



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Review of Initial Teacher Education  
Infrastructure: Open University

17 September 2014

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Employment and Learning

### Review of Initial Teacher Education Infrastructure: Open University

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

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

**Witnesses:**

Mr John D'Arcy	The Open University
Dr Gwyneth Owen-Jackson	The Open University

**The Chairperson:** I welcome Mr John D'Arcy, director, and Dr Gwyneth Owen-Jackson, the subject leader for the design and technology PGCE in the faculty of education and language studies. You are very welcome. Over to you.

**Mr John D'Arcy (The Open University):** Thank you very much for the warm welcome. We are very pleased to be here to comment on the aspects of the international panel's report that referred explicitly to the place of the Open University in Northern Ireland within teacher education. I am particularly pleased that Gwyneth is able to join me today because of her expertise in the realm of teacher education. She also has a wider UK role, and that perspective will be of interest. You have seen our paper, so I will not go through it, but I will highlight some of the threads within it.

We were pleased that the international panel recognised the unique role of the Open University in higher education in Northern Ireland, particularly within teacher education. It highlighted the university as being a world-leading flexible distance learner, which is important. The panel was saying in the report and in its discussions with ourselves that we need to ensure that Northern Ireland has access to that flexibility, given the range of schools in rural, semi-rural and urban areas, so that there is capacity and content for teachers to engage and increase their skills levels. As members will be familiar with, that means of delivery extends from BBC television programmes, which are no longer on very late at night and are the bigger productions like 'Bang Goes the Theory' and 'An Hour to Save Your Life', through to the use of smart devices like those in front of you.

The other thing that the university has been very good at, in addition to high-quality undergraduate and postgraduate provision, has been the extent to which it has made available open educational resources available to the general public. A point that the international panel picked up was that there is great value in that resource being made available to teachers in their classroom as they develop

their career. A lot of that is free — anyone can access it — and if a teacher wants to improve his or her skills level, for example in STEM subjects or business and management, there are free materials that can assist them before they move on to a more formal process of continuous professional development.

That was the other strand that the international panel focused on. The university still has a strong level of postgraduate provision as well as undergraduate courses. We no longer do the Postgraduate Certificate in Education per se, but we still have a lot of accredited courses that meet the needs of teachers throughout Northern Ireland. Being in the teaching profession involves career-long learning: what you learn in your university or college needs to be refreshed because of the challenges facing teachers in the classroom. Chairman, that highlights the issues that the panel has picked out with us. We were pleased to be part of the engagement and pleased that it recognised the uniqueness of the university. We look forward to the conversation that we have with you about the role that the Open University may play in whatever system is decided upon in due course.

**The Chairperson:** John, from the Open University's perspective, do you have a preferred model from the four options? Do you see anything as the best fit for you?

**Mr D'Arcy:** We do not have a preferred model, Chair; that is really a matter for the existing institutions, the Minister and the Department. We are very much an open university and are open to collaboration. Whatever shape or form the emerging infrastructure takes, we will be happy to work with the system. The fact is that we are not a bricks-and-mortar university as such, but we have technologies and approaches that I think could blend into any of the options that are there, and we look forward to working with our partner universities and colleges in the future. We already do that to a significant degree. In the last year, we have worked closely, for example, with Queen's University in FutureLearn, which is providing free online higher education right across the globe. That has been a very rewarding experience for us because it has increased that bond between us and Queen's in Belfast, and we see that as a good working model for moving forward.

**The Chairperson:** Gwyneth, in your role you will have a UK perspective. How do you find the approach to teacher training in Northern Ireland compared with that in the rest of the UK?

**Dr Gwyneth Owen-Jackson (The Open University):** There are of course very specific elements to the Northern Ireland provision, but you are probably aware that Wales is also looking at its structure. It is trying to, in a way, do what you are doing, which is look at the structure and try to get the most efficient, high-quality provision that it can. Wales is also looking at the structure but perhaps from a different perspective. Scotland has always had a separate education system, and its teacher education provision does not run along the same lines as it does in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Although we operate the PGDE (postgraduate diploma in education) there, it operates in a different way. As you know, England is now moving over to numbers going to School Direct rather than to universities. The four nation states actually seem to be growing more diverse, and it is hard to draw comparisons between them.

**The Chairperson:** What is the OU's input in the other member states?

**Dr Owen-Jackson:** As you know, we are withdrawing from the PGCE programme in 2016. Our current offering in Scotland — the PGDE, as it is called there — is a full-time programme that students can undertake either as a one-year full-time or two-year part-time programme. It has a fixed start date and fixed end date, and we took our last cohort of students on to that in August 2013. That provision will be withdrawn in 2015. In England, Northern Ireland and Wales, as you know, we currently run the six start dates and three finish dates, and, as far as I am aware, we have contacted every school, every tutor and every student to let them know about the timetable for withdrawing the programme. We will offer any support that is needed to any school, tutor or student who needs it to meet that timetable, and we have made as much provision as we can to make sure that that happens.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Good morning. Compared to the two previous submissions that we have heard, this is a more distinctive contribution in terms of initial teacher education, and I am always pleasantly surprised at the elements of this. Both the previous submissions made reference to special educational needs and disabilities, as well as collaborative work that they do. Clearly, you undertake ongoing continuing professional development. Will you spell out to us what it means, for example, for the students and the value that it brings? I agree with you that new techniques are needed and that refresher courses are needed for teachers, for example. Chair, it comes up continuously at the all-party group on disability that teachers are not in a position to see the telltale signs of someone with a

learning disability or who is slower than the class. How does that help and assist a teacher's progression in their job?

**Mr D'Arcy:** I suppose, Pat, we have a slightly different view from other institutions on that, in that there is a particularly high proportion of students with a disability studying with the Open University. The figures we had last year in Northern Ireland were that 13% of our student body had declared a disability. To make sure that we engage with those students appropriately, we put a lot of effort into both our student services and our academic staff development to ensure that we are meeting those people's needs. So I think that we approach it in a slightly different way, and we would be very happy, in terms of a staff development perspective, to work with the other institutions in Northern Ireland to share those experiences. Gwyneth, do you want to comment on the content of any of our particular modules or structures?

**Dr Owen-Jackson:** I just want to say, as well, that I think that John was referring to the general student body in Northern Ireland. We have had, and we do have, students with disabilities who have gone through our teacher training programme. I personally have had a student with cerebral palsy qualify recently. I know that we have also had students with sight and mobility problems on the course. Again, as John says, we offer the support that those students need. We also ensure that the schools in which they work offer the support that those students need. We do that for our students.

To prepare those student teachers to work with students with disability in the classroom, we have a particular module on our PGCE that deals with diversity and inclusion, which looks at not only learning disability but the range of issues that students bring to the school context. We discuss those issues through the module text with the students, but then we set activities for them to do. And because of the Northern Ireland context, one of those activities specifically requires them to look at a range of named conditions, investigate those and look at them within their own context as well.

**Mr P Ramsey:** It would be useful if you could share some of that information specifically on the named conditions, for example, maybe physical or learning disability. John, you made reference to the free modules available for continuing professional development. Are they at this level as well? Are there refresher courses for teachers on different types of subject matter?

**Mr D'Arcy:** Not so much refresher courses as such, Pat, but the content could be seen as adding to the skills and competency levels that a teacher has. In fact, your last question is important as well. Gwyneth mentioned that one of the modules on the existing PGCE would address that need. One of the things that the university is looking at, as our current PGCE concludes in 2016, is how we can take material from the PGCE and put it into different formats. That is still under development, but we would be happy to talk to you about that.

In terms of the extent of the information that we have, our own OpenLearn website is a bespoke website that any member of the public can go onto. It has had 23 million visits since it was set up in 2006, and it has 400,000 unique visitors every month, so it is very popular. A proportion of that number of visitors are teachers, but obviously we cannot necessarily quantify that. On that site, there is 11,000 hours of learning material. Some 8,000 of those hours are from our existing undergraduate and postgraduate provision, so those free materials are higher education quality, and that is available to anyone. One of the things that we may want to look at is whether we can, for example, unpack that huge resource into a more easily accessed portal or whatever that teachers could maybe access in a more user-friendly way. So there is extensive material there.

We are the biggest university in the UK for YouTube provision, and we have our own channel. There are 1,600 videos on that, and they have had something like 20 million views. So, again, if a teacher who has done a very full day at work is considering adding to their own skills and competencies, this is something that they can do at home, alongside all the other tasks that they have to do professionally and personally. However, the strength that we bring with those free materials is flexibility. That you do not necessarily have to travel down a road to go to an institution or even pay a fee to extend your knowledge in a little way. We see this informal learning as a very useful pathway to assist teachers onto a more formal CPD programme with any of the providers here in Northern Ireland, and you will be aware that there is excellent quality across all the universities and colleges.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Thanks very much, John. Maybe at a later stage — I know that we are quite busy in the schedule of the Committee — we might get a walk through some of those modules.

**Mr D'Arcy:** I think that we have a visit scheduled in the new year.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Oh, there is one.

**The Chairperson:** Great idea, Pat. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr D'Arcy:** We would be happy to do that. It is all very well talking about mobile devices, but it would be good to take you through some of them, and one thing I would like to do, perhaps, is bring some students into that experience as well.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Thanks very much.

**Dr Owen-Jackson:** You might want to note, when you do that visit, that on our OpenLearn site we have a module on inclusive education and one on understanding dyslexia and teaching dyslexic students. You might want to look at those in particular.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Very good.

**Mr Douglas:** Thanks for the presentation so far. John, earlier you mentioned the future search and your collaboration with Queen's University. Will you expand on that?

**Mr D'Arcy:** Yes, Futurelearn. We were the first European university to jump into this thing called massive open online courses (MOOCs). They have been in development over the last five years, largely in Canada and America. Basically, the idea is that any member of the public can click on to one of those courses. Typically it is two or three hours per week for maybe 13 weeks. You do not get a qualification but you learn some information. Our vice chancellor, who I think many members have met, took a very bold step about a year and a half ago and convinced the university to set up a wholly-owned company called Futurelearn. It is an interesting proposition, because we work with over 40 other institutions, largely in the UK, but increasingly internationally. What we do with those institutions is take their content and their teaching expertise and put it in a format that people can access over the internet.

In the relationship with Queen's, the first programme was on critical listening skills for sound production, which was quite a technical course coming out of its Sonic Arts Research Centre. It attracted thousands of interested people. The second course was on public space. So we have Queen's in Belfast and Trinity College in Dublin as our partners, as well as the University of Glasgow and the University of Southampton. Interestingly, one of the newer developments has been the inclusion of the British Library and the British Council. Some of the programmes we are taking forward with them are English as a second language internationally, so there is a lot of mileage there.

We have enrolled students from right across the world. We enrolled more students in our first day with Futurelearn than we did in our first year as the Open University. We had a huge number roll up, so it has been a very successful proposition. The good thing is that it is getting people to use technology that is available to increase their learning.

Separate to Futurelearn, about a year ago we also introduced our own OU Anywhere app, which means that, if you have a Kindle Fire, an Apple device or an Android device, all of your course materials will be personal to you on that. Once you have them downloaded, all of your course materials are there, including your assessments and assignments. One of the challenging things that we think we need to do for a region like Northern Ireland is to make sure that our population becomes digitally skilled, because all workplaces are becoming increasingly digitally skilled. Our teachers need to be digitally confident to take that sort of learning forward.

Futurelearn has been a great adventure for us — importantly, building those strong collaborations with other universities. The experience that we have had with Queen's — I think it has had a positive experience with us as well — is something that we could easily mirror, not just in the space of teacher education but in other aspects of higher education as we move forward. We have invested a lot in technology and we have the people expertise. For a place this size, it would make sense for us to work more closely moving into the future.

**Mr Douglas:** John — maybe it is a question for Gwyneth — do you see developing the smart apps and FutureLearn as an opportunity for development in initial teacher education in the future?

**Dr Owen-Jackson:** As John mentioned earlier, the PGCE is not due to be withdrawn until 2016, so obviously at this stage we are currently negotiating what is going to happen to those materials. We certainly hope that there will be some possibility that some of those materials will go on to the OpenLearn website and be freely available to anyone, but obviously I cannot at the moment say that that is definitely what is planned, because negotiations are still ongoing.

**Mr Flanagan:** Thanks for your presentation. I have looked through your Futurelearn thing, and there are a number of useful and informative courses there. I think the big challenge is getting the message out, particularly in the deprived communities where people want to improve themselves but cannot necessarily afford the course. I wish you well with that. What sort of demand is there among our teaching population for continuous professional development?

**Mr D'Arcy:** We think there is a fairly healthy demand, Phil. In the Open University we have 52 teachers on postgraduate courses this year. That is quite a healthy number for a smallish university like ours, so there is demand out there. Given the nature of curriculum change and the nature of the employability space, teachers continually want to increase their skills base, their competencies and their confidence. In Northern Ireland, I think, there is a strong appetite for it. Obviously we would like to explore what the demand is for different subjects.

I suppose that where we can bring a little bit of added value is through a lot of the free materials, which could be almost a primer for people to think about where they want to extend their formal professional development. For example, for an aspiring teacher who may want to be a principal or a vice principal over time, we have a lot of content from the faculty of business and law on leadership and management. Although the schools are very different, there is a commonality to those skill sets which we think people would be interested in. I think that there is a strong demand there. In moving towards having a world-class education system, we have to be serious about continuous professional development to ensure that we do that over time and in a planned way.

**Mr Flanagan:** Do you work with any of the teacher trade unions to better promote those schemes? How do you get the message out to teachers?

**Mr D'Arcy:** It is always a work in progress for us, Phil. We obviously work very closely with the University and College Union, which represents most of our own staff. I have been at a number of events with the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), the Ulster Teachers' Union (UTU) and so forth. I think that there is an onus on us as a university to get that good news story out there.

We have just introduced a new Northern Ireland website for the Open University, which we think is much more user-friendly, and there is more information on it. We will add links to those sorts of materials over time. We know that we have a job of work to do there. We are happy to engage with communities, and we have a strong relationship with the libraries. We do very frequent Open Near You events. We were in, I think, Carrickfergus and Ballymena over the last number of weeks. We are very open to going out to do demonstrations and to talk to people.

I suppose that, as technology moves on, devices like tablets are becoming much more common in households. There is always going to be an issue over access to broadband, but hopefully that will get resolved over time. The fact that you do not have to go and buy a book is a great start for people. Some of the books that we have on, for example, the iBookstore have embedded video and sound to get people over that confidence step. Peter, in his presentation, talked about being excited and energised. We think that that is a good way to crack things like building confidence for teachers in subjects like science, STEM, IT and mathematics.

**Mr Flanagan:** There are certainly problems with broadband in rural areas, but I think that people can bring — I am not saying that this is a solution; everybody should have broadband — their device to the likes of a library or somebody else's house to download the resources, which then remain on your device.

Has a survey ever been carried out to try to ascertain the level of demand amongst teachers for CPD?

**Dr Owen-Jackson:** The Open University has not done its own survey, but we have looked at the GTCNI survey, 'Teachers' Voice 2010'. From that survey, we have tried to identify some of what we call the hot topics that the majority of teachers perhaps identified as areas that they might want to follow in any CPD programme. We are looking at that alongside what we have available to see where the match is and where we can develop some of those resources.

**Mr Flanagan:** One of the things that the Committee has looked into is the whole issue of careers. I am sure you are aware of that. We have called for some or better work to be done on CPD for careers teachers. Is the Open University offering that at the minute, or are you considering doing that?

**Mr D'Arcy:** Employability and careers education is a very strong topic in the Open University at the minute, and we are contributing to the ongoing discussions with the Department on how that can be improved. I suppose, Phil, that most of our students are a different sort of cohort. The average age of an Open University student is 29. Many of them will have —

**Mr Flanagan:** Sorry, I am talking about careers teachers.

**Mr D'Arcy:** Yes. I think that that experience would be helpful for them. We contributed to the careers review that the Committee undertook last year. We would be very happy to contribute our experience in any way there. We work very closely with sector skills councils and employer groupings to get a sense of where, like every university, we need to make changes to our courses to make them much more employer-focused. We would be happy to engage with careers teachers and their organisation.

**Dr Owen-Jackson:** I am not 100% sure, but I am pretty certain that we have some units on OpenLearn that are to do with careers education in schools.

**Mr D'Arcy:** We can check that for you.

**The Chairperson:** OK. Gwyneth, John, thank you very much for your time.

**Mr D'Arcy:** Thank you very much, Chair and members. We look forward to welcoming you to the Open University in 2015, which is not that far away.

**The Chairperson:** OK. Thank you.