract learners into the colleges. As part of that, all of our full-time student open days took place within a three or four-week period this year, the aim being to condense everything and help with the marketing campaign for FE. As part of that, we go out to schools and give talks. Historically, the marketing managers gave the talks, but we have changed how we do things, and careers advisers from the colleges now do that. That helps students and parents to make more informed choices. As you said, when young people are being advised to take an FE course, it is really important that they are also told what jobs and labour market information is available.

Mr P Ramsey: That is certainly most welcome, Karen. My final question is on the employer engagement that Brian has often talked about. That needs to be intensified to ensure an end product of placements or work opportunities, particularly in the public sector. Is there a change of mindset about youth training and, I suppose more importantly, the high-end apprenticeships that the Minister hopes to formalise?

Mr Doran: Perhaps the best way of answering that, Pat, is by saying that it is too early to say. There are many challenges ahead. We need to be very careful. As Gerry and I have said, a placement is a vital component of any level 2 training programme.

We will talk about the apprenticeship review in the next session. There is a clear challenge for employers: do they take on young people through placements at level 2, and do they offer apprenticeships? We have to look at mechanisms whereby we can have a much more structured approach to placements, leading on to, dare I say it, opportunities for progression to apprenticeships. That remains a challenge. There is no doubt about it.

Do we have all the answers to present to the Committee? I do not think that we do, but we have some suggestions to make about the brokering. We are very conscious that our economy is based on the microbusiness and SME sectors. Those small companies, because of the resources available to them, face many challenges that the larger companies do not when it comes to having well-structured and planned placements. So we have to work with them in a much more constructive way to bring clusters of SMEs and microbusinesses together in order to encourage them and work through the opportunities afforded to them by placements in a structured way.

Mr P Ramsey: Thanks very much. I will be keen to see how that progresses, particularly after the summer when you have commenced the new recruitment programme.

Ms McGahan: Thank you for your presentation. I have a general question. Do you feel that you are capable of meeting the needs of the economy, or are there potential weaknesses that may need to be examined?

Mr Doran: The colleges are well resourced, including on the physical side through newbuilds, and are very much geared up to meet the needs of industry. That does not mean that future investment will not be needed. It will, of course, be needed in the physical infrastructure.

The vast majority, if not all, of the lecturing staff employed in colleges to deliver vocational training have that expertise by way of industrial experience. They also have the requisite qualifications set down by the Department: that is a requirement. We certainly believe that we are well resourced to meet the current and future needs of the economy.

Colleges are also gearing up to deal with evolving and new areas, such as renewables and sustainable new technology, on a number of fronts. That is being done through investment in the physical infrastructure and by upskilling and ensuring that the personal development plans in colleges reflect the need to be able to respond to the local economy in the future. We are very much geared to looking at the immediate and future needs.

Mr Edwards: Some recent examples show how we adapt to the needs, such as through building in new qualifications. I know that the Minister presented to the Committee on the IT Assist programme and our other work in IT, but programmes such as Assured Skills are also delivering high employment rates. We have, for example, had a 100% success rate in getting employment in the IT industry for

participants in our Cloud Academy. Through that programme, we have addressed the IT skills shortage and built opportunities for Northern Ireland.

The colleges are very responsive to specific skills needs, and the new strategy on engineering skills will result in, for example, aeronautics manufacturing opportunities. This goes back to Pat's point about making sure that the message about those skills opportunities and the links between the colleges are fed back to 14-year-olds so that they understand the pathways to that employment. However, there are risks and Brian touched on those earlier. In England, some policy shifts on qualifications could have an impact on allowing us in Northern Ireland to adapt and change. A paper published by BIS in March on the reform of vocational qualifications through to 2020 outlined a pathway, but that was for England. There may be opportunities to look at whether that pathway is right for Northern Ireland, and components of it may be. To date, the qualifications structure has meant that we have been able to adapt and deliver offshore wind farm training etc. I am concerned about whether we could continue to adapt in that fashion should changes be introduced into all four nations, meaning that we begin to use the UK qualifications. It is a matter of looking towards the future and sustaining what we do currently.

Mr Douglas: Thank you for your presentation. Brian, I think that you mentioned the needs of young people, particularly in literacy and numeracy. How successful have you been? I know of some organisations that try to work with young people whom I would describe not as hard to reach but, at times, as impossible to reach. One of the major issues for them is literacy and numeracy.

Mr Doran: Of the 9,000 level 2 students and trainees that the colleges support, the vast majority — I want to highlight that point — have a deficit in literacy and numeracy. Therefore, the colleges are committing significant resources to ensure that the essential skills provision is offered to them. In FE, we also offer them the opportunity to repeat GCSEs. That is, dare I say it, still recognised as the gold standard, so we still view that as an important development for many of those young people. We are very much committed to that.

Success rates in essential skills across the six regional colleges continue to improve year on year, as recognised in recent inspections. Justin can correct me, but I think that there have been success rates of 75%-plus for young people who come through from 16 years of age.

You are right to highlight this. There are many challenges. These young people have had five years of post-primary education, yet, when they come to us, we have one academic year to get them up to a level 2 standard. We face many challenges, but I certainly believe that the sector has responded very well to the needs of those young people and will continue to do so.

Mr Douglas: I think that you also mentioned the drop-out rate. I was speaking to a parent last week, and she told me that her son had gone into his second year of vocational education training. In first year, he was very enthusiastic, but a number of young people then dropped out, and it seemed that the interest and enthusiasm in the course had diminished. How do you deal with a class like that when certain young people just decide to opt out?

Mr Doran: Colleges and curriculum managers use a range of retention strategies right across the sector. The primary objective is to identify the young people who are at risk at a very early stage of a programme, be that through monitoring their attendance or sitting down and providing one-to-one pastoral care. Colleges do these things on an ongoing basis.

Retention is an issue for us across the six colleges, and it goes back to the point about effective pre-entry advice and guidance. If young people understand what a programme entails and are informed about the progression opportunities, that, in itself, will, we hope, help to motivate them to succeed on the programme. For the majority, that certainly works.

Mr Douglas: Thanks very much.

Mr F McCann: I have to apologise for missing the early part of the presentation. I was called out.

I want to pick up on a couple of things. The first is Justin's point about the changes coming from England. The more information we get on that, the better, as it will allow us to keep on top of whatever changes may be coming down the road that will affect us.

My other point is on the two-year apprenticeships. I know that it cannot be easy and that we have argued here about their impact, especially the electrical engineering qualifications, which were not recognised by industry leaders. However, a happy medium has to be found, and I agree that young people need to be fully qualified. I have a number of friends who are fully qualified electricians, and the most precious thing in their working life is their badge, which is recognised worldwide. We need to work to achieve that.

I can understand what Pat said, but I disagree with him to a certain extent. Sometimes, when we try to promote advanced apprenticeships, we are in danger of rubbishing all the other apprenticeships. Many people survived and thrived in what we would call the traditional trades of bricklaying, carpentry and electrical work. I include hairdressing on that list because my daughter is a hairdresser. She studied leisure and tourism in college for two years and hated it. Her parents were pushing her to get a good degree, but she went back to what she loved best, and that was hairdressing. People need to be given choice. That is why you need to find a happy medium that allows young people to compete. If hairdressing is one of the trades being chosen, well and good.

Mr Edwards: Of all the education and training programmes available, the great thing about youth training with a work placement and apprenticeship is that it is welded to the skills needs of the economy. If there are jobs and opportunities, the colleges can respond through placements. The choice of the curriculum fully ties into the opportunities. Hairdressing can be moved into training and apprenticeships to satisfy the skills needs. The colleges will always have a role in those qualification areas as well as in advanced manufacturing, including the IT side of that. The breadth of the curriculum can be fully sustained, where the employment opportunities exist.

Mr Doran: I will make a further comment, Fra, on level 2. I reiterate that there are many young people who come in at 16 years of age and know exactly what they want to do. If they exit college or a training provider with a level 2 qualification, be it in painting and decorating, brickwork or whatever, that may well be sufficient for them to obtain a good job in the particular sector. However, you are right that when we focus on higher apprenticeships at level 3 and above, although the objective is to try to raise the profile and importance of apprenticeships, we should not neglect the fact that level 2 provision in those areas is equally important to the local economy.

Mr F McCann: As you said, we need to meet the needs of future industry, but we also need to meet the present needs. If there is a badge or qualification that is recognised by industries, well and good, but we need, at all costs, to equip people for the future. That is the important thing.

Mr Edwards: On the point about qualification changes in England, I will outline what we see as some of the potential issues arising in the BIS document titled 'Getting the Job Done'. It states that adults will undertake GCSEs in maths and English. In Northern Ireland, the essential skills strategy is a key part of the agenda to tackle literacy and numeracy in vocational areas. So there are some policy shifts coming, and they may have an impact on delivering some of those skills agendas, meeting the needs of people in vocational areas and addressing their literacy and numeracy needs.

Mr F McCann: The important point is that there is a need to look at how that is delivered. Many adults will not go near the colleges, but a satellite facility in the local community would provide a suitable background for them.

Ms Lennon: We have initiatives in the colleges to attract that type of adult to come back, such as the DEL-supported learner access and engagement programme. It is working with local community groups to act as "a hook" to get those people to come into the college.

Mr Hilditch: You are welcome and thanks for the presentation. You mention and welcome the number of reviews taking place of the needs of young people in general. You went on to say that they were taking place in isolation. Is that a good or bad thing? How do you feel about the situation? DEL must be the Department with the most ongoing reviews. It is a constant theme here.

Mr Doran: I suppose that, in an ideal world, we would probably have preferred training to be included in the review of apprenticeships. However, we understand the Department's decision to separate them. We also take cognisance of the fact that DE and Minister O'Dowd have carried out a similar review of GCSEs and A levels. The point that we make is that both Departments need to sit down, following the completion of the three reviews, to set out clearly a joint 14-19 framework or policy that addresses all of the points from the academic pathways and the changes to qualifications there. We are promoting the technical, vocational, employment and training (TVET) model: a simplified,

vocational pathway that offers parents, young people and employers a simplified understanding through the use of qualifications. I will put that in context: 27,000 vocational qualifications currently sit on the qualifications credit framework. Is it any wonder that employers, parents and young people are confused? We have to simplify that through this TVET model. We may well have to be selective in the choice of qualifications, and so be it. That decision and how that falls out of the three reviews very much has to be laid at the door of both Departments to try to structure it.

Mr Hilditch: Are you content that that is the direction in which we are going, or do you have any concerns?

Mr Doran: It is fair to say that, through the engagement that we have had with the Department, it is keen for that to happen. We are also a little frustrated by the fact that, to date, it has not.

Mr Gerard Campbell: On the back of the reviews, David, there will be the opportunity to take a more holistic view on what emerges from them. We have been consistent in putting forward to our Department our vision for the future: the TVET model, as Brian explained. Although it will not happen overnight, there is an opportunity to look at the landscape and at what will fit the economy now and in years to come, and how that will involve employers in making sure that we have the right level of skills for the economy, business and industry now and into the future. There is a big opportunity.

The Chairperson: OK, folks, thanks very much for that briefing.