



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Strategy for Higher Education in
Northern Ireland**

8 June 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

**COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

Strategy for Higher Education in Northern Ireland

8 June 2011

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister
Mr Sammy Douglas
Ms Michelle Gildernew
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Barry McElduff
Mrs Sandra Overend
Mr Pat Ramsey

Witnesses:

Sir Graeme Davies) Higher Education Strategy Review Group

Mr Fergus Devitt) Department for Employment and Learning

The Chairperson:

I welcome Sir Graeme Davies, the chairperson of the Higher Education Strategy Review Group and Mr Fergus Devitt, the director of the higher education division at the Department for Employment and Learning. You are both very welcome, and we look forward to hearing from you.

Sir Graeme Davies (Higher Education Strategy Review Group):

Thank you very much, Chairman. It is nice to be back with the Committee, which I see has changed significantly, but it is nice to see some familiar faces. I will run briefly through the history of events that bring us to where we are, and I will indicate the next steps.

The process of developing the strategy began in the summer of 2009, when the now Lord Empey invited me to take on the chairmanship of the steering group. I was then the vice chancellor of the University of London, a post from which I stepped down at the end of August 2010. The Committee should know that, at the extremely short notice of a week, I was asked by the Department in Whitehall to take over the interim directorship of a body called the Office for Fair Access, which is dealing with the issue of access agreements for the universities under the new fees structure. I assure the Committee that I cleared it with the Department in Whitehall and the Department here that there is no conflict of interest.

We set up a steering group, a project group and five expert groups to take matters forward. The steering group embraced a very wide range of stakeholders, not only from the heads of the universities but from, broadly, the community and voluntary sector, further education, schools, business and student representatives. The process started with the steering group setting some broad parameters within the expert groups, working quite diligently to bring forward ideas that related in particular to their briefs.

There were five key themes: learning; economy; international; society and people; and finance and government. Alongside that, we embraced clearly the discussions that I had when I first met the Committee that the process should be inclusive, both with regional and with stakeholder issues. Therefore, as part of the initial development of our thinking, we had stakeholder engagement events in Belfast in October 2009 and in Londonderry in June 2010. The expert groups presented their findings to the steering group in the summer of 2010, and, from that, we worked on our ideas about the strategy. That led to the formulation of the consultation document, copies of which you have received. I emphasise that, in particular, we met the officers of Ilex, representatives of the university for Derry group and Derry City Council as part of getting a feel for the regional aspects of what might come out of the strategy.

In the Department, we worked on the development of the consultation document, which was launched on 20 January and closed on Friday 15 April. We received a considerable number of

responses, and, on the whole, they were supportive of the general drift of the consultation document.

We were looking to emphasise that there should be a renewed strategic focus for higher education, looking to build on the real achievements that have been made by your higher education sector. Both your major universities and the colleges, but particularly the two universities, have established themselves as world-class establishments, and it was quite important to recognise that any strategic development must seek to sustain and, preferably, add to that. At the same time, there was recognition that there were some issues in the broad context of higher education in the community that needed to be addressed.

The consultation document engaged with some of the stakeholder concerns, particularly those around the economy and issues relating to small and medium-sized enterprises and the way in which the chain of connections might be worked, which I heard being discussed earlier this morning.

We also looked very closely at seeking to ensure that there were ways in which some of the shortcomings, one of which is retention, might be dealt with. The consultation document proposed, among other things, new territory for higher education: a new method of funding called mode-free funding, which means that you do not differentiate between students who are in full-time education and those who are in part-time education to encourage students to move between the two if needs be.

We looked very closely at the issue of better articulation between the further education sector, which provides quite a lot of higher education, and the higher education sector. In the responses to the consultation document, that was an issue that featured prominently.

We looked at how we might ensure that, subsequent to education, perhaps in the formal way through the universities in Belfast or elsewhere, there were access points distributed around the Province.

Furthermore, we looked at the issue of part-time students, recognising that they are a very important community and one that, perhaps, out of the whole higher education sector in the United Kingdom, has not received the support that it merited. We also built on issues of

community engagement and stronger internationalisation.

During the consultation period, I hosted stakeholder events in Derry, Armagh and Belfast. Those were well attended, and the community engaged very much with us in bringing forward their ideas. We received a number of responses, perhaps fewer than we might have expected, but, on the whole, that allowed us to produce a summary report, of which you have received a copy.

It is our intention to publish the consultation response on the Department's website towards the end of this month, and we welcome your thoughts and comments, both verbally and formally, so that we can take them into account since it is important that the community sees the way in which we seek to respond to the consultation responses. Our expectation is that we will pull together the steering group in mid- or late September.

We are conscious of the issues that arose in the previous discussion about the timing of events around budgetary matters and the like, although, as a strategy steering group, we are very conscious of the fact that our deliberations are influenced by budgetary issues, they are, on the whole, a political and not a strategic matter. We also want to be able to take into account the responses to other consultations that are closing, particularly the consultation on widening participation.

I am ready to try to deal with any issues that Committee members wish to raise.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much for that, Sir Graeme.

Mr P Ramsey:

Sir Graeme and Fergus, you are very welcome.

A concern that we have had for some time has been about how we can synchronise this review of higher education and the widening of access, because they are very relevant. Although I recognise and acknowledge that you talked originally about regionality and access, I am disappointed that there is no reference to that issue in the responses to the consultation. I know that when you held the session in the Derry city, which is in my constituency, regional disparity was foremost in the contributions of most people who were there that night.

I will be brief, Chairman. An area that has been raised, particularly by business and industry throughout Northern Ireland, is that of STEM subjects. Much emphasis has been placed on STEM subject areas and on going forward to meet industry's needs, which clearly are not being met. Again, focus is being put on research and development and on having centres of excellence throughout the region.

The Chairperson:

We will deal with those two points. You still have the floor, Pat. Perhaps Sir Graeme will deal with the regionalisation issue and then with the focus on STEM subjects.

Sir Graeme Davies:

There was a particular question in the consultation about the constraints that exist because of the use of the maximum number of students (MaSN) cap as a weapon of budgetary control. It is quite clear that it is a very unpopular measure. It is seen as being an outdated measure. Responses to the consultation confirmed that. Part of the group's thinking on greater flexibility and changing funding modes was to seek ways in which one could expand provision in a regional sense without running up against the buffer of the MaSN cap. That is very much in our minds. Just last week, in discussions that I had with the two vice chancellors, we got close to the issue of expansion of the Magee campus and what might happen.

I want to unpack the regional question just a tiny bit. An issue that we have talked about is the concern about retention. It is a difficult issue. We lose about 13% or 14% of students at the end of their first year. It is a terrible waste. It appears that we lose only a very small proportion of that 14% because of academic failure. We lose them for social, personal and family reasons. Many of them are from the regions. One clear idea in the minds of the steering group is that building upon the backbone of technology that works through both university campuses and the further education colleges outside Belfast, we can find ways to contact and hold those students in the education process. Therefore, although we may lose them as full-time students in Belfast, we will not lose them as students. In that way, we can take education to them, rather than take them to education. That is a very important issue. Of course, it does not obviate the clear recognition that the case for building additional capacity in the north-west must be manifest in the report that we finally produce.

Mr P Ramsey:

Going forward, we have to find a way to ensure that we do not have one strategy in one place and another strategy in another place with no synchronisation of their key themes with regard to ensuring and widening access to participation. That is key in any review of higher education.

The Chairperson:

It is a good point. I will come back to that issue.

Mr McElduff:

Your report covers your vision for higher education. It states that some people believed that widening access should also be included in that vision. It appears to me that widening access is a glaring omission from the vision statement.

Did you learn anything in the course of your work about the Universities Ireland concept and how those nine universities work together?

Sir Graeme Davies:

Yes; we did. We bore that in mind. A member of the steering group is an ex-president of one of the Irish universities. Therefore, he was very much involved in that. We had dialogue. We recognised that. In a sense, you put your finger on one of the issues, because a parallel widening access consultation is going on; we recognised that it did not duplicate it. One of the reasons for not getting the steering group back together again until late September is to ensure that the information that comes out of the widening access consultation is connected to the information that has come out of the strengthening exercise. It would be foolish for us to come forward with a higher education strategy that did not take into account the information on widening access. They are intertwined and irrevocable.

Mr Fergus Devitt (Department for Employment and Learning):

Sir Graeme is right: we had the ex-president of Limerick University on the steering group. However, as you are probably aware, the Republic of Ireland was also developing its own higher education strategy, and Sir Graeme met the chairperson of that group. Later this month, we have a meeting with our counterparts in the relevant Department in the Republic of Ireland to talk through the issues and commonalities and what we are trying to achieve. That interaction certainly does take place.

The Chairperson:

At the risk of being a little bit provocative, what is the purpose of higher education?

Sir Graeme Davies:

There are three: a strong economic purpose; a strong social and cultural purpose; and strong evidence that better-educated people are better citizens. Therefore higher education in that sense adds general value to the community. However, it must also equip those who go through it with the ability to deal with the changing circumstances of their lives.

The Chairperson:

If I were to say that we heard evidence earlier that in the next five to 10 years there will be a requirement for 60% of our workforce to have level-4 qualifications and not level 5, why would we not make the argument that we should be diverting resources away from HE and into FE?

Sir Graeme Davies:

As I travel round the higher education sector internationally, my firm belief is that all governments recognise that if you do not equip your community with an immensely strong knowledge base at the top end, their communities will be seriously disadvantaged. We need both. Not only do we need people at level 4 going into level 5, but we need the creation of the innovative ideas at the top end that create the employment and development opportunities further down what we might call the economic food chain. You cannot do one without the other.

The Chairperson:

Why do Northern Ireland's higher education bodies attract a disproportionately lower level of research funding from the research councils?

Sir Graeme Davies:

Research councils are an immensely competitive business. In recent years, research councils have been constraining, and their budgets have shrunk. Queen's University does better than the University of Ulster, but that is to be expected. However, what is often not recognised is that, among those institutions that were not traditional long-term members of the higher education communities — the established universities before the reforms of the 1990s — the University of Ulster, as a new university, is now far and away the best new university in the United Kingdom.

One must be careful about league tables, but there is a table of research performance that comes from the research assessment exercise and is conducted on a UK-wide basis. The fact that Queen's University and the University of Ulster are within six places in the thirties and forties is an admirable tribute to what has been done here. The complementation from the Department and Government here of research funding that comes from the research councils has created a research base that needs to be sustained.

The Chairperson:

I could make an argument that the research at our two universities is not all it is cracked up to be and that if we are to investment in it we have to make the case. I suspect that you know from your previous position — I am sure that you have a fairly intimate relationship with many of the research councils — that the quality of the research proposals that we were putting forward was not up to scratch.

Sir Graeme Davies:

I have not looked at them closely. The answer must be that if they are not getting as much funding as they wish, that may be a conclusion that we would draw. Success rates are very low in most of the research councils now, no matter where you come from. Even if one takes the top end of Oxbridge, they still run at only about 20%.

The Chairperson:

I just want to make a few points, but I will take other people in. What I am looking for — colleagues will reach their own conclusions — is an argument. I am a general supporter of higher education, but we have an issue in that we are not getting — at least not until recently; I do not know what the recent figures are — the full, pro rata amount of research from the research councils. We need to make an argument to the citizens of Northern Ireland about why we invest in those issues. Someone has to explain why it is not a luxury but is, in fact, part of our strategic economic drivers. That is really what I am looking for from a document like the one you have produced. I am not quite sure that we have hit all those issues.

Sir Graeme Davies:

Perhaps I am partly responsible. One of the complications that I found between starting to formulate the strategy and formulating the consultation document is that if it is to be a true consultation, you must put down the issues in broad terms. It is clear from, for instance, the work

of the expert group that looked at economic matters, that universities' role in creating circumstances that will add value is fundamental. That will, of course, appear much more starkly in the final strategy document. That is critical.

There is a tendency to look back and underestimate what has been achieved in building the baseline and the base skill landscape in the two universities for important domains such as STEM. Ten or 15 years ago, the University of Ulster, for instance, would not have been seen as a major player in biosciences; however, across the United Kingdom it is now seen as a major player. There is a resource that resides in both of your universities that my steering group and I believe it is critically important to sustain for the well-being of Northern Ireland in the next 10 years.

The Chairperson:

However, when you get closer to your final report, I would like somebody to articulate that. By way of information, we had another paper in front of us earlier stating that we were funding 795 postgraduate students, 495 of whom were core; however, we have run out of money for the additional 300 places, so we are asking for another £3.5 million this year to keep them going. We have to make an argument. The Minister, whom you no doubt heard speak earlier, said that if we do not get the money it will be cataclysmic for apprenticeships and other things.

I understand that when you consult you have to reflect what the consultation says, and I accept that that is what you are bringing forward, but we would also like to see an articulation, if one can be made, of why continued investment in higher education is an appropriate use of scarce taxpayers' money, because we have to explain it.

Sir Graeme Davies:

I assure the Committee that the strategy picks that up. For example, the graduate studentships were not just thrown willy-nilly into the system; they are focused on areas that are seen to be beneficial to Northern Ireland, particularly to economic development.

Mr Devitt:

The additional 300 PhDs that you referred to, Chairperson, were restricted to areas of economic relevance, and the 12 cross-border projects worth £17 million that were funded in the last CSR were also restricted to areas of economic relevance. We have been trying to direct some of the funding differentially into areas that will support the growth of the economy.

The Chairperson:

I understand that you know what you are doing and why you are doing it. However, the point is: what do the people think? We are in a very difficult financial environment. Someone will have to say why we need 300 PhDs rather than 600 apprenticeships. That is only one of the issues. I do not want to monopolise the conversation; I want to bring other members in. However, we may come back to some of those points. You asked me about our input. Well, you are certainly getting a flavour of my contribution, which is one of critical friend.

Ms Gildernew:

You are very welcome. I cannot help but think that the Minister might be adept at getting the bleeding stump out. We need to look critically at all those issues. To that end, I have a few questions. Do we connect enough with the EU strategic framework? Do we draw down enough research funding from the EU and, therefore, put more money into the research pot?

I am a great believer in higher education — higher national diplomas, foundation degrees, etc — delivering education to people, often in rural areas, who cannot access university education. I know that the higher education sector has to be responsive to the needs of the economy, and I have seen very good examples of that in my constituency. It also has to meet the changing needs of employers and learners. It has to take cognisance of the fact that there are people who cannot get back into education or training because of challenges such as transport, rurality, childcare or other caring responsibilities. I suspect that if a piece of work were done on drop-out figures and people were asked to answer honestly why they left, we would see a mix of those factors coming to the fore. I agree that they are probably not academically linked, but we have to look at the support measures for people returning to education and being fit for the workforce.

I would like to see more being done to encourage and support women to go into further and higher education. I am concerned that the higher education sector is seen as the poor relation. However, a Chathaoirligh, I am pleased that you do not seem to be in awe of the universities and what they are doing. Higher education has an important role to play as well.

Sir Graeme Davies:

One of the reasons why it can play such an important role is because it is so regionally distributed. That is why I said earlier that part of what will come out in the strategy is that you

must move away from what is, in many people's minds, the concept of university education being traditionally for 18-year-old school leavers. However, that is no longer the community that we are dealing with; we have to deal with a community that is much more heterogeneous and flexible. That is why, in the next 10 years, you must have a deliberate and well-based policy that not only brings the student to education but takes education to the student.

Therefore, building on the experience that you should not just do it all on a whim, you must have educational hubs. The thinking is very much around using regional FE colleges as places where higher education can be accessed and serviced. There must be people there who can give students the immediate tutorial, functional and operational support that allows them to benefit from the access to technology, if I can call it that. Again, there is strong pedagogical evidence that if you just throw the technology at students, they will use it very inefficiently; whereas if they are mentored, guided and tutored, they can use it effectively and efficiently, and many of the inhibiting factors, such as travel, distance and family, are obviated.

Mr Devitt:

May I answer the question about the EU?

The Chairperson:

I will bring you in on the EU point in a moment. Michelle raised the point about women in higher education, but the attrition rate is not in primary degrees; it is in PhDs. We do not seem to be able to get bright women to stay to do them. Why is that?

Sir Graeme Davies:

I do not know the answer. If I remember the figures correctly, the higher education community is about 60% female in Northern Ireland, but we tend to lose them. Often, social pressures get in the way of doing post-graduate studies in a fixed location. If that were made more flexible so that it can be accessed part-time and supported and sustained in a part-time way, the likelihood of bringing people in will increase and the likelihood of losing them will decrease.

The Chairperson:

I will not labour the point, but I am just giving you some pointers. The benefit of being Chairperson is that I get loads information from goodness knows where. For instance, the Royal Society of Chemistry told us that sciences in the United Kingdom provide 60% of the economic

driver. That is actually better than IT. Nobody is selling that argument.

We heard earlier from Michelle about the space connection that some young people had, but nobody has told us that there is a UK space programme, of which Northern Ireland's share is zero, despite the fact that we have world-leading composite technology. We have Bombardier and graduates with great expertise, but it is about selling the argument. It even comes down to the issue about the framework. I do not know if we are still on framework 7, as I have lost track of which one we are on now. However, the ability to leverage funds from other places is an argument that universities will make to us, but we do not get to go and make it to other people.

People need to understand those issues so that they can make meaningful contributions. As I said, when we look at the final strategy for higher education, we will need some strategic direction in those matters. Fergus wants to come in on the issue about Europe and the points that Michelle raised.

Mr Devitt:

Before I do that, I will mention a bit about higher education and further education. There is a balance between the amount of funding that goes into higher education and the amount that goes into further education, but there is a cross-over, which is higher education in further education. About 17% or 18% of all higher education is delivered through the further education sector. The pointers from the responses to the consultation show that there is scope to increase that through flexibility, access and part-time study, so that is something that we will definitely look at.

In respect of the EU, there has been a push recently to get universities to engage more with framework 7. Queen's University in particular has been successful in drawing down some funds to mainstream a couple of the cross-border projects that I mentioned earlier. We have set aside a little bit of funding this year to encourage Queen's University and the University of Ulster to access framework 7 and to encourage them to work more with SMEs. SMEs came up earlier, so we are trying to push them down that direction. There will also be intent coming out of Barroso that there must be a 20% increase in the amount of funding that Northern Ireland in general draws down from European Union sources.

Sir Graeme Davies:

Framework 6 was an administrative nightmare. It required collaboration across borders and

complicated managerial arrangements, and many British universities simply retreated from Europe in framework 6. Framework 7 has put it back together again; it is now a much more user-friendly process, which is one of the reasons why there was a dip. It was not just a dip in Northern Ireland but a dip in the United Kingdom in funding from framework 6, which is now being rebuilt in framework 7.

Ms Gildernew:

Several respondents stated that our distinctiveness should be regarded as a strength rather than seeking uniformity. I was very pleased to see that; that is a view that I would like to see factored in.

Mr Allister:

I want to take the discussion back to some of the issues that the Chairman was dealing with and to similar themes. We have a very high level of participation by young people in higher education — 48% — which is worn as a badge of honour. That is a phenomenally high figure. Given that, is this surge for quantity producing a deficit in quality?

Sir Graeme Davies:

I believe not.

Mr Allister:

I will not say that a primary degree today is worth nothing, but it is worth much less than when I took my primary degree. That is one reason why we have so many graduates stacking shelves, which is a pretty poor outcome —

Sir Graeme Davies:

Indeed. It is not what —

Mr Allister:

— and not a good investment in higher education by state, family or anyone else. When we increase the fusion between higher and further education, are we just lowering the bar all the time? Are we really serving the needs of our community by tempting people by the surge — I was going to say propaganda — into university or higher and further education when they should be in skilled employment? That may contribute to the 14% dropout rate in the first year. Is there

a downside? Are we falling into a trap regarding higher and further education, as they are not delivering for our economy the skills that we actually need?

Sir Graeme Davies:

My response is a personal rather than a steering group one. Looking across the United Kingdom, following the big expansion that began in the late 1980s, you will see that up until then participation rates were about 17%. That has grown. In England, the rate is now about 39%; in Scotland, it is about 48%, as it is here.

Mr Allister:

The polytech generation.

Sir Graeme Davies:

Yes. Although one hears frequently about graduates who are unemployed, the evidence is irrefutable: if you are a graduate, the likelihood of your being unemployed is much reduced and the likelihood of your having greater career earnings is much enhanced.

Mr Allister:

Not if you are stacking shelves.

Sir Graeme Davies:

They are a minority; a small proportion of those who complete their degrees. Furthermore, looking at those 20 years, you will see that a considerable number of professions that were previously non-graduate — let us just choose banking and nursing — have become graduate professions. All the evidence is that those professions have benefited from the change. If you continue to educate a very large proportion of your community, the likelihood of that community being strongly supportive of the broader needs of society — economic, social and cultural — is significantly enhanced.

Mr Allister:

It produces nice statistics, but does it produce the skills that our economy needs?

Sir Graeme Davies:

There has been real progress in several areas. The question was about soft skills. One change,

particularly in the past 10 years, has been the emphasis on what are called key skills, soft skills or transferable skills, such as literacy, group working and being able to make presentations.

Those are now built into the curriculum in a way that they were not formerly, and many employers acknowledge that. We all hear, and read in the press, reports of some of the deficits in literacy or numeracy skills. However, that is another issue and is why the point was brought up by the Minister about articulating the work of the Departments responsible for education, whether at school, at FE or HE level; that has to be seen and connected in a joined-up way because they are all inter-related.

Mr Allister:

I am concerned that we are heading towards the lowest common denominator in higher education.

Sir Graeme Davies:

I do not feel that to be the case. If I speak to employers, as I do all the time, most will acknowledge that they are getting employees through the graduate system now —

Mr Allister:

Some of them will also say that they are getting graduates who cannot spell.

Sir Graeme Davies:

That was my comment about literacy, but I think that you will find —

The Chairperson:

Sir Graeme, I understand your point that in your experience there has been improvement. However, would you take Jim's assertion that the perception persists?

Sir Graeme Davies:

Yes, of course.

The Chairperson:

There are graduates flipping burgers who cannot get jobs. Why are we turning out degrees on Manchester United? There is an issue for the higher education fraternity to establish a more trusting relationship with the citizens who are paying for them.

Sir Graeme Davies:

That, of course, has been one of the changes since tuition fees began to appear as part of the landscape. The relationship between the student as participant stakeholder and as participant customer has changed. Universities will acknowledge the pressures on them to ensure that what they deliver is in the interests of students and not in the interests of the university teacher alone. That relationship has changed significantly. There is an expectation that anybody who goes into higher education does so not merely for the public good but for their personal good; however, that has to be paid for, and it has to be handled properly.

Mr Douglas:

Sir Graeme, your report, in the section entitled “Higher education and civil society”, states:

“Some respondents believed that new initiatives should be developed to target new audiences: widening access, for example, to adult learners, returning learners and business.”

Have you had a debate on social inclusion and targeting hard-to-reach communities? Are there other examples of the successful targeting of hard-to-reach communities?

Sir Graeme Davies:

We have not had much debate on that issue in my steering group, partly because of the way in which widening the participation agenda has been conducted in parallel. The next stage must be to direct them together firmly. Part of our discussion in my steering group about targeting the groups that you do not normally get at goes back to the point made by Michelle about communities that, for all sorts of practical reasons, whether family or location, find it very difficult to get into the higher education system.

Often they are not the people who, for one reason or another, might have been the obvious beneficiaries of an institution such as the Open University; they need a different system from the Open University. They need a system that has many of the manifestations of the Open University in the presentation of the educational programmes and processes. However, alongside that it is critical, and the evidence pedagogically is very strong, that they have the tutoring/mentoring structures also in the places where they are. That is why we see building upon the network of the further education sector and the “wired-upness” of Northern Ireland as being a genuine advantage that must be built upon.

Mr Lyttle:

I want to return to some of the points that Jim raised, although we are, perhaps, running out of time and will not have time to discuss them in detail. I do not think that there is anything worse than a law graduate, PGCE graduate, or IT graduate coming to you and saying that they are finding it impossible to get employment in those fields. There seems to be two key questions. First, how do we identify the skills that the economy needs? Secondly, how do we get skilled employment for our graduates? I am as keen to hear from the Department as I am to hear the outcome of the review as to what processes are followed to try to do that.

There are an excessive number of law graduates in a given year. What mechanisms exist between the Department and the universities to control or guide the numbers that we are producing each year in different fields?

Mr Devitt:

Quite a lot of work has been done recently by Bill McGinnis's team. He is the Northern Ireland adviser on employment and skills. The work has been led by Richard Barnett from the University of Ulster, and it is trying to identify Northern Ireland's future areas for priority skills, not only for universities but for various skill levels. That work is coming to a conclusion. It will provide useful pointers, not only for the Department, but for careers advisers, broader society, parents who are making choices, and students. It will inform them about the areas in which it might be useful to choose a career in the future. It goes back to what Jim said about whether people are making informed choices as graduates when they enter higher education. That piece of work is ongoing. It ties in with some of the earlier discussion about whether there should be differential funding, such as bursaries or internships, for certain subjects to encourage students to study them. We will be looking at that when taking a broader strategic approach on how to incentivise people.

Mr Lyttle:

How does that factor into the number of places that universities are offering for particular courses?

Mr Devitt:

Universities operate on a supply and demand basis. I will separate out teaching. You mentioned PGCEs. Teacher numbers are decided by the Department of Education, not by the Department for Employment and Learning. The Department of Education determines intake based on a

complex model. As the Committee Chair said yesterday, universities engage with employers on a range of issues and try to identify the future needs. There is a combination of factors involved, based on market experience, market intelligence and trying to identify future opportunities.

Mr Lyttle:

Are they engaging with the departmental group that is doing good work?

Mr Devitt:

Yes. Richard Barnett from the University of Ulster chaired that piece of work, and a senior representative from Queen's University is on it as well.

The Chairperson:

Fergus, let us not take teachers, because that is defined; let us take doctors. We are producing doctors like there is no tomorrow, and they are all heading overseas. It is quite good that they go out there, but what feedback mechanism is there. Are we producing too many or too few?

Mr Devitt:

You will begin to wonder whether the Department for Employment and Learning has any role in this, but those places are determined by the Health Department. Doctors, nurses and allied health professionals do workforce planning and modelling to determine how many people from those sectors will be needed in the future.

The Chairperson:

As the recipient of such miscalculations, does your Department go back to those people and tell them that it is not working?

Mr Devitt:

There are very high-level structures set up, particularly around nursing, medicine and allied health professionals, which involves DHSSPS, our Department and the universities. Therefore the feedback mechanism does exist, and it has resulted in a drop in the number of intakes to the medical profession and social work this year, for example. So, yes, it does happen.

Sir Graeme Davies:

I will make a passing observation from a lofty higher-education place. Most people are unaware

that our medical schools are now 70% female. That is having serious impacts on forward planning from the point of view of who will be retained in the profession, particularly in the cases of those who graduated 10 years ago and who are now in their early 30s and 40s. It is a complex issue.

The Chairperson:

Absolutely, I understand the issue.

Mr Lyttle:

How do we assess whether we are providing the skills that the economy needs or whether we are creating skilled employment for graduates? Are there measurements and outcomes that can be measured that you provide to the Committee?

Mr Devitt:

Yes, we have a range of research tools, Chris. One relates to the destination of higher education leavers, in which people are tracked over a number of years to see whether they enter graduate employment, at six months and at three years after they graduate. That information is available to the Committee.

Mr Lyttle:

That would be helpful. If I am correct, the Department for Employment and Learning creates a menu of careers advice options for schools that they can choose to use. Is that sufficient? Anecdotal feedback from young people continues to be that the careers guidance that they receive is not what it should be. Every time I ask the Department, I am told that the careers advice menu of options that it provides is second to none, so where are we falling down?

Mr Devitt:

That is not my specialist subject, but the recently launched all-age careers advice and guidance service, which covers our Department and the Department of Education, is working better together. Our careers service works with the universities, not only with the people who come in but on what the graduate employment opportunities will be. That work is improving.

Sir Graeme Davies:

For a long time, the careers services in universities were interested only in getting people a job

when they left. Now, most of them have articulated their careers advice with their alumni services so that people who are five years down their career track can still draw upon advice from the university's careers service.

Mr Lyttle:

Chair, perhaps we can at look at this issue further down the line. My understanding is that schools are not obliged to follow the departmental careers advice. That strikes me as being a bit concerning because it means that we do not know what is happening.

The Chairperson:

We will note that issue, Chris. We will come back to it as a potential theme for discussion with the Minister.

Sir Graeme and Fergus, I appreciate your coming and answering our questions. As you said, the Committee is new, and some of the points that you have had to deal with may have been raised already. In your consultation exercise, you were asked to reflect on higher education. To what extent does that involve the further education colleges?

Sir Graeme Davies:

As Fergus said, a substantial proportion of higher education is delivered through the further education colleges, so that was taken into account. At all stages in the process of heading to where we are now, we have had representation from the FE sector, both in the expert groups and in the steering group. Therefore, we have sought consciously to ensure that the further education sector is a community that has a voice in a very prominent way in the whole process.

The Chairperson:

Your briefing paper states — and this has been raised with me on a number of occasions — that the further education colleges believe that the same higher education funding model should be applied. It is an issue of strategic importance to them. We have not really concentrated on funding, but it is an interesting issue. It appears to me that our funding is not sufficiently targeted or, at best, the priorities are decided by other bodies, whether they are other departmental bodies or universities.

I am speaking with very imperfect knowledge, so please forgive me, Sir Graeme; you will

know much more about this. However, I would like the strategy to show why we are investing in higher education. I would like it to say that, with the funds given, we are able to provide higher quality jobs with better income levels and can attract match funding from the Research Councils and Europe under framework 7. I would like it to say that higher education is at the centre of our economic development and that it is not just research for research's sake.

Having said that, I think that people need to make the argument — and it can be made — that primary research is of value in developing innovations and, indeed, an international reputation. Apparently, two of the United Kingdom's top chemists are in Northern Ireland, but no one knows about that. We need to explain to people how good we are in certain areas. The strategy that you bring forward should be about selling targeted higher education and explaining that it has genuine benefits for individuals and society. That is one area that you might consider.

Sir Graeme Davies:

That will be in the document. It is essential. I have tried to impress upon my group that their job is to do just that: identify the priorities that are important for the prosperous future of Northern Ireland, and I mean that in the broadest sense. How those priorities are dealt with, and which of them are funded or not funded, is an issue for you. It is a political matter. However, we have to give you the ammunition to be able to make sensible decisions.

The Chairperson:

The reason that we are working in parallel on this is that the key question regularly asked is this: is it worthwhile to get a degree? We are being told that if the fees go up, many people will decide not to take on the debt as there is no guarantee of a job. Others feel that people get degrees in areas that are of no particular subsequent value. I note that Invest NI was one of the respondents to the consultation. It provided information to us saying that Northern Ireland produces far too many lawyers and people in business-advice jobs and not enough electrical or electronic engineers. I know that the market changes more quickly than supply can match. However, in this paper, people talk about the importance of STEM subjects.

Northern Ireland, given its size, probably has to take a few strategic decisions. Those decisions will feed into the system, and we may have to adapt. That would be useful in developing the specific identity of Northern Ireland's graduates.

Sir Graeme Davies:

There is reference in the consultation document, and in our thinking behind the strategic document, which you will not have seen, to incentivisation in those important areas. We must pick that up.

The Chairperson:

We have had a really good conversation. We will forward you a copy of the Hansard report of the meeting for your deliberation and consideration. Thank you for your patience in answering our questions. We look forward to further discussions with you.

Sir Graeme Davies:

It is my pleasure. Thank you very much indeed.