



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Review of Careers Education and Guidance:  
Briefing by the Independent Panel

24 September 2014

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Review of Careers Education and Guidance: Briefing by the Independent Panel

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

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

**Witnesses:**

Ms Marie-Thérèse McGivern	Belfast Metropolitan College
Mr Brian Ambrose	George Best Belfast City Airport

**The Chairperson:** I welcome Ms Marie-Thérèse McGivern, the panel member for Belfast Metropolitan College; and Mr Brian Ambrose, who is the chair of the panel and is from George Best Belfast City Airport. Over to you, folks.

**Mr Brian Ambrose (George Best Belfast City Airport):** We welcome the chance to update you and tell you where we are. This panel was set up to look at the review that has been carried out and to make recommendations. If you are comfortable, I will take five or 10 minutes to bring you up to where we are. I can take questions as we go, so just interrupt if you want any clarity on anything.

From the outset, the panel decided that the most useful thing it we could do would be to come up with a concise set of recommendations, ideally summarised on one A4 sheet. I think that we are just about to achieve that. A number of consultations are happening this week with those who have made submissions. We did not ask for fresh submissions. We have a volume of material that literally stands quite high. I am going to talk you through the thinking that has evolved on the five recommendations, and we are on track to report by the end of October, which is our target. I have met both Ministers and given them an interim update.

We had to keep narrowing things down to bring them back. I am just going to use the generic term "careers", because you can branch this out and get involved in all sorts of wider discussions. The first item that we homed in on was to recommend that all young people have exposure to a minimum of one week's work experience, and we will be recommending a time frame within which that should be achieved. That puts an onus on business to make work experience more interesting. At the moment, it is a great disservice to some young people that, when they finally get work experience,

we stick them in a corner and they photocopy or read a manual. That is not work experience. We think that a lot of organisations, including in the public sector, make excuses as to why they do not take people on board. That should be addressed. Many of us have constraints with confidentiality, securing things and everything else, but we manage to accommodate young people.

The idea is to get out into the world of work and get a feel for things. Typically in that week, when they come into the airport, it eliminates the things that they do not want to do as much as anything else. Some people sit in air traffic and love it while others hate it. Some people like the fire station, some enjoy being in marketing and some enjoy being in finance. At the end of the week, we are helping them to narrow down what they think they would enjoy doing as a career. There is a whole series of recommendations around work experience.

The second recommendation is that we believe that, starting from P7 in primary school, every young person should develop an e-portfolio. It is a bit like a CV: it would start to capture something other than just pure academic output. The reason for that is that, as employers, we often find, for example, if we have two young people who have completed their A levels and candidate A has achieved four A\*s and candidate B has achieved four Bs, the system defines that candidate A should get the job. However, it may be that, in their school career, candidate B has managed to work in other countries and has been involved in music or the arts or in youth or church groups. You will typically find that candidate B will shine because they have developed their personality, have a bit of confidence and they will get the job.

An e-portfolio should be a warning sign for two people. If I am going into fourth year or fifth year — I still use the old terminology — and that e-portfolio is blank, it is warning sign to say that someone is just cramming to get A\*s, they are not developing themselves and are limiting their chance to get a job. It is also a good indicator for those at risk of dropping out of the system — the NEETS, as we sometimes refer to them. We recommend early intervention. If a young person demonstrates early in their schooling that it is unlikely that they are going to get five GCSEs at grade A to C, there should be an intervention to make sure that that young person does something meaningful during their schooling career. The last thing we want — we know that we have a problem in Northern Ireland — is too many people leaving the system with nothing. They become unemployable and the third generation of unemployed. There is a big issue around e-portfolios, and there are a lot of recommendations.

Our third recommendation is a careers website. When you look at labour market information, you see that the positive is that there is no shortage of it but the negative is that you need a PhD to interpret it. We are looking at a website that a young person and, just as importantly, their parents or those who care for them can understand. For example, how many jobs have been created in Northern Ireland in the last five years and in which sectors? It is about starting to inform career choices. You may want to pick certain A levels or a university degree, but it is staring you in the face that there will not be a single job available in your chosen sector in the next five years. Another part of the website will provide information on evolving sectors and areas where Northern Ireland is beginning to grow. It is not a cumbersome website. For this generation in particular, it is something that is interactive and exciting and that young people and those at home would use. We believe that that will take a little bit of time, but it is about taking a lot of current data and turning it into something useful.

The fourth part is that, when it comes to assisting young folks to make their choices, they should receive independent careers advice. So, while there is some of that on our panel, some best practice for careers teachers and those who have spent their entire lives in academia, there should be some external input to help young people. How can you advise if your world has been quite restricted? We are looking at a number of things there. There is a lack of consistency and uniformity in the whole area of careers advice. Some schools have careers teachers who are quite excellent, but there are other schools that do not have them and have an annual careers budget of £150, which says it all. The lack of consistency is quite alarming, from those that do it very well to those that do not do it at all. There are those critical points in a young person's schooling career, for example, when they are going into third year and making GCSE choices, or at the point when they are deciding whether to go into further education, an apprenticeship or to pursue their A levels and go to do a university course. We need those interventions at those critical stages to help people to make the right choices.

In many ways, our final issue is exercising us the most. If the recommendations are accepted, how do you ensure that something actually happens? We have a great inbuilt DNA as a panel. We do not want to produce a report that catches dust on the shelf. I met the inspectorate. It acknowledges that it is not unusual for a school to be on a seven-year cycle. So, I do not hang my hat on the fact that this is on the inspectorate. If I am a principal, I only have to face up to it once every seven years, and it is only a small part of the overall inspection. So, there needs to be some kind of quality assurance

framework to make sure that it is happening. We are aware that this is not the first report that has been published. It may not even be the best report that has been published. Both Ministers bought into it when I suggested that we would aim to produce one A4 page.

We have Professor Tony Watts and plenty of expertise on our panel. We will substantiate everything that we say and back it up in the rest of the body of the report, but we are following through with our objective to produce one A4 page. So, as public representatives, if you want to hold everyone to account, our recommendations will be crystal clear.

There is a great disservice to young people. There is some best practice, but there is an awful lot working against the young person making the right career choices. It is either producing people who are capable and choose the wrong higher-level qualification — we know of that underutilisation where someone with a quality degree is doing a very basic job — or, at the other end, too many young people are spending a chunk of their life in formal education and end up being unemployable.

That is a very rapid run-through. We will complete the wider consultation this week. The panel meets for the final time next month, and we will make our recommendations to Ministers Farry and O'Dowd before the end of October.

In case you have any technical questions, I brought Marie-Thérèse with me. If you have any superficial questions, I am happy to take them.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much, Brian. First, from the Committee's point of view, how much recognition or cognisance did you give to our inquiry and the recommendations that we put forward?

**Mr Ambrose:** We tried to do two things. It formed the core of our study. In our report, we will acknowledge that, if you do everything that we say, it will leave things undone. The report that you have is more comprehensive. It makes more recommendations, but our concern was that it has a greater risk of not being implemented. We did not differ from anything that is in that report. We have looked at it, and when you load that with the CBI report and all the other reports, it just worried us that, while there is a lot of good work, there is a danger that some of that good work never causes change. So, you should find that, if you were to do all of this, a big chunk of what is recommended in your report will happen, but there may need to be a further piece of work in years to come to address issues; you cannot do everything at once.

**Ms Marie-Thérèse McGivern (Belfast Metropolitan College):** I think that it is important to say that the report from the Committee for Employment and Learning has been extremely influential in shaping the debate. You covered big things, such as the issue about overcoming barriers, the issues related to science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and the issues about access and information flowing. I think that we all felt that it was a very constructively critical report, which is what we wanted, and it gave us lots of clues. It has been quite important in shaping the debate and the discussions, and they have been in-depth.

**Mr Ambrose:** In fact, that is how we conducted our review. At each of our meetings, we took two of your themes, and the secretariat prepared a briefing for us as to what was in that report, and we invited input and we asked Tony Watts to look at some external benchmarks. That is how we did it: we took your report, segmented it and broke it into chunks and addressed two of them at each meeting. At the end of each meeting, we then tried to conclude what our recommendations would be, which was probably a summary of what you had in your report.

**The Chairperson:** Please do not take this as being flippant, but did you discard any of our recommendations out of hand as being unworthy of further consideration, perhaps because they were too difficult to deliver?

**Mr Ambrose:** It was not so much that they were too difficult. The most difficult thing is getting the wording right. Here is the danger: in your report, there were lots of good recommendations, but, if I was a cynic, my question is about whether it would force me to do anything? The good schools, the good leaders and good principals are doing that anyway. So, they will continue to do that and will probably read into your report and enhance what they are doing. If you word a report in a way that lets those who give scant regard to that off the hook, there is a danger that they will continue to give scant regard to it and will think that their only purpose in life is to run an exam factory. They are besotted with these, albeit media, league tables. We are trying to say that there is more to life than those tables.

I do not think that there was a criticism of the report or anything that we thought unworthy of implementing, but we thought that the wording left it too loose. Maybe we will fall into the same trap, but we are trying to make sure that we make really concise recommendations that, if Ministers and officials buy into, will force change. While there is good practice, there has been a huge amount of criticism about the current level of provision.

**The Chairperson:** I just want your —

**Ms McGivern:** Sorry, Chair, I just want to add to that. I have worked on a lot of these expert panels, and I have to say that Brian's chairmanship has been quite different. He brings a very businesslike —

**Mr Ambrose:** "Different" is usually a scary thing.

**Ms McGivern:** No, I mean it in the sense that, at first, when he said that he was going to get it all on one A4 page, I thought that there would be short cuts. That has not been the case. We have had some very deep and meaningful conversations and some quite robust conversations, but I think that Brian is very keen for us to come up with something that can be implemented. I think that that is why the knotty last question that we are left with is about how we can ensure that the recommendations are made to happen. That is part of the problem. We have lots of reports, but it is quite a big framework, and trying to get all education providers to do something at the same time is difficult. You have to ask what carrots and sticks you have.

We are at the final hurdle of trying to see how we can make sure that the things we have suggested are realised and can be implemented. That is always the knotty question. The businessman in Brian pushes us all the time to look at the outcomes, how we will ensure that they happen and how we know that we are getting the results that we want. It has been very good experience for some of the public sector people on the committee.

**The Chairperson:** Finally, Marie-Thérèse, you talked about the carrot-and-stick approach, and your first recommendation is one that the Committee discussed in-depth and thought was crucial, so we agree with you. It was about the value of work experience.

**Ms McGivern:** Absolutely.

**The Chairperson:** How do you engage employers to provide meaningful work experience?

**Mr Ambrose:** There is a bit of meat behind the one-pager, and we are looking at developing a minimum spec. We have lots of micro companies in Northern Ireland, and a lot of the owner/managers of those small businesses would see this as all too much just for taking someone on for only a week. There are other ways of doing it.

A lot of companies would be willing to come to a regional event. They could set up their stalls, and the young people could come and sample dozens of companies. That might be part of the solution. There are also companies like Bombardier that do it extremely well. Let us share that experience and help companies to see what happens. I have never had someone on work experience — we put them through at four a week — who has let me down. If you make it interesting for them and keep them moving around, it can work. They are there to impress.

We are looking at developing a spec and recommendations that will tell us what good work experience looks like. It is not disruptive to an employer. People are afraid of it because they think, "Am I going to waste part of my time looking after this young person?". It is not like that once you have experience of it.

**Ms McGivern:** I will use one tiny example. There is an onus on the education sector, including FE, HE and the schools, to go out and engage with industry. I see it in my own college. I see the bits of my college where lecturers are out engaging. You are aware of it because you are a huge supporter of our fashion side and our fashion management side. They are great exemplars for making sure that everybody gets work placements and everybody gets organised and spends time in the industry. If all my lecturers worked in the same way as the lecturers in fashion, it would be better. So, there is that onus, and we work with small employers and big employers in the fashion industry, but the issue is that you have to go out and make the placements and make it safe for business so that they know that

things will be organised, that we will not just send anybody to them and that it will be properly run. They will then get that confidence.

We now have about 30 fashion organisations, industry leaders and small businesses champing at the bit every year when we come to them and are ready, whereas there are other sectors where we have not had that same level of engagement and do not get the same work placements and the same opportunities. So, there is a bit of an onus on us in the sector as well to be out there making those connections and getting more opportunities for young people.

**Mr Ambrose:** The final report will probably say something like, "within three years or five years". We have still to be debate that. We have been robust. We went back to the CBI and said, "OK, you are making demands. Are you up for it?". I said to the chamber, the CBI and Business in the Community, "You need to up your game and get your memberships engaged". We also said to the public sector, "Stop making excuses. You need to open the doors and get involved". There needs to be leadership in the public sector too. I do not see any reason why you cannot take a young person into any Department. Law firms are bringing young people in. Come off it. The public sector does not pull its weight here, and part of our recommendations is a real shift in its thinking and what it is doing.

**Mr Flanagan:** Thanks for the presentation. Brian, I attended an event that was organised by Business in the Community in April, at the start of this process. That gave the industry leaders that were in attendance a good opportunity to hear about the work that was going on with careers. It also gave those who were in attendance a good chance to hear from young people about their experiences. The young people who addressed that event were very articulate and all had a great story to tell. I can see that the panel is represented by people from industry and the world of academia. As part of this discussion, have you tried to engage with young people in any way to find out their views on it?

**Mr Ambrose:** They have. There have been a number of the written submissions where young people were involved and engaged, and we have spoken to them through the apprenticeship scheme as well. The danger is that if you invite any group in, you have to invite all groups in. So, we had dozens of requests for presentations and hearings. We have the written body of material. In our recommendations, we say that young people should be brought in for the design of the website because, frankly, my kids understand this game better than I do. We need to ask, "What would be interesting and cause a young person to want to go to a website?" They want it to be interactive; they do not want dozens of Excel spreadsheets. So, part of our recommendation will be to involve them in developing the solution. You are trying to develop a website that they want to spend an hour on. It has to be a directive, has to have video clips and has to be the type of stuff that they deal with on social media every day.

**Mr Flanagan:** Are you considering making an app as well?

**Ms McGivern:** Yes, it is the full social media package, because we all know now that, as soon as we get to grips with emails and the Internet, they have something new like Flickr or Instagram or whatever it is. It is constantly changing and evolving, and you have to keep up to date or they do not regard you as very cool.

**Mr Flanagan:** There is a specific problem of schools only being interested in getting their students into a university place to improve the perception of the standard of the education available in that institution. How do you propose to solve that problem so that schools take a more active interest in the future of young people and are not just interested in getting them a university place?

**Mr Ambrose:** One of the measures that we are considering is schools having to publish destination data on what happens to the young people when they leave their institution. That is quite an important metric. If a school engages in this type of thing, it is more likely that the young people will end up in meaningful employment. It is one thing saying, "I have done my bit, and x% of my kids have gone to Oxford, Cambridge, Queen's or wherever", but that is not a job yet. So, there are some output data that we need beyond simply your last day at school. Apparently — it was news to me, and we picked it up only this week — a wealth of data on that exists. However, again, none of it is in a meaningful format that would tell me anything if I, as a parent, were considering which school to send one of my children to. We suggest that that should be something that schools have to publish.

**Ms McGivern:** Sitting alongside the careers review, which DEL is doing jointly with DE, are the review of apprenticeships and the review of youth training, which the Committee will be aware of. The review

of apprenticeships is complete, and the document is out for consultation. It will significantly change how apprenticeships are done, both in their level and their range. The public sector thing is interesting. One of the planks of that is that we will see more non-traditional apprenticeships. Traditionally, apprenticeships have been in the trades areas. We will start to see apprenticeships in ICT, financial services and, potentially, public service. I think that that is going to change people's view of apprenticeships. Secondly, you have the youth training review, which will hopefully go out to consultation fairly soon.

So, you have a real change in the alternatives to university in Northern Ireland. We have fallen way behind where we used to be. There was a time in Northern Ireland when doing an apprenticeship was seen as a good thing, and parents wanted their children to go into apprenticeships. Obviously, it was mostly boys, but that is the way that it was. That has fallen by the wayside. We need to rethink how we approach it. We need to get parents to again see apprenticeships as really important possibilities.

We have good examples coming through in Northern Ireland. PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) and Deloitte are now taking in young people with GCSEs and A levels and putting them onto apprenticeship schemes to do accountancy, financial services and tax consultancy. That is a completely different route from going to university. In three years' time, those young people will emerge with their accountancy qualifications and other tax qualifications with no debt and having been getting paid. That will start to become an attractive route, but we have not yet got to the point where the careers services in schools understand it as a very valuable and very good route. We have a way to go.

I accept what you are saying. We will absolutely have to do a lot of work on alternative routes to university to give young people hope that, if they do not want or cannot afford to go to university, there are other completely viable ways to go forward and have a fantastic career. It is not the end of your life if you do not have four A\*s and are not going to university. There are other extremely important routes to very good careers that pay as well as the careers of those who go to university. This careers review in Northern Ireland has to be seen in a continuum of change in relation to the whole way that we treat vocational education and mainstream academic education.

**Mr Ambrose:** We are not naive. We know that there are — vested interests may be too strong a term — influences that direct young people in ways that may not be in their best interests. If this starts to take hold and the information is meaningful, young people will start to vote with their feet. If they are better informed, they will make a better decision. That may not be being driven down a particular track just because someone gets money if they take on somebody from this level or that level. We are aware that some of this is like turning a tanker.

**Mr Flanagan:** When you talk about —

**The Chairperson:** Phil, can you —

**Mr Flanagan:** It is a short question. When you talk about destination data, are you talking about data for just the previous year's cohort of students or for three or four years beforehand?

**Mr Ambrose:** It is a bit of a shift in what schools sometimes like to publish. I was with the principal of Inst recently, and the tradition had been "Here are a number of old boys who are now household names". That is OK, but the data is more meaningful if you build it up over the years and say, "OK, last year, 700 boys left Inst, and 500 of them are now in employment, and 200 are still looking for a job". I am oversimplifying the thing. This will take time to build up, but you want to be able to start to get a school, college or FE provider that has a reputation, and say, "You know what? Go here. You have a better chance of getting a job than if you go there".

**Mr P Ramsey:** Marie-Thérèse and Brian, you are very welcome. Our Committee has undertaken two very important inquiries: the careers one, which the Executive have now taken ownership of, and one on young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs), which is hugely important. I am keen to see how we can synchronise the levels between careers and NEETs.

I chair the all-party group on learning disability, and one of the biggest issues is the level of careers guidance that a child gets. I have always made the call, particularly to Stephen Farry, for what can only be described as specialist careers advisers. We need the empathy of a youth worker who knows young people and is growing up with them but who can also talk to people who are furthest from the

barriers, identify the learning disabilities and have more-tailored careers guidance for them. Where do they fit into this?

**Mr Ambrose:** I am chairman of Mencap, so I have empathy for that whole area of learning disability. In many ways, it does not differ. You are trying to give a person, with whatever range of abilities, a much more informed set of choices. When you take the NEETs or those who are going to drop out of the system, it is about early intervention. If we know in the first year that we have a problem, why do we just persist with it for another five years, and then dump some young person out the other side?

Going back to the Chair's point, there may weaknesses in what we do by being very focused on five things — or four things with the backup — that are going to have a material impact. There may be people who feel we have not given learning disability or something else a strong enough profile, but if you keep the principle the same, whatever form of education a young person is in, they just need much more meaningful information.

**Ms McGivern:** For me, this is an important issue and is one that we looked at. In my college, we have a large learning disability side. The recommendation that there is independent careers advice for every child is a good starting point. I agree with you: the style of that has to be a bit different. It is a bit different from meeting your teacher. In some cases, it would be much more appropriate if it was a youth-worker-type approach and more interactive.

It is the same with NEETs. Some children will sit very well and want to behave in a classroom. Other children do not react very well to that, so that is the first issue. Secondly, every child will have the e-portfolio, so, again, that is an opportunity, even for children with learning disabilities. They, too, should have a right to have that portfolio, and we should be looking at it and making sure that there are constantly things coming onto that portfolio.

The labour market information is also interesting because I can show you that a large number of our learning challenged students are in employment or in types of employment. There are employment opportunities for children and young people with that type of disability, but often people do not know that. We should build that labour market information into the website and the social media. It is about giving children who have more challenges role models and positive images of enhancement of their life through career paths and other things. It is about changing the attitude, and what you say is absolutely right about that youth-worker approach or slightly different approach. One size does not fit all.

**Mr Ambrose:** At Mencap we have young folks who have been involved in the Special Olympics. You see a spark with them. It has built their character. That is in the e-portfolio.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I appreciate that. Disability is something that I am very passionate about. Parking that, we have 30,000 people in Northern Ireland who are NEET and who would be academically challenged. Marie-Thérèse, you are right to talk about STEM. We are all talking about STEM and about the higher-level apprenticeships, which is a good project. How do we reach those 30,000 who are furthest away unless they are fundamentally part of the review and there are actionable points towards that.

**Mr Ambrose:** There are three bits that we see coming together. Sometimes, it is a case of those people getting the chance to get out there on work experience and find something that they are really interested in. I will use our own company as an example. We have such a wide range, from an air-traffic controller earning six figures to every other job needed to keep an airport going. If someone at risk of being NEET gets work experience in an airport and says, "It mightn't be my dream job, but if I get in here as a baggage handler, it might be that a lot of those baggage handlers now have jobs in other parts", and they can see a career path.

With the e-portfolio you have an external, independent adviser sitting down. It is not that those young people have no talent. It may just be that they are unlikely to have the ability and discipline to get GCSEs. You start to say to them, "If you're involved in music, you go for it, and make sure that you are not just one of many but you could be the best". So you are intervening and taking an interest in a way that does not seem to happen at the minute.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I am going to finish, because the Chair is pushing me on, and he is right.

**Mr Ambrose:** Our answers are not as concise as they could be.



**Mr P Ramsey:** My point is actually very short. Given that there are so many young people who are vulnerable and marginalised — 30,000 of them — you have to engage with the NEETs organisations. We have heard very positive stories of young people who are in employment programmes and of the joined-up thinking between careers and employability programmes. I know you said that you have received umpteen written presentations, but I think the best organisations that can advocate for and champion a young person's voice are those NEETs organisations that come into this Committee. I think you need to talk to them.

**Mr Hilditch:** You are very welcome. Thanks for your presentation. I just want to go back to a point you made, Chair, in relation to work experience and the difficulties that surround that. I would like to get a wee bit more meat on the bones that you alluded to, Brian. I would advocate a root-and-branch overhaul of the work experience system, because from the outset the onus is on the young person to actually find a place, which is very difficult at times and in certain areas. You just witness so many young people getting a week in the school property with a bin liner and a litter-pick. Is one week even enough over a two- or three-year period to make that judgement? Can you put any further meat on the bones?

**Ms McGivern:** I am happy to talk. I totally agree with you. I think that, often, work experience is seen as something that they have to add on. They have to go out for a week; they have to do this or they have to do that. Quite often, the onus is put on the young people, and we identify that as difficult. You are all aware that there is a public debate about who gets internships. It is not what you know; it is whom you know. That happens in schools as well. Children whose parents know people who can get them a week in a solicitor's office are obviously going to have an advantage over the child whose parents do not have those connections and therefore end up with whatever the teacher has left. Certainly, as I have mentioned, it is not at the level at which I would want it to be throughout our college. Some parts of our faculty are very good at connecting with business, going out and making those connections, talking to those businesses, being clear with them about our expectations of a work placement and the sorts of things that we want our person to encounter, and, then, preparing the young person, so that, when they arrive at the business, everybody keeps up their side of the bargain. I think that we have a long, long way to go — I really do.

This is a big ask, but it will be a very important ask. I have already indicated that the education sector has to do this much better. Brian has also referred to the fact that he has challenged the CBI, other employer organisations, chambers of commerce and whatever. They have got to get involved in it, too. It has to be a two-way process for the benefit of the young people whom we are working with.

**Mr Hilditch:** The private sector, when it appeared before the Committee in the inquiry, was very clear that it wanted to see something different as well.

**Mr Ambrose:** We have our own business. We have adopted six schools. You find that that changes the dynamic entirely. Because you build a long-term relationship with the school, people who would not go through that traditional route of their mum, dad or somebody knowing somebody get access. The kids are in and out from school choirs or whatever. That is working. We are trying to say to the business community that it had better up its game. You are right: one week is an absolute minimum. If that is all that you achieve, that is fairly pathetic. Some people are not even getting that. There should be a multiplicity of engagements. Even if it is just a school choir coming down, they are out in the world of work and seeing something different. We have shone the light on business pretty powerfully.

**Mr Buchanan:** One of the recommendations that you propose is either a new website or the upgrading of it or whatever. Who will be responsible for the upgrading or setting up of a new website and making it attractive, maintaining it and all that type of thing?

**Mr Ambrose:** My own observation is that this should not need any money. Redeploy people who are doing things that may not be adding so much value and put them onto something like this. I think that you could put it back to the two Ministers and tell them to find the resource. People who were gathering this data met us. It is not that we are not paying people good wages, but they acknowledged themselves that, unless you are an economist, it is not in a format that makes any sense to you. I do not know the answer to your question, but I would say to the two Ministers that they do not need to ask for any more money. They just need to go back and find the number of people who are gathering data, replace one of them with a marketer, bring in different skills sets and set up a working group. The schools and the young people will get involved in it. Business will volunteer people who do this for a living. We will help to develop it. To me, it should be the easiest thing in the

world to get a working group together. To me, it has to be ready for the start of next term. This is not about five years getting lost somewhere. Get a nice, concise working group with a six-month programme up and running. It will not cost you a penny.

**Mr Buchanan:** We are not that interested in the cost of setting it up. The thing is that it is one of the key recommendations that you have condensed this in. This is one of the things going forward. Therefore, it is all very well making a recommendation or putting forward a proposal. You have to follow that though. Who will be responsible for setting this up, maintaining it and for ensuring that it is something that is fit for purpose and attractive to the young person out there? That is a key issue.

**Mr Ambrose:** To answer it more generally; what I have said to both Ministers at the kick off, at the interim and will say again when we wrap up is that they have asked us to volunteer our time to make a set of recommendations. We cannot hold a Minister accountable, but we will make it known if we come up with a bad report or have failed, and we will accept that we have given bad recommendations. If there is an acceptance that we have incorporated what you had in your report and that this make sense, I will certainly make it known if, in 12 months' time, there is no evidence that anybody has done anything. I will make it known in the business community that I will not volunteer for anything else. We are looking for results.

Ultimately, we are saying to the Ministers that we are giving them a tool, and, now, they have to go back to their Departments and find the resources to make it happen. To be fair to them, both Ministers are very comfortable with that approach. They say that they are not doing this as a tick-box exercise; they want to see change. Time will tell.

**Mr Buchanan:** Your last recommendation is on how to ensure that these things happen. What type of scrutiny do you believe needs to be put in place to ensure that all schools and colleges, especially the low-performing ones in the career sector, will follow through on this and come up to standard?

**Mr Ambrose:** From my observation, there is almost an inbuilt weakness in the system. DEL and DE tend to take different approaches. DEL will say that we educate with the economy in mind. DE's approach is, "Well, we don't want to dictate to principals what they do". If something is not working, I understand that it falls first to the boards of governors, some of which are strong and others weak. We are trying to get information through websites. To use a business approach, if we develop a website, we will promote it. We will be sending things into these young people's homes to say, "Look, here's a tool".

There has to be some means through which boards of governors can ask principals, "What are we doing on careers?" We have shied away. To legislate for some of this could become heavy-handed. To bring it onto the inspectorate is only part of the solution because of the infrequency of inspection. A Minister has every right to be ask the inspectorate to go in and audit this in 12 months' time to find out whether there has been any change or whether the good schools are still doing good things and bad ones are ignoring all of this. It is, to me, the most difficult one to pin down. It is alright to say something, and you can use terms such as "mandate", but even that does not guarantee anything. We have to be realistic and not be naive enough to put something out that reads well and think that things are going to change. In one sense, we must give it teeth, but, hopefully, young people themselves will do a bit by saying that they are going to take control and become better informed. They will start to shape this agenda. They will be asking more informed questions about their options. Your question is a good one for which we do not yet have a full answer.

**Mr F McCann:** Thanks for the presentation. Brian, I know some of the work that you have done at the City Airport in partnership with communities beside the airport or further afield, and it offers opportunities for young people to enter that particular type of employment. One of the concerns that we have raised before — I certainly have — is that when we talk about apprenticeships as a guide to a career future, you already see a separation. We had an apprenticeship review that spoke about high-level apprenticeships, and you talk about a separate youth training review for the sorts of people that Pat spoke about, who end up falling into the NEET category. So, you are separating there. How do you marry both to offer equal opportunities to people who may want to move on to that?

Another thing is that, during the inquiry into careers, several people stood out, but particularly the guy who headed Armagh Planetarium, who talked about going into primary schools. He said that he saw eager young minds, willing to buy into the whole area of science and other stuff, but once he left, the teacher, the principal or the board of governors knocks that out of them or points them in the direction

that they have always gone in, whether that is teaching, law or whatever. Do you not believe that you should start earlier, in primary schools, and move on from there?

**Mr Ambrose:** We did debate that. In fact, Gordon Parkes of the CBI hammered home the point pretty hard that this all starts at primary school. Both apply. I feel that, as in all things in life, it often comes down to leadership. We cannot stray into that subject, but the good principals will be doing this anyway. That is why we said that e-portfolios should start at least at P7 but probably earlier to get young people thinking more widely. We are promoting a unique apprenticeship at the airport. We are taking on kids who have nothing. They have no qualifications and have never worked a day in their life. Moreover, they may not have a clean record either as far as behaving themselves goes. So far, every one of them has been a star. There is a huge range of people. We had a young lady from Short Strand, and it did no harm for us that Sinn Féin said, "Don't let Short Strand down". Her timekeeping was excellent, and she is now in full-time employment. We have a deal with Marie-Thérèse and her college where, for two days a week, apprentices go out and do their NVQ. For the other three days, they are in with us. That might involve working in a coffee shop or in admin, but we need more of that.

You are right: these kids do not have a hope of getting on to most of the apprenticeship schemes. We have started 10, and, as a reward for achieving that, we have told Michelle that we want another 10. There has to be something in all of this that captures those folks who will not get through an interview or on to the first rung of the ladder. I agree totally.

**Ms McGivern:** I just want to add to what Brian said. I agree totally with you, Fra, about primary schools, because by the time pupils get to secondary school, a lot of patterns are already set. You have been a supporter of CoderDojo, as has Sammy. We are getting them in at eight and nine years of age to learn to do programming. We are introducing them to that. It is important to have them doing it at that stage. The panel said that it would like to see more people from industry coming in to talk to primary-school children. It takes a different kind of skill to talk to kids of that age, but you can excite and develop them.

On the other side, I am very passionate about NEETs and the difficulties that we face in Northern Ireland. We continue to have somewhere in the region of a quarter of our young people leaving school functionally illiterate and innumerate. How long have we been talking about that yet still allowing it? In our college, we play catch-up, because we get those young people at 16, and, in many cases, we have to teach them to read and to do basic maths for the first time. You kind of wonder what they had been doing for the past 10 years. There are big structural issues in Northern Ireland that we need to face. However, I think that the changes that are coming through with the youth training scheme that the Minister has put forward, and then linking that directly to good apprenticeships and then to higher apprenticeships, will give you a route that will run parallel to the academic route. Everybody understands that you have to go to school and do GCSEs, and, if you get them, you do your A levels. If you asked someone to explain the vocational side, we cannot do that in Northern Ireland, because it is very complex. The review will create a much simpler process whereby young people may decide not to do GCSEs but instead go into a youth training scheme and do levels 1, 2, 3 and 4, which are equivalent to GCSEs and A levels. Once we start to understand that better, we will see more opportunities and will be able to put people through. However, it is important that we widen the scope for youth training and apprenticeships. Brian has taken a step at the airport. Previously, we would not have had apprenticeships at the airport. We now have to enlarge that. I will throw in an even better challenge: in Westminster, I know that there are 12 people apprenticed to MPs. In the rest of the UK, there is a widening concept now —

**Mr Ambrose:** Are we to add that to our recommendations?

**Ms McGivern:** I am showing that we have had a very narrow focus on what apprenticeships are. We can talk more broadly about apprenticeships in public life. However, if someone wants to work in policy development in the political sphere, there should be an apprenticeship route to doing that. We will have to start thinking wider and more ambitiously about what we can do with young people.

**Mr F McCann:** I do not think that there is any difficulty with people from industry going into schools. The difficulty is with the attitude of those who are teaching and progressing the children. There needs to be a wider understanding that there is a bigger life out there.

We are doing an inquiry into post-19 special needs education, which Pat touched on. One of the things that we have learnt from it to date is that there is a huge gap. Some of the schools are

excellent in how they provide, teach and train. However, there is a big gap in provision. It may not be a bad idea, when you look at special needs or training, to avail yourselves of the wealth of experience and understanding, not only among teachers but among some of the parents to whom we spoke. They spoke passionately about how difficult it is for their children to undertake the transition.

**Mr Ambrose:** Yes. With the increase in autism and things like that, that transition is becoming a bigger issue for us.

**Mr Lyttle:** Thank you for your presentation. Delivering a system of consistently fair, high-quality careers guidance is absolutely vital to addressing a plethora of issues across society: personal development; economic development; and equality of opportunity. I proposed the inquiry back in June 2012, when the Executive were proposing to dissolve DEL. I tried to sneak it in as quickly as I could, and I am glad that I did. I am glad that the joint review is now happening.

I think that you have picked low-hanging fruit in mentioning work experience, careers websites and labour market information. However, one of the key issues that you touch on is the need for fundamental change in what we consider to be positive outcomes at secondary-level education. That is one of the harder things to get at. A lot of the change needs to happen in schools in particular. I know that you are presenting on the DEL side of things, but some of the recommendations that we made in the inquiry, and that you have not touched on include a statutory duty to try to provide consistency of approach across the board; consideration of compulsory subjects; and parental engagement. Can you comment on the panel's thinking on those three issues?

**Mr Ambrose:** Just give them to me again.

**Mr Lyttle:** A statutory duty to address the fact that careers provision seems to be wide and varied across the board; whether there is a need for some sort of compulsory subject, the aim of which would be to try to tackle the differentiation in the time that is allocated to careers considerations; and how we address parental engagement, given that, in addition to the culture of schools, parents are often the key drivers in a lot of the decision-making and in making information accessible.

**Mr Ambrose:** There is an assumption there. Some of the young people who have the greatest difficulty do not have that sort of stable environment. We are aware of that.

Let me take your points in reverse order. The idea of parental engagement or the involvement of those at home is just to make it more meaningful. The website has to be something that I as a parent can sit down and make sense of without needing it explained to me. There are two ends to the spectrum. At one, there are parents who have been driving their young people down the doctor-type route, with no recognition of what opportunities exist in the job market. They seem to be keener on their son or daughter being a doctor than they are on finding out whether there is meaningful employment at the end of their studies. Likewise, there is the whole area that Marie-Thérèse has touched on. There is a range of options available, particularly at 16, but those options have never been presented in a meaningful way. So, to involve parents has to be to give them meaningful information. As I said in response to one of the earlier questions, we are struggling to get the right balance on the matter of a statutory duty. Careers should be a fairly straightforward matter. Let us not make rocket science out of something that we all should be able to understand. To get a bit of uniformity, we looked at qualifications for careers teachers. That is part of what we are looking at and recommending. I do not recall that we gave compulsory subjects an awful lot of consideration.

**Ms McGivern:** We did not, but it is a very interesting idea, Chris. Personally, it was very interesting for me to be on the panel with practitioners from the schools sector, and they tell a varied tale. In very good practice, a school builds its careers section, puts in a careers teacher who has careers qualifications and builds a very good centre for careers in the school. In other situations, anecdotally, they would talk of other schools where the careers teacher is the geography teacher or the PE teacher and got careers to do part-time as an extra duty. We need consistency, and we have been grappling with the statutory issue. We are not yet at a final position. We have to come to some kind of resolution on how to get consistency across the process, because the problem is that there are brilliant examples in the system but also some very bad examples.

**Mr Ambrose:** That is the only weakness of the panel. We had five stars, but we should have had some tube on it to help us see what the other side was like.

**Mr Lyttle:** The Northern Ireland Schools and Colleges Careers Association does a lot of work in that regard. Was it engaged as part of the panel's work?

**Mr Ambrose:** It was a written engagement. We have got its reports, and it has given us further reports in the past month. Yes, it is fully involved, and we have been invited to speak to it after as well.

**Mr Douglas:** Thank you, Brian and Marie-Thérèse, for your report so far. You mentioned the one week of work experience, and you gave a good example of the George Best Belfast City Airport, which is obviously a very good experience. However, you also talked about shining a light on businesses. Are we talking about a particular size of business? I understand that the airport is big and that you can link to all the various resources, but what about a small business in east Belfast, perhaps employing eight people involved in IT? We all know that young people are interested in social media, computer games and all that. They may not be interested academically, but they could be whizz-kids in the IT industry. Are there resources available for young people to get placements in such companies?

**Mr Ambrose:** We are turning it back on the likes of Business in the Community, which has good links to a lot of the smaller companies. We use Business in the Community when we start to look at issues around corporate responsibility. Many of us did not have a clue where to go, and it gave us the initial road map and showed us what best practice looks like so that we could begin to walk towards that. We are looking to Business in the Community to help us develop a template so that we can say to businesses, "If you have never taken young people on before, this is the type of thing that companies do that young people enjoy and find interesting, and here are the things not to do". It is not about providing cheap labour for a week, where young people are going to do your photocopying or some menial task. We are telling them not to do it.

We have also talked to the CBI and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry about situations in which, if companies cannot see themselves taking on young people, they can between them do something — a day each or something like that. We would almost turn it back on those who have been lobbying for it. They will tell you that, if we mandated this today, we could not deliver on it. We need to see what is reasonable, whether it be three years or five years, to get us to that point, but there should be a step up made each year. If you throw the public sector on top of that, and it starts to participate, given its size, there is no reason at all not to deliver on this.

**Mr Douglas:** Chris mentioned parental involvement. Obviously, all the research will show that there is huge influence outside the school gates from parents and the wider community. The East Belfast Partnership had a programme called Dads and Lads that got young kids, both boys and girls, who had no interest in school but were interested in football linked to Glentoran — the second best team in the world after Rangers. The kids were taken to the matches and were got to write a wee match report. All of them got prizes at the end of it. Have you looked much at how the wider community, including youth groups and Church groups, which you mentioned earlier, Brian, can get involved?

**Mr Ambrose:** Is it a reward to take young people to a Glentoran match and get them to write a report? *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Lyttle:** You have to say yes. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Ambrose:** I am with you on that.

All of that is in the outworking. If you are going to achieve this, it is going to involve more than the traditional companies that have been doing it. You are quite right to say that it does not necessarily have to be only businesses. I am sure that you will get willing participation from some of the other groups mentioned. We have not discussed that matter, but it widens it out for us.

**Mr Douglas:** Finally, I will just say to Marie-Thérèse that, like you, I have sat under Brian's chairmanship, and it was scary for me as well. *[Laughter.]* I am only joking.

**Ms McGahan:** Thank you for your presentation. One of the issues concerns women in STEM subjects. There is very poor uptake, and there needs to be a dedicated focus. Engineers Ireland's chief executive is a woman — I cannot remember her name — and it is holding a dedicated STEM careers event for women. That is something that should be explored.

You mentioned earlier highly skilled individuals doing jobs in the low-skilled category. That is down to the economic recession that we are in. I know that opportunities, in particular for those who fall into the NEETs category, are few and far between, because the jobs do not exist. One of the issues that you will hear about Key Skills level 2 is that it is not a qualification that is recognised, because employers do not see it as equivalent to a GCSE. That impacts on opportunities. A different approach needs to be taken, and the review of apprenticeships would play an important role in that.

Have you come up with any initiatives or ideas regarding women in STEM?

**Mr Ambrose:** There are a couple of things. I do not think that the higher-skilled/comes back to the fundamentals of what this is about: poor careers choices. You have people who have degrees, but they have degrees in sectors in which there are no jobs. Had they chosen a degree in a different sector, they could well be in high-level employment at the moment. It is not exclusively the case, but, quite often, underutilisation is a result of poor career choices.

On women in STEM, we have swung it back around to business, which is pretty lousy at this. Marie-Thérèse and I had a fairly horrendous experience at a dinner the other night, where someone was trying to promote —

**Ms McGahan:** I thought that there was going to be a walkout at the dinner the other night.

**Mr Ambrose:** — a career in electrical engineering. The individual was passionate about the subject area, but he was saying, "Look, we have plenty of bright young lads coming out of college, and there are good opportunities for young lads". Even when we asked him, "Are you fishing in just half the pond here?", he still did not get it. My point is that one of the things that business does poorly sometimes is that, instead of sending out the best people to have these engagements, it sends out people who have a bit of spare time. If you want to inspire women into engineering, you need to send out people who can inspire anybody into engineering. Business needs to start to present itself a lot more holistically if it wants to make these career options seem exciting.

**Ms McGivern:** You are absolutely correct. In Northern Ireland, it is hard to get a good number of people interested in engineering, or in the STEM subjects in general. So, we have that problem. We also have a class problem that we do not talk a lot about. More affluent students tend to pick the sciences in greater numbers than less affluent students.

Girls are not choosing to go into the sector at all. There are a number of initiatives. The engineering side has done it, and DEL itself has sponsored quite a number of events. We recently had an ICT careers event for sixth-form girls. However, we do have a fundamental problem. We have to make those industries more attractive. It is interesting that, for some parents, the penny drops when we ask them whether they know what an ICT graduate will earn within x number of years. On that career pathway, the financial recompense is very high if you move up further in the industry. However, a lot of people do not see it that way. It is the same for engineering. Parents do not see it as a career option. The simple solution is to be a doctor, a lawyer or an accountant, because that is easy.

We have huge barriers to overcome there. We talked about it and saw the careers portfolio and information building. The independent advice might start to break the cycle and change it. However, we do not underestimate the work that still has to be done in making those choices.

**Ms McGahan:** All of that was identified in the review of careers, but we need solutions.

**Mr Ambrose:** It was. We have tried to weight it. We have said that there should be some initiative to target work experience in areas where STEM is required, or the growth sectors where the future lies, to get as many people into that arena as possible.

**The Chairperson:** Brian and Marie-Thérèse, thank you very much for your time and your input. You can see from the questions from around the table that the Committee has a great interest in this. That is shown in our inquiry as well. We will keep an eye out, see how you get on and give you any support that you need.

**Ms McGivern:** We are delighted to come. Thank you very much for taking the interest.