



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into the Education and Training
Inspectorate and School Improvement
Process — PISA Tests and OECD Report
(DE Briefing)

19 February 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Trevor Lunn
Ms Maeve McLaughlin
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr Robin Newton
Mr Seán Rogers
Mr Pat Sheehan

Witnesses:

Mr Dale Heaney	Department of Education
Dr David Hughes	Department of Education
Dr Gayle Kennedy	Department of Education
Mrs Karen McCullough	Department of Education

The Deputy Chairperson: I welcome David Hughes, the director of curriculum, qualifications and standards, Dale Heaney, the head of the assessment and qualifications team, Gayle Kennedy, the head of statistics and research, and Karen McCullough, the head of the standards and improvement team. I am sorry that you were kept waiting for so long: there was a passion for the previous subject. We are running 40 minutes behind, so I ask everyone to be concise in their questioning. You have 10 minutes, and I look forward to hearing you.

Dr David Hughes (Department of Education): Thank you very much. With your permission, we will address both the programme for international student assessment (PISA) report and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) review of evaluations and assessment.

I will keep my opening remarks at quite a high level. There is clearly a value in opening our education system to external scrutiny. It enables international comparison. These exercises, therefore, are invaluable in allowing for internal reflection. Both works are highly respected studies of international interest and are considered in countries across the world. They allow us to raise our sights and give us an opportunity to challenge our internal perspective on our education system.

I remind the Committee of the two exercises that we are considering. First, the OECD embarked on a review and published its report, 'Synergies for Better Learning', which reviews evaluation and assessment frameworks in different education systems. Through that, the OECD is gathering different types of evaluation and assessment, including system evaluation of the education system as a whole, school evaluation, pupil assessment and teacher and leader appraisal. The review is looking at how

those different types of evaluation and assessment operate within, to a greater or lesser degree, a single coherent framework.

The OECD report ultimately included work gleaned from 14 separate country reviews as well as 15 further participant countries where the work was done on a data basis. Our education system was included among those country reviews.

The second exercise, the PISA report, is a three-yearly assessment conducted by the OECD that tests reading, maths and science among 15-year-olds and includes a survey of principals, teachers and students. In each three-year cycle, the PISA report will look at one of those three elements — reading, maths and science — in detail, and, in this round, maths was the subject of focus. At the risk of terrible oversimplification, I am happy to flag up the headlines from those two exercises.

From the OECD report — this can be confirmed by those who heard Claire Shewbridge from the OECD giving an overview at a presentation last month — the organisation was happy to give a positive account of the evaluation and assessment framework, which demonstrates the degree to which there are real synergies between the different areas of evaluation and assessment. It also highlights areas in which attention is due. There needs to be a continued emphasis on areas that are already being addressed. The message that most of us would have taken from the dissemination event is that, fundamental to taking forward our evaluation and assessment framework is the enhancement of confidence across the system in the evaluation and assessment framework and the different elements of it.

The headline message in PISA is that, although the average scores remain broadly similar to those the last time around — three years ago — our education system has dropped in its ranking against other education systems, some of which have improved considerably. Nevertheless, the qualitative evidence in the chapter that deals with the survey of principals, teachers and students demonstrated some very positive messages about the attitude of our young people towards learning mathematics and the importance they place on it.

"What next?" is the question that arises following the publication of these two important studies. In both cases, there is an enormous amount of information in the reports. That data is enormously valuable. It not only provides a source but feeds into general policymaking. The PISA report can be said to confirm the evidence of previous PISA results, particularly in the context of the trends in international mathematics and science study (TIMSS) and the progress in international reading literacy study (PIRLS) results 12 months previously, which looked at the performance of primary-school children. There will be one or two new points to draw out from the PISA report. One of the most striking is probably looking at the levels of performance at the highest level as opposed to the averages.

The OECD report is not a policy review with an action plan or implementation plan. It is a report that enables us to use it as a basis for policy development. The message from the OECD is that the report contains what it has seen but that it is over to local experts and participants as to what to do with it. From the Department's perspective, we would say that we need wide engagement with stakeholders to address the issues that the OECD has raised. There will be some areas in the evaluation assessment framework in which that engagement is going on and in which there is already policy development and finessing, so evidence from the OECD report feeds into that engagement. In particular, I mention the work on pupil assessment, some early work on system evaluation and work on teacher and leadership appraisal.

That engagement with wider stakeholder partners began with the dissemination event on 17 January. On that occasion, it was said that the Department must not go into a huddle and emerge with a list of things that must be done, which would be completely contrary to the message from the OECD. The positive development of what is probably a very strong basis needs to be taken forward in partnership with all stakeholders.

I am conscious that the Committee has also asked us to comment on a report produced and provided to the Committee by the General Teaching Council on rising to the challenge. I think that it is worth mentioning —

The Deputy Chairperson: I do not think that we have that in our papers today. We are not ready for that, so I think that we will leave it for another day.

Dr Hughes: That is fine; no problem. In that case, I draw my comments to a conclusion. I hope that we have not disappointed the Committee by not having a point-by-point response to every policy recommendation in the OECD report or to every table of data in the PISA report. As I said, to do that would run against the clear message from the OECD that progress needs to be made on the basis of collaboration within the wider education sector. To secure general confidence, we need to act in concert, hence our plan to manage a wider engagement process with stakeholders, to look at each of the themes in the OECD report and to take those forward in a measured way in order to inform progress.

The Deputy Chairperson: Very good. Wider engagement is definitely the way forward, so we welcome that wholeheartedly. When we met at Stranmillis, we were told that we have all the right mechanisms but were not using them to the best advantage. On the back of that, what worried me was the fact that teachers are always saying how over-consulted and overworked they are. However, it is very important that we listen to them and make sure that we find a way to get it to fit in so that we can learn from it.

I will pick out one or two major points. It concerned me that we were hearing stories that we were not really comparing countries that are like with like, or that some countries are preparing their students so that they give a better set of results. Are we comparing like with like when you are looking at places such as Shanghai and Macau? Should we be taking it seriously?

Dr Hughes: It is important that we do not pull out PISA results and look at them in isolation in a table with different education systems in rank order without considering the numerous factors that informed that. At the same time, I think that there is value in what PISA is doing. It is saying that, in all education systems, there are skills that are fundamental to a child's education, and here is a way of examining and testing them, here is a test that can be applied universally, and here are the results of those tests.

With that kind of data, it is enormously interesting to see it presented in as many ways as possible in order to inform the countries that are being tested. It also informs us about other countries and stimulates a discussion along the lines of looking at how those countries are doing it and what they are doing differently, in the same way that other countries are doing precisely the same thing. It is certainly not the be-all and end-all of educational policy to improve one's PISA ranking, because that does not tell you anything as valuable as other ways of measuring one's own education.

The Deputy Chairperson: There are two points that I think are vital, which are based on what principals think. First, with buildings and computers, principals thought that, compared with the rest of the United Kingdom, we did not have the right facilities or that we needed to improve them. The second issue emerging from the report is morale, which is much more important.

Dr Hughes: Surveys of principals, teachers and students are enormously interesting, but they need to be read very carefully to understand precisely what the question is and why the answer might be the way that it is. In an objective sense, access to computers can be very good, but principals might still say that they could do with more. PIRLS looked at access to school libraries, and the proportion of schools in which children had access to a school library was strikingly low, but that was because they had access to a class library that had even better resources. When one is looking at an international context, one needs to be very careful about what the question is precisely and how we understand the answer.

The PISA survey results are very interesting and deserve careful consideration, particularly when Northern Ireland stands out, and the results are striking in some areas.

The Deputy Chairperson: That means that we will need to hear more from you about what you have taken from the reports.

The report states that classroom observation and weekly evaluation of staff was different from England, in that there was a much smaller proportion —

Dr Hughes: Are you referring to the proportion of time that head teachers are giving to particular functions?

The Deputy Chairperson: Yes, that is right.

Dr Hughes: I am not sure that we have any additional commentary on that.

The Deputy Chairperson: Will you come back to us when you have analysed things in more depth?

Dr Hughes: If there are questions that the Committee wants to raise about specific elements of the data, I am very happy to consider those.

Mrs Dobson: The OECD report effectively rubbishes last year's fiasco with computer-based assessment (CBA). It highlights the failure to pilot adequately over a proper timescale and also the list of changes following the pilot. Do you recognise your failure last year? Will you accept the recommendation to undertake any future pilots over a longer timescale?

Dr Hughes: The OECD report draws attention to the very real difficulties that everyone experienced when the computer-based assessment was in place. The OECD does not rubbish the whole exercise. It very clearly recognises the value of the diagnostic assessments in the autumn term. The OECD comments are along the lines — I paraphrase, but I think that it is fair — that this is worth doing and persisting with in some form, but that we must make sure that it is done properly.

Mrs Dobson: Why was such a short timescale adopted for the pilot? Were you overconfident of your ability? Danny touched on this. Surely the Department could learn from best practice in other countries that operate CBA successfully. Why was there such a short timescale?

Mr Dale Heaney (Department of Education): The timescale was approximately 18 months. We worked with the CCEA in weighing up the risks of that timescale, given that we had to work through all the requirements that schools feel that they need. Schools were involved in that process. Following a series of pilots, the Northern Ireland numeracy assessment (NINA) and Northern Ireland literacy assessment (NILA) were made live in 2012. With the benefit of hindsight, we recognise that working more closely and over a longer period of time with schools on the fine detail of the questions that were being asked would have paid dividends. We accept that. Having learned from the experience, we would want to take longer over the detail of the assessments and what they provide, not just the questions but the reports and the use to which those reports could be put in a school and how closely aligned those can be to other assessments that schools are perhaps more familiar with.

Mrs Dobson: The OECD report also highlighted a lack of any official means of communication with parents, unlike in other OECD countries. Does the Department plan to take up the recommendation to establish a consultation platform for parents? How soon could you have an official channel of communication in place? That is vital. It was so lacking. Do you plan to do that?

Dr Hughes: We are not in a position to say that the Department is taking a particular position on any individual recommendation. We need to engage with stakeholders on all the recommendations. The point about engagement with parents is valuable and important, and it has certainly registered in the Department. It is not the first time that it has been observed. We are aware of other education systems in which a stakeholder group or stakeholder representation of the parental voice has been demonstrably valuable.

Mrs Dobson: How can you ensure that all parents who want to make a contribution can do so? How would you establish that?

Mr Heaney: We have endeavoured to do that. As you will know from our update on GCSEs and A levels last week, we used Parenting NI as a means of engaging with parents that otherwise would perhaps not have been there. We saw that as an important part of building in the parental voice and taking on board their views, for example, of the assessment and qualifications offered at Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5. That work is done at various levels across the Department but I accept —

Mrs Dobson: That it needs to happen a lot more.

Mr Heaney: — that we need to do it across a range of policy areas. I am happy to take that on board as to how CBA and other parts of assessment might be taken forward.

Mr Rogers: You are welcome. Thank you. The purpose of education is to equip young people for the world of work, and so on. Given my background, I tend to look at tables. Some of the tables tell us

that, generally, we are not doing as well as the Republic, Scotland or England. Our young people are at a disadvantage in competing for jobs compared with young people from those regions. We also hear a significant tale about maths, science and reading. How are you going to address this? Compare education here with education in the Republic of Ireland: teachers here will say that they have been on a roundabout of change for the past 20 or 30 years. There has not been so much change in the Republic. What lessons will you take from that report for a curriculum review, particularly a primary curriculum review?

Dr Hughes: There a couple of points worth making. I raise these not as excuses but as analysis. If you recall from the evidence session on TIMSS and PIRLS, the evidence is that, at primary level, Northern Ireland children are performing very well indeed. However, the PISA results show that, at the age of 15, their performance is relatively average on an international scale.

There are a number of reasons why that might be. One significant element is that the children who sat the TIMSS and PIRLS tests were the first cohort to go through entirely under the revised curriculum. Only part of the school career of the 15-year-olds who sat the PISA tests was within that revised curriculum. It is worth making the point that the revised curriculum is very strong on the skills that PISA tests. What PISA tells us next time, when the young people sitting the tests will have had more of their school career within the revised curriculum, will be very interesting indeed.

I have heard commentators from the OECD pointing at our curriculum as a good example of a curriculum that is very strong on skills and that balances knowledge, skills and understanding very carefully. That is exactly the kind of educational reform that takes quite a long time to play out. I would expect it to take some time to play out.

It is enormously valuable to compare with nearby jurisdictions and education systems. We will take up some very significant challenges from looking at the figures in that way. Contact with officials from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in Dublin shows that they are as interested in our TIMSS and PIRLS results in primary schools as we are in their PISA results. There is valuable engagement to be had for us to understand their analysis of their success this time in comparison with quite a modest performance last time and the relative stability of our performance this time as compared with last time.

There will be commentary on England's performance, which is relatively strong — we have heard political and media comment on that — and whether that has anything to do with recent reform in the English system or the long-term experience of the education sector there. These are all elements in the mix. It is important for us to look at the figures and understand more about what they tell us so that that informs what goes on here.

Mr Rogers: You know that I am coming to this, but I am thinking particularly of science. The 15-year-olds and PISA — when those children were in primary school, the curriculum was different. There was probably a stronger emphasis on science than the next time this happens, when science is within The World About Us. When you talk to many primary-school teachers, you hear that they are particularly concerned about science being buried in The World About Us. Is that something that is on your antennae as well?

Dr Hughes: We are getting a couple of messages about science. One of them is, in a way, the positive message coming out of the same situation. In actual fact, the experience of science education in post-primary schools is positive, and it is not necessary to have the same degree of emphasis on science in primary schools for science education in post-primary schools to be engaging, enjoyable, challenging, stimulating and inspirational to children in attainment in science. We are getting that message as well. So, we need to hear both messages about the place of science.

Mr Rogers: Do you share the concerns of the likes of the Association for Science Education?

Dr Hughes: Specifically?

Mr Rogers: To do with primary science.

Dr Hughes: I have not seen the specific points that it is making. As I said, if it is making the point that there is not enough primary science, but we are also hearing that there is quite enough primary science, and it does not necessarily impact upon the long-term outcomes in science education, we need to take both of those on board.

Mr Rogers: Thank you. My other point is on self-evaluation. The OECD report talks about self-evaluation not being well enough embedded. It also talks about the demise of CASS and the effect that that has had. The last point that I want you to comment on is the inspectorate role and support role of the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). Those things are flagged up by the OECD.

Dr Hughes: I do not want to set out a departmental position arising from the points made by the OECD. I think the OECD's observations around the role of an inspection and the inspectorate in its wider role have got to inform the way in which inspection is taken forward. There are the observations about the need for support to the teaching profession. With regard to CASS, I do not think that anyone is going to deny that it is not ideal to have a service that is wound down to such a degree. However, we are conscious that there needs to be a support function. There are support functions already in existence that need to be operating in concert with one another so that there is an understanding of the relative and respective roles. It is not an area that has finally come to rest in its final form. I think that that is a fair point to make.

Mrs Karen McCullough (Department of Education): There are examples of where the ETI is providing support like that. Take its themed studies, which can feed back into the system. The principals' conferences are very popular amongst principals. Attached to those, they run workshops where they showcase best practice. There was also the recent best practice in literacy and numeracy. It fed back into the system and brought —

Mr Rogers: Yes, I hear very positive comments about the special education conferences as well.

Mrs McCullough: Yes, there is good feedback.

Mr Sheehan: I want to touch on some of the points that Seán made on comparative analysis with other jurisdictions. Does the OECD provide any information on that? Does anything glaring jump out between the systems here, for example, and China, or between here and the South?

Dr Hughes: I make the distinction between what PISA is telling us and what the OECD study of the evaluation assessment framework is saying. PISA is based on the same tests being used across the world, so comparison is possible, to a degree. I caveat that very carefully by saying that there are reasons why different education systems perform differently in different ways at different times. The PISA report contains a lot of data, and there is a lot more data that can always be accessed, right down to a great degree of granularity, and that will always repay study. With regard to the OECD report on evaluation assessment, there is a big report looking at all the countries and education systems that were visited or reviewed on paper. OECD is generalising from such a huge range of different ways of doing things that there is not very much of, "Look at what this system is doing; you should be looking at doing something like it." Rather, it is saying, "We look at a lot of systems, and we recognise at a very high level some general patterns of good practice. Now look at that good practice and look at what you are actually doing. Don't worry about all the other countries and education systems; look at yourselves and these patterns of good practice."

That is what the report on our own evaluation assessment framework is doing. It is not comparing us to other countries; it is taking some very high-level good-practice messages that we need to compare ourselves to. That said, there was an international conference to launch the big 'Synergies for Better Learning' report, at which different education systems were invited to give a short presentation of what they are doing in certain areas, and they chose those presentations from education systems that have shown a particular strength or have a particular reform programme in progress where they are saying, "The rest of the world can listen to what is being done in these areas in those other education systems, not to replicate it, but just to understand what is possible." It is to the credit of the Northern Ireland education system that we were invited to present, at that international conference, "This is how it is done in this system — in particular, the fact that so many elements of evaluation and assessment combine and are pulled together in a framework that actually fits together." OECD said that other countries need to see what is possible to ensure that system evaluation, school evaluation, pupil appraisal, teacher appraisal and leadership appraisal all fit together in some way.

We are actually being held up by OECD in some ways as an instance of an education system that is taking that good practice model and coming quite close to it in many ways. Of course, there are lots of things that need to be developed, but that is where it started.

Mrs McCullough: The real strength of PISA is that it takes, in a way that other studies do not, outcomes from something that is a test of the children and attaches them to other information about

those children and the environment that they are in. It has that attitudinal information, it has got the way that they are taught, and it has the views and activities in the school that takes it across a lot of factors. Then, looking across everything, OECD can see what kind of behaviours and activities get the highest performance. That is a particular strength of that study that we do not have from other things. If we look at somebody's GCSE results, we have very factual stuff, but we do not have more detailed analysis of how they have been taught or what their views are.

The Deputy Chairperson: We had the two briefings down as separate, just in case anyone got lost during that. We were having a departmental briefing on PISA, and that was to be followed by the inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate and school improvement process and OECD. We have somehow linked the two together, which may have lost some members. We had suggested questions on page 86 for the departmental briefing and on page 154 for the inspectorate. Given that that is our inquiry and, therefore, almost the more important focus, I suggest that we send those questions to the Department for answers. Also, if anyone else has got any extra ones — Seán, you raised the issue of primary science — we should add that in to get more thorough answers.

I am still concerned. You were talking then about all the things that we are doing well, and that is great. However, of the first two questions that we were furnished with, one was on the rundown of CASS, which Seán touched on, and the challenge to the ETI to get proper support to do it properly. The other question was whether the Department will instruct the ETI to better exploit the evidence resource. There is so much in there, and I think that we should also focus on the things that we are not doing well. I go back to your point at the beginning: I am glad that you are going to talk more widely, but what recommendations will come out of some of what you have said today?

Dr Hughes: The critical point from the conclusions of the OECD report is that, by taking the different themes — the system evaluation, school evaluation, pupil assessment and leader and teacher appraisal — we are posed a challenge to look a lot of streams of work that are already going on, in a way that makes the connection between them and does not weaken the bonds of a framework of evaluation and assessment. There are already some streams of work, and the Committee will be aware of the assessment of pupils at the end of Key Stage 1, 2 and 3. That pupil assessment engagement, with the unions in particular, about how those arrangements can be progressed will necessarily be informed by the fact that the Department, the unions, CCEA and others will have read the OECD report and seen what an outsider has said about the assessment arrangements. That is very important. That is one that is already ongoing. There is some work that is beginning, particularly around system evaluation, that is informed by the OECD report.

All Departments will acknowledge that work will be needed as we head towards the next Programme for Government, which is where the system evaluation for education will be apparent at its highest profile. There are streams of work that will necessarily be going on that will have to be informed by the OECD's assessment and analysis of our system.

What I do not think we can do is try to take forward individual decisions that make immediate changes outside the context of looking at the strategic aims of the evaluation assessment framework. Many of the points that the OECD made are medium- to long-term points and require that kind of engagement to progress them. The most likely outcome that I can imagine is a programme of work that is carried forward in parallel with those different themes, so that the connections are not lost and we are not swamped by the sheer volume of detail, information and consideration that has to be given to those individually very important subjects.

The Deputy Chairperson: We are in the middle of a rather important inquiry and it is the end of February. We really need to see recommendations that come out of the report that can help us with the inquiry. We also need something solid in the answers to the questions that we will send to you today. We cannot just let it work slowly towards the next Programme for Government.

Dr Hughes: It may be that the questions you raise admit of immediate answers. If that is the case, those can be given.

Mrs Dobson: I want to ask a couple of questions on PISA. It is disappointing to note that principals are increasingly reporting teacher shortages in subjects other than maths, science and English. What do you put that down to? How do you plan to tackle that issue in the future? We certainly do not want to end up with staffing gaps, especially as teachers begin to retire and need to be replaced.

Dr Hughes: I am afraid that I am not in a position to answer questions about the levels of available teachers.

Mrs Dobson: No, but the PISA report obviously highlighted that principals are reporting shortages. What do you plan to do? Do you have any inkling? Do you plan to do anything?

Dr Hughes: I cannot speak for business areas that are looking at the number of teachers.

Mrs Dobson: Can we maybe ask, then, through the Committee, for an answer to that?

The Deputy Chairperson: OK. I think that we can do that.

Mrs Dobson: I hope that you can answer my other question. Why did the questionnaire conclude that more principals here than in the rest of the UK reported inadequate buildings, school grounds, computers and Internet connections? The Deputy Chair touched on that earlier.

Mrs McCullough: That was actually quite different to what happened in PIRLS and TIMSS with the primary schools. They were being quite positive about those things whereas, when it came to post-primary resources, they were less positive. It may be a fact of the buildings. I do not know about that.

In relation to computing, the point that David earlier made about context is important because, relative to other countries, our schools have very good facilities for Internet access and computers. However, it could be that it is where they are coming from. Maybe they want access to a different kind of technology, such as iPads or something else. It is about where your starting point is and what you have in mind that you would like to have. We would need to look at that more.

Dr Hughes: I am not sure whether the evidence from the PISA review will necessarily give us the detail of why they answered in the way they answered. We can apply some good sense to those figures. As Karen said, compared with other education systems, we have remarkably good computer system provision and an expectation that it is used. Of course, if you provide a good computer system, and an expectation that it is used, the schools will continually want more because it is valuable. Obviously if it is demonstrably valuable, schools will want more. Therefore, an expectation that there could be more, and a degree of dissatisfaction, is in many ways a positive thing: schools want to have more access and use it more because they have already discovered and established the value of it. Simply on an anecdotal level, I have also heard from principals who say that C2k is fine, but that they need it to do this, this and this. Elsewhere in the world, they look at C2k and say that it is an extraordinarily impressive system.

Mrs Dobson: I was particularly concerned about inadequate buildings. Recently, I raised a constituency issue regarding inadequate facilities at Craigavon Senior High School with the Southern Education and Library Board. I was told that it did not view that as having a major impact on academic attainment. I am interested to hear whether the Department shares that view. Surely, better facilities can only improve the pupils' experience.

Mrs McCullough: Anecdotally, I once read a report that said that the highest outcomes were in the most crowded schools with the poorest — *[Inaudible.]* It was related to the nature of the schools. The schools were selective schools, which had older buildings and — *[Inaudible.]* So, there was something else behind those outcomes. I appreciate your point, however.

The Deputy Chairperson: There is a danger here that we are going away thinking everything is great and fine.

Mrs McCullough: No.

The Deputy Chairperson: Good. Thank you.

Dr Hughes: Your questions are coming out of the survey of principals and their experience and the surveys of pupils and teachers. They are enormously interesting surveys. They are telling us a lot about what schools' experience actually is. They are telling us, in particular, how very different some elements of our education system can be, compared with others — compared with the average, for

example — or that, in line with outcomes, we may be very like the average in some areas. The results from the surveys will always merit reference back to those figures in order to inform us more.

Mrs Dobson: Finally, I think that Karen's comment about the highest achievement in crowded schools will be cold comfort for Craigavon Senior High School, who are long past waiting on a newbuild.

Mrs McCullough: That was in a paper that I read. It seemed at odds with what you would expect, as you say.

The Deputy Chairperson: We could all draw out lots of schools in our own areas.

Mr Rogers: My question relates to the point that I made earlier. I was thinking back to the ETI report. In the past, it talked about issues of satisfactory school leadership. I also saw, somewhere in all that paper, that the percentage of actual classroom visits by the principal was much lower in Northern Ireland than in England. To go back to schools' self-evaluation, does the Department agree with OECD's recommendation for a common reference for school leadership appraisal? Having been in the role of school principal in the past, I know that it is a very lonely position. Are there any plans for a root-and-branch look at the support that head teachers get, beyond the professional qualification for headship?

Dr Hughes: Given the cast you have in front of you from the Department, there may be others who are better able to answer particular questions about school leadership and professional development for school leaders. The Department is very conscious of the importance of this area. It is fair to say that it has been demonstrated to be almost impossible for a school to perform at the highest level if it does not have fine leadership. I know that the strategic forum, which is made up of unions and employers, as well as other stakeholders, has had a work stream looking at leadership specifically. That is being taken forward. It is part of the Department's focus. I cannot comment on any specific issues, but I would also go back — again, I may be drawing from this well of anecdote for a long time — to visiting the area learning communities, where we would meet the principals' group. The views coming out of those meetings were that there is, very clearly, value in the formal structures that RTU is providing, and so on, but there is clearly value in the, relatively speaking, informal structures of meeting on an area basis and seeing the practice of other schools, even to the point of just sharing the trials and tribulations that head teachers face at any given time. Whether there is more mileage in developing the formal structures of leadership development, but also in seeing the value of, and what can be done with regard to, those less formal structures in which leadership can develop, both of those areas need to be considered.

Mr Rogers: With reference to the point that I was making, does the Department agree with the one common reference for school leadership appraisal that OECD talks about?

Dr Hughes: I am sorry; you have caught me on a point of detail on which I am unable to give an absolute answer. I am sure that there is an answer. I apologise.

The Deputy Chairperson: We will add that to the questions that we will put through.

Thanks very much. I am concerned that we are looking too much at the things that we are doing well. We should do that, but there is a whole mass of things that are arising as part of the inquiry that need tackling and recommendations. It may be that we need to ask you to come back in line with the questions that we will put to you after this meeting. Thank you very much.