



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Briefing from Colleges Northern Ireland
on Current Issues in Further Education**

29 June 2011

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Sammy Douglas
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr David McIlveen
Mrs Sandra Overend
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Mr Ned Cohen)	
Mr Bertie Faulkner)	Colleges Northern Ireland
Mr Trevor Neilands)	
Mr Tom Place)	

The Chairperson:

I remind members and the public that this evidence session will be recorded by Hansard; therefore, electronic devices should be switched off. Members' papers include suggested questions sent to the Committee by the lecturers' University and Colleges Union (UCU). Members may wish to look through those to see whether there is anything that they think needs to be asked.

Our papers also include a briefing paper from Colleges NI, dated June 2011, and the Colleges

NI response to the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) consultations on widening participation, student fees and finance in higher education strategy. I welcome Bertie Faulkner, chairperson of Colleges NI; deputy chairperson, Trevor Neilands; Tom Place, who is acting chief executive; and Ned Cohen, policy and public affairs manager.

Before we start, we are interested in a discussion. You have probably picked up from the tenor of the meeting that we get many papers, particularly papers that have already been submitted to other places. Frankly, it is like wading through treacle. We want to take the opportunity to engage with you and to hear the issues that you think are important. We want you to draw attention to the points that you think we should look at. We will have an open and free conversation, during which members will chip in and have a chat, so long as they do not shout over each other. With that proviso, I invite Bertie to start off.

Mr Bertie Faulkner (Colleges Northern Ireland):

Thank you very much. On behalf of the sector, I thank you for the opportunity to engage with the Committee. First, I congratulate you and your Deputy Chair on election to your offices. We in the sector look forward to working with all of you in driving forward the Northern Ireland economy. To my left is the vice-chair of the sector, Trevor Neilands and the acting chief executive, Tom Place; on my right is Ned Cohen, the policy and public affairs manager.

We would like share our thoughts and brief you on the outline, role and function of Colleges Northern Ireland and what its membership body represents in the six colleges. Trevor and Tom will speak, and we will be happy to take any questions that you have as we move forward. Briefly, from my point of view, as the chair, Colleges NI comprises just six colleges. I will let Tom continue and give the Committee some background on where we have come from and where we intend to go.

Mr Tom Place (Colleges Northern Ireland):

Many of you will have heard us being referred to as the Association of Northern Ireland Colleges (ANIC). That was the name of the organisation from its inception in 1997, when the colleges were incorporated and taken out of the control of the education and library boards. As recently as 1 April 2011, we changed our everyday name to Colleges Northern Ireland. We are still registered as a company named the Association of Northern Ireland Colleges, but we use the working title of Colleges Northern Ireland.

At the time of incorporation, there were 17 colleges, later to become 16. As members know, the mergers brought the number down to six colleges. The board of Colleges Northern Ireland comprises two persons from each of the six colleges — the chairperson of the governing body and the director of the college — making a 12-person board. It is important to point out that Colleges Northern Ireland, although it replaces a lot of what the education and library boards used to do for the colleges, is accountable to the colleges, not for them. That is the difference between the relationship that we have now and that which we had in the days of the education and library boards. The colleges fund and make demands of departments within Colleges Northern Ireland.

We provide the voice for the further education sector and we build consensus on policy. That is created by the organisation and approved by the board and becomes the voice of the sector. We provide an interface between the colleges and a wide range of stakeholders, including the trade unions, Departments and associated agencies, and business representative bodies, such as the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Chief Executives' Forum and so forth.

We support a range of activities across the colleges, including the management information system that operates in all six colleges. It is a single system that is funded jointly by the colleges and the Department for Employment and Learning, but Colleges Northern Ireland manages the ongoing development and maintenance of the system. Another example is the Connected project, which is a knowledge transfer project worth £4 million over the next four years, which involves knowledge transfer from the universities to the colleges and from the colleges to various business organisations across Northern Ireland. Supporting the economy of Northern Ireland is at the heart of what we do. Trevor will talk about some more detailed issues in that regard.

Mr Trevor Neilands (Colleges Northern Ireland):

Chairperson, I am very mindful of your direction that you would like us to concentrate on what we think are the main issues facing the sector. Perhaps that is where a lot of our discussion will come around to, but we are happy to answer any questions that members have for us. We have provided members with some basic information.

We find that, quite often, we have to draw attention to some of the work that we do in colleges. What we do is so diverse that not everyone gets the full picture, so you will forgive us for giving you such basic information. However, it is significant; for example, we deliver 18% of

all higher education in Northern Ireland, which is a significant statistic. We provide education and training to one in three of all 16- to 17-year-old school leavers. We have around 180,000 people enrolled or engaged with us at any particular time. The turnover of the six colleges amounts to £250 million, so we are a very significant factor ourselves in employment and direct support for the local economy, never mind the businesses with which we interact. We reckon that 4,500 businesses of various sizes are currently involved in some kind of activity or interaction with the colleges. Sometimes, therefore, we need to remind people about the volume of work that we do and, as a result, our contribution.

I will move on to what we think are the most significant issues facing the college. First, it is our desire to retain that degree of impact on the Northern Ireland economy, given the public expenditure situation that we understand we have to face. We know the difficulties that the Assembly has had and the difficult decisions that have to be made. We are concerned about what might happen if there is a decrease in income for the further education sector. The Department for Employment and Learning recognises that, over the past three to four years, since the mergers, we have delivered some 20% efficiencies and savings, at the same time as recruiting an increased volume of students, so we feel that we have made large scale efficiencies. In the coming financial year, we face a situation where we have to deliver 3% efficiencies; in other words, the same level of work with 3% less income. If, in the coming years, we face further decreases in income to the colleges, in the words of the Department, the:

“sector will continue to struggle to sustain capacity and financial balance.”

The impacts that we envisage include reductions in student numbers; reductions in the number of courses that we deliver; reductions in community-based provision; reductions, which I mentioned earlier, in support for local companies; reductions in staffing levels; and, in some cases, reductions in campus opening hours, or even campus closures. Those are some of the possible contingencies being lined up.

On a personal note, we are sitting in a magnificent new campus where, a long time ago, I started my further education teaching career, although I will not reminisce about that. Over the past number of years, there has been fantastic capital investment in the sector. However, I should make the Committee aware that that capital investment has not reached all arts and parts of Northern Ireland. Two colleges — one of which is my own, and the other is the Southern Regional College — are badly in need of investment because of substandard accommodation. So, although there has been a fantastic picture over a large part of the sector, there are still issues to

address. We realise that funding will be a very big issue over the next number of years.

Although the Department faces some difficult decisions, as do we, given what we can contribute to the current economic circumstances, we would like to present ourselves not as part of the problem but as part of the solution. The most significant contribution that we can make is to prepare our society and economy for the upturn, if and when it comes, so that we are ready to take advantage of new employment opportunities and investment in improving productivity and skills. Improving productivity and skills is one of the main contributions that we can make, so we feel that we are indispensable to any planned and co-ordinated attempt to support economic recovery in the medium to long-term.

I was at the previous Committee for Employment and Learning a number of times, and one of its concerns was about NEETs, those who are not in education, employment or training. Given the colleges' track record in improving participation and access, particularly for those from the most socially deprived parts of society, if there is to be a co-ordinated approach to the question of NEETS, the colleges must be at the heart of it. We offer a vast range of opportunities, and we have a track record in student support and taking care of at-risk learners, so we feel that we could play a key part in any developing NEETS strategy.

That brings me to another key point: the relationship between FE colleges and the schools sector. The colleges are extensively involved in partnerships at local learning community level with schools to deliver enhancements to the age 14 to 19 curriculum. We believe there is considerable further scope for those partnerships to develop at a local level, and there has been talk for some time of DEL and the Department of Education (DE) coming up with a joint policy, strategy or framework for 14- to 19-year-olds. Given the volume of our activity in that age group, we want to be centrally involved in the development of any further strategic development and the local developments that we think should be done through area-based planning across the country. We see ourselves very much as being part of that, and the 14 to 19 agenda is important to us.

The Committee has had some discussions about higher education. I remind the Committee that 18% of all higher education in Northern Ireland is delivered through the six regional colleges, which is a significant minority for that provision. We are aware of the huge issues facing higher education with fees and the decision that is pending in that area. We responded to the

Department's consultations on student fees, widening participation and the higher education strategy for Northern Ireland. In its response to those consultations, we feel that the Department for Employment and Learning should consider new models of higher education delivery that are suitable for the current economic circumstances and that provide greater flexibility in the delivery of provision to meet the practical needs of learners and employers. The Department should also consider greater efficiency and cost-effectiveness in the delivery of higher education.

If there is to be pressure on the funding of full-time higher education, which we believe there will be, the Department must take a close look at the alternative part-time methods of delivering higher education and at increasing access for young people and adults who want to access higher education. More imaginative and flexible options are required that may involve attendance at colleges and universities, blended learning, e-learning, distance learning and work-based learning solutions. We need a much more radical consideration of alternative ways of delivering higher education, and, if radical alternatives are looked at, the role of the further education colleges will be seen to be central in that delivery.

The question and development of foundation degrees is an important part of the provision by colleges. We have had some difficulty in the flexible delivery of those degrees, particularly in our relationships with the two local universities because of conflict between us about the number of years that it takes to develop a foundation degree into an honours degree. We want a model that involves a two-year foundation degree with a one-year top-up. That can be done through some of the English universities, but there appears to be a problem in delivering that in Northern Ireland.

The six key issues that we think are facing the sector are funding, both recurrent and capital estates development; our role in preparing Northern Ireland for economic recovery; NEETs and our contribution in that area; the 14 to 19 curriculum; and higher education.

Chair, I apologise for rushing through my presentation, but I was conscious of your direction that you wanted to spend as much time as possible on discussion. Thank you.

The Chairperson:

Thank you.

Mr Faulkner:

That winds up our presentation. Do you and the Committee now wish to ask some questions?

The Chairperson:

Yes, we will get stuck in.

Mr P Ramsey:

Thank you very much. You are very welcome to the meeting. I share your thoughts on the six themes that you identified. There is no doubt that further education makes an immense difference to young people's lives in the areas of education and training. I particularly agree about the difference that it makes to NEETs. However, that is for another day and the Committee will need to sit down and discuss a way forward in that area and the cross-departmental approaches that are necessary to make a further impact. We still have 40,000 young people across Northern Ireland who are not in employment, education or training. I welcome the sharing of your communication system and the Connected project, but it is a pity that you did not share good labour and industrial relations across the colleges as well. It is a shame that you are not doing that.

I want to ask about the Deane pay settlement of 2009. Why is there no consistency across the colleges in the responsibility allowance to lecturers and the job evaluation of lecturers that should have taken place? There seems to be a lack of consistency there.

Mr Faulkner:

We have just spent a day and a half as a sector, with six directors and six chairs. Our aim is to have consistent terms and conditions of employment across the sector. That is certainly one of our priorities. I do not know that there are any anomalies as such. Trevor, are you aware of any?

Mr Neilands:

It is difficult for us to talk about industrial relations in individual colleges, but I suppose I could make a personal statement. I suggest that the industrial relations situation in my own college, for instance, would warrant any kind of outside examination. We have excellent industrial relations in the Northern Regional College, and I am quite happy that unions are asked for their opinions to corroborate that.

Mr P Ramsey:

That is the point I made, Trevor. If there are good labour relations and industrial relations, they should be shared.

Mr Neilands:

OK, I am happy to do so. A specific question was raised about the Deane agreement, which took quite a long time to negotiate, and may have left a legacy in industrial relations that we will obviously want to tidy up. The specifics of the question related to responsibility points. I think the issue there is that the responsibility points were introduced in colleges at different times because of whatever temporary arrangements had been put in place in the colleges in relation to the delay in the actual agreement. In my case, for instance, we had to put temporary arrangements in place, which are coming to an end next year. The responsibility points were phased in to replace senior lecturers at different times depending on what arrangements the colleges had in place. However, it certainly is the intention that there will be consistency around the sector in the criteria used to appoint people to those positions.

I agree with the comment about job evaluation. It is disappointing that there has been a delay in getting agreement on the detail of job evaluation and the actual implementation of it. That is something that I feel is important. We made an agreement to introduce job evaluation. We already have job evaluation for non-teaching staff, so it is simply a matter of introducing the teachers' scheme. I feel that we should have only one job evaluation scheme to cover all staff, but we have the problem in the colleges where we have different conditions of service for teaching staff and support staff. That can lead to some frustrations for management. I accept the points that were made about the need for a common approach across the colleges. That is certainly something that we will be seeking to establish.

Mr P Ramsey:

I made it clear that I have to leave at 11.30 am. Maybe at a later stage we could find out what the present position is on job evaluation from the six colleges directly.

The Chairperson:

I was going to suggest that Colleges NI would be the appropriate body to write to. If we were to write to you with some of those questions, you could respond, Tom.

Mr Place:

Job evaluation is dealt with through the lecturers' negotiating committee. That body is constituted by management on one side and the staff unions on the other side. It has been on the lecturers' negotiating committee agenda for quite some time, and that is the appropriate channel through which it is dealt with.

The Chairperson:

We will write to you and you will have the option to set out the appropriate response. You will have been aware of some discussions that we had about difficulties about the North West Regional College. I do not know if you were in the meeting at the time, but the comments are in the Hansard report, and they relate to industrial relations. I will just say to you, without going into the detail now because it is sensitive, that it is an issue that a corporate and collaborative approach from yourselves should seek to resolve. I leave you to look at the Hansard report and decide.

Mr Faulkner:

I was disappointed by what was said in the Assembly by the representative, but I will take it up at local level with that Member and we will discuss it. I remind the panel that there are five unions, and we have a problem with only one. I say "we", and it may be my perception, but I want it on the record that I was extremely disappointed at the Member's comments in the Assembly on Monday.

The Chairperson:

That is now on the record, and that is one of the benefits of having a discussion such as this. Pat wants to come back in. I do not want to derail some other things that we have to talk about.

Mr P Ramsey:

Chair, I speak only because the matter has been introduced; it was not my intention to broach the subject. For the record, we have the chair of the board of governors of North West Regional College saying that he has a problem with one of the unions. That is on the record. He can be disappointed all he wants. If the governance going on in North West Regional College is bullying, intimidating and instilling fear into lecturers, there is something drastically wrong. It is not just me saying it but every elected parliamentarian in Foyle, namely the six MLAs and the MP. Members of the Committee are now saying, through a motion carried this morning, that we

will write to the Minister asking for that to be investigated immediately by an independent panel. I say that because that chair said he has a problem with one union.

The Chairperson:

OK. It is right that people have a flavour of this. There is a concern and, as with all these things, it is best addressed rather than left to fester. I am happy if you want to talk about it now, Bertie.

Mr Faulkner:

No.

The Chairperson:

It is an issue of concern and it has been raised without prejudging the outcome. It is a matter that you might collectively turn your attention to and engage on.

Mr Faulkner:

I would like you and your Committee to know that I have met the Minister and that, as Trevor said before, we have an internal auditor, and we can have external auditors come in. We are open to any suggestions whatsoever. I am absolutely convinced. However, I want to keep it at sector level here.

The Chairperson:

That is a welcome remark. I now move on, as the points have been made in the appropriate way to the appropriate people.

Mr D McIlveen:

Thank you, gentlemen, for your presentation. Trevor mentioned collaboration between schools and colleges and we all welcome that. Recent discussions I had with a lot of principals in schools reveal that there is a huge issue around inspiration. That word comes up time and again. There is little to motivate and inspire young people, particularly in years 9 and 10, coming up to GCSE selection. I want to tease out in more detail what, from the point of view of outreach and inspiration, colleges are endeavouring to do. I am conscious that one in three 16- to 18-year-olds in the education system is excellent. Why not two in three? Let us always aim for better. I want you to dwell a little bit on what you are seeking to do, and perhaps on what the people round this table can do to help to ensure that the issue of inspiring our young people is addressed.

Mr Neilands:

There are a number of important points, which I would like the Committee to be involved in. The first and fundamental issue is about independent advice to young people. I believe that motivation comes largely through inspiration, to use your word. What motivates a young person to learn? What choices are available locally to a young person? The most fundamental issue locally is the provision of independent advice to young people, so that they know exactly what the range of opportunities are in any given area, and we take away some of the vested interests that there are in what choices are presented to young people, particularly at the age of 16.

We are not here to have a go at the schools sector. We are here to talk about collaboration with the schools sector but we are well aware that around Northern Ireland there are some very small, uneconomical sixth forms operating with very limited choice for young people. That is not in the best interests of young people and their parents.

So, my first point is about the need for clear, independent careers advice locally, and access to the maximum range of choice and progression opportunities locally. We can provide a lot of that choice through what we offer, and young people make that choice. The one in three we talked about makes the choice to decide to come to us at the age of 16. Obviously, there is something there that motivates young people to make that switch and pursue a vocational course that they are interested in.

The third point is about how local education resources in any given community can be best combined to enable the maximum amount of options to be available when young people have made their choices. That is where our work in collaboration with schools comes into play. We work with pupils aged 14 to 16, thereby introducing a lot of young people to vocational options at that age. We also work with pupils aged 16 to 19, with young people getting the opportunity to enhance what they may be doing in sixth form or at A level, along with some vocational options. So, it gives them a broader outlook and range of opportunities on where they may want to go after they finish their 16 to 19 provision.

The three things that are important are careers advice, the opportunity for colleges to offer their own range of programmes locally, but also then the need for education institutions locally, depending on local circumstances, to make whatever collaborative arrangements are appropriate

to offer the maximum choice, opportunity and progression.

Mr Faulkner:

In our own local situation in Derry/Londonderry, the college sits on what we call a Foyle learning community, where 17 secondary schools and colleges are involved with the regional college looking at academic and vocational routes for 14- to 19-year-olds. We also work with the workforce development programme with industry, and are involved with the Ilex regeneration of the city. So, we have a strong voice locally, and I am sure that is replicated throughout the sector.

Mr Ned Cohen (Colleges Northern Ireland):

One of the key things that colleges bring to their educational offer is the sort of workplace, industry or business-type relationships that lecturers have. So, many of the learners coming into the college environment have a very different relationship to learning. However, their access to people who have experience of what it is like out there in the real world can really engage young people and move them on to look at their education as part of something that they should invest in for their learning journey moving forward. That is something very different that happens in the college environment that they may not necessarily be getting through their schools or in other places.

Mr D McIlveen:

There are obviously other organisations outside there, and sometimes a joining of minds is wise on such issues. Have you engaged with organisations such as Business in the Community and the Prince's Trust?

Mr Cohen:

Absolutely. The Prince's Trust operates a programme called Team, which is probably one of the most successful NEET-type initiatives. It is essentially a partnership between colleges and the Prince's Trust, which does a lot of soft-skill personal development work for people who are quite distant from education and society in their local communities. It is a good example. You will receive our submission on NEETs shortly. Partnership in lots of different ways is what colleges are about, which includes partnerships with schools, businesses and the higher education sector. Partnership describes lots of ways that we go about our business, as Bertie said.

Mr Place:

To emphasise that point: there has been a long-standing extensive exchange programme between colleges and schools that enables pupils who are aged 14 to 16 to come in from several schools to colleges at one time. There are large numbers of pupils, and colleges can organise a wide range of vocational subjects at one time. That has proven successful. However, it has struggled a bit because of funding issues. Considerable additional work has to be done between the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education to continue to forge that relationship and push those arrangements forward. We support that fully.

Mr McElduff:

I welcome the team. I have two questions. First, can you tell us about the work that you do to help workers in the construction industry, for example, which is in decline, to, perhaps, transfer them to industries where there is new potential and opportunities? Secondly, how hard do you work corporately to assist local FE colleges to obtain a relaxation of the maximum student number (MaSN) cap, which prevents students from accessing higher education through regional FE colleges at local level?

Mr Neilands:

The first point you mentioned has been a difficult one for colleges over the past two to three years. If I had been talking to you four or five years ago, my tale about construction skills would have been that we did not have capacity to cope with the demand from industry. Of course, over the past couple of years, that has totally turned around, unfortunately. Our problem is that a lot of that training was done through the apprenticeship scheme and Training for Success. The difficulty is that fewer and fewer young people are actually being employed as apprentices. The colleges' response to that, in collaboration with the Department for Employment and Learning, was to establish alternative training routes that did not rely on young people being employed. That has been our main contribution. In other words, young people were allowed to develop skills that they would need to be employed in a future upturn in the construction industry without the status, if you like, of being employed as apprentices. That is not an ideal situation. We are fully aware of its limitations. As you can imagine, there are motivation issues. Young people do not see themselves actually getting jobs. A lot of those young people did not bargain for being at college for the length of time that they will be there in the absence of any jobs. We need to work more closely with the construction industry on that issue.

That is also part of the answer. We have developed relationships in project work through the Innovation Fund and other initiatives to work with the construction industry to address its particular needs. One project my college took part in involved working with employers in the construction industry on their purchasing of sustainable materials. They now all have to demonstrate their environmental contribution before they are awarded many contracts. We presented them with the opportunity to be trained in how that could be done. That is an example of working directly with a sector that is in a depressed state in order to try to help Northern Ireland companies to bid for contracts. Ultimately, of course, that has the knock-on effect of improving apprentices' employment prospects. You put your finger on a particular problem with regard to training. You can rest assured that, if training is cut back in colleges, in three or four years' time, when the construction industry picks up, we will be the first to hear about the lack of available skills in the industry.

The question about higher education and the MaSN cap is one that we are very interested to engage with you about. The MaSN cap exists because government wish to fund only a limited number full-time higher education places.

Those places are then distributed between the two universities and the FE colleges. However, when you divide our allocation between six colleges, you do not end up with a huge number of places.

The question for us is twofold. First, would Government sustain the argument to increase the MaSN cap and, therefore, fund more higher education places? We are well aware of the financial constraints on that at the minute. If the overall number of funded places were increased, we would obviously argue for a greater share of those new places. If we accept that it is going to be difficult to fund more higher education places, our argument is about the distribution of the existing number of MaSN places between the universities and ourselves.

In our responses to the higher education strategy, the fees document and the widening participation higher education strategy, we argued for a greater share of the existing MaSN places, because we believe that some of the higher education provision that we provide at Higher National Diploma (HND) level and foundation level is actually more relevant to economic need and to the employment prospects of young people than some of the places funded at universities. I am quite sure that the universities take a different view. So, there are two arguments: one is about how many HE places you can afford to provide in the first place, and the other is about how to distribute the places that are funded.

I just want to come back to a point that I tried to make earlier. If there is an economic difficulty with funding full-time higher education, I believe that we need to look at alternative ways of enabling people to access higher education, specifically part-time higher education, where there is much greater flexibility for providing people with access to higher education. If we really looked imaginatively at how colleges, universities, employers and individuals themselves could combine modules, elements and programmes and turn those into relevant qualifications through, say, distance learning, I think that we could come up with a much better value-for-money solution, given the fact that money is going to be such a huge problem for us.

Mr McElduff:

On Friday, I, along with Tom Buchanan and some other MLAs, went to the Omagh campus and met the senior management team. The percentage for HE places there is 12%. The percentage was trebled after the merger, but it is still well below the 18% figure that you gave. You would think that the MaSN cap should be increased in more remote areas.

Mr Neilands:

Yes. I think that that results from a kind of anomaly in that there were not very many full-time higher education colleges in that area, so there has been an attempt, quite rightly, to redress the balance over the past number of years. Then again, the competition for MaSN places is very competitive. The bit that I left out is that the colleges scrap with each other to get the maximum number of places. When there is less of something around, your competitive nature increases, because you want to get your hands on what you think is an appropriate proportion of what is available.

Mr McElduff:

I have been reassured that Bertie is from west of the Bann.

Mr Place:

We support what Mr McElduff said about increasing the MaSN cap. However, we have to be realistic. We understand that an increase is unlikely to come about because of issues in the Department for Employment and Learning. We are, therefore, being required to think imaginatively, as Trevor said, and to find other ways of getting more people into higher education without it being a drain on the public purse.

Mr Ross:

I visited the Newtownabbey campus during the election campaign. I must say that some of the new facilities there are very impressive, and it has a great learning atmosphere. In response to Barry's question, you touched on some of the concerns about the apprenticeships and on their importance. The fact that there is not the right the number of apprenticeships has been an issue for some time. I would like to ask a couple of things about links with businesses. Links with schools are obviously very important. I know that older schoolchildren are doing some of their courses in college, and that is very good for their development. Some business leaders in big, successful companies in Northern Ireland are fairly critical of school and college leavers not having the skills that they demand. Will you touch on the sorts of links that you have with businesses, particularly business leaders, to make sure that the skills that you provide are the ones that are needed? That will be particularly important if we get the upturn from having lower corporation tax; we hope that there will be not only high-end graduate jobs but an increase in jobs right through the supply chain. Is there any financial support from local businesses? In a climate of tighter public finances, universities and colleges need to look for other means of getting finances. Is there any private money from local companies to help to support courses or help the colleges in certain ways?

Mr Neilands:

Those are important issues. Since the college sector was reorganised, we have certainly attempted to improve relationships with employers' representational umbrella organisations. It is very important to have dialogue between college leaders and industry leaders. When it comes down to it, I have found from personal experience that nothing beats the personal contact between a local college and local companies or factories. It is really only when you get into that level of discussion that you can really identify what some of the issues are.

We set up workforce development forums in each of the six college areas. That was a useful attempt to engage with local employers. However, I have found that only a limited number of companies are prepared to meet you and talk about general employment and skills needs in an area. They will talk a lot about their specific employability and skills needs, so that reinforces that the contact between the local college and the local employers is where you can get down to the specifics of what is required.

A lot of the complaints that you get from employers are not always about the qualifications but about some of the softer skills of employability and the disciplines that are involved in making somebody employable. As you are probably aware, the issue of basic essential skills, such as literacy and numeracy, is enormous. I am sure that the Education Committee has been looking at that as well. Perhaps there is a need for collaboration between the schools and the FE sector because, as you know, we spend a considerable resource, funded through DEL, on improving the essential skills of young people and adults who come to FE colleges. To be honest, getting the appropriate engineering or construction qualification is perhaps the easier part. Some of the other issues about employability are probably more difficult to engage with.

We have to work at both levels. We have to work at our representational level, and we have to engage in a debate with business leaders about what they want at that level. It is about specific direct contact with local companies. Despite the difficulties of the past number of years, a lot of companies — some of the larger companies, admittedly — have invested in skills. We were involved in an initiative with Michelin in Ballymena. Instead of laying people off, Michelin put people on a shorter working week and filled the rest of the week with specific training initiatives in association with the college. Where you have a specific need and a good relationship between a company and a college, it is possible to come up with the solutions.

You put your finger on another really important issue for us. If we engage with companies — this applies particularly to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) — their ability to access funding to pay for training can often be a major difficulty because the whole landscape out there, in respect of where people get advice and support, is extremely complicated. We are one factor in a very complicated landscape. Bill McGinnis, the Northern Ireland skills advisor, has been looking at simplifying the advisory structure for business and small businesses. We are very supportive of that simplification, but we would also push ourselves forward as providers of a local one-stop-shop solution because we already have a network that stretches right across the country. Therefore, we feel that we would be in a strong position to have a bigger role in working in what has to be a more simplified landscape for providing support, advice and finance for businesses, particularly small businesses.

Mr Faulkner:

Just to build on that —

The Chairperson:

Bertie, I hope you do not think that I am being rude. Tom has also indicated he wants to speak, but I am going to move on. I will conclude on a number of things, and you will have the opportunity to respond in writing or through further meetings. This is an introductory meeting, and we cannot cover everything in one go.

Mrs Overend:

Thanks very much for the presentation. I only recently became aware of the e-learning that you provide, so I want to ask for some more information about that. What types of qualifications are available? What size is the sector? How do you promote it? Is it replacing current teaching methods? Are you getting new students coming in for e-learning? Is there is a feeling among staff that e-learning may make them redundant?

Mr Neilands:

It will be useful if I clarify the terms that are being used. Terms used in this field include “e-learning”, “distance learning” and “blended learning”, which is probably the one that we are most keen on talking about at this point in time. There is no question that colleges have to move with technology, not just because we are all trying to embrace and use technology better but because young people now are so literate in all sorts of technological advances, much more so than we are. Therefore, we really have to try to keep up with the young people. So, for all those reasons, all educators would be very foolish not to try to embrace the advantages that new technology can give us.

To respond to one of your concluding points: when we talk about blended learning, we are talking about integrating elements of individual learning, including tailored learning and resource-based learning, into existing programmes to enhance the attractiveness of those programmes and to keep in touch with how young people actually access and absorb information. We are also, of course, trying to promote and build up the whole notion of people being independent learners. So, when we talk about those developments, I like to talk about them in terms of the blended learning approach, which is all about improving how we deliver programmes as opposed replacing anything.

We do have to look to the future and efficiencies, and I referred to efficiencies earlier. In the current financial circumstances, we do have to look for efficiencies wherever we can find them. I

think there is probably a market for us to deliver more pure e-learning, which involves people using learning packages with maybe some tutorial support.

To go back to one of my earlier points, SMEs have problems accessing training or, if they have a small number of employees, they may have problems releasing them for training programmes. Using a self-contained learning package for whatever the particular staff development or professional development need might be provides a very cost-effective way for an SME to access training, provided it has got the appropriate backup of any tutorial support and preparation for examinations or assessment that is required.

I think that all those things have a place in the wider provision that further education will need to develop in the future.

Mrs Overend:

That is very good. I actually did a distance e-learning course, because I was working part-time and am a mother.

Mr Neilands:

The Open University has run like that for years.

Mrs Overend:

Yes, so it might have been more beneficial to have had that link with somewhere local when I was doing that. I did not know that what you are offering was available, so perhaps promotion is an issue.

Mr Place:

E-learning has been around for quite some time. For a number of years, we had an initiative here called learndirect, which involved the colleges and other organisations opening town centre shops with computers. The opportunity was there for people to come and learn, using the packages provided and the computers. Unfortunately, the funding for that initiative was withdrawn, and it no longer exists.

To refer to your first point, there is probably very little limit on the range of courses that can be made available. It is limited only by the amount of packages that are written by commercial

organisations or by the colleges.

The Chairperson:

I will draw this session to a close, unless anyone has a burning issue they want to raise.

Mr Buchanan:

What are the colleges doing to market what they are providing? There seems to be a problem, because people do not fully understand what is available. Joe Public does not fully understand what is being delivered by the colleges. This week, we had a presentation from Queen's University in the Long Gallery to see what exactly it is doing. It was an eye-opener to see all that is being provided by the universities. I am sure that not everyone is up to speed with what is being delivered. It is the same with the colleges. What are the colleges doing to promote what they are doing? That is one way in which you can attract businesses to come along to work with you. Furthermore, there may well be a financial pay-off from that, and you may be able to interact with businesses, as Alastair said, to help overcome some of the financial difficulties that you may face in years to come.

Mr Neilands:

We always have to accept that we could do more to promote what we do. However, you need to counterbalance that with a refresher on some of the statistics that I quoted at the beginning. We are currently attracting 180,000 —

The Chairperson:

I will tell you what we will do. I think that the Deputy Chairperson has raised a very good point, and I am sure that he would be more than happy to invite you to the Long Gallery for the sort of event that Queen's University had. We will maybe talk about that. Do not misunderstand: if the Deputy Chairperson is asking a question, it means that an answer is required. It is not enough to say, "No. We are actually doing that." I take your point about engaging with SMEs about their understanding. I can tell you that the average owner of an SME does not believe in e-learning; he thinks that it is just boys playing on the computer. There has to be a way of engaging and explaining what people do. That is the point that the Deputy Chairperson brought up. Trevor, you have the floor, so you can carry on, but I think that you should take it as an opportunity rather than say what you are doing already.

Mr Cohen:

In the previous mandate, the Committee for Employment and Learning sponsored a breakfast event in which the six colleges participated. It was very successful. The college representatives did not speak, but a range of business partners were brought in to talk about what they did with the colleges. Those businesses were from the public sector, large companies, SMEs and engineering companies.

The Chairperson:

We would be more than happy to pick up on that. You should talk to the Committee Clerk about it. Queen's University had a very successful event. It is serendipity; these things happen to cross over. The good thing was that there were a lot of MLAs there. You will know what it is like; these are all very busy people. There is an issue that I will close on. I want to bring Sammy in, and we will finish with that point, Ned, if you do not mind.

Mr Douglas:

I could probably bring my question to the next evidence session, which will be on widening participation.

The Chairperson:

I appreciate that. We have gone on a wee bit; we had a good rattle through the matters earlier, then we went on a bit. I want to mention a couple of things about engagement, which you might want to look at. I was struck by the discussion on business people getting involved in specifics but not being interested in the generality. That was in response to Alastair's question. There is a job of work to be done there. People will participate if they can see a direct pay-off. If they want more welders, for instance, or more people involved in electronics, they will participate if those trades are available. However, there is a wider issue. I am not sure that the notion of having boards of governors that were supposed to bring industry into colleges has worked in the way it was anticipated. So, there is a need to get better embedding in the industrial base or commercial base of the place.

I have absolutely no doubt that you are doing very well with student participation and all of that. However, and I say this gently, you have something of an image problem. Given all of the great work that you do, it strikes me that there would be some benefit if you were able to develop the idea of doing the one- and two-year higher education courses at FE colleges and doing the

third year at one of the universities. That would help break down the idea that there is a good/bad or a junior/senior divide. An integrated approach would help. Other institutions will have their own ideas about that.

Although you have made the statement, it is not yet clear to me why your sector is more effective or efficient in delivering higher education. That is something that you might want to address the next time you come to talk to us.

Finally, I have spoken to the Chair of the Education Committee, and we are keen for the Committees to take on certain work together. One such piece of work is about careers advice. I know that work was done on that in the previous mandate, but we need to explore how we engage people in the fact that education is a good thing. We will take that forward, and, given your comments, you will be front and central in that.

I thank you all very much for coming along. Although we talked about some other issues, earlier discussions that we had took place when we were discussing correspondence and, therefore, were not covered by Hansard. Footage of those discussions will be on 'Democracy Live'. You know the issue that we are talking about anyway, but I do not want to have misled you. There is certain information in those discussions that you may wish to take note of. Thank you all very much for coming.

Mr Faulkner:

Thank you for accommodating us and for the exchange of views. We look forward to building on that. Thank you all very much.