



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Review of Initial Teacher Education  
Infrastructure: St Mary's University College

17 September 2014

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Employment and Learning

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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 Chris Lyttle  
Mr Fra McCann  
Ms Bronwyn McGahan  
Mr Pat Ramsey  
Mr Alastair Ross

**Witnesses:**

Professor Peter Finn	St Mary's University College
Mr Brian McFall	St Mary's University College

**The Chairperson:** I welcome Professor Peter Finn, the principal, and Mr Brian McFall, the director of finance and administration. You are very welcome to the Committee this morning. We have about 45 minutes. The first 10 minutes will be a presentation from you, which will be followed by questions and answers, if that suits. Gentlemen, over to you.

**Professor Peter Finn (St Mary's University College):** Good morning, Chairman, and thank you very much. Can I just clarify something? Did you say that the presentation would be 10 minutes? I thought that it would be 15 minutes.

**The Chairperson:** It is up to you — 10 or 15 minutes.

**Professor Finn:** Good morning everyone. We thank the Committee for its invitation to provide members with an outline of the position taken by St Mary's University College on the review of teacher education conducted for — note that word — the Minister for Employment and Learning. Members will have received a short briefing paper from me, so you will know, in general terms, what our position is. We have spelt out our position in the form of seven bullet points. I will go through those, because they are rather important.

They express our intention to continue as an autonomous, values-based, higher education (HE) institution in the Catholic tradition; to be mission-focused, with a strong emphasis on the internationalisation of the student experience; to remain academically integrated with Queen's University, pending a review of the formal agreement in 2015; to continue to promote and to develop our distinctive ethos and identity in the higher education sector here in Northern Ireland; to be located on the Falls Road in Belfast; to contribute to a pluralist system of teacher education, which the college

believes is the most appropriate approach in a consociational democracy; and, last but not least, to be involved in systematic and sustained collaboration and sharing with those who contribute to the education and training of teachers. That is our position.

You might ask why we are so determined to have an autonomous status, because that is the core of our position. Why do we not just go away? Why do we not just agree to merge and integrate with some other body? That is the fundamental question. Jean Monnet, regarded by many as the chief architect of European unity, once said that people can come up with ideas but only institutions can turn ideas into concrete actions. That gives you an insight into why we are so determined to maintain the integrity of St Mary's as an autonomous institution, not part of a Belfast or Northern Ireland institute of teacher education or part of a federation but in a collaborative partnership with others.

The idea, in the sense that Monnet used the term, that we espouse is that of faith-based education. In its final report, the panel articulated the idea of faith-based education so well that I will quote from section 6.4. In the faith-based model, it is argued:

*"the process of becoming a teacher is not simply a form of intellectual engagement with relevant academic and pedagogical studies, combined with the acquisition of a repertoire of skills and strategies through which pupils' learning is progressed."*

The report continued, and this is the important bit:

*"In addition ... it is an integral feature of learning to teach that students ... espouse certain values, which give point and purpose to the whole professional undertaking. These values are absorbed through the lived experience of participating in an educational community; they are exerted by, and implicit in, that community's whole mode of operation."*

We seek an accommodation of faith-based teacher education, not its integration or merger into what is a secular system. I trust that you understand and appreciate why we take the position that we do. St Mary's requires autonomy to be mission-effective.

It is worth reiterating the essence of paragraph 2.6 of the report, in which the authors refer to the university colleges being involved in what they call:

*"the continuing and debilitating fight to protect their distinctive missions."*

Let me assure the Committee that we are not debilitated. However, our energies could certainly be better employed than they are at present in more or less waging a constant battle since 2007, in its most recent manifestation, to justify our very experience.

Before setting out our response to the panel's report, it is important that we inform you of the college's high level of performance in the HE sector. There is no place for an institution that is not high-performing. We point, in particular, to our consistent and very high ranking in the National Student Survey and our ranking among educational and specialist institutions in 'The Guardian University Guide 2015'. It is important that members take a brief look at appendix 1 of that guide, as St Mary's is ranked fourth in the United Kingdom of over 70 providers of undergraduate teacher education behind Cambridge, Huddersfield and Reading and is the top specialist institution. That is very important.

We also provided you with a key information set, Unistats, which is produced by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and which outlines very good diagrams of the satisfaction of students, their employment status and the way in which our courses are set out in lectures, seminars and similar. We also have a strong record in quality assurance and enhancement. External examiners from all over the British Isles who are appointed by Queen's have, for many years, highlighted the quality of provision, and the most recent ETI inspection report for provision in numeracy and literacy was very strong. On the social side, we recruit a high proportion of students from low-income background and have a commitment to improve access and participation for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. None of those performance indicators should be jeopardised by the DEL review of teacher education infrastructure. St Mary's is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a problem institution.

I will now provide you with a summary of our response to the panel's final report. The panel's assessment of initial teacher education in Northern Ireland was that it has a "number of key strengths", while it also displays "significant weaknesses". The same could be said of the panel's report. It has

key strengths, and it is extensive and contains very useful insights into current provision, international trends, principles and conditions for change. It is very supportive of the need for an approach to the future development and improvement of teacher education that balances pluralism on one hand and sharing on the other. That is entirely in line with the vision statement that St Mary's presented to the panel. The report explicitly recognises that neither the principles on which, the panel believes, the enhancement of teacher education should be based nor the conditions that they suggest for that enhancement point inevitably to any specific infrastructural arrangement. That is its conclusion: neither the principles nor the conditions point inevitably to any specific infrastructural arrangement. The report also takes very strong account of religious identity in education globally and recognises the importance of faith-based education in Northern Ireland.

There are significant strengths in the report, but there are also weaknesses. This is important: St Mary's did not have the opportunity to view a draft of the report before it was published. That was in sharp contrast to the approach that was taken to the Grant Thornton review in stage 1. The significant points of weakness in both the content and the process, which we will bring to the Committee's attention this morning, are those that we would have brought to the panel's attention, had the opportunity been made available to us.

What follows is a number of points that are worth noting about the content of the report, although it is by no means an exhaustive list. I provided you with a list in my briefing paper, and I will now pick out some of the more significant points from that list. First, St Mary's University College is characterised — defined, you might say — incorrectly in section 3.27 of the report as a "teacher education institution". Unlike the examples referred to of institutions in Switzerland and Belgium, for example, the college is academically integrated with Queen's University and has diversified its academic provision since 2000. We made a very strong case in our submission to the panel that university college status, which was given to us by the Privy Council, delivers an existing partnership of enormous benefit. The recruitment and retention of high-calibre individuals in teaching results in exceptional outcomes that compare favourably with education systems in other knowledge-based economies.

Furthermore, neither the principles nor the conditions for enhancement as outlined by the panel give any significance to the need for a strong internationalisation of the student experience. That is an amazing omission by the international panel, especially given how prominently that issue featured in the report on teacher education in the South of Ireland, to which some members of the panel were also contributors, and given that it is listed as a key theme in the panel's preliminary overview of international best practice that it released in February 2014.

The Department of Education's role in initial teacher education, as set out in section 4.5 of the report, is of much greater significance than the panel and the report suggest. Reference to the cost of higher education in Northern Ireland, in the context of the Grant Thornton report, presented data that are now out of date and misleading. Finally, in a number of places, the report refers to a "substantial pool of unemployed teachers". That is not the case in Northern Ireland.

What follows is a number of points that are worth noting about the process by which the review was carried out. First, the circumstance in which the report was commissioned amounts to a disconnection from the Department of Education. We believe that there is little justification for undertaking the review without the joint involvement of the Department of Education, and the panel said as much in section 4.19 of the report. There was also a failure to meet Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, given that one of the best examples of sharing in initial teacher education is, in fact, in the provision of Irish-medium post-primary teacher education. Further, representatives of St Mary's were in attendance with members of the panel on just two occasions: first, at a very positive meeting on February 24 that covered a wide range of teacher education issues by way of background to the review; and, secondly, on Monday 30 June, when a copy of the final report was presented to us. We took no part whatsoever in the discussions of 30 June, when it emerged that the process of the review had concluded without any meaningful engagement with us on either the findings or the options for change. That was significant.

I will now move to the ministerial statement of 1 July. Our view is that how the Minister takes the review forward is of much greater significance to St Mary's than the report itself. The Minister has been very clear from the start about his integrationist agenda. We, on the other hand, seek accommodation. Those are two very different approaches to how one addresses conditions in Northern Ireland: an integrationist approach or an approach based on accommodation. In his statement, the Minister paid particular attention to the premia received by the university colleges. In our opinion, that part of the statement lacks the appropriate contextual background for a full

understanding of the premia issue. We believe that the Minister returned to the premia, when, responding to a question from Mr Flanagan MLA, he stated:

*"a context of continued subsidy, never mind a situation where subsidy is gradually removed from the institutions." — [Official Report, Vol 96, No8, p9, col 2].*

If by "subsidy" the Minister is referring to the premia, St Mary's will consider any move to gradually remove them in the absence of countermeasures such as increased diversification or a funded role in continuing professional development (CPD) to be coercive. We note that the review panel had a view on such an approach when it wrote the following, which is on page 32:

*"there is little point in seeking, through coercive measures or otherwise, to expect those who adhere strongly to a particular conception of the education of teachers ... to weaken a commitment that is unshakeable."*

That is the panel's view.

Finally, the position of St Mary's is firm and resolute. We understand that the panel undertook its work through the lens of international trends, some of which can assist in teacher education enhancement in our circumstances. We would certainly engage in that. However, in our submission to the panel we quoted Musset 2010 on current practices in OECD countries:

*"The design of the teacher education ... has to respond to specific needs of each system, so policy has to be thought of case to case."*

In the case of Northern Ireland, we believe that there must be a place for St Mary's as an autonomous institution in the Catholic tradition, located in an area of Belfast that highly values the contribution that we make to the economic and social regeneration that is so necessary for the people in our local community. However, St Mary's is also an autonomous institution that is committed to a collaborative partnership with others.

The core argument that has been running through this entire review process from day one is integration. That reflects the political views of those who designed it, and that is accepted and understood. However, there is an alternative view and argument: accommodation. Our case places accommodation in the position of the key design principle, thus our emphasis on autonomy. We believe that we have a strong case for accommodation, and we will defend it. Thank you.

**The Chairperson:** Thanks, Peter. I will open with the same question that I asked Stranmillis. Do you believe that the Minister's mind was made up before the process was started, or do you believe that it is an open process and that he is listening?

**Professor Finn:** I do not know the Minister's mind. I have read what he has said to the Assembly, and I have had meetings with him on a one-to-one basis. I think that the Minister is very clear that he supports an integrative approach to all aspects of life in Northern Ireland. Integration is what he stands for, so I am of the view that, if he has an end goal, it is integration, but he clearly has not shared the specifics with me, and I do not know. However, I do know that his political background is quite clear. It is genuine, and I am not making a complaint about that. His political adviser is also quite clear on those matters. He represents a view of the world that is based on the principles of integration. I represent a view of the world that is based on the principles of accommodation. They are two different principles.

**The Chairperson:** I listened to what you said in your presentation about the autonomy of St Mary's and your process of accommodation. I take it that you do not see that fitting with any of the four options as presented by the international panel.

**Professor Finn:** I think that it is maybe better if we make it clear what autonomy actually means. It could be very helpful to members to understand what we mean by accommodation, and from that will emerge what we think of the four options. My colleague Brian will maybe guide us through our position on autonomy.

**Mr Brian McFall (St Mary's University College):** We have made it clear a number of times that autonomy is the absolute key for us. In our view, we have an understanding of what exactly we mean

by autonomy. Maybe, as Peter says, it would be best to share that with you and to set out in some detail what exactly we mean by it.

First, in our view, the college's Catholic ethos would be maintained in an autonomous institution, and we would remain as a separate legal entity. Our current governance arrangements would be unchanged, and we would continue to have a separate trust deed and a scheme of management. The ownership of the college, land and buildings would continue to rest with the trustees of St Mary's University College.

Where governance arrangements are concerned, we believe that autonomy would mean that we would continue to have a separate board of governors appointed under the terms of our current scheme of management. The powers and authority of the trustees and the board of governors would be unaltered. Responsibility for the college's strategic direction would remain in the hands of the board of governors, and the college's strategic and operational plan would be approved by our board of governors. Resource allocation would be a matter entirely for the college board of governors, which would have authority for the approval of our annual budgets. The college would, of course, continue to have its own finance committee and audit committee.

An autonomous institution would have employment authority over its employees. In other words, the employment contracts would be with the board of governors of St Mary's. Recruitment and selection of staff would be the sole responsibility of the college. We have already accommodated our academic integrated status with Queen's University on that, in that Queen's is consulted on the appointment of academic staff. The college would set its own staff terms and conditions, and we would develop our own employee-reward strategies.

The college would retain control of its own finances. We would continue to have our own financial memorandum with the Department for Employment and Learning. The college would receive funding directly from the Department and would be accountable only to the Department on financial matters. We would prepare our own financial estimates and publish our own report and accounts.

The college would continue to have its own management structure. We would continue to have full responsibility for the main functional areas of finance, human resources and estates, and we would develop our own subsidiary strategies on those areas. On research, again in consultation with Queen's, the college would determine its own research strategy. Yet again in consultation with Queen's, we would have responsibility for our own learning and teaching strategy, which would also include responsibility for developing our strategies for our library and information services.

The college would have its own admissions policy. Again, we would consult with Queen's on that, but it would be our admissions policy, and we would retain control over student recruitment and selection. We would set our own fees, the college would continue to set the level of the bursaries that we pay to students from lower-income families, and we would have our own widening of participation plan.

Those are the key elements of autonomy as far as we are concerned. I think that it is best that we set out what we mean by autonomy, because we have used the word a number of times.

**Professor Finn:** Chairperson, the second part of your question related to the four options. First, decisions for St Mary's are taken by our board of governors. I have the authority to represent the board on the matter of the review. I do not, of course, have the authority to make the final decisions, but I am not in the position to recommend any of those options to our board. I will be recommending to our board what I describe as a collaborative partnership approach, but not that set out in this report. We have made our position very clear — our vision statement and approach is very strong — on the development of a collaborative partnership approach.

**The Chairperson:** OK, so it is something around option A.

**Professor Finn:** I am not talking about the four options; I am talking about a collaborative partnership approach, but not as laid out in section A. There are elements of section A that impinge on our autonomy.

**Ms McGahan:** Thank you, Peter and Brian, for your presentation. Perhaps it would be useful if you could expand on what you just said about a collaborative partnership approach.

My second question is about the changing needs of the economy. There is a particular focus on STEM subjects. In your document, you say that DEL has been involved in stopping any further academic diversification at St Mary's, thereby impacting on the enhancement of teacher training. Could you elaborate on that?

**Professor Finn:** Your first question was about our view of what is described as a collaborative partnership. Collaborative partnership is about the institutions agreeing to work together rather than working separately, and, to be absolutely fair, we have been involved in quite a number of collaborative partnerships with the institutions of higher education. We are involved in a very big collaborative partnership with Stranmillis University College on special educational needs. We have been involved with all others in computer literacy around work on C2k. So, whenever I talk about collaborative partnership, what I am getting at is that we do not all set off to do everything on our own and that a forum is established so that the educational issues of the day come to the attention of a forum. That forum should also agree on a joint way forward in which the institutions, acting with whatever level of autonomy they wish to have — we wish to have the autonomy that Brian outlined — agree to work together, not separately. That is what I mean by collaborative partnership. That will develop, but it will do so, may I suggest, based on need and on the principle of a voluntary approach and not on a mandatory demand that one has to do what the Department tells us to do. It is based on the needs of the system, the needs of school system and needs that have been brought to the attention of a forum of providers who will work together.

Yes, academic diversification was stopped in 2007. Lord Empey was the Minister at that time, and he took the view that the university colleges should really not be further diversifying into other areas and should be focusing on teacher education. At one level, I do not have a problem with that if, for example, we were able to divert our energies and attention towards the CPD of teachers. However, in the absence of CPD and of the university colleges having a funded role in that, the university colleges have no way to grow other than through academic diversification, which has de facto been stopped. It is very challenging now to try to pick it up six and seven years later. If we were trying to do so, we would need time to look again at what those options for academic diversification might be, and, if we were to do that, one of those options most certainly would have to be in the area of STEM.

I think that the best contribution that the university colleges can make is through what is called STEM education, Bronwyn. There is an enormous need amongst the teaching force in the North of Ireland to be better prepared for educating our young people in the area of STEM. We are involved with the Arkwright foundation and in a number of Sentinus projects to take this agenda forward. We are doing those, may I say, in partnership, in the case of Sentinus, with the University of Ulster and Stranmillis University College. So, I hope that that gives you a flavour of the issue.

**Ms McGahan:** That was useful, Peter. Thank you.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Good morning. You reference in your submission the disconnection from the Department of Education, and the previous submission referred to an unpublished report on teacher education from the Department of Education. I think that it was Anne Heaslett who mentioned that. Chair, you will recall that I was very quizzical of the Department on the Department of Education's role in going forward on teacher education, and it is still beyond me why it is not involved in collaborative thinking in and around initial teacher education. What are your views on that and on DE's disconnection from this process?

**Professor Finn:** My views are strong. First, I believe that a joint review with the Department of Education on this matter would have had much more credibility. This review, in my view, was clearly what might be described as a solo run by the Minister. It was described as such by one of the Members of the Assembly, and that raises all sorts of questions about motive. When you do a solo run, there must be a reason, and I would like to know what that reason is. There was and always is the other approach, which is to work collaboratively with the Department of Education. Secondly, the review panel has spent many sentences and words explaining how it has stayed within its remit when, in fact, it will be clear to anyone reading this that you cannot comprehensively address issues of initial teacher education infrastructure without considering the provision of the teacher education itself and the student intake numbers. You cannot do it. Thirdly, in a very practical way, a joint approach between DE and DEL on a review would have had a much greater chance of successfully addressing the issue of teacher CPD, which is very strongly raised in the report. The panel emphasised the importance of teacher CPD to raise standards, and yet DEL has no authority whatsoever in the area of teacher CPD.

Since March this year, I and the whole community of teacher education in Northern Ireland have been engaged with the Department of Education in a process of developing a strategy. It has been a very good process, well led by the officials. I am very confident of that process, and I feel as though my role in there is valued. That is disconnected, of course, from this particular review. It seems amazing that the Department of Education is going down a line of developing a strategy for teacher education in the North of Ireland and that, parallel to that, the other review is going on. The Minister says that he is seeking a more integrated and shared approach to teacher education. In my opinion, it would have sent out all the right signals if the review had been — dare I quote — "shared and integrated" with the Department that has the greatest level of responsibility for teacher education. That is set out in article 66 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, which makes it clear where the real responsibility for teacher education lies, and the DE circular 2010/13, which is explicit on the role of DE in teacher education. Put simply, this approach is not joined up; therefore, that raises questions.

**Mr P Ramsey:** That response does not surprise me. I think that it would be fair to say that the whole process has been skewed by an Alliance Party policy in delivering it, and I have said that to the Minister as well. I suppose that in many regards, as a practising Catholic, I have strong feelings on the subject. It is important to protect the integrity, the ethos and the autonomy of St Mary's. On the same platform, I would protect the values that Stranmillis has as well.

This question is important, given our previous discussion with Stranmillis, and you referred to the social value of the campus on the Falls Road: can you outline to the Committee the staffing resource and the student resource and your opinion of the economic and social value that the institution or campus of St Mary's has to the Falls Road and the part it plays in the community?

**Professor Finn:** OK. The member to your left — Fra McCann — might be able to make a contribution to this.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Don't encourage him.

**Professor Finn:** As a resident of the area, he knows and can give the perspective of those who live in that community.

**Mr F McCann:** Pat must have been looking over my shoulder.

**Professor Finn:** St Mary's, of course, is small. It is a small institution; let us not get carried away here. We have a total staff complement of 150 people working on campus. Of those, about 60 are in the academic field, and the rest are in a range of other areas, although the staff has diversified over time, and we have staff working part-time etc. Putting it at a very basic level, there are quite a number of people on the staff who live in the local community and who earn their living in St Mary's, and that is brought directly into the area in which they live. We have a student population of just under 1,000. Those students attend that campus for most of the year. They make a contribution to all aspects of the business economy of that area — everything from local shops, local restaurants, cafes — dare I say it — pubs and the local Cultúrlann. There is an economy in terms of the spend of 1,000 students. Of those 1,000 students, somewhere in the region of 200 live locally, and all the international students live locally. For each semester, we have about 60 students from the United States or various parts of Europe, and they live in the local Beechmount area. They pay rent and they pay food bills locally, and that generates an economy. It does something more, because every year in the area around St Mary's, there are 60 people from different parts of the world integrating, talking and being part of life on the Falls Road.

We are located in the Gaeltacht quarter, and we make an enormous contribution to the Irish language. St Mary's provides teachers in Irish for the primary schools and the post-primary schools. We have Áisaonad Lán-Ghaeilge, which is the Irish-medium resources unit. It produces the books and learning materials for the entire Irish-medium sector across the North of Ireland.

Those are just some of the statistics. Then, we get into community outreach. First, very many of our students volunteer to go into a community that has suffered and has many socio-economic difficulties and work in schools as reading partners, working alongside kids in schools to enhance literacy and numeracy.

Our other community outreach activities involve the extent to which our campus is opened to the community. The campus is in a very fine state. I will not say that it is world class, because that terminology means nothing in the real world, but anyone who has visited our campus will know that it



is in a very, very fine state. That campus is open to our local community. Féile an Phobail, which does work of enormous benefit to the community, virtually takes over St Mary's for the month of August. There are numerous school events that take place on the campus. For example, the transition school from primary to post-primary education in the west Belfast area is held on the St Mary's campus. The revision school at Easter to help kids who are having some difficulties with English and maths is held on our campus. That involves hundreds of young people coming to the campus, learning English and maths and being inspired to study in higher education, not necessarily at St Mary's but wherever they want to go.

Time does not permit me to continue that particular line of argument, but St Mary's makes an enormous contribution. If the panel had been very honest, that would have appeared in the report. It is my understanding that many people in west Belfast wrote to the panel and made clear their position about the socio-economic benefit of St Mary's to the west Belfast area.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Presumably, Chair, the response is that you are not for moving.

It is separate to the discussion today, but you talked about a collaborative approach on special educational needs. Anne mentioned that as well. Maybe you could report back to us on how that is progressing.

**Professor Finn:** We will do that. Maybe, the Committee Clerk will remind me about that, because I am rather focused on other things at the moment.

**Mr Douglas:** Thanks very much for the presentation. Obviously, we had representatives from Stranmillis University College in this morning. How do you define your relationship with Stranmillis? You talked about collaboration earlier, Peter.

**Professor Finn:** We have a very good working relationship with Stranmillis. My main point of contact for my work outside of St Mary's on taking forward many matters is Anne Heaslett. We meet regularly. We have joint projects, and we work together on different aspects. However, we are different; we do not come from the same type of institution. We have a different view of the world. Our ethos and identity and that of Stranmillis are different. They are not dissimilar, but they are different. In broad terms, we work well with Stranmillis, and I work very closely with Anne Heaslett. That is all I can say.

**Mr Douglas:** I want to bring you onto a subject that you mentioned before, but I am talking about the review and the future. What is your thinking on the Catholic teaching certificate?

**Professor Finn:** I was expecting that question, but I was expecting it from the Chair, because I did my homework and saw that the Chair asked that question of the Minister back in July. I have an answer ready, but I am addressing it to a different member.

I do not mean this in any way as a put-down, but the Chair referred to the matter as an inequality. I need to clarify first and foremost that the issue of the certificate in religious education is not a matter of inequality; it is a matter of access or, as the panel says, an anomaly to do with fairness. I accept that. You might be interested to know that at no time throughout the review did the panel ask us about the certificate, but it covers the matter in section 4-24. This is the first time, as part of the review, that anyone has asked me or St Mary's about the certificate in religious education. In a sense, I thank you, Sammy, although I thought that it was going to come from a different source.

The course leading to a certificate is an occupational requirement for teaching in a Catholic primary school as far as CCMS is concerned. That is the legal basis of this. If it were not an occupational requirement, it would not be legal. We offer the course, which is quite demanding. It is over three years, and it involves a substantial amount of work for the students, but it is our view that it is critical that the students who graduate from St Mary's have the knowledge, skills, understanding and capacity to be a teacher in a Catholic primary school.

In the final comments of my presentation this morning, I described St Mary's as an autonomous institution that is committed to a collaborative partnership with others. Let me make this clear: if we can bring the uncertainty that is prevailing to an end and agree a way forward with the Minister, I would like to address the issue directly with my colleagues at Stranmillis. I believe that Stranmillis has two options for taking this forward. It could develop a certificate, which, I think, would be very difficult because of the staffing and the costs involved, or establish a collaborative way in which Stranmillis students who wish to achieve the qualification and to undertake this programme of learning could do

so through St Mary's. I am having exploratory discussions with Dr Heaslett tomorrow afternoon about this. It has to be understood that the issue can be resolved by collaboration; it cannot be resolved by coercion. It will not be resolved by coercion.

**Mr Douglas:** I have a final, quick point, Chair.

You mentioned the student international experience. Will you elaborate on the teacher training, Peter?

**Professor Finn:** This is the one part of the report that causes me concern and annoyance. I have invested 20 years of my life promoting the internationalisation of the student experience. The report that was submitted by the panel is in stark contrast to a report that was submitted in the South of Ireland. Let me give you two quotes from the report in the South of Ireland. By the way, two of the panel members were on the panel in the South. Page 18 of the report states:

*"The Review Panel wishes to reiterate that the key characteristics of internationally recognised teacher education systems include ... real internationalisation of the institutions providing initial and continuing teacher education."*

It goes on to say on page 23:

*"Internationalisation in higher education is one of the key aspects of European higher education policy today."*

The review panel suggests that:

*"a concerted effort should be made, at national level, to attract student teachers to the country and to encourage Irish student teachers to spend part of their study period abroad".*

That aspect — internationalisation of the student experience — is given little or no coverage in the report under consideration today. Do we conclude that internationalisation of the student experience is important in the South but not important in the North? Do we conclude that? No, we cannot conclude that, and I will tell you why: firstly, internationalisation is a key strand of DEL's higher education strategy, which I was party to; and, secondly, internationalisation is critical for the student experience. As I said, I have been involved in this for 20 years, with others. International study addresses many of the aspects that come on to the field of how we can share and understand each other better. It creates the kind of characteristics that we want in our teachers, such as openness to new ideas, appreciation of diversity, a willingness to engage in mutual understanding and, for those students who study for substantial periods abroad, resilience. This year, we have placed many students to study elsewhere in Europe and in the United States of America, and nine of our students studied for one month in Beijing in China. I do not know why the panel does not recognise the significance of internationalisation, and I would like to know. I have a very strong view on that. It is a big omission.

**The Chairperson:** The panel is in front of us next week, Sammy. You will get a chance.

**Mr Flanagan:** Thanks for the presentation; it has been very useful. Your helpful definition of autonomy is very important, but it was not included in our papers. Can we get a written copy of your definition of autonomy? Maybe the Committee Clerk will remind you about that, too. Have you given a copy of that to DEL, DE or the panel?

**Mr McFall:** We have had conversations with the Department officials and the Minister around that issue. We have never submitted a set of principles around autonomy, but we have made it clear many times to the Department what we mean by autonomy, and, in the conversations that we will have over the coming months, we will perhaps get a chance to explain exactly our position on autonomy.

**Mr Flanagan:** My position on St Mary's is that it is only right that the college has the autonomy and government support that it requires to promote the mission that you are putting forward in terms of academic excellence, teacher education, Irish-medium education and access to higher education for disadvantaged groups, particularly the community engagement in a very deprived area that you have spoken about. It is only right that that is allowed to continue. It is worth pointing out the small section of the review panel's report that you have quoted. It says:

*"there is little point in seeking, through coercive measures or otherwise, to expect those who adhere strongly to a particular conception of the education of teachers to ... weaken a commitment that is unshakeable."*

What are the next steps when the review panel says that we cannot or should not force people to go down a road that they do not want to go down? You are very much saying that you do not want to give up your rights to autonomy. How do we move forward from here? How do we end the sword of Damocles that has been hanging over the college for many years?

**Professor Finn:** The next step is that I am meeting the Minister tomorrow. I hope that the Minister will work collaboratively with me and with St Mary's to bring this whole matter to a conclusion, because it is just uncertainty year after year. We have made it quite clear that we are not going down the integrative line. We are not going to integrate into a federation or an institute or, indeed, merge with another university. But we are going to sign up to, as has been made very clear, systematic and sustained collaboration and sharing. I sincerely hope that when the Minister takes account of the broader field of all this, including the views of the Assembly, which have been very clear — he has picked them up on more than one occasion — and when he reads what the panel has said about not trying to force people into positions, he will work with us on the path to systematic and sustained collaboration. I hope that that is the case tomorrow. I do not know.

**Mr Flanagan:** There are four options in the review report, and you have said that you do not accept any of them, and, based on what you have said, I fully understand and appreciate why. Is it your understanding that each of them would lead to the removal of the autonomy of St Mary's and see it wither on the vine and disappear as a teacher training university?

**Professor Finn:** Let us say that they are on a continuum: at this end is A and then you get to D. By D, St Mary's is gone completely. The panel provides a wonderful definition of what it is to have faith-based teacher education and is then prepared to present an option where it is reduced to having a chapel for worship and a few chaplains. There is a total disconnect between that and its very excellent definition of faith-based education, which is about living in a community and having values that are based on the holy Gospels. The panel defines it well, and then you get to D, which is, "We are going to have this institute, and, to keep the ethos of St Mary's going, we will allow you to have chaplains and you can have a religious education pathway in the B Ed". That is not faith-based teacher education; let us make that quite clear.

It is not a question of our rejecting the options. The panel, in fairness, looked at other places in drawing down the options. I can see Glasgow coming through in one place and Singapore in another. I know where the panel got the ideas from. My point has been that the OECD report is very clear that, at the end of the day, each jurisdiction, nation or state — however you want to describe it — has its unique circumstances and ways of being. It is difficult to transport a model from one part of the world and put it in another. That is not how it works. It has to be from the bottom up. We have a particular education system here in the North of Ireland. It is what it is for the reasons that we all know, and our teacher education system should build on that infrastructure, not try to impose an infrastructure from Glasgow, from Dublin, for that matter, or Singapore or anywhere else.

I do not want to come across as negative, in the sense that we reject the four options. That is not the tone at all. We are saying that those four options were imported on the basis of external circumstances. Here, we are talking about a positive way forward, which I have described as "collaborative partnership", which, may I say, reflects the underlying principles of the Good Friday Agreement or, indeed, the St Andrews Agreement, where the principle involved is accommodation of difference. We are asking for nothing other than the political system in which we exist manifest in teacher education.

**Mr Flanagan:** In page 4 of your briefing, you mention the premia, when you describe how the Minister responded to a question that I asked him. Will you elaborate on that point and outline whether there have been any further discussions with the college on it?

**Professor Finn:** I have grave concerns on that. The Minister clearly has a number of levers over St Mary's. All Ministers have levers over organisations that they fund. One lever, for example, is the number of diversified students. If the Minister should decide that he is not prepared to give it those numbers any more, St Mary's will suffer a calamitous reduction in its income and may not be viable. The other lever that he has is to go back to the funding mechanism and remove those premia. The point I make is that those premia are in there for a very good reason.

Diversification was stopped by Lord Empey, for reasons that I can understand, and Lord Empey engaged with the Higher Education Funding Council for England and Wales, saw what was happening in England and used the method that was used in England to provide a subsidy for small, specialist institutions that are not permitted to grow. If we could grow our business, we would not need the premia, but, if we are not allowed to grow our business, another method of funding is required, which is the premia. That is very clear to me. If those premia were to be reduced, that would be a lever applied on St Mary's to go down a road that it does not want to go down, and we will challenge any attempt to remove those premia that is not counterbalanced by, for example, opening up — as perhaps Bronwyn was suggesting — other courses to bring in more students or — with the agreement of John O'Dowd's Department, of course — a funded role in CPD, which would then balance the thing out. However, as we stand, the colleges need those premia. The Minister knows it, and I know it. I hope that that is not what tomorrow's conversation is about.

**Mr Flanagan:** I would be concerned about any coercive moves that the Minister might make in that regard without the support of the college.

My final question is about Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta. Do you have any understanding of why it was not involved in any of the discussions at any stage? Maybe you do not and it is a question that we need to ask the panel next week, Chair.

**Professor Finn:** I do not. The panel rightly met with the Council for Integrated Education. In the Good Friday Agreement, there are two fields of education that were to be promoted in the new dispensation: integrated education, through the integrated education council, and Irish-medium education, through Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta. I find it an omission that the panel did not meet with Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta. It is as simple as that. Why they did not meet them, I do not know.

**Mr Flanagan:** We will try to find out next week. Thanks a million.

**Mr Lyttle:** Thank you for your presentation. You have obviously made clear your support for a consociational form of democracy as instituted by the Good Friday Agreement, and you touched on some other aspects of the agreement as well. What role do you think that you have to play in contributing to the Good Friday Agreement's duty on the Department of Education to promote, facilitate and encourage a more integrated approach to education?

**Professor Finn:** The specific requirement under the Good Friday Agreement is to support integrated education. Chris, I know the Alliance background that you come from, and I know your politics: let me make it quite clear that I have no difficulty whatsoever with integrated education and integrated schools for the people in Northern Ireland who wish to have them. Therefore, if there are students in St Mary's who wish to undertake their teaching practice — what we call "school-based work" — in an integrated school, we will certainly facilitate that. I have brought a teacher from the integrated sector into what I call the "principal's council", which is a council that I have to bring in all sectors of education to advise me, on an annual basis, on what is going on in the school system and what I need to know about for how our courses are aligned with what is going on in the schools. We have somebody from the integrated schools sector on our so-called principal's council. We will outreach by all means possible to engage with the integrated school movement as long as it respects the fact that we have a different form of education, namely, in the Catholic tradition. This has to be about a mutual understanding. Take it from me that we will work and are working with the integrated schools sector and will work more if we can move to a more collaborative partnership approach.

**Mr Lyttle:** I know that I can only get into so much detail today, but the report states:

*"In the Republic of Ireland, the government has adopted a policy of promoting the rationalisation of teacher education colleges within a university-integrated framework. For example, the process of incorporating three denominational teacher education institutions within Dublin City University is well advanced. Their incorporation involves provision for their denominational identity, while being members of an Institute of Education within the university."*

I know that you have not responded to the four options that may be similar to that approach, but could you give us an idea as to why that is not an approach that you support?

**Professor Finn:** First of all, we are not in the business of importing solutions to issues in other jurisdictions. The circumstances in Dublin were around two very, very small colleges that really were not sustainable in terms of the campus development or the size of their student body, aligned with the situation in Dublin, where the Catholic Church is very conscious of the fact that it has to take a step back in education because so many of the schools in the Republic are Catholic. The Church is going in a different direction in the Republic of Ireland due to the demography and circumstances there. The conditions in Dublin are not the same as the situation in Belfast.

I found it amazing that the panel drew upon the example of Dublin City University (DCU) and its relationship to those three colleges but chose not to draw upon what is happening in Limerick, where, in fact, an institution established on exactly the same day by the British Administration in Dublin in 1898, namely, the Mary Immaculate College, is not merging into the University of Limerick. It is entering into a collaborative partnership with the University of Limerick. The model that you describe is highlighted in the report because it happens to suit a certain perspective, but the other circumstance in the South of Ireland, namely in Limerick, is not mentioned. I think that we cannot cherry-pick. We cannot decide to highlight an issue linked to DCU in Dublin and then ignore what is happening in Limerick. I saw through that. You cannot cherry-pick.

The bottom line is that it is not about importing external answers; it is about answers to issues and challenges that rest within this jurisdiction, within its own historical experience, in relation to its own demography and in relation to the nature of the population in this jurisdiction. That is my view, Chris.

**Mr F McCann:** Obviously, at this stage of the game, most of the stuff has been asked. However, I want to touch on a couple of things. One is around the financial viability of St Mary's. I understand — I have seen it with enough schools — that, if the rumour is out there long enough that a college or school is on its way out, people will start to look elsewhere. You get the desired result by default. Can you just comment on that? I believe that St Mary's plays an important role, obviously not only in the Falls community but in the west Belfast community. Most of its students come from outside west Belfast.

Most of the other universities, including the University of Ulster and St Mary's, are falling over themselves to integrate themselves in the wider community and offer the types of stuff that you have been talking about here today. That is another form of integration that is not taken on board. I just fear the impact that the loss of something like St Mary's will have on a place like west Belfast. Maybe you could also speak on that. It has been clear from the outset and several inquiries over many years that there has been an agenda at work with regard to the future of places like St Mary's and Stranmillis.

I wish you well tomorrow. I have no doubt that we will be back at this again next week and next month. Does it wear you down when you are trying to deliver the high-level education that you provide in St Mary's?

**Professor Finn:** Well, I will ask Brian to fill the Committee in on the financial viability of St Mary's. I will just make some brief preliminary comments.

I am not worn down. I am energised by this because I have right on my side. The evidence is very clear that St Mary's is a really outstanding institution that I am absolutely proud and delighted to lead. The energy that I get is from what I see on the campus every day: students coming in and learning; people from the local community coming in and being part and parcel of our campus; and international students from the United States, Germany, Turkey and Italy coming to St Mary's and thoroughly enjoying the experience, their life in west Belfast, Belfast, Northern Ireland and Ireland when they are there. I take great delight when my students go off to China, the United States and Europe. I am entirely energised by all of this.

There is an open day at St Mary's today. It is full of people coming in who want to get into our courses. I take endless phone calls from people trying to get into St Mary's when, in fact, we are blocked; We have our numbers capped, and that is the end of it. We could take in many more students if we were allowed to do so. Fra, I am totally energised by all of this. I do not like the fact that I have to put so much of my energy into this issue. I sincerely hope that tomorrow — I have more hope than perhaps you might have on this — we can come to an understanding with the Minister that this has to come to an end and that we bring finality to it. He understands our position. In fact, as Chris knows, it comes down to a difference of political understanding: I take a consociational view of life in Northern Ireland, and that is it. I am not going to change it. He knows that I am not going to

change it. It is time that we accept that we differ and look for an area of middle ground where we can take this thing forward. I offer a middle ground in terms of collaborative partnership.

Brian can answer the big question of whether St Mary's is financially viable.

**Mr McFall:** I suppose that the short answer is that if you go back to the report where it refers to concerns about the financial viability of St Mary's, you see that it is drawing on the Grant Thornton study. Grant Thornton has, in fact, been to the Committee and presented its findings. What the Grant Thornton report actually says is that St Mary's is financially stable in the short term. I think that it also demonstrates that the college will remain solvent in the longer term and all of the information that is contained in the report supports that. It is only in relation to some sensitivities that were introduced by Grant Thornton that viability would be challenged. Our contention is that if these sensitivities were applied to any university or college, they, too, would not be viable. We are saying that, if we used the funding council, HEFCE's criteria for assessing viability, the college would be viable.

I will go into a little bit of detail. As I say, the issue is raised in this panel's report drawing on the Grant Thornton study where it raised a number of concerns about financial viability. If you look at Grant Thornton's remit, you see that it was asked to do a number of things. It was asked to consider the financial stability of the colleges and to look at future sustainability.

What does the study say about stability? The report concluded that the colleges were currently financially stable. That is what it says. It noted that the colleges are dependent on core funding and tuition fees. I thought that that was self-evident of any college. Of course we are dependent on core funding and tuition fees. How could it be otherwise?

In relation to sustainability, it looked at longer-term viability. I think that Grant Thornton used a very narrow definition of sustainability. It simply considered projected surpluses and deficits. I will come back to that definition in a moment when I conclude. In its conclusions, Grant Thornton said:

*"the College is likely to be financially stable in the short term."*

It concluded that the college would maintain positive reserves and cash balances throughout the 10-year period covered by the projections. Let us be clear: Grant Thornton concluded that, under the present arrangements, St Mary's will remain solvent for the foreseeable future. That is what it says in the Grant Thornton report. It does not say that we are not financially viable. It has been repeated and reported to us many times that Grant Thornton said that St Mary's is not viable. I suggest that you read the report in detail. It does not say any such thing. Grant Thornton's concerns relate to what it calls sensitivities. It is actually saying that if funding were greatly reduced, or if student numbers were drastically cut, viability would be challenged. That is not the same as saying that the college is not financially viable.

I think that it is self-evident that massive reductions in funding or student numbers would challenge the viability of any institution. It is only by introducing those doomsday scenarios that Grant Thornton was able to raise concerns on the college's financial viability.

In relation to that, and the fact that this would apply to any institution, look at the English funding council's most recent assessment of the financial health of universities and colleges. It states that the risk of public funding constraints and uncertainty about student recruitment could result in increased volatility of financial performance. In other words, the sensitivities described by Grant Thornton apply to the entire sector. It is simply a statement of fact to say what it says.

I will go back to Grant Thornton's definition of sustainability and my concerns about its narrow definition. At the outset of the Grant Thornton review, we raised concerns with the Department about the definition that Grant Thornton was using. We proposed that it use a definition based on the funding council's assessment of sustainability. How did it assess sustainability? It looked at key indicators of financial performance. It looked at liquidity, cash flow, surplus or deficit position, staff costs, affordability of borrowing and level of reserves.

Under that definition, how would St Mary's be assessed? We contend that any such assessment would show that there is no evidence challenging our viability. Our liquidity is good; our cash flow is good; we are generating adequate levels of surplus; staff costs are under control; we have no borrowings; our reserves are appropriate for our needs; we are financially stable; and we are confident that we can maintain that position.

To maintain that financial strength, we need stability. Peter has referred to this. We need a supportive policy environment. We have an approach and a strategy in relation to our viability. We will continue to focus on our core business — training teachers — and we will make that as cost-effective as possible. We have reduced our cost base significantly over the past five years. We will continue to pursue our strategy of diversification, which was first suggested by the Audit Office, and, a number of years ago, endorsed by the Department. We are seeking modest increases in non-teacher education student numbers, and we will continue to pursue our funded role in the provision of continuing professional development (CPD). We think that, if we are able to do that, this strategy, combined with the academic excellence that Peter has referred to, can deliver long-term viability.

**Professor Finn:** Fra, I have one final comment. Brian refers to sensitivities; I called them levers. These are the levers that the Minister has. If he changes those numbers or changes the funding mechanisms to take out the premia, then, of course we have problems. So, it is down to the Minister; it is down to the Department. We require a supportive policy environment.

**Mr F McCann:** Chair, I have one final question, and it goes back to something that Pat asked earlier. Do you think that the panel's review of teacher education was too narrow and did not cover all aspects of education? I am saying that in terms of Irish-medium education. It also did not look at the impact that the removal of institutions like St Mary's from their locality would have on that community or the wider community.

**Professor Finn:** Because the remit was incredibly tight. I remember that a former member of the Committee, Jim Allister, was very clear about that at the very start and questioned the remit being much too narrow for a matter that embraces a whole aspect of life.

Chair, could I finish on a very light and humorous note?

**The Chairperson:** We still have another member to go.

**Professor Finn:** I will come back to that.

**The Chairperson:** We will keep that as a highlight.

**Professor Finn:** Please do. One came to mind.

**Mr Ross:** We will wait for the humour in a few minutes' time.

I have one issue; it should not take too long. The panel talked about the issue of common admissions. That has been raised before in the Committee and by the Minister as has the disadvantage that Stranmillis is perhaps at because you do not use the UCAS system. Are you willing to look at that issue? You have spoken very strongly about the importance of autonomy to you. I do not think that the Committee is in any doubt about that and it was helpful that you outlined exactly what you meant by that. Are you willing to look at using the UCAS system in your admissions policy? If not, why not?

**Professor Finn:** OK. The quick answer is yes. Thank you for the question. This is the first time since the review started that anyone has asked me or St Mary's about the UCAS matter, and yet it is in the report in sections 4.25 and 8.9. I hope that I am making an important point here. Alastair Ross is the first person who has raised UCAS with me in the context of the review.

Let me explain what the problem is in simple terms; I retain an open mind. The UCAS system is not suitable for recruitment to our primary BA degree programme because we have what is called a subject-option approach, with small numbers going into each subject, so into English, mathematics, science and so on. The risk of us overshooting the overall target that has been set by DE is just too great if we were to use the predicted grades approach of UCAS. If we said to people that they could get into St Mary's to do primary teacher education with English with three As and we have 10 places and 30 people get 3 As we will have overshoot by a large margin. The UCAS system is designed for very large universities or for large groups of students, where there is room on either side to make variations. Our particular degree is such that we are trying to put students into very small groups, so we use a different system by which, after the examination results are made available, we rank order students in terms of what they got and take in the best 10, 9 or whatever the case might be. So, there is a technical reason why St Mary's is not in UCAS. Nobody has ever asked me that, so I am telling

Alastair and the members of the Committee now that there is a very good reason why we are not in UCAS.

I recognise and understand the problem that our direct entry approach causes. I would like to know more about the scale of the problem and whether we are talking about it impacting on 10 students or 20 students — I do not know. All that I can say in response is that, in a spirit of collaborative partnership and on the basis of having achieved agreement with the Minister on the way forward, I believe that the problem can be resolved. The problem, Alastair, is not UCAS, but that a number of students who have applied to Stranmillis and have been given places in Stranmillis switch and come to us, virtually at the last minute, as we have a separate system, and that is upsetting to Stranmillis. It is losing a number of students and is having to go back into the pool. I understand that. Surely there is a way, by sharing the information about who has applied, to find a method that does not compromise either institution and ensure that the problem, which is not the fact that we are not in UCAS but that Stranmillis is experiencing problems, can be resolved. I would like to help to resolve that problem. That is what the Committee needs to hear.

**The Chairperson:** Over to the humour now, Peter.

**Mr Flanagan:** There is pressure on you now, Peter. This had better be funny.

**Professor Finn:** It is funny, although the problem is that I have now set myself up and it is not going to work. As I was being asked a question, I began to think about the disconnection and how having a narrow remit can somehow produce a world-class teacher education system. I then thought of Manchester United and its huge efforts to become world-class again. I can just imagine the reaction of Louis Van Gaal on being told by the management of Manchester United that he is only allowed to fix the infrastructure — the training ground and the playing kit — and that he was not allowed to touch the provision — the players. That does not work when you are trying to become world-class in sport, and it does not work when you are trying to be world-class in teacher education. This has to be looked at in the round, across Departments and across issues. The wider issues must be brought in, as they were today, concerning the role of any institution of higher education in the community in which it is located.

Sorry, it was a bit of a damp squib. I thought the Louis van Gaal analogy was quite good, but it has passed. Nevertheless, you get the point: we cannot go forward systematically on this if we do not look at things in the round, across the two Departments and beyond to the impact that institutions like ourselves have in the communities in which we are located.

**The Chairperson:** Peter and Brian, thank you very much for your time. Your input is much appreciated.

**Professor Finn:** I am always happy to come to the Committee. Even if the members change, there is a tone and approach here that I find very inclusive. This is an environment that is superb for a small institution, because it is a place where we can have our voice heard. In that regard, I am pleased to have been here this morning, as is Brian. We have had our voice heard, and we thank you for that.

**The Chairperson:** No problem.