



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

**Committee for Enterprise, Trade and  
Investment**

**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

**South Eastern Regional College:  
Environmental Skills Centre**

**23 February 2012**

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment

### South Eastern Regional College: Environmental Skills Centre

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

Mr Alban Maginness (Chairperson)  
Mr Daithí McKay (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Steven Agnew  
Mr Gordon Dunne  
Mr Phil Flanagan  
Mr Paul Frew  
Ms Jennifer McCann  
Mrs Sandra Overend

**Witnesses:**

Mr Thompson Keating	South Eastern Regional College
Mr Ken Webb	South Eastern Regional College

**The Chairperson:** I welcome Mr Ken Webb, chief executive, and Mr Thompson Keating, director of corporate and economic development. Thank you for permitting us to meet here in the college. Part of our policy is to get round as many institutions and to meet as many people as possible in the community. We were delighted to take up your invitation, and we look forward to hearing what you have to tell us.

**Mr Ken Webb (South Eastern Regional College):** Thank you very much. On behalf of the college, I formally welcome you. We are absolutely delighted to see the Committee here today. We have a short presentation, and then we will take questions.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much, Mr Webb.

**Mr Webb:** I welcome you to our fourth largest campus. After the meeting, we will give you a tour of the environmental skills centre, where you will be able to see how closely engaged we are with businesses. In the presentation, I will give you a brief outline of Colleges NI and the South Eastern Regional College (SERC), and we will give examples of how further education (FE) can support the economy.

You have some details of Colleges NI in your pack, and I do not intend to go down through any of those. The sector is a significant size, with a turnover of £250 million. Under the stewardship of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), the colleges have taken a tremendous leap forward in the past four years, since the merger process that took us from 16 colleges to six. I am a Johnny-come-lately to the FE sector: I have been here for less than four years. However, even in that short time, I can see how far and how fast the colleges have moved in their role in supporting the Programme for Government and, in particular, supporting the economy. Speaking on behalf not just of myself but of other principals across the sector, we are keen to do more to assist and promote the development of the economy.

The six Northern Ireland colleges are of a scale that, quite frankly, would be deemed to be large on a UK basis. With that comes the resources and the capabilities to be able to deliver real assistance to the economy. Northern Ireland is competing on a world market. Its businesses need to be world class, and they need to be supported by a world-class further education system to enable them to succeed. That is our aim.

I move to the 'FE Means Business' slide. As I said, we had the merger to form the six colleges, moving away from a supply-led to a demand-led model. Thompson will speak to some examples of that. It is very much focused on delivering the Programme for Government, taking cognisance of what industry itself — not just the sector skills councils — wants, and being very close to businesses. We have a desire to get as close to businesses as we possibly can because it is only by knowing and understanding what businesses need that we can make sure we are delivering what businesses want. As a sector, our belief is that we are highly flexible and highly responsive. That is an important factor.

I will set the funding into context. The FE total budget, in terms of what is distributed for courses to the colleges, is about £145 million. In contrast to that, the school transport budget is £75 million, and the higher education (HE) in FE budget is about £25 million. We provide some 20% of all higher education provision in Northern Ireland. When you consider that, as shown on the 'Colleges NI' slide, there are 180,000 enrolments, you get some sense of the scale of how many people we are dealing with and the amount of money involved.

SERC has about 1,100 employees and 32,000 enrolments. I will come to that briefly. We deal with over 1,100 businesses across the island of Ireland, and we have a £45 million turnover. Critically, again under DEL's stewardship, there has been nearly £80 million of capital investment in the short time that I have been at the college. We have new campuses in Newcastle, Downpatrick, Ballynahinch and Lisburn. Here in Ards, you can see that half of this campus has been rebuilt. We have world-class facilities. The same has been the case in many other areas of FE. Sadly, a few colleges are still operating with resources and facilities that are not as good as ours. There is no doubt that the significant investment in facilities is allowing us to give students opportunities to access the very best equipment and enabling us to promote a culture of excellence.

The next slide gives you some idea of the mix of enrolments. We have some 4,200 Training for Success and ApprenticeshipsNI enrolments; over 8,000 enrolments on essential skills, that is, numeracy, literacy and ICT; and some 18,000 enrolments in further education and 1,500 in higher education. You can see the spread of those enrolments across the college area.

At any given time, we have about 1,000 students on placements with companies. Those range from students who are doing higher education courses — we run courses right up to full degree level — right down to Training for Success students. We are very focused on getting industry projects and real-life projects on which the students can work. We have done that very successfully across most of our programmes.

We are, obviously, experiencing difficulties in getting students placed, because industry is finding things tight. In recent weeks, things in the construction industry, in particular, seem to have been getting more difficult. We are faced with a situation where students may not have an opportunity to get a placement with a company to develop their skills. Therefore, we have been creating projects with not-for-profit and private sector organisations in which we can get the students working on real-life projects and getting actual experience. Examples of those have ranged from creating prayer walks at the Belfast Bible College, to refurbishing boiler rooms and replastering and rebuilding parts of the college

with other voluntary groups. The experience that those young folk are getting means that, whenever they apply for or get a job, they will have the necessary practical experience to enable them to do the job.

STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) is a vital part of our work going forward. Just under one third of our enrolments are related to science, technology, engineering or mathematics. As a college, we have very much taken the view that we want to promote STEM. In fact, practically every new course includes a STEM element. We also have students coming not only from across Northern Ireland but further afield. In fact, we have students from 44 different countries studying at the college.

The next slide is about success rates. We say that retention times achievement equals success. If 100% of people are retained on a course and 90% pass, you have a 90% success rate. Our higher education success rate is 91%. Many universities would die for such results. Across the sector, the standards in higher education, which are checked by the same quality assurance organisation that examines universities, stand testament to what the colleges can do.

We have a success rate of 57% in essential skills. That is for individuals who have not been able to achieve a grade C or better at GCSE in maths, English or ICT. Some 81% of those who sit the exam are passing it. Again, that is a testament to the work of the staff in getting people forward.

Thompson will now focus on how we can work with businesses.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much, Mr Webb.

**Mr Thompson Keating (South Eastern Regional College):** I will narrow the presentation down a little bit to how we engage with businesses. Before I do, I will speak to a slide on how we promote public value through our return on investment from the public purse. You heard Ken talk about how effective we are as a college. The slide highlights the fact that it takes 3-4 years to get a return, through taxes, on the public investment that it costs to get a level 2 qualification. If you go from level 2 to level 3, or from level 3 to level 5, it takes only 1-9 years for the public to reclaim the money on that investment through taxation. Given a 1-9-year return on an investment, most people in business would make such an investment.

I move now to business engagement. Ken mentioned that we engage with over 1,100 companies throughout the whole of Ireland, from Coleraine to Cork. We do that in various ways and through various means. One initiative we used was FGas. Some legislation around gassing and recharging came out for the air conditioning industry, and that entailed a lot of training. We set up a mobile training centre that could travel around industry to service that level of qualification. We trained 300 people in the North of Ireland and 600 in the Republic of Ireland. We are continuing and diversifying further. That demonstrates how flexible and responsive to sectors we can be. Although we engage with a high number of businesses, we are forming partnerships and partnership agreements with some of the bigger companies in Northern Ireland. We have had a long-term partnership with Denman, for example. We have invested in *[Inaudible.]* measurement machinery that has helped the productivity of that business. There has been a more recent partnership with Coca Cola over the last year and a half. It not only sponsors our enterprise system but engages in our industry projects. A recent project actually saved it a substantial amount of money. At the moment, we are developing online training for it to reduce its downturn and to improve its corporate governance and productivity. I could go on through all the major companies listed, but I am just trying to highlight how we are engaging at many levels.

One of the strategic aims of FE Means Business is about being responsive to industry needs. We are doing that in various guises and through various work streams. One example is upskilling through the software testers course. Through working with Momentum and e-skills, it rapidly came to our attention that there was a huge demand and lack of skills in software testing. Software testing involves a different skills set to that needed for software writing. In conjunction with DEL and with its support, it took five weeks for the college to put on a level 5 qualification in order to provide a conversion course

for those who had attained a certain level and convert them into the required skills sets for business. Once we created the course, we advertised, and we got 700 applications for 20 posts. Those were guaranteed interviews. We ran the course in Lisburn, and 19 of the 20 completed the course and achieved the interviews. That is an example of how engagement with the sector and with business can identify skills that are relevant and required and moves us away from the supply-led model to the demand-led model.

In relation to workforce supply, we are forming a partnership with Grafton at present. We went to Allen and Overy because, as you are probably well aware, Invest NI brought in Allen and Overy. It is a very London-centric organisation and is used to different cultures. It went through a recruitment process, and it has concerns about culture in many ways. The company told me that it had recruited for behaviour and attitude, and it now has skill issues. The skills that it requires are modern-day office skills. It is about document creation and proofreading. It is a level above normal office administration. The company trades in documentation around the world. I am currently working with Allen and Overy on courses and skill requirements to provide the level of expertise it wants. If that company has that level of skill deficit, it leads me to believe that so do PwC, Carson McDowell and the other companies that have to work in a global society.

Another area that we are focused on is productivity. There is a flagship scheme called business improvement techniques, which has proved very successful. The example I will cite is Huddleston Engineering. We have done not only level 2 business improvement techniques but level 3. We are currently the only college delivering level 3 business improvement techniques. That company has been very impressed with improved productivity. It is very difficult to quantify, but the company says that it has made in the region of over £200,000 of improvements through its investment in that training.

We are also working on applied research. We set up the environmental skills centre just over a year ago, and we have had two companies coming through. One was a company called Bluebuild Energy, which wanted to focus on the renewables markets and saw the opportunity coming up. With the renewable heat incentive coming in, its timing was pretty good. We brought his workforce here, upskilled it, and helped him to source new product material. He is up and running now, and it is proving very successful for him. The second company is called Astar, which is in the process of redeveloping a heat pump that has the unique selling point of not having a fan. We are doing the final research and development work for that company, which is in late negotiations with Four Seasons Health Care to put the heat pumps into its nursing home. The company's focus at the moment is on social housing. We are also working with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in respect of upskilling the workforce for retrofit and passive housing.

One example of reskilling is where Bombardier advertised for mechatronics engineers but could not get them. So, it came to us, and we put on a course that took its basic maintenance engineers and upskilled them to mechatronics engineers. We were very pleased with that, and we are now going on to get progression routes up to the next level — level 3 — in mechatronics.

That is a range of examples that shows how we are responding to industry needs. We are working hard to understand what the skill sets are and to meet the demands of making the curriculum more relevant. We also try to underpin strategic decisions for Northern Ireland. For instance, there is a food strategy for Northern Ireland that highlights jobs and skills deficits, and one particular area, in keeping with today's theme, is that Invest NI wants to ensure that Northern Ireland is leading in low-carbon research, design and manufacturing. That strategic aim, combined with the fact that 17 of the 24 sector skills councils highlighted that there were skills deficits in the environmental and low-carbon areas, prompted us to take a hard look at what we needed to do, and we came up with the vision of the environmental skills centre.

FE is responding collaboratively. One of the big wins out of the merger is that there are now six colleges and signs that communication and collaboration are more focused. One particular emerging market is the low-carbon economy, and we have a collaborative approach to that. Three years ago, we started our carbon-zero project, which has been hailed as a success. Its aim was to look and raise awareness and to create a fit-for-purpose curriculum. Belfast Metropolitan College (BMC) has taken on apprenticeships in wind turbine maintenance; we are focusing on offshore accreditation among other things; and the wind industry foundation degree has been created at South West College. That college

is part of the global wind and maritime alliances, as are we. We are just about to set up a cross-working group to see how we can respond to the offshore wind skill sets that will be landing on our doorstep next October.

The environmental skills centre is a little bit more focused and wide-ranging. As I said, it was set up to address the skills deficits highlighted by the sector skills councils. It has to do two very simple things: to help to exploit the opportunities, and there are many of them coming down the line; and to help to meet the challenges. People do not know enough yet. The renewable heat incentive is coming in in April, and a lot of people still do not even understand what a biomass boiler is. The centre is about having access to somewhere that is independent. That is a big plus — we are independent, and we are not trying to sell you anything. Everybody else is trying to sell you something. We can carry out research and development and teach you whatever you want. It is a big triangulation between industry, education and, hopefully, government, where people can come and access information.

The environmental skills centre currently works on three key work streams. The renewable energies lab is there to show you and to identify all the different types of renewable energies, so you can feel it, touch it, train on it or do whatever it is that you want to do. The other area is low-carbon design, because that is the future in respect of passive housing and how you can reduce expenditure through energy.

We set up the environmental skills centre less than a year and a half ago. In one year, we had received five awards and accolades. However, what has impressed me most is how industry wants to engage with us. Every time we hold a seminar here, we get 100-plus people coming to it, and industry has actively approached us to form active partnerships. For example, JP Corry wants to be part of the scheme, and it is highlighted in an initiative called the render centre. Rendering is going to be an important part of skill development in respect of retrofit and reducing fuel poverty. Kingspan wants us to be its solar centre and to take on its training instead of that being done within the organisation. Baxi came to us and said that it wanted to set up a Baxi academy here.

It is hugely important that we engage with business and that business engages with us, because technology is moving at a tremendous pace. If we have to teach children the latest technologies, we need to be tied into industry. We need to have access to their innovation hubs and networks and to be able to solve issues for them going forward. So, by having that connection, our lecturers, technicians and students are being upskilled to a world-class level.

I think that we have spoken for 10 minutes, so we are now open to questions.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much, Mr Keating, and, once again, thanks to Mr Webb. The presentation was most interesting. It certainly dovetails with the Committee's approach to renewable energy, in particular, and to trying to push that agenda with government. So, we are very pleased to acknowledge your work in that area. I suppose that, in a sense, it is not about pure research but about skilling or upskilling people for the renewable energy sector. It is more about the application of research than the pure research itself. I think that that is very important. I was very impressed by the facility you have here to respond quickly to the needs of business, and you should be commended for that. Setting up the centre is, of course, part and parcel of that, and it seems to be fulfilling a need and filling a gap that exists.

In respect of your contact with business, does business come to you or do you go to business? Mr Webb, you have some association with, I think, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI). Is that right?

**Mr Webb:** Yes, Chair.

**The Chairperson:** It is very easy to say that colleges and education generally should try to satisfy the needs of business and industry. You can make that statement, but doing it is an entirely different thing. So, does business come to you or do you go to business? What is the position?

**Mr Webb:** I will start off, and Thompson can jump in. It is a bit of both. As Thompson outlined, businesses certainly come to us. However, we are also very active in reaching out to businesses. As outlined, we are actively looking for student placements with businesses, and that helps us to engage with them. We are also looking to assist businesses with their development, so that is another area where we engage with them. We engage with businesses and the business community on multiple levels through, for example, the councils and their work on economic development activity; Invest NI; the Department; the CBI — I sit on the CBI council; the Institute of Directors (IoD); chambers of commerce; and city centre management groups. The college is a national skills academy for retail. Last week, all the city and town centre managers were with us in Lisburn to look at how we could provide upskilling for staff working in the retail industry during these very difficult trading times. So, we engage with businesses on multiple levels. However, we are always keen to do more and to engage more.

**Mr Keating:** I will add a couple of points to that, but before I do so, I would like to pick up on the point about research that you made. I am mindful of the Committee's inquiry and our response to it, and one thing that I did not bring out very clearly in the presentation was our working relationship with the University of Ulster and Queen's University. This facility is equally important for signposting research and development, and we have done that on many occasions. We have excellent working relationships. One of the points that I made in our response was that the colleges could augment the research and development process by developing research centres for applied research and development. The majority of companies in Northern Ireland are small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that do not necessarily align themselves to universities but are more comfortable to walk through the door of a college [*Inaudible*]. Once they get the helping hand, we can signpost them into the universities.

**The Chairperson:** Is that approach in association with other colleges or simply within your institution?

**Mr Keating:** It has always been here, inherently, but the environmental skills centre has put a lens on it and has enforced that, because we need to work collaboratively with both universities. There are synergies. Increasingly, the universities need to have a bit more understanding about the applied side of the house. They can come here and touch and feel and get a bit of experience for their students. Equally, we need a path into the universities for businesses that are developing and need that extra step forward.

**Mr Webb:** That is the approach that other colleges wish to follow and are following. For example, South West College is moving in exactly the same direction. All the colleges are keen to do that.

**The Chairperson:** Sorry, I interrupted you, Mr Keating. Have you finished?

**Mr Keating:** I was going to make one more point about business engagement. There are various ways of engaging with businesses, and I am noticing now that one of the more successful ways is to use existing channels through such organisations as IoD or CBI. Organisations of that nature have already made network channels, and we can be part of that and can align our strategic aims with theirs. That gives you good access in and raises the profile of what you can do.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much indeed.

**Mr McKay:** That was a very good presentation, and an important point was made about ensuring that students and lecturers are up to speed with industry. In this area of work, you need to be ahead of the

curve as technology moves forward at rapid speed. We are always talking about the need for communication, and, from the presentation, it comes across to me that everything is well interlinked and gelled together. Have there been many difficulties in getting to that stage?

**Mr Keating:** It is well linked because our network is extensive, so we look at it from every perspective. We look at it from the perspective of where Northern Ireland's strategy on the economy wants to go, and we make sure that we are aligned with that. We are also connected to sector skills councils, to the sector and to businesses, so we have a rounded perspective of where we can go. We have evidenced here that we have provided a facility that meets the needs of business through having that rounded perspective, and, because we have done that, it is proving very successful. Those businesses would not be coming to us or wanting to be part of this if they did not think that it was going to be a success.

**Mr McKay:** Do you find that students who come from education are geared towards the environmental and renewables sector? To be honest, we do not hear that much about the work that you are doing. Is more public discussion needed around how that can steer the economy?

**Mr Keating:** At the moment, we are satisfying the demand of the existing workforce. There is a bit of work to be done on the framework and the environment to start creating the jobs. I have no doubt that the renewable heat incentive that is coming in very soon will start to change people's thinking and that there will be a demand for new ways of doing things, which will have to be reflected in upskilling and reskilling. New career pathways will be created on the back of that.

Creating new careers has to go back a few years to our supply chain in schools. It is about motivating schoolchildren around the future types of employment to do with the STEM subject areas. We are beginning to do that under the entitlement framework and by working with careers and having careers days here that are focused on STEM. Last year, over 2,000 children came to our Bangor campus, and the theme was STEM and renewables. It will take a while for that to filter through, but it is about how we are focusing on our supply chain for the future.

**Mr McKay:** There is a bit of debate now about the future of DEL and whether it splits up into Education or Enterprise, Trade and Investment. You are looking in both directions: you are looking towards business and the economy and also towards the earlier stages of education. What is your view on that?

**Mr Keating:** I am firmly looking at the principal at the minute. *[Laughter.]*

**The Chairperson:** I suppose that, in essence, it is a political question. However, do you have any comments on what might take place?

**Mr Webb:** Under DEL's stewardship, the colleges have come a long way in supporting industry, but one also needs to keep sight of the work that we have done on the entitlement framework and how important that is. So, presently, we are in one Department *[Inaudible due to mobile phone interference.]* As Thompson outlined, it is vital that we help to shape the curriculum and career paths in schools so that children move through education in a route that will ultimately take them to jobs and will satisfy the needs of industry. Our workload and funding tend to indicate a move towards a Department of the economy rather than a Department of education, but we need to recognise that we have a role in education as well.

**The Chairperson:** In essence, it will be a political decision. You can advise, but you cannot determine it.



**Mr Webb:** Absolutely, Chair. Once that political decision is made, whichever Department we, as a sector, are in, it is vital that we have the resources and mechanisms to allow us to deliver for the Executive, the Programme for Government and society as a whole. I, personally, am comfortable that, as long as we have the resources and mechanisms, the decision is an organisational and political matter rather than a matter that is directly for us.

**Mr Agnew:** Thanks again for your presentation; it is good to speak with you again. The Deputy Chair, as he often does, has stolen much of my thunder.

Do you feel that enough is being done to push us in the direction of the ambition for Northern Ireland to lead in low-carbon research, design and marketing? I compare us with Scotland. My assessment is that Scotland sees a low-carbon economy as an opportunity and wants to do as much as it can. I sometimes think that we see it as something that is coming down from Europe that we have to do, certainly at government level. What is your assessment of that and what more should we be doing? If we are to compete with Scotland, we are starting behind them at this point.

**Mr Keating:** I have two comments on that, because there are two ends of opportunity in the low-carbon economy. Invest NI has clearly set the stall out on research and design and on being at the forefront of the knowledge economy around the low-carbon economy, and Queen's University and the University of Ulster are gearing themselves up and working very closely with Invest NI to promote that.

However, I fear that we are, potentially, missing another opportunity at the other end of the market, which is about working in the offshore market and maintaining and accessing jobs. The recent initiative of placing offshore wind turbines in the Irish Sea could create a lot of job opportunity, and I am not wholly convinced that we are taking full advantage of that. As you may or may not know, DONG Energy has won two contracts to install and maintain two offshore wind turbine farms in the Irish Sea. They will manufacture those in Germany and bring them across to Hull, where they will assemble, test and commission them to a degree where about 12,500 jobs will be created. They will then come across to Belfast, where the logistics and assembly plant is being created by Farrans. That £50 million of investment will, potentially, create 4,500 jobs, of which only three are currently guaranteed in Northern Ireland.

The offshore market holds many opportunities, particularly for a construction sector that is suffering. In order to work offshore, you have to lay cable and put foundations in the seabed and to erect the huge structures. A lot of the skill sets already exist in the construction industry here. However, you need a ream of health and safety legislation to work offshore. You cannot put one foot offshore if you do not have minimum safety requirement training, such as minimum industry safety training (MIST), OPITO and Client Contractor National Safety Group (CCNSG) training and a helicopter dunk test. In Hull, all that infrastructure is in place, so the indigenous population can access those qualifications and local people can avail themselves of the job opportunities. In this college, we are working to create some of those qualifications, but there is an opportunity to open up some of the potential jobs to people by skilling them in offshore accreditation.

**Mr Dunne:** I apologise for being late this morning. It is good to see you, Ken and Thompson, and we congratulate you on the excellent work that you have done at SERC. It is to be commended, and you have shown a lot of leadership. The new buildings that you have throughout the area are a great credit to you and show the commitment that there has been.

Ken, you mentioned apprenticeships. That is a big issue. During a recent visit to the college, I was struck by the young lads who were doing work within your own buildings and were keen to learn basic skills. That brought it home to me and others that there is a tremendous shortage of opportunity for young people like that. What more can be done to address those issues?

**Mr Webb:** As I outlined in the presentation, a lot of companies have been unable to offer apprenticeships and the numbers of apprenticeships have fallen by the wayside. The Department for Employment and Learning introduced the programme-led apprenticeship scheme over two years ago, which allows young people on that course to get placements with companies. They spend two days in college to get the underpinning skills and, hopefully, spend two days with a company in the same way as an apprentice would.

Unfortunately, getting placements has been difficult and is becoming more difficult, particularly in the construction industry. To ensure that students get opportunities to practise and embed the underpinning skills, we have created projects with not-for-profit organisations and the voluntary sector, through which the students can undertake work to practise those skills. As I said in the presentation, we have worked with the Belfast Bible College, where students have created prayer walks, refurbished boiler rooms, built walls, replastered rooms, and painted and decorated. Indeed, those young people have also been involved in the full construction of buildings. At any given time, about 400 of those young folk are out on projects across the whole of the south-eastern area. There are projects with Autism NI in Newcastle, the Atlas Women's Centre in Lisburn, organisations in Bangor, and so forth.

The benefits of that are many. Those young folk get the opportunity not only to practise their skills but to work in an environment that is like a real work environment. They have to turn up on time and to behave properly as they would do in the workplace. They also interface with people who they may not otherwise have had the opportunity to interface with, so it helps with their personal development. The charities also benefit. They get work done that they could not have afforded to pay to have done. They provide the materials, and the materials or supply industry benefits because the project would not have happened at all. So, it is one of those situations where everyone is a winner. However, in particular, it is the personal and skills development for the young folk that is so important.

We frequently hear from businesses that graduates or students coming out are not work-ready and that they do not have the attitude or the necessary skills to come straight into work. That is why we have pushed to have industry projects and placements. We have also introduced a City & Guilds qualification aimed at students' personal development and promoting enterprise and entrepreneurship. From September, universally across the college, students will not just do a single vocational course. They will do a range of courses, from their vocational course through to the essential skills courses on ICT, literacy and numeracy, and the City & Guilds personal development course, which will embed the skills to enable them to be work-ready when they come out. That is why, as a college, we promote student companies as part of our programme, so that students can gain an understanding of what it is like to be in a company and to be in a work environment.

**Mr Dunne:** OK. Thank you very much. I have a couple of other questions. Do you see universities as a threat or a challenge?

**Mr Webb:** I see them as neither. We are complementary to one another — very much so. As Thompson outlined, we work very closely with both universities in Northern Ireland and those elsewhere. We each have our role to play. Universities are very focused on the big "R" of R&D — the blue skies research. Colleges are more focused on the development side. Our skills are complementary. The mixture of the two and the promotion of the two working together will only add to the strength that we, as part of the education sector, can deliver for industry.

**Mr Dunne:** Do you feel, Ken, that we need to get away from the idea that everyone needs a degree to be successful?

**Mr Webb:** I think that there should be more higher education in further education, particularly in apprenticeships at levels 4 and 5. There are insufficient numbers of those. The way in which schools have approached education has been that you go through GCSEs, get A levels, and go to university to get a degree. That is it; that is the route. However, since 2008, we have been seeing situations where lawyers are becoming unemployed, and the traditional route through education of getting a

degree is not necessarily delivering the best outcomes for students. We can certainly improve on current careers advice. Higher education in further education is an area that is underdeveloped and needs further development. The applied area of higher education is one that needs a greater focus because it is ultimately what industry needs.

Radox, for example, will tell you that, when it advertises jobs, it gets people with PhDs who have aspirations for pay. However, what it wants them to do is not PhD research work but is more akin to level 4 or 5, and it finds that such people do not have the skills necessary to start to work. In simple terms, those are pipetting skills, titration skills and so forth. Those people have not gone through an educational process that is practical in its nature; it has been academic in its nature. I think that is the area that needs further development.

**Mr Flanagan:** Thank you very much for your warm welcome and your presentation. Thompson said that many people would not know what a biomass boiler looked like. That is largely accurate and is the case for most forms of renewable energy, apart from a wind turbine. That is also the case for the payback period and the costs associated with installing such devices. How do we go about addressing that? A conference on renewable energy was held yesterday in the agriculture college in Enniskillen, where a wide range of businesses displayed their products. It attracted a big crowd. There is huge demand for those things, both with the security of supply it brings and, eventually, the lower prices for electricity and heating homes. It also has economic benefits and the potential for job creation. How do we improve people's knowledge of renewable energy and the different forms of renewable energy generators out there?

**Mr Keating:** It is around communication, and communication as a two-way process. At the minute, we are communicating one way — the environment framework is not enough for people who want the information. As I said before, when the renewable heat incentive comes in, neighbours, friends, businesses and companies will start putting in those renewable sources because of the grants associated with it. That will be the proof of the pudding, and people will be asking the questions.

Along with a lot of other stakeholders, such as Action Renewables, we put on seminars and tried to raise awareness. The information on biomass came from an Action Renewables survey. However, until such times as it becomes a reality, like the renewable heat incentive, it is very difficult to get the message out there. There needs to be the framework around the environment before we can communicate properly and start to create the demand for the skills. Again, it is like the Housing Executive around fuel poverty and the Programme for Government. That will probably secure some action now. We are also working with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive on areas of development.

**Mr Flanagan:** What do the majority of students do when they leave here? Do they go and work for some of the businesses that you collaborate with, or is there a high level of entrepreneurial spirit among your students to start up their own businesses? Is it the case that there is not enough support for young people who want to leave college and start their own business? I am interested in what your college is gearing young people up for.

**Mr Webb:** We are gearing them up to either to start their own business, go into employment or go on to further and higher education. We do not want them to end up unemployed. This year, significant numbers are progressing into further education. Almost 1,000 students from this college made applications to the Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) for university places, so we are very much part of the progression route. Significant numbers of our students are starting their own businesses, and significant numbers are going into employment. Indeed, the young man at the back of room, who is controlling the sound system, was a former pupil of this college and now has a successful career. There is a range of outcomes.

To go back to personal development: because the economic climate is changing so quickly and because areas of business and industry can find themselves facing an economic downturn very quickly, with new areas arriving, we try to make sure that our students have a mental attitude that enables

them to have confidence in themselves so that if the job opportunities in one area diminish, they can reinvent and reskill for jobs in new areas.

When one company was closing down in west Belfast, I listened to an individual on the television say that he was a lathe operator for 18 years but that there were no opportunities for him going forward. It is absolutely criminal that he thinks that he is finished and washed up. He said, "You can only have so many taxi drivers in west Belfast." As a lathe operator, he was operating complex machinery. He was having to operate to very fine dimensions. He had huge skills that he did not properly appreciate. He had a mindset that said that he was finished. We have to instil our young folk and our older workforce with confidence. We are endeavouring to do that. They need to understand the skill sets that they have and that they can reinvent themselves and seek out and take new opportunities.

**Mr Flanagan:** Do you think that the Executive, or society as a whole, reacts quickly enough to large scale redundancies like that? Is enough support provided to people who have find themselves out of a job and who, with a bit of money, could maybe start up their own business? Is there anything that you would like to see changed to give people more of an avenue to get back into employment quicker?

**Mr Webb:** There are a range of facilities on offer. As with everything, there are areas that can always be tweaked and improved. However, in some ways, this is not about money. It is about instilling an entrepreneurial attitude and an attitude of confidence in people and society as a whole. That is about communication as much as it is about money. It is about ensuring that people have the attitude and the skills to be able to deliver on it.

**Mr Frew:** Thank you very much for the presentation and your answers. I will name-drop a few businesses in my constituency. Willie Wright of Wrightbus is very vocal on where further and higher education should have gone 20 years ago. What he said then is taking place. There are other industries and large companies around Ballymena, such as Japan Tobacco International (JTI), Michelin and Moy Park. They all say the same thing, which is that, for years, the further and higher education facilities looked down towards their student base rather than up to their business base. What is happening now is the realisation of Willie Wright's dream. He has always talked, and probably more so in the past seven years, about the skill sets that people leave school with, especially numeracy and literacy skills. You talked about the additional skill sets that companies need above that, with regard to office work and so on. How big a problem is it? Do you recognise it as a problem? Is there a vacuum or void in the numeracy and literacy levels of our young people?

**Mr Webb:** It is well known that significant numbers of young people are coming out of school without having attained a grade C in GCSE maths. Although that number has been declining, it still is a hugely significant number. As a college, we have 8,000-odd enrolments. Across the whole sector, 25,000 students are enrolled in essential skills courses to get them to a level that we really should have had them at when they came out of school. It is a significant problem, and we are playing our part in addressing it. There is no doubt that, if we had students coming to us with a grade C in GCSE maths, it would be easier to push up attainment levels in the college. DEL has been focused on it, and it has had a very high priority in that Department. It has had a very high priority in this college, and the Department of Education is very focused on it. It is absolutely a top priority. Also, in addressing this, we find students coming in with not just educational problems but a wide range of social and financial problems that, quite frankly, have more impact on them not attaining *[Inaudible due to mobile phone interference.]*.

**Mr Frew:** I see that you have a wide range of engagement with businesses across the island of Ireland, and that you have enrolments from all over the Province. What makes people come from other areas of the Province to this college? If it is because you prioritise one subject or a series of issues, what are the other colleges doing throughout the Province? Do they have niche projects or markets? How does that network together in a Province-wide scheme?

**Mr Webb:** If you look at enrolments for other colleges, you will, to an extent, see the same sort of pattern. However, we run courses that some other colleges do not run, as do they. Students will travel to go to those courses because there would not be enough demand to warrant a course in each college. That is easier to do for level 3, level 4 and level 5 courses, but at lower levels, people will not travel or cannot afford to travel distances. You will see from the breadth that people are travelling that it is probably at the higher levels of provision rather than the lower levels. We need to have campuses that are accessible to the local population without them having to travel too far.

**Mr Frew:** My final point is about the construction industry. Do you feel that the construction industry is adapting to renewables with the bad time that it is going through, and, although it pains me to say it, there being no real sign of recovery? Do you see that drive there? Also, what interaction do you have with the agricultural and agrifood base with regards to adapting in this very worrying climate? We have been talking about renewable energies, and we have targets of 40% in the strategic framework, but I am one of these people who believe that you cannot convince a household to go down this route unless it costs them money not to have it or it saves them money by having it. Until you convince them of the pound in their pockets, renewable energy and the environment does not really come into it. Do you see enough change happening in the construction industry and the farming community?

**Mr Keating:** Some change is happening, although I am not sure whether there is enough. There are opportunities around two or three areas. I mentioned the renewable heat incentive that is coming in, and I think that will create demand. With demand, I think there will be the potential for jobs and reskilling people in those areas.

There is a potential around the green new deal, but by the same token, housing associations are forwarding the agenda on fuel poverty. That is going to require skill sets and upgrading and regrading. It is also going to capitalise on new skills in the construction industry. There is the potential also of offshore working in the Irish Sea and beyond, which is a massive market in maintenance. As I said, the skill sets in the construction industry around budget management and laying cables are transferable as foundations would be needed in the seabed, and I think we should be doing more to open up those opportunities to the construction industry. There are opportunities, and I think there will be an opportunity for the construction industry to diversify by going into renewables and various workstreams.

**Mrs Overend:** Thank you very much for your presentation. It was very interesting. I feel as if I am back on the Employment and Learning Committee.

On work placements, it was very interesting that you are working more with charitable organisations. It often seems to be the case that you work with large organisations because it is easier to find placements. How are you finding working with smaller businesses? Is it possible to change their mindset to the same as that of the charitable organisations? Maybe they could get more done if they took people on. How are you finding that?

**Mr Webb:** A significant number of our placements are with small businesses. In our Training for Success and ApprenticeshipsNI areas, we have training support officers who engage directly with small businesses to endeavour to get placements. The officers engage with businesses during the placements to ensure that the students are getting the benefit of the placements and that the employers are happy. That presents opportunities for us to develop wider engagement with the businesses. That is something that we have been doing, but we recognise that we need to do more in that area, because, at the minute, those training support officers are focused on the placements. Obviously, we need to expand that to make placements more fulfilling for small businesses. That is an area that, as a college, we are working on to help improve the service that we are giving to small businesses so that the staff who are engaging with them on placements are able to offer them help and advice or signpost them to where they can get additional help and advice, and give them encouragement to employ more people.

We find that, when a business takes a student on placement, it ultimately moves towards employing them because it has had time to see them developing in their workplace. You can see that significant numbers of students, having been through placements, do get jobs.

**Mrs Overend:** I was most impressed by your links with businesses and your ability to respond to their demands. How is your careers advice adapting to reaching into schools and the community? How are you getting your message through? Are you working on that as well?

**Mr Webb:** Increasingly, we are working closely with schools through the area learning communities. There are area learning communities across Northern Ireland, and in north Down there is a particularly active one. That is an opportunity for the local colleges and schools to get together to look at how they are going to deliver on the entitlement framework. That also gives us an opportunity to engage with the schools on careers.

Careers advice is also about helping to form the curriculum that students should consider and be offered. Through that process, we are working with schools to help inform them about what we see as career opportunities for students and routes of study for students. In the 45 schools that we are dealing with, not just in the south eastern area but in greater Belfast and beyond, 11 of which are grammar schools, we have seen them changing their curriculum to take account of what we are suggesting. The curriculum is becoming more focused on what industry needs.

**Mrs Overend:** Very good. That is very interesting. I want to make one final point about the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). Is Invest NI helping you in any way? How is it supporting you?

**Mr Keating:** The relationship with Invest NI has become quite strong over the past three or four years, and certainly since the merger. There has been better recognition that further education colleges can contribute to Invest NI's strategic aims and objectives and to the economy. In particular, we have strong relationships in areas such as environmental matters and renewables. We are working with Invest NI at all levels, and the working relationship is a good one.

**Ms J McCann:** I apologise for missing the beginning of your presentation. You mentioned the need to work together with business and to encourage young people to take up STEM subjects, because of the apparent decline in uptake. I was interested in what you said about the impact of an individual's social and economic background on their studies. You are obviously setting out a clear pathway for the jobs that are going to become available in the future, which represents common sense and is good practical advice.

The diagram in your brochure shows that, for the most part, enrolments for the STEM subjects are low in socially and economically deprived or disadvantaged areas. You mentioned the location of the colleges; is that the reason for low enrolment? Is it because people cannot afford to get to them, or that no transport is available, or is it because further education is undeveloped as a whole? Do we need to look at the types of subjects that some of the other colleges are delivering? It seems to me that you are delivering a focused subject range. I know that you deliver other things, but I am interested in building the STEM subjects. Is there a disconnect from some of the other colleges in other areas?

**Mr Webb:** All the colleges are focused on the priority skills and on improving the STEM subjects. You will have seen that there has been an increase in priority skills and STEM subjects across all the colleges. The grammar school sectors have been stronger in STEM subjects than the secondary school sectors. That is why we, as a college, have been keen to look at the mix that we are providing under the entitlement framework, and, perhaps, look at giving further opportunities for pupils in

secondary schools, which tend to serve more disadvantaged areas, to engage in the STEM subjects at an earlier stage. That is very much part of the process that we are developing to improve opportunities for students to study STEM subjects. All the colleges are focused on that.

**Ms J McCann:** Why is there such a low uptake in Belfast?

**Mr Webb:** I am sorry; I should say —

**Ms J McCann:** Is that just the uptake in your colleges?

**Mr Webb:** Those are the enrolment figures for our colleges. They show that, although an individual may live in Belfast, they may choose to attend one of our campuses. Belfast Met has a similar map that shows students coming from the south eastern area being in Belfast.

**Ms J McCann:** Are they enrolled on similar programmes?

**Mr Webb:** There are similarities, but the answer to the earlier question is that each of the colleges has areas of specialism. Up to and including level 2, you will find that all colleges will, in the main, offer the same provision. Above level 3, there are differences between colleges that reflect those areas of specialism. We provide a huge amount of information, communication and technology (ICT), for example, in comparison with other colleges that offer different subjects.

**The Chairperson:** During the week, I met Mr Jim Nicholson MEP, and he is very keen on the further education colleges working together on research and development. He feels that Northern Ireland as a region is too small to indulge in a fragmented approach to research and development and that that applies not only to what I have termed pure research but to applied research. It is a strong point that he made to me, and he is looking at it from outside as it were and saying that this is what should be done. It was a strong message that he delivered, and I have sympathy with it. I leave you with that message.

**Mr Webb:** Collectively, all the colleges are keen to progress on further collaboration, particularly in the areas of research and development. More recently, we have been doing that in international work. Colleges Northern Ireland, including a representative from our college, was in Saudi Arabia recently, and Thompson has been in India. We have a sister college in Japan, Toyama National College of Technology, and students from Japan come to our college. There are a wide number of examples of the colleges collaborating and working together, and I see that further developing as we go forward. By the same token, individual colleges will further develop their areas of specialism individually and collectively. We will be much more collective operating as a sector.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much, and, once again —

**Mr Agnew:** Chair, can I ask a quick final question?

**The Chairperson:** Yes, of course.

**Mr Agnew:** Phil made a point about people's awareness of renewables, and, in one sense, it is a great strength of renewables that there are so many diverse technologies. At the same time, getting people

to understand what is out there and what they should go for is a problem, so they may not start to try because it involves too much research. Do you have any ideas about how we can help that process?

You mentioned the importance of word of mouth; your neighbour gets in it and says that it is great. Obviously, poor-quality installation or the wrong technology in the wrong home damages the whole industry. Is there merit in seeking an industry standard, something like CORGI? Would that help to give people confidence in the industry?

**Mr Keating:** That was three or four questions. It is critical that there be industry standards going forward, both for installation and for where people are selling renewable energies. We see a lot of situations where people are selling renewable energies that do not meet the claims that they made. The strength of this college is its independence, and suppliers see that and are keen to have their products here. We can work with products and explain them. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive is piloting schemes around passive house and retrofit, and we are looking at ways to create an accredited workforce that it can have confidence in and at having auditing systems that can maintain that confidence level.

**Mr Agnew:** Thank you, Chair, for your indulgence.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much, Mr Agnew. Thank you, Mr Webb and Mr Keating, for your presentation and your answers to our questions. On behalf of the Committee, keep up the good work. It is very impressive, and this has been a very positive engagement.