



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Careers Education, Information,  
Advice and Guidance in Northern Ireland:  
RBAI Briefing

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in. From our point of view, we want all pupils to find the right career pathway for them. For year 12 pupils, for instance — fifth form pupils — we get people from Belfast Metropolitan College to speak to boys about alternatives to A levels, because A levels will not be right for every pupil at our school.

Having said that, I contacted them. At the end of last year, I was thinking about my plan, and I contacted them to get them to come in. I would like to see what they can provide by coming into the school. So, I contacted them and said, look —

**The Chairperson:** It is one of the things, Darren, that we get in submissions, that everybody always tells it from their point of view. That is part of the reason why we have a variety of people, so we understand.

**Mr D O'Neill:** Queen's University, for instance, is very good. It will e-mail us and say, "This is the menu of speakers that we can provide you with for year 10, year 12, and so on". If the further education colleges were to do that, we would be very keen to get that from them rather than contacting them ourselves. Of course, I contact them, and I suppose you could argue that we should be contacting them.

**The Chairperson:** OK. Jim has indicated, so we will let Jim go first and ask, since you were brought up in that — *[Inaudible.]*

**Mr Allister:** Actually, I wanted to pursue another issue. I want to get a feel for the value or otherwise of the work experience that is offered in schools. Probably every MLA around this table has had pupils with them on work experience. From the perspective of the careers adviser, is that valuable? Is there a read through from that work experience to the career that the individual pursues? Does it germinate new thinking or ideas with them? Does it cause them to go back and say, "That is something that I am definitely not going to do"? Does it cause them to go back enthused, or is it just a week out of school?

**Mr D O'Neill:** Work experience is vital for pupils, and we outline to them how important it is. We have boys go and work in an accountancy firm, thinking that they want to be an accountant. From doing that work experience, they may come back and say, "Well, no, I do not want to be an accountant", and that is as important as informing them that that is what they want to do.

The majority of pupils at our school definitely value the work experience, but —

**Mr Allister:** If it is so valuable, why is it limited to three days in your school?

**Mr D O'Neill:** Having talked to employers, we feel that three days is sufficient. However, we are flexible, and if a boy tells us that an employer wants him to be in a work placement for five days, we are not going to say no. However, employers feel that three full days with them is sufficient.

**Mr Allister:** Do you think that work experience is genuinely a critical issue in assisting pupils to make career decisions?

**Mr D O'Neill:** Definitely. It is not a black or white case for a lot of people. If they have a definite career path in mind and going to a particular workplace will make them decide whether they want to follow that path, it is valuable. All work placements are valuable as they give pupils their first indication of how the workplace works and what overall employability skills they need. In that way, it is vital for the pupils.

I think that there is a problem with the consistency of the quality of work experience that pupils get. A pupil may go to a large company, and they will be seen as just a person on work experience and will be given a few bits of admin to do. Someone else may go to another workplace and get an unbelievable work experience.

**Mr Allister:** Do you censor or sift the employers that you engage?

**Mr D O'Neill:** We get feedback from the pupils through evaluation forms. I will not name the company, but, last year, an extremely academic boy went to a company on work experience and was just packing things away for three days. From that feedback, if the company is going to take someone

next time, we will ask it whether the pupil can do something more specific, or we may recommend that boys go somewhere else.

**Mr Allister:** On a similar theme, I want to link this back to the earlier discussion about FE colleges. Is there the scope or facility, not for work experience, but for educational experience in another environment? For example, might a kid go to one of the regional colleges for a week?

**Mr D O'Neill:** That is not something that we have looked into. A lot of our boys go to university departments for work experience, but we could certainly look at the further education colleges. In our school, pupils carry out work experience in lower sixth. In —

**Mr Allister:** I was not thinking so much about work experience but educational experience. Boys could go to a college for a week, sit in on classes and see whether there was something there for them.

**Mr D O'Neill:** That is certainly a possibility.

**Mr Allister:** But that does not happen.

**Mr D O'Neill:** No. Again, it is one of those things where, if a further education college were to present us with an opportunity for boys to see this or that and offer us a menu —

**Mr Allister:** In your school, you must have a stream of boys who probably are not going to be academic high-flyers. At some point might it not be useful for them, in particular, to feel out what the other options are?

**Mr D O'Neill:** Yes. We have a careers period every week, and we contact the further education colleges to come to those. Boys in years 12 and 13 receive talks from different careers and professions on a weekly or two-weekly basis.

**Mr Allister:** There might be scope to take it beyond talks.

**Mr O'Neill:** Definitely. Now, on that —

**The Chairperson:** I am not interrupting — well, I am, but it is just to be supportive. Do you feel that some boys from your school go to university, when, maybe, they should go somewhere else?

**Mr D O'Neill:** If they have the grades to go to university, it is hard to tell them that they should not do so, because all the labour market information now says that, in the future, more people will need higher qualifications.

**The Chairperson:** We hear that a lot of students come out with degrees and cannot get jobs in their field. It is almost like you go through UCAS and choose whatever course you can get because you have to go somewhere. As Jim said, should we advise people that they may be better off with a vocational subject?

**Mr D O'Neill:** I think so. Some boys go to university who are maybe not suited to it. However, the problem is that if they go for a job, it is a bit of an unknown. Will someone favour them if they have a degree rather than a vocational qualification? If people are more suited to hands-on vocational qualifications and work rather than other types of work, they should take that route.

**Mr McElduff:** In the one-to-one interviews, how much effort is put into assessing individual suitability and the individual needs of the boy?

**Mr D O'Neill:** We interview all the boys in year 10, year 12 and year 13. We do not just interview them but have all the information on the boys such as how they are doing academically and their other interests, and they will talk to us about their interests. For example, a boy in year 10 might be thinking about doing the three sciences at GCSE, but we can see from his profile that he is quite weak at sciences. We try to advise him that that is maybe not suited to him.

All the interviews are catered towards the needs of the pupil, and we have an individual profile of the pupil when we interview them. It is a one-on-one interview, and we ask them whether they are interested in any specific careers. Once they tell us, we ask whether they have researched that career and give them information on how to research it using our careers library, careers websites, and so on. The individual interviews are very important because that is where we are able to give people individual advice.

**Mr McElduff:** How long is allocated to an individual interview? For example, a GP gives you 10 minutes.

**Mr D O'Neill:** It is about 10 to 15 minutes. In year 12, they receive an interview from the head of year 12 careers and a 30-minute interview from the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) careers adviser as well.

**Mr McElduff:** Personally, that strikes me as not long enough.

**The Chairperson:** Do you think that that is long enough, Darren?

**Mr D O'Neill:** The 10 to 15 minutes? That is only one part of it. In year 10, pupils do a range of things, including an interview. The head of year 10 careers is a full-time teacher who has a full timetable, and he uses his free periods and is maybe allocated a day off timetable to interview 155 pupils. If we had half an hour or 40 minutes to interview them individually, we would do that.

**The Chairperson:** Is it not about individual mentoring, Darren? Obviously, you need a formal structure, but, at some stage, some people will have made up their mind that they want to be a doctor and, to be honest, you have to let them get on with it, more or less. However, is there not a case for someone to sit down and say, "You seem to be an outgoing person and you need to think about sales"? I cannot imagine that any careers adviser has ever said that, yet some people are born to do it. Other people will have unrealistic expectations and might want to be footballers, and you have to say, "Unless you are at the elite end of the sport, it will not be a good thing." Does someone take a personal interest in an individual boy over a period of time and say, "Here is where you ought to be heading?"

**Mr D O'Neill:** Yes. What we have got is, at year 10, they have that interview. We keep that as a record in their individual careers file in an interview booklet. All that information is recorded at year 10. When they come back to be interviewed in year 12, another page is added to all the records that are there of how they have done in their academic studies, their interests and all of that. The same happens in year 13. So, all of that is kept. We can never tell them that they should not do this or that that is not suited to them. We are always reluctant to say: "You should be a sales person or you should be a lawyer." However, if someone, which I have had a lot of times in the past —

**The Chairperson:** Why are you reluctant to say that?

**Mr D O'Neill:** I am sorry, I will try to use another term. If they say that they want to be a doctor and want to do medicine, and we can see that that pupil is just OK at sciences and, to be honest, will not become a doctor, we say to them, in the nicest possible way, that they may need to look at alternatives.

In presenting the facts about what they need to get to university to do medicine, we are really saying to them, in the politest possible way, that they are not going to be a doctor. We may see from their profile that they are interested in, and good at, physics and mathematics. So, we outline that to them and ask whether, given their strength in those subjects, they have looked into mechanical or aeronautical engineering. Their answer to that may be yes. However, if they have not done so, we recommend that they do so because those subjects relate to such careers.

**Mr McElduff:** How are you influenced by the wider STEM — science, technology, engineering and mathematics — agenda that our Chairman is very good at promoting? Do you push some arty type students towards physics and chemistry? I have a memory of being pushed away from Spanish and into chemistry, which was bad advice for me.

**The Chairperson:** Just think of the trouble that Northern Ireland has gotten into because of that.  
[Laughter.]

**Mr McElduff:** I was getting 99% in Spanish and 55% in chemistry, yet I found myself doing chemistry as opposed to Spanish.

**Mr D O'Neill:** I totally agree with that concern. There is a big push for STEM subjects. STEM subjects are a major driver in pushing the economy forward, but not everybody will be excellent at those subjects. Only those who are very good at science and maths will succeed. When we give them advice about GCSEs and A levels, and they say that they want to be an engineer, but they are not great at maths and physics, we say to them that they should choose subjects that they are best at and enjoy most. It would be bad careers advice and pointless of me to tell someone such as that to do chemistry just because there are so many STEM-related careers out there. Not everybody is STEM inclined.

We have a brilliant relationship with PricewaterhouseCoopers, which has sent representatives in to talk to our fifth form and sixth form boys. They have highlighted that their most important consideration is a person's employability skills. They do not care whether you have a degree in chemistry, history or mechanical engineering. They tell us that, at interview stage, they test and look for somebody's employability skills. So, they will ask at interview for an example of something about which the person has a genuine passion. The interviewee must then outline that passion, their ability to manage a project, to work with others or their leadership qualities. That is where we try to make it a whole-school thing and the extracurricular activities outside the classroom are so important.

**The Chairperson:** I just want to follow up on Barry's point. He may find it surprising that my bent was more history and geography, but they battered that out of me and so I did science. I do science now just because I can. I did a degree in chemical engineering, and the minute that I got out of university was the last bit of chemical engineering that I ever did, because it turned out to be advanced mathematics.

**Mr McElduff:** You seem to have rediscovered your enthusiasm.

**The Chairperson:** Listen; when you are the low ebb that I am, Barry, it is any port in a storm. I have got to find some niche. I cannot even be the opposition, because Jim Allister there has grabbed it. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr McElduff:** Aye, you are quite convincing.

**The Chairperson:** There is an issue here. Employability is important, and you heard me talking to the colleges about that. Interview skills and reading around subjects are vital. A young man who was going for an interview with Deloitte yesterday phoned me for advice. I asked him whether he knew what would be happening today, and he said no. I asked him whether he had heard about the Chancellor's statement or the Irish Budget, and he said no. You have got to be able to read around your subject.

Even more fundamental, however, is an appropriate appraisal, in an uncertain world, of what seems to be the right way forward. I am not against people doing humanities, but they need to understand that, if they go down the law route, only one in three people comes out of Queen's University with a job in that field. On the other hand, we cannot get enough people doing computer science.

So, if you are undecided and it does not matter, you would be better to be doing computer science than law. That is the sort of advice that I think people ought to be given in school.

**Mr McElduff:** You have a good approach to careers advice as a school, but that is why the short 15-minute interview is not individual enough. Someone could find themselves pushed towards sciences even though they are more suited to something else. I could be wrong —

**Mr D O'Neill:** I hope that —

**The Chairperson:** Hold on a minute. The Deputy Chairperson indicated that he wanted to speak.

**Mr Buchanan:** The concern is that, especially in schools where pupils are assessed and where the school says that they have the ability to go on to university, the schools are pushing all those pupils in that direction. Sometimes, it is not the right direction.

I have seen examples in my own family, and in other families close by, of young people who had the ability to go on but did not want to do so. They were being pushed to go to university and it left them not knowing what to do. They knew the direction in which they wanted to go and the kind of employment that they wanted and, after much thought, they went along their desired path.

They have progressed so well, but had they gone to university for three or four years, they would probably have come out with something that they did not want and did not have any interest or desire in and which would be no good to them. Now, they are on the career path that they wanted.

I think that careers teachers have to be very sensitive in matters such as these. You may well have a number of pupils with the ability to go on, but if they do not want to do so and prefer to go into some other field, they need to be encouraged to do that rather than be pushed into something that they really do not want. Sometimes, I feel that that can happen.

**Mr D O'Neill:** If boys know — I keep saying boys because I work in an all-boys' school —

**The Chairperson:** We worked that out.

**Mr D O'Neill:** I just noticed that I did that.

It is a problem in that when a young person reaches 18, he or she wants to know what alternatives are available. Five or 10 years ago, and you can correct me if I am wrong, there were clearer alternatives for doing A levels and going straight into employment. Now, are there many opportunities for employment for young people straight after A levels or further education? If there are, boys and girls would do that.

PricewaterhouseCoopers and other companies are starting to look at this issue. It is offering school leaver programmes now, and one of our boys has just entered one. Rather than waiting for boys and girls to go to university and then employing them, the company is offering those programmes, which train them as technicians.

**The Chairperson:** We have gone on a bit, Darren, and there are a couple of points that I want to make myself.

**Mr Allister:** I have to go.

**The Chairperson:** OK, you can go if you need to go; that is fine. I am just wrapping up.

**The Committee Clerk:** We will not have the four.

**The Chairperson:** Give me 30 seconds.

**Mr McElduff:** 29, 28, 27 —

**The Chairperson:** That chemistry was wasted on him. He should have been a clock. *[Laughter.]* I have a couple of things that I would like you to do for us if you would, Darren. You have been very good to come along and talk to us, and there is always a danger when you are in the third session. I would like you to review some of the other Hansard reports from today's contribution and from earlier meetings. You said that you are here as only one school, but it is good to get one school's take on what other schools say. Therefore, we would really appreciate a critique.

There are a couple of innovative things that you might want to think about. Jim raised the issue of employers being variable with respect to work experience. Maybe we need to think about a way of giving feedback or credits to employers or insisting that they do something, or pay them, because they need to know that the most important thing that they can do for anybody is to give them some quality experience, even if it just lets people know a bit more about them.

You might think about letting us know whether you do much entrepreneurial activity, because everybody is very keen to tell people to get a degree. However, it would be quite interesting to look at personal financial capability, and whether people know how to work out an interest rate, not just because they do maths, but because they know how to live. If they were going to start up a business,

how might that work? You can answer yes or no to this question: does the school take part in Young Enterprise?

**Mr D O'Neill:** Yes — Young Enterprise and Sentinus. We run a business insight day.

**The Chairperson:** I have been unfair to you, Darren, so if you get a moment, will you drop us a line about the things that you do on the entrepreneurial side and on engagement? I would be keen to see how many people engage in that. If you take it to that stage, you are more than welcome, having had that experience, to send us another modest submission. We would be keen to hear not just what you do but what you think.

**Mr D O'Neill:** Yes, and I have suggested recommendations. One is consistent with the other schools, which is to have careers teachers who have a professional qualification in careers, but no formal qualification is available for careers staff in schools. The other relates to current labour market information. We are expected to give out current labour market information, but we need DEL to maintain and update that information.

**The Chairperson:** We get that information, but I understand that you would like it to be in a format that is useful to you. We will look at that. Was there anything else that you wanted to mention or are those your two recommendations?

**Mr D O'Neill:** Those are the two recommendations. We would like Invest NI and large employers to give regular updates on current labour market information, and we would like careers staff in schools to be offered a professional qualification in careers.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much for your submission. I appreciate that you have given us your time. You realise that everything that is said during the Committee has been reported by Hansard. Towards the end of the inquiry, we will tend to read things again, and your feedback and insight into what was said will be really useful. Thank you for your time and interest.