



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Belfast Metropolitan College: Draft Corporate
Plan/Special Education Provision

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:

Mr Justin Edwards	Belfast Metropolitan College
Mrs Carmel McKinney	Belfast Metropolitan College
Mr Ian Patterson	Belfast Metropolitan College

The Chairperson: I welcome Justin Edwards, the assistant chief executive and director of curriculum; Carmel McKinney, centre manager for inclusive learning; and programme coordinator for Towards Work and Independence, Ian Patterson. First, Justin, I and members thank you and the campus for hosting the Committee. It has so far been an excellent venue, and we look forward to the rest of the meeting, your input and a tour of the facilities afterwards. So, over to you.

Mr Justin Edwards (Belfast Metropolitan College): Chair, thank you very much and we thank the Committee for coming to the Millfield campus. We are delighted to have you here. I am sure that you will get opportunities throughout the day to see what we are doing with our learners on this campus.

The presentation from the college is essentially in two parts, the second part of which will be split into two components. In the first part, I want to draw the Committee's attention to the college redeveloping its three-year corporate plan. It is in cycle and out to consultation. I want to bring the Committee members and their constituents up to speed on what the college plans to do over the next three years.

Before going into that three-year-plan, I will highlight a bit of the journey that the college has been on and the context in which that three-year plan is set. The Committee will be aware that Belfast Met has been under a college improvement plan over the past three years. I am pleased to announce that, yesterday, we received notification from the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) that the college is now out of special measures and has been instructed to continue its normal operation. That is down to the leadership of Marie-Thérèse McGivern, who sends her apologies for not being able to be here, and to the team in the college. The significant journey of improvement over those three years involved 72 actions and a £60 million investment in our estates. Quality has improved to the point where we got a grade "good" from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) in its assessment of teaching and learning provision.

Working with our governing body, our three-year mission is:

"to deliver outstanding education and skills that will transform lives and contribute to the economic success of Belfast and Northern Ireland".

That does not differ much from our previous three-year vision, and it encapsulates what we are about, which is that skills, training and education can transform lives in both a social and an economic context. Over the past two years, Belfast Met has very much focused on integration with the wider Northern Ireland economic strategy, through delivering programmes such as the Deloitte academy's work around data analytics, which you mentioned this morning, and working with companies including Bombardier, Fujitsu, IT Assist etc. The college also provides feeder programmes that provide opportunities for people to avail themselves of jobs in those companies.

We have a four-point plan that will deliver our mission vision. The first point is to put learners at the centre of everything that we do. A college is not just about buildings; it is about what happens in those buildings and, ultimately, with learners, whether they are learners from industry who are trying to upskill and gain professional qualifications or learners with special educational needs, about which we will hear more. It is also about what happens right the way through to our level-2 and level-3 FE students, which is a core part of our work.

We are doing that and meeting learners' needs in everything that we do and delivering high quality in everything that we do. The journey over the past few years and the conclusion that DETI has drawn is that we are going in that direction, tying up with the economy and doing that at a high quality standard. We still have a stretch. Our desire is to move to "outstanding" and become recognised. We have now been asked to join the 157 Group, which is a UK group of leading colleges. We are the first college outside England to be invited to join that group and have input to that group. We have just started our membership of that, based on the quality of what we have achieved so far.

The third point is about having a significant impact on the economic and social well-being of Belfast and Northern Ireland, primarily focusing on the community that we serve and the community that surrounds us. We realise that some of our provision is unique, such as our dance and drama or our fashion provision, which some Committee members will have seen, and it draws people from right across Northern Ireland. However, we also have provision that is similar to some of the other regional colleges and represents the needs of the local community.

There is also the idea of being not just excellent in our teaching and learning but excellent as an organisation, being sustainable, being innovative and providing innovation on the Northern Ireland, UK, European and global stage. We have been invited to speak at Nesta on our innovations and what we are doing around teaching and learning and integrating cross-curriculum. I will be travelling in Europe to talk about what we are doing around quality and quality enhancement, so Belfast Met is being seen as a vocational education training leader in this space as well.

In respect of mapping to the economic strategy, underneath our three-year plan, we have a curriculum strategy. It looked at the economic priorities and mapped that back to what we do well so we can focus on that. The curriculum strategy is delivering results. We have tiered it, so there are three tiers and six areas within those tiers. In the top tier, we talk about multi-tiered skills. Those are curriculum areas where opportunities are provided for people who are coming in with no qualifications, and it can move them right the way through to professional qualifications and professional employment. If you look at mobile cloud and digital technology, our work with Deloitte and PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) is a prime example of where we have taken opportunities. People without employment have come from career backgrounds or education backgrounds not in IT, and now we are reskilling them into the jobs that Deloitte is providing. Our IT apprenticeship in the public-private partnership apprenticeship, which DEL led on, has tripled in size in the past 12 months from that approach. Our work around biosciences looks at the application of science in the food science testing industry.

In the second tier, we are focusing primarily on levels 3 to 5. For example, in leadership and management, we are not focused on high-level MBAs. That is not what we are about; we are about mid-level management capability skills. For example, do people who are taking on management roles for the first time understand how to get the best from people, how to deliver team working, what the effective skills are in that space? It is also about skills around Sage and financial services and how to process transactions. Likewise, in manufacturing advance composites, we are doing a lot of work with Bombardier around level 3, and we have been asked to look at the development of a higher education apprenticeship to take forward construction in advanced materials for wing manufacturing, for example. That is going to come in at levels 3 to 5.

The entry tier is what I term employment opportunity skills. Those are skills where people do not have significant qualifications in the background, but we have identified that, in Belfast and the wider region, there are employment opportunities, so service industry skills include travel and tourism and hospitality. Our work around the Hospitality and Retail Training Employability (HARTE) programme in the Titanic Quarter during the World Police and Fire Games really shows what we can achieve in that sector if we set our minds to it.

With regard to our support and maintenance and sustainable technologies, we developed the qualification for offshore wind farm maintenance with City and Guilds. We are one of the UK's leading providers of offshore wind farm maintenance supply contractors in that space. Hydraulics also comes into that and sustainable construction builds. All that feeds into the 13 corporate objectives, which, again, are succinct and link back to the four key mission statements.

I would just like to draw the Committee's attention to the internet address. You can download our full corporate plan for 2013-16. After the consultation, we plan to do a full launch and release on 9 December. We are looking for as much feedback as possible to make sure that what we are doing is relevant.

At this point, are there any questions from the Committee before we move on to the issue of special educational needs and inclusive learning?

The Chairperson: First, congratulations on the college coming out of special measures. I know that it has been a big challenge for the college and its leadership, but it is testament to the work that has been done. It is a big step, so well done for that. I know that a lot of work has been done there.

How much involvement do the students have in the consultation on your three-year corporate plan?

Mr Edwards: The process actually started last week. We have meetings directly with students on individual campuses. Those are facilitated engagements, and rather than just doing a survey, we are asking specific questions about each part of the corporate plan. We are also seeking feedback from the student governor and representatives of the students' union as a set group.

We are also interested in working with community groups and, where possible, post-primary providers to get feedback from potential next-generation students who are very near to exiting or transferring from school. At the moment, our main linkage to adult students is through employers. On that basis, we are trying to get to employees to make sure that they have a voice.

We have over 30,000 students, and their ages range from 14 to 92. We try to take a very broad sample across that range, and we have to use to different mechanisms to get that feedback.

The Chairperson: What benefit will being part of the 157 Group bring to Belfast Met and its students?

Mr Edwards: From initial engagements with the 157 Group, what we have found is that there is an awful lot of useful strategic thinking from the colleges on, for example, what next generation vocational education and training look like and what effective apprenticeships look like. Some of the challenges in England are replicated here, and to get soundings from large colleges in England, some of which are larger than ours, about what they see as the future in, say, the apprenticeship space or in special educational needs development is really challenging our thinking and making us think about different alternatives. I suppose that it stops groupthink in terms of what is happening in just Northern Ireland. Aberdeen College has now been invited to represent Scotland, so, hopefully, thinking from the three nations will start to go into the pot.

So far, the 157 Group has published a manifesto on the next generation of vocational education skills, and I am happy to share that with the Committee. It is a very simple paper, but it gives some ideas on what the future of vocational education might look like in the next five to 10 years.

Mr P Ramsey: Like the Chair, I want to say well done to the college. You were in a bad place a few years ago, and now you are coming out of that, so well done to the management.

From the Committee's perspective, the issue of NEETs is, clearly, very relevant for us, given our inquiry into and the Department's strategy on NEETs. What measures have you introduced to help people in the NEET category?

Mr Edwards: NEET is obviously a complex area in respect of recognition. NEETs can have no qualifications or can be qualified and find that their qualifications do not tie up with economic opportunities at the moment. I will talk about the full spectrum.

At one end of the spectrum are the people who are being introduced back into education after facing certain challenges. For those people, we have the community innovation fund, which is a threshold programme. During that six-week programme, we work directly with community providers who act as mentors to those young people in order to bring them across the threshold. They help them to see that the college is not a threatening or challenging environment but somewhere where they can feel comfortable and choose their next-step qualifications. The individuals get very personalised taster courses on the vocational subjects in which they are interested. They also have a direct relationship with their community provider, who stays on site with them, and when they return to their community, there is a constant conversation going on the whole way through.

If we go right the way through the spectrum, obviously our work around Training for Success (TFS) and apprenticeships is very important in the middle of that. I think that the new TFS contract, from Skills for Your Life through to Skills for Work, provides great opportunities for NEETs, right the way through to our Deloitte programme, on which there are 25 young people who have a variety of degrees, such as music technology, geography or social sciences, but they are now taking up opportunities in Deloitte as data analytics experts. They are making that conversation and that step sideways. The NEETs schedule really fits in with the wider schedule of skills for economic success. Will those skills, through that pipeline, deliver economic links?

Mr P Ramsey: I have a supplementary question on the measurable outcomes, evidence-wise, for people who have been NEET. We in Northern Ireland are still looking at a figure in excess of 40,000 young people. Can you convince me that you are reducing those figures? I am not asking you now, but, for future reference, it is good to see that, for practical purposes, either with employers or through apprenticeships, you are making a dent on those awful figures that we have. Maybe not now, but at a later stage, it could be provided to the Committee. How, for example, are the young people referred to you? I do not expect that they are knocking at your door. You have to go on an outreach programme to try to bring them in, with the assistance of community-based organisations. I am keen to hear how that happens.

The Chairperson: Have you any input at this stage?

Mr Edwards: I think that one of the challenges with providing evidence is that you have to use different strategies to reach out to different component parts.

Mr P Ramsey: Yes, I accept that.

Mr Edwards: So, for example, 42% of our essential skills enrolment comes from areas of targeted social need. We know that that is significantly above, for example, our FE, which is 37%, or our HE, which is 31%. We know that the programmes are making an impact in those areas. We are running the likes of the Deloitte programme with the Department. I have to say that the Department has been very supportive of us on that programme and in advertising it. I think there were over 700 applicants for that programme. We know that there is more opportunity to grow that programme. It was a pilot programme, but we hope to roll it out on a bigger scale. It is early days for some of those programmes, but I believe that the high numbers of applications and the fact that the programmes are sustaining young people coming into them shows that they are going some way to addressing that need. In terms of meeting the needs of the entire 40,000, I think that maybe Belfast Met needs to do a wider piece of work.

Mr F McCann: Again, congratulations. I know it has been a difficult journey, and it is always great to see light at the end of the tunnel and come out the other end. I live not far from this college, and this is a recognised area of generational unemployment and generational difficulties right across a number of parameters. Right across the road from it, on the lower Shankill, you have a similar type of thing, right in the shadow of this institution, but what do you do to try to deal with the serious problems that exist in the area, especially among NEETs, as Pat said?

Mr Edwards: We talked about the programmes, but one of the areas that we are exploring more is how we provide careers information and how we get out to the communities and community groups to

inform choice. With economic changes, I do not think that people understand that the opportunities around, for example, the IT industry, are multi-tiered. They are from level 2 right the way through. People sometimes think that you have to have a strong academic ability to enter that particular industry. From the college's perspective, we are trying to get out more with those communities, not just to educate but also to advise. Could we do more? Yes, I think we could listen and engage more with the community groups to try to create more synergies between what we are doing and what they are doing so that it is a softer handover in terms of the learner's experience. I think we are making better steps on that.

Mr F McCann: I know that Pat asked for information, but is there any information to show that you have been proactive in dealing with the structures and organisations that exist in, say, the Falls, Clonard or lower Shankill wards, and that it is making an impact? I am a member of most of the community structures in the Falls, and, to me, there is no evidence showing that it is making an impact on the lives of people in that area.

Mr Edwards: We can certainly explore the evidence that we have. Perhaps there is a wider piece of work to be done to look at the wider economic impact that the college is having, and maybe, over the next 12 months, we should explore the economic return that a college has.

Mr F McCann: I thought that the academy of sport was excellent and reached out to people who may have fitted into the NEET category. I believe that there are now some problems with its delivery. Can you give us an update on that?

Mr Edwards: Certainly. On the previous occasion that I met the Committee, I outlined what we were doing around the football academy at level 2. We were doing it under our FE funding, and one of the things that we were exploring was what we could do under training. We submitted a proposal to the Department to take forward the football academy under training, but that was rejected by the Department on the basis that it did not see the skills opportunity. I think that the sector skills council advised the Department on that, and that was in the letter of return. We are now further exploring whether we can do it with the Irish Football Association (IFA) through the apprenticeship framework, so Belfast Met is not stopping exploring the opportunities.

Mr F McCann: Do you not think that the Department's response to you is a bit short-sighted? Many young people would love to have the opportunity to go into coaching, and I think that the most attractive part of the whole programme is that not only would it allow them be involved in something that they love but there is an educational element to it.

Mr Edwards: We did articulate, in the same way that we did to the Committee, the impact that it was having. It had 100% retention and a 100% success rate. We were reaching out across communities, and, not only were we delivering football skills, we were addressing the literacy and numeracy component. Social skills were also being addressed, and those are the kinds of wider, softer skills that may lead to employment — maybe not in the area of football, but they lead to tackling generational unemployment issues. We are planning to look at how we can now roll it out through the apprenticeship route. We are trying to work with the IFA, where the IFA can work with the young people to provide them with some form of employment so that we can work with it through that route rather than the training route. We will not stop working on this, and I think that we are onto something with our football programme. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) identified that we are onto something with this programme, and we will continue to push for it.

Mr F McCann: Chair, I do not know whether there is anything that the Committee can do about this. When the people from the academy were speaking to the Committee, we all bought into the idea that it was something special that offered people a route back into education. Is there anything that we can do to try to highlight that?

The Chairperson: We can write to the Department and ask it for an update and ask it to share that with Belfast Met.

Mr Ross: Can you tell us a bit more about the process of how you get onto the 157 Group? Do you get invited to it? Do you apply for it? Is there a cost to it? Is your membership of that group then reviewed?

Mr Edwards: Historically, admittance to the group was by invite. It is chaired and governed by the membership colleges. The membership colleges, having become aware of and looked at the work that Belfast Met was doing during and beyond the recovery programme, felt that there were lessons to be learnt for the wider further education sector, so we were invited to join. There is a very small annual membership subscription, because, as I said, the 157 Group is a self-governing group of colleges, and the subscription is to contribute towards the light operating management of that group on the way through. We will review our membership of that group annually, but, at the moment, the benefits distinctly outweigh any costs because the interrelationship with developments that are happening in other colleges outside Northern Ireland give us ideas and thought and keep us one step ahead of the curve about what is occurring in vocational education.

Mr Ross: One of the areas in your presentation was about service skills for industry. What sorts of formal structures do you have with various sectors of the economy in Northern Ireland to be responsive to the needs of industry? Do you have formal structures with Invest Northern Ireland or the Tourist Board for their specific needs, and do they help you to develop courses?

Mr Edwards: One of the areas identified in the recent ETI report was our engagement with industry, which was outstanding. It looked at our structure, which is quite light. We have curriculum development advisers or curriculum development leaders, who are curriculum personnel who have been placed in roles that are directly out to listen to industry. They have specialist skills in media, hospitality, business management and ICT, and they work with companies, asking what they need. That is fed back to the college, and we reshape the curriculum on that basis. In some cases, it revolves around talking to sector skills councils; in others, it is working directly with employers. The Assured Skills programme is very effective, and Invest NI is working with DEL on it. Companies are coming in, and DEL is contacting us, but it is a three-way situation between Invest NI, DEL and the college as a provider in understanding a company's needs and in providing a bespoke solution for them. That programme, particularly for the ICT sector in the Belfast area, is making major inroads in our relationships with employers. Deloitte turned to Belfast Met to provide a graduate re-education programme, and to put a further education college in that space is quite an innovation.

Mr Ross: The two guys across the way talked about getting younger people engaged. We hope that there are more opportunities now for older people, as things seem to be getting better on the job front. How successful have you been in getting older people who have recently lost their jobs to re-engage in formal education structures to retrain and reskill or convert their skills and take advantage of the opportunities that exist in the modern workforce?

Mr Edwards: When people need to reskill rapidly and are suddenly exploring what their reskilling opportunities are, the education marketplace can be quite confusing: for example, what is a vocationally related qualification (VRQ) and what is a national vocational qualification (NVQ)? Much of our work initially in those situations is explaining to people and working out on an individual basis what skills they have and how quickly they can transfer them into what we are spotting as available economic opportunities. Our part-time evening provision is a stable hold because most of those people are in some form of employment and, therefore, need to take evening classes to transfer directly out of those skills.

Mr Ross: How many people are involved in night-time provision?

Mr Edwards: I would have to get the exact figures for you for this year, as I do not know them off the top of my head. One of the challenges facing the college is that people who want to engage in evening classes want to engage more through online resources. We have to redevelop our concept of delivering evening classes in a physical site like this to mixing and matching it with online learning. We have identified our age profile through our objectives, and we have found that younger people up to the age of 35 engage with us and are on a career ladder path to develop their qualifications. There is a lull from the ages of 35 to 45, with re-engagement at 45. Re-engagement at 45 seems to be the social or skills bases to enhance their career after that. If you talk to learners looking at level 2 or level 3 aged 35 to 45, they often have young family commitments and are at that particular point in their lives, so online learning will be a particular asset to them. Although we have a very strong virtual learning environment, we have to do more to work with the Department to develop programmes that meet that need and age group.

Mr Ross: If we could get more information on that, it would be useful. You have a bit of homework to do from various requests for information, but a breakdown of those age groups and how you engage with them would be useful.

Mr Hilditch: My question is along the same theme. I will start by supporting Fra on the football academy. I declare an interest as a director of a football academy and understand the problems that you are facing. If the Committee is going to write, we might need to look at others who are in a similar position and are struggling to move things along on that front as well. I am delighted to hear your update and, hopefully, we will get some change there in future. Was there any indication in your consultation with the private sector on apprenticeships and up-skilling that some qualifications are not even available? The Committee had a presentation a few weeks back on welding qualifications not being available in Northern Ireland. Are you aware of cases of us having to bring in workers from Poland, Portugal and Italy? Are we missing out because the qualifications are not available in Northern Ireland?

Mr Edwards: I noticed your previous engagement on this matter in the Hansard report. There are opportunities around marine welding. A wider answer to your question is that if there is a qualification need, the college has already proved that it can work with awarding bodies to develop qualifications. There was a skill shortage for technicians at levels 2 and 3 in off-shore wind farm maintenance. We were able to develop a qualification in six weeks, get it through the City and Guilds awarding body and start training within eight weeks. If there is a qualification shortage, particularly at levels 2 and 3, the college can respond and work with awarding bodies.

We can draw down qualifications for marine welding; it just depends on which funding or support mechanism from the Department that those fit within. If employers believe that there is a skills need, and are willing to engage with the college, the college is in a position to develop that. We have been talking to major suppliers about marine welding opportunities, particularly around off-shore decommissioning. We believe that we can supply the qualifications in that base. It may be just in a different funding channel from the previous presentation.

Mr Hilditch: Chair, you probably read Hansard. My frustration was seeing guys who were skilled to a fair degree probably standing on a production line at FG Wilson in east Antrim rather than being out doing what they should be doing best.

Mr Edwards: One of FG Wilson's sites is a direct neighbour of ours on the Springfield Road. Within 12 hours of the announcement, we were on-site talking to that plant trying to work out solutions for those people. One area was the opportunities around marine welding decommissioning. People from that site then undertook part-time evening classes in advanced welding on the Millfield site.

Mr Hilditch: Excellent. Thank you.

Mr F McCann: In one presentation to the Committee the other week, we were told that 50,000 jobs will be available in and around the North Sea over the next five to 10 years. Are the qualifications that people get here recognised by the industry? I asked last week about electrical engineering, and the people who run the business said that the qualification that people get in institutions such as this — I think that it is a two-year qualification — is not recognised. An advertisement on TV last week said that anybody who did not reach the qualifications laid down by that industry would not be taken on. Does that not in some ways make the piece of paper that people get here worthless for moving on?

Mr Edwards: There are always challenges around qualifications, particularly if you are trying to write a qualification that meets the needs of multiple employers because employers may have different views about what should be in a qualification. However, if there is a specific skills need, we can identify and articulate it and work with an awarding body. The process of bringing it onto the national framework and getting a nationally recognised qualification means that it has to go through sector skills councils and be approved against the national occupational standards. Therefore, it is a rigorous, UK-wide transferable qualification under the qualifications and credit framework.

There are then challenges in getting some of those qualifications onto appropriate funding mechanisms. The difference between further education funding and training funding may mean that the same qualification is not recognised under both funding schedules. Sometimes, there can be delays or misunderstandings in getting it onto that schedule. Developing qualifications is not necessarily the challenge here.

Mr F McCann: It is a challenge for the industry. If they are saying that people coming out after a two-year qualification is not acceptable to them, that tells you that something is wrong. People's

expectations of what they require to become full-time apprentices have to be taken in account. There seems to be no meeting of minds between what is being supplied by the education system and what is required by industry; there seems to be a gap in the provision of apprenticeships. I am zeroing in on electrical engineering. I raised that matter last week, because there was an advertisement on TV that said, "If you have not reached the industry's qualification, you can no longer practise your trade." We heard that the two-year qualification that people go through here does not allow them to do that.

Mr Edwards: With regard to our work with the apprenticeship, we are doing subcontracting work for the employer body, so we have not faced that challenge directly.

Mr F McCann: However, that is what they said to us when they were in a couple of months ago.

Mr Douglas: I apologise for being late. I want to reiterate what Pat and David said about the football academy. It was one of the best and most innovative programmes that I have seen. I support whatever we are going to do. I think that we are to get an update on that. That programme targeted some of the most disadvantaged young people and gave them an opportunity in sport. However, there is also the aspect of discipline. It is a fabulous programme. I was very disappointed to hear that there were problems with it; I did not realise that.

Justin, I have read your presentation. I have a particular interest in autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) and Asperger's syndrome. Are there young people coming from those backgrounds, and autism in particular? I am involved with a number of families, and the young people are reaching the age where they may go on to college.

The Chairperson: Sammy, that is going into the next part of the presentation; the first part of the presentation is solely on the college and its development plan.

Mr Douglas: They know my question anyway, Chair.

The Chairperson: We will put you down first. Justin, do you want to move on?

Mr Edwards: I am going to set the context and then introduce you to Ian and Carmel, who are my experts in these two areas. I welcome the opportunity to speak to the Committee on this broad area of work — special education needs through to inclusive learning. The college's position is one of an umbrella approach throughout the pathway from severe through to moderate learning difficulties and translating right the way through to inclusive learning. Our approach has always been whether, on the severe learning difficulty area of the spectrum, we can provide programmes that lead to a meaningful social opportunity, through to sheltered employment and then to work right the way through with those learners with inclusive learning needs who may be studying at our higher education programmes and need continual support in that space.

We recently did some groundbreaking work. When I joined the college, I asked the team to consider developing a dyslexia centre of excellence, as dyslexia and dyscalculia are significant barriers to successful outcomes at all levels of learning. I asked whether we could have a centre that took the lead as an FE college in providing a service. Carmel will talk about our inclusive learning centre in a moment. The Committee may be aware that Carmel was in London on Sunday, because we had been nominated as one of the finalists for the UK Pearson teacher of the year award, and Carmel was a runner up. We will do better next time. *[Laughter.]* It has been recognised in the UK nationally that we are doing something interesting in that space. I will hand over to Ian, who will talk about our work on specific learning difficulties and disability (SLDDs) and mental learning difficulties and disability (MLDDs).

Mr Ian Patterson (Belfast Metropolitan College): Good morning. The college been delivering a package of programmes of courses to young people displaying moderate to severe learning difficulties for about 30 years. Across our provision, we have 400 students who come to us from a variety of locations, from moderate learning provision, severe learning provision and health and social services day-care settings.

I will not labour the point; I will give you an overview of our provision. Essentially, students can, as you are aware, leave the special school severe learning disability (SLD) provision at 19. However,

students in moderate learning provision are required to leave at 16. I recruit from the severe learning provision schools such as Glenveagh School and Tor Bank School and moderate learning provision schools such as St Gerard's Educational Resource Centre, Cedar Lodge School, Rosstulla and Longstone School. I have 84 students enrolled in my provision from those settings.

They will display a variety of learning disability from Down's syndrome to autism, which is a particular interest of Sammy's. Increasingly, the students coming through are displaying somewhere on the autism spectrum. I no longer have the classic learning disability cohort coming through to me. I find that, increasingly, of the 84 students perhaps 30 or more are on the autism spectrum.

We attempt to offer those students, possibly for the first time in their lives, an inclusive experience. They have been in a special school that is terribly secure; they are behind a buzzer and are very carefully managed. Then their parents and carers take a huge leap of faith to send them to further education and we take up the gauntlet from there and run with their education provision.

When parents come to me, it is interesting that they do not ask me about employment opportunities for those young people. They want to know whether they will be in a safe environment and whether they will be able to progress their self-awareness and self-advocacy skills to be able to cope as an independent young person and, hopefully, get on the economic ladder and move towards the world of work. Ultimately, however, it is to assume an independent life.

Many years ago, Paddy Rogers, who was my then boss, had a conference in the Waterfront Hall entitled An Ordinary Life. In some respects, that has been our thrust ever since. We want these young people to have an ordinary life. While they are here, of course, we want them to work on their reading, writing and numbers and on their employability skills; more than that, however, we want them to be able to engage in the community in which they are to live.

As an example of that, I have worked in Muckamore Abbey Hospital one day a week for 25 years. I work with forensic patients and students who display complex learning disabilities. I am sure that you are aware from the press that Muckamore Abbey Hospital is going down to 86 beds. Those people are returning to the community and they need the skills to be able to do so. There is a bigger picture that needs to be embraced and addressed, and the community needs to be ready to meet the demands of those people.

Our provision offers various support strategies. I can make requests of our support services if someone requires one-to-one assistance. We have a student support worker in every class who is a bit like a classroom assistant in a school. Those support workers engage in this inclusive environment in Belfast Metropolitan College (BMC).

Our student retention is excellent. When they begin, our students tend to complete with us; if they start at 16, they can stay, potentially, until they are 23. Some of the students who leave the SLD provision and start at 19 can complete at 23 and move on to our adult provision. We attempt to facilitate their move into an ordinary, everyday life, but hopefully to become economically viable along the way. We have various partnerships in our curriculum provision. We have school partnerships, with day attendance from the various schools that I have outlined. The programme for which I have responsibility, Towards Work and Independence, is available for up to three years, but it can be more. It is an entry-level qualification, and the qualification's Open College Network is called Skills Towards Enabling Progression. What we want is for people to be on that progression ladder and for students to move from where they are when they come to us to that different place, which may be assuming an independent role in life, or, if they are capable, towards the world of work, which may not be possible for all. It may be a paid employment position or it may be in sheltered employment in Belfast and the wider area.

We have two other provisions. One is the pathfinder, which tends to be slightly higher-ability level. Increasingly, students displaying autism avail themselves of the pathfinder provision. Then there are the Training for Success route ways, which become those students who are able to get into the employability stand of training. We have found that the training opportunities tend to be around retail and the hospitality industry for our student cohort. Those are our designated partners, and we work in tandem with the various retail facilities in Belfast. Essentially, employers are not very good at bringing us on board. It tends to be charities, charity shops and so on that are willing to give our young people a chance. We used to have Marks and Spencer on board. Increasingly, I have to say — I have been doing this for many years — with the economic downturn there has been a reluctance to bring on what some employers would see as yet another responsibility, or perhaps they are working within a very

tight budget and management structure. I hope that we could perhaps pick away at bringing the wider public employer on board there.

On our progression route, a student does not necessarily have to start at one and move through to four. We may say, "You have completed the year on this; you are now ready to move to route ways or Training for Success". We might say, "No, you have been inappropriately placed there; we are going to move you into pathfinder". So there is movement and progression in the delivery.

Moreover, as part of the recruitment process, we have a sampling experience, where we liaise with schools and ask them to send us their young people. We work very closely with the schools, because they know their young people incredibly well and have got them — thank goodness — to the stage where they can move on. We will say, "Let us provide you with our sampling experience. We will put you into various classes. We will assess your social ability, your reading, writing and numeracy and your ability to communicate". All those schools will be assessed over a three-day period. We will then go back and, with the school, we will review that and ultimately offer a place in the appropriate strand of the provision.

Sammy, to give you an example of our work with young people with autism, at the moment we have a young man who left Cedar Lodge School who has quite a complex need and requires a fair degree of support. As a college, we have put in place one-to-one support to enable him to engage in the programme, but we have also brought in the Middletown Centre for Autism. Are you aware of Middletown? We have a wonderful support worker from there who has brought skills to us that we did not have. For example, that young man has difficulty in relating to new situations — something that I would not have thought of. She brought her iPad; she takes photographs and she has made a storybook that he leafs through and follows, which reassures him. Therefore we are fully prepared to recognise what we can do and where to bring in the others. If you have someone in mind or someone who wants to talk to us about whether we could offer them something —

Mr Douglas: Talk to you.

Mr Patterson: Absolutely, talk to me, and I would be happy to give them an overview of it. It is pretty much as we have here. I just wanted to run through that with you.

Mr Edwards: With your permission, Chair, we will go into the next part, because it interlinks with inclusive learning. We will take questions at the end of the entire presentation.

Mrs Carmel McKinney (Belfast Metropolitan College): Good morning, everyone. I am the manager of the centre of inclusive learning and development. To give you a bit of context, I joined Belfast Met in April. Before that, I was the principal of a school in an area of very high social deprivation with numerous barriers to learning. I also have a very strong background in special educational needs.

I was delighted to get this post at Belfast Met, and, if I may, I want to talk a bit about we do in our office for our students. Above everything else, as colleagues have said, the student is very much at the centre of what we do. We feel that, from where we are sitting, unless we get it right at the first point of contact with us, it will not work particularly well for the student when they start going to classes.

What do we do in our centre? First and foremost, we give advice and guidance to staff and students, and we assess the support needs for students with disabilities. The disabilities can range from mental health issues right through to partial sight and across that spectrum. I will talk a bit more about what we do on that later on. We provide additional support services, and you heard Ian talk about the equivalent of classroom assistants. In our role, we employ what are known as learning mentors and note takers. The learning mentor's role is very much to work alongside the student to mentor them in their learning pathway through a range of strategies to meet the disability of the learner.

We also provide expert specialist teaching for students with dyslexia. I am trained and have postgraduate qualifications in the area of dyslexia as has the specialist teacher, Gráinne McMullan, who, hopefully, you will meet later. A lot of people talk about dyslexia, but the understanding of dyslexia is not particularly widely known. Justin mentioned the whole area of mathematics and dyscalculia, which is the mathematics equivalent of dyslexia. We are finding that a lot of students are coming through with that now as well. We also provide assistive and enabling technologies to assist our students on their learning pathways, and that can be from software packages right through to equipment that will aid them if they have physical disabilities.

That is an overview of what we do in the centre, and I thought it would be important for members to see some of our figures. Since September 2013, we have received in our office 304 referrals from students from what is known as the learning support 1 (LS1) form. When students enrol, they will indicate to us if they have a disability, and we will then meet them and go through an assessment process with them. Members, you will note that 127 of those referrals this year have been for dyslexia or dyslexia-type disabilities and that 97 of them have been for Asperger's, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and mental health issues. We are noticing very much that more students are willing to discuss mental health issues than may have done previously. In the past, they may not have disclosed that, but we have more students disclosing it to us now. Other students will have declared Tourette's syndrome to us, as well as dyspraxia and indeed their physical disabilities. That is the broad spectrum that we are dealing with.

Finally, I will talk about what we call co-morbidity. Many students who come through to us with disabilities, for example dyslexia, have other issues and disabilities therein. We are getting a lot more students coming through with ADHD, but the co-morbidity spectrum shows that those students regularly have other disabilities. For example, there is Asperger's syndrome, then we move into the mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. Dyspraxia also has a big co-morbidity around ADHD. So, it is important for me to say to members that when we say the word "dyslexia", for example, regularly, there are other issues around those students that we in our centre need to address.

Justin mentioned the Centre of Excellence for Dyslexia which we are also moving forward to. Gráinne and I were through to the regional UK finals for the outstanding work that we have done in dyslexia. I must say to the Committee that, in my view, and from my background in a school, we discovered that many of the NEETs and children underachieving in literacy and numeracy had disabilities such as dyslexia. So it is very much a question of whether the young person is underachieving or low achieving. From where we sit, we feel that we need to engage with NEETs and schools to move forward our Centre of Excellence for Dyslexia, so that we can identify those young people at an earlier stage.

That is our office, and what we do. I am happy to take questions.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, folks. Carmel, you referred to the number of pupils that you deal with, and also the one-to-one support that you give. How big are your teams?

Mr Patterson: They are huge. Within my provision, I am responsible for 10 full-time staff and at least another 12 part-time associate lecturers. We have four full-time and four part-time designated support staff. There are various related professionals who come in, such as the Middletown person. On any given day it varies. Sometimes, we need to be careful that we do not have too many staff. It changes the balance if you have all of these staff, especially with a young group. So, we try to manage the experience. We have pretty hefty staffing on it.

Mrs McKinney: We can always do with more staff. In our office, we have three learning-support officers, who carry out the initial needs assessment. However, when we need to go to full assessment of these students, only Gráinne, who is a specialist teacher, and I have the qualifications to carry out those needs assessments. So from where I am sitting, and in the area in which I work, we can never have enough specialist staff. At the minute, we manage, but members will see from the figures that I have put up that those will increase as time goes on. I have no doubt of that. We also have a very dedicated team of support providers who we bring in as learning mentors and note takers. However, they are an arm of what we do in the hub of our office and in our centre.

Mr Edwards: In a wider context, on both sides of the presentation that you have heard this morning, we try to secure staff with very high skills which are highly developed, not just from a qualification background, but with understanding, emotional intelligence and softer skills. Getting the correct people to work in this environment and trying to secure them for employment is challenging. In both regards, when we have advertised for posts, we have always been lucky with the people that we have recruited. However, the pools that we get to choose from are limited.

The Chairperson: Sammy, I cut you off earlier. Do you have a question?

Mr Douglas: Thank you, Chair, for remembering me. *[Laughter.]* I will address my question to Ian. You talked about some trainee students going into the likes of sheltered employment. I have had

some involvement with the Orchardville Society, and it is an excellent organisation. What is the process for someone going through training? When do they get to the point where they are placed in the Orchardville Society?

Mr Patterson: Very often, students come to us from school who have already engaged with the Orchardville Society. Our provision is four days full time, so they may have that placement already. If that is the case, we continue to work with that; or we can work with, Alan and so on at Orchardville. We can say that we have a student whom we now feel is ready to move from us. We make representation on the part of the student. We have worked with them for many years, with the business centre, the cafes and so on.

Mr P Ramsey: It is always reassuring. Lecturers' jobs, on the whole, are generally fairly tense in preparing young people, but you need a special type of skill to have that involvement with young people who have special needs, and I want to commend those in the college. I can hear the passion and how proud the staff are in working with those young people.

I chair the all-party group on learning disability. We are looking into preparing the terms of reference for the Committee inquiry on post-19 special educational needs, and we are looking at how we can theme that to ensure that we are getting the greatest participation. Some people tell us that we should focus on severe learning disability, others, including myself, I may add, would be inclined to open it up to include mild, moderate and severe learning disabilities. For those working in that field, what is your opinion?

Mr Edwards: I will start. As I said in the presentation, I think that there are inter-relationships in the full spectrum approach. That is why we have taken the view of demonstrating both what we are doing on SLD and MLD inclusive learning because they transfer. The whole idea is to work towards social inclusion and then work towards economic inclusion and higher qualifications and whatever you can fit across that spectrum. I think that that is the wider question to ask. I will hand over to Ian; he will explain from his perspective.

Mr Patterson: To recap the earlier point; children with moderate learning difficulties leave school, by and large, at 16 years old, but those with severe learning difficulty leave at 19. There seems to be little by way of provision, outside of us, for someone leaving the likes of St Gerard's or whatever at 16. St Gerard's and, I think, Rosstulla have managed to gain an additional year which offsets the moment that young people have to move on until age 17, but I have always recruited from the schools, from an education point of view that if I was a parent and making that choice I would want my young person to go at 16. They need to move as early as they can; they need to get into mainstream inclusive provision. The moment has passed to stay within a very secure separatist facility. From my experience, SLD provision is better catered for across the board and MLD, with the myriad demands there have been, has been a little left behind. We can offer that, and we can bring those young people on board.

Mr P Ramsey: I appreciate that, and I am glad of the response. Can I home in on some of the other areas in which you would have an interest? At the minute, you have around 350 students, part time and full time. You have definitively given the range of complications that people have, from learning disabilities to physical disabilities. Could we get a breakdown of those? I am very keen to see that. One can imagine, and you have made the point, that the retention of these students is very high; I would say much higher than that of the student body across the colleges, and one can analyse that in the context that parents see this as respite as well.

Mr Patterson: Yes.

Mr P Ramsey: Yes, and it gives them peace of mind and there is nothing wrong with that. But, what is the variety of courses and how do the same people in this category advance? How many different courses do we have and what levels do they get to when they are in the college?

Mr Edwards: If I can refer back to the slide regarding the inside of the work, we can provide breakdowns against our progression pathway. It starts at entry level; level 1 — meaningful QCF, nationally recognised qualifications, work in the right way to the Training for Success model, and

ultimately bringing that in. We will be able to provide breakdowns in that regard on the inside. That is where we have high retention rate; we have 96% retention and 100% success rates on that.

Inclusive learning pupils are embedded across our range of provisions, so the 300-plus referred to will come from everywhere including higher education, but we can go back and identify for you how they are doing and the rate of success.

Mr P Ramsey: Are some of those 350 students repeatedly doing the same course?

Mr Patterson: There is a tendency for that to happen. We embrace the notion of lifelong learning. I have to say that I do see young adults with a learning disability coming back. They ultimately have not gained employment or they had a short period of sheltered employment that ended for a variety of reasons, from medical considerations to an organisation no longer being in operation.

When a person comes back, we try to move them on in some direction to perhaps engage in training with a more vocational thrust. For example, we had car valeting for a year. When people come back, we do not want them to do a similar social and life skills provision that they may have engaged in a few years before. We are constantly moving that forward.

The thrust that I am very much getting from social services, and what is happening out there, is to prepare people for independent living and independent status, so that they are able to live in, perhaps, sheltered accommodation in their community.

Mr P Ramsey: I can only commend you on doing that. You spoke about trying to sow confidence in employers. When we talk about employers, we think of small businesses, retailing, or cafes and restaurants. What about the public sector and other Departments?

Mr Patterson: By and large they are not supportive.

Mr P Ramsey: It is disappointing to hear that.

Mr F McCann: We get presentations from the Department about job creation and employment schemes. It seems natural that the work that you do has a knock-on effect with the Department when it is looking at job creation schemes, probably providing interaction with employers to ensure that there is follow-on. Does that take place at all? Some employers may get £7,000, £8,000 or £9,000 per year to take people on.

Mr Edwards: There is a link. Going back to the progression route that we outlined in the diagram; where we are looking at Training for Success, it is part of the same training programme that leads to apprenticeships. So, we use the same mechanisms, although we get significant additional time allocation from the Department to work with that. We use the same mechanisms for work placement as for the other Training for Success candidates. We just make the employers aware at that point that work placements often need to be in a sheltered environment with support from other organisations and link organisations.

I think Ian's point is that the challenges of getting employers to step up to that responsibility has become more difficult in recent years, whether the employers are big or small or are public or private. When you are having a conversation in the same frameset on Training for Success and say, "This person comes with learning difficulties or needs sheltering and additional support, and it is the same Training for Success programme", you do not always get the same welcoming response.

It is a wider thing in that the college constantly works with employers in challenging and showing the added benefits. The added benefits for staff, particularly in large employers, is that they understand working with somebody in that environment. As an employer, Belfast Met engages with this programme in learning and physical disabilities. It has knock-on benefits in our staff understanding the wider impact on society of how those people work. I just wish that more employers would work with us on that basis.

Mr F McCann: With some schemes, should employers be not only encouraged but that a percentage of places be made available —

Mr Patterson: Required —

Mr F McCann: — required to deal with that? Pat spoke about departmental involvement. It is very sad that Departments have not seen fit to help you and the other educationalists involved in this work. I think that we need to start looking at that.

I want to ask another question. When I deal with constituents or working groups, I constantly see the rise in ADHD and other things. It has always existed. I heard the questions about substance abuse and poverty. Do those have a direct impact on some of these difficulties?

Mrs C McKinney: I picked up ADHD in your question. We are finding that some young people are manifesting with ADHD. In our day, they would have been seen as being just naughty children or young people.

We are also finding evidence of post-substance abuse. The mental health issues are all in and around the barriers to learning and the whole notion of NEETs. Young people will have failed at school and do not want to perpetuate that any further. It is about looking for and finding new ways to bring them into education, often through community and voluntary groups and, in some respects, analysing their disability and putting specialist programmes in place that engage them back into learning.

We are finding that co-morbidity elements such as poverty and the environment that people come from have an impact. For example, certain areas of Belfast have high levels of suicide at the minute. That very much has to be built into the disability framework.

Mr F McCann: What should the Committee and the Government be doing to try to ensure that there is better provision to allow you to deal with some of the severe problems?

Mr Edwards: The problems are in a very broad spectrum. As I identified, getting specialist skills in, whether through external agencies or being able to appoint internally, is very important to the college. We could do more to train up expertise in inclusive learning and make sure that it is seen as a career opportunity. We need more experts in that space to deal with each of those different angles.

I come back to your point about substance misuse and links to mental health. This is only anecdotal and I am certainly not an expert, but time and again in the FE environment we see young people with substance challenges and the mental health issues that those bring. Sometimes, the best thing we can do is keep them on-programme and keep working with them. However, that might mean that the programme needs to be extended beyond a two-year or one-year time limit so that we can take time and slow down the pace of learning, recognise the challenges that people have to overcome and adapt to on the way through. Perhaps, we need to look at personalised learning. I know that DEL is considering how we go forward with the funding models and what have you. Perhaps this is an element that we need to consider as part of how we fund education so that it becomes more personalised when people demonstrate the disorders or effects they have.

Mrs C McKinney: We feel that the parents and carers of those young people have a huge role to play. Our role in working with the community in the outreach provision and skilling up parents and carers to assist young people who, for example, may have ADHD or dyslexia is another journey and direction of travel that we need to follow in Belfast Met.

The Chairperson: Justin, Carmel and Ian, thank you very much for your time and input today. It has been valuable and will help us with our inquiry. We will see you shortly after our next presentation. Thanks again for your time.

Mr Edwards: Thank you, Chair.

Mr Patterson: Thank you.

The Chairperson: Members, a couple of points arose from that presentation that we will follow up on. We will check those in the Hansard report.