

Ministerial Statement

Higher Education: Widening Participation2

Executive Committee Business

Charities Bill: Second Stage 12

Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (Levies) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 18

Pensions (2008 Act) (Abolition of Contracting-out for Defined Contribution Pension Schemes) (Consequential Provisions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 19

Pensions (2008 No. 2 Act) (Abolition of Protected Rights) (Consequential Provisions) Order (Northern Ireland) 201221

Oral Answers to Questions

Finance and Personnel23

Health, Social Services and Public Safety28

Executive Committee Business

Tobacco Advertising and Promotion (Display of Prices) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 201236

Adjournment

Flooding: East Belfast42

Ministerial Statement

Higher Education: Widening Participation

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): Mr Speaker, thank you for this opportunity to make a statement to the Assembly on fair access to higher education in Northern Ireland. In particular, I want to advise Members of the launch of Access to Success, the new integrated regional strategy for widening participation in higher education.

Widening participation in higher education by students from the sections of society that are currently under-represented, in particular students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with disabilities and learning difficulties, is one of my Department's key strategic goals. My Department's vision for widening participation is that any qualified individual in Northern Ireland should be able to gain access to higher education that is right for them, irrespective of their personal or social background. Students should enter higher education on the basis of their ability to learn, not their ability to pay.

At almost 50%, Northern Ireland now has the highest participation rate of any area of the United Kingdom. In addition, we also have the best record in the UK of attracting students from low-income backgrounds into higher education. We have, therefore, already been considerably successful in achieving our objectives of raising the motivation, aspirations and performance of students who otherwise may not have considered going into higher education. I take this opportunity to congratulate our universities, further education colleges and schools on their work in this vital area. Nevertheless, there remain some stubborn pockets of under-representation, including those from socio-economic classification groups 5 to 7 and from low-participation/high-deprivation areas, and that is why my Department has been leading on the development of a new integrated regional strategy for widening participation in higher education in Northern Ireland. The widening participation strategy seeks to assist individuals with the greatest need by targeting resources on where they will have the greatest effect and impact, with the focus kept firmly on the most able but least likely. Specifically, the strategy will target individuals from socio-economic classification groups 5 to 7; students with a disability, whether physical, sensory and/or learning; individuals from low-participation neighbourhoods — that is, areas of high deprivation; and young Protestant males from areas of high deprivation.

There are many benefits that graduates, as individuals, and society generally may derive from higher education. Research studies show that participation in higher education may lead not only to more rewarding jobs with higher pay but to a range of personal benefits, including a higher sense of well-being and personal confidence. Research has also shown the direct correlation between higher-level qualifications and skills and higher levels of employability. Higher education is also about much more than just getting a degree. It is also about personal fulfilment, forging new friendships and developing skills in preparation for the rest of one's adult life. Above all, it is about investing in the future.

Access to Success recognises higher education as more than the traditional three- or four-year primary degree. It includes all qualifications beyond level 4, including intermediate-level qualifications, in which Northern Ireland currently has recognised skills shortages, as identified in my Department's skills strategy, Success through Skills. The skills strategy considers the current skills base and identifies the skills that we are likely to need in the future to grow the Northern Ireland economy. It forecasts that, by 2020, there is likely to be increased demand for higher-level skills: science, technology, engineering and mathematic (STEM) skills; management and leadership skills; the upskilling of the current workforce; and attracting moderate levels of appropriately skilled people to Northern Ireland. Access to Success will, therefore, seek to increase the number of learners studying full time or part time for a foundation degree to 2,500 in 2015 from a baseline of 1,132 in 2010. Foundation degrees are delivered by the further education regional colleges and offer a close-to-home opportunity for people who face travel barriers to participation in higher education. I therefore recognise the importance of ensuring that we continue to provide all our people with the opportunity to avail themselves of the benefits of higher education. In that context, last September, the Executive and I decided to freeze tuition fee levels for local students at local institutions and to sustain the level of funding of the higher education sector. Widening participation in higher education is vital for achieving economic competitiveness as well as social justice. It is also crucial to the economy that we harness the talents of all our people. To achieve the very highest standards, our higher education institutions must have access to the very best pools of talent. If we are to position ourselves in the global economy and to make this country world-class, we must encourage participation from people who would not have traditionally benefited from higher education.

In 2010, my Department established a higher education widening participation regional strategy group and four expert working groups comprising relevant experts from education, the public and private sectors and other government Departments to consider the issues involved and to begin to outline a new approach. In 2011, my Department published a public consultation document based on the findings of the regional strategy group to ensure that as many views as possible were considered in the development of the widening participation strategy. I thank everyone who participated in the steering group and in the expert working groups and everyone who gave evidence to those groups or responded to the formal public consultation. Access to Success, therefore, represents the first fully integrated regional approach to addressing this issue. The overall thrust of the new strategy will be to focus, as much as possible, on individual students. The twin keys to the strategy are integration and regionality. It is about getting all our higher education providers to work to common definitions and measures for widening participation, while developing their own unique approach within a common framework. The strategy will be delivered through 11 key actions that support the five key themes that underpin the vision. Those themes are understanding the demand-side needs; raising aspiration and attainment; enhancing recruitment and selection; improving the quality and relevance of support for retention and progression; and streamlining the structures for involvement and investment.

I will now briefly outline a number of the key actions. To understand the demand-side needs, my Department will work closely with higher education providers to identify more clearly at individual level, where possible, the most disadvantaged students applying to higher education. That will help to increase our understanding of the patterns of application and acceptance and help to direct and focus institutional efforts to support wider participation. The identification system developed should be able to assess an individual's need for support and recommend the level and type of assistance required. There is evidence that personal circumstances and background can have a very significant effect on participation in higher education. To put it another way, almost three times as many young people with parents in professional positions will attend university as young people whose parents are in lower-paid occupations. Research shows that a lack of role models in a young person's life can lead to them never even considering that higher education could be a realistic option for them. We need to find ways to instil confidence in those young people to help them to raise their personal aspirations and to help them to see that university is as relevant to them as to anyone else. To raise aspiration and attainment, my Department, working in conjunction with higher education providers, will develop and implement a centralised campaign to raise awareness of the potential value and accessibility of higher education to all in the community. That programme will be augmented by community outreach programmes and should help to reduce early community barriers to participation.

Let me be clear that my vision for widening participation does not include quotas or the lowering of academic standards; rather, my vision of widening participation is about raising aspirations, challenging stereotypes and empowering those who are most able but least likely to enter our universities. Widening participation in higher education is not about dumbing down. If we are to expect the next generation to compete in the world, there can be no reduction in academic standards; rather, we need to find ways to raise attainment levels across the entire education system to ensure that Northern Ireland has a ready supply of suitably qualified young people equipped to take advantage of higher education. Therefore, my Department will make funding available to expand the range of aspiration- and attainment-raising programmes at school and college, in the community and the workplace. All institutions offering higher education courses will be encouraged to offer community outreach programmes designed to raise the educational attainment levels of students to enable entry to higher education. Outreach activity should be undertaken not only with local schools and colleges in under-represented areas, but with adult learners in the workplace and in local communities. The outreach programmes will be overtly linked to the single awareness-raising programme and must incorporate an attainment-raising element.

In Northern Ireland, the higher education institutions are frequently asked to take into account exceptional circumstances when considering applications to higher education courses and, on occasions, may adjust their offer criteria if the circumstances of the individual applicant are considered to be sufficiently extraordinary. However, there are two main problems with that process: the systems are not standardised and not publicised, thereby potentially increasing unfairness between those who have the presence of mind to make the appeal and those, perhaps less familiar with higher education, who do not. Therefore, to enhance recruitment and selection, my Department will encourage the higher education institutions to develop and pilot regional standardised exceptional application procedures for the most disadvantaged applicants. To maintain a close targeting of the most able but least likely, eligibility criteria should be strict and eliminate all but the most disadvantaged applicants. To benefit from the programme, an applicant should be clearly identifiable as a person of multiple

disadvantage, meet the minimum entry requirements for the relevant course and provide satisfactory evidence of how their disadvantage or disability has negatively affected educational attainment.

10.45 am

Increasing the number of people from under-represented sections of society will not be enough. Having got them there, we will need to ensure that they have adequate support, direct and indirect, that is appropriate to their needs and will give them the best chance to complete their studies and emerge with the all-important qualification at the end. The dropout rate in higher education has become a specific area of concern in recent years. The issue is a particularly complex one, and research has shown that many factors may impact on dropout, including finance, gender, educational background and, of course, the subject being studied. My Department will seek to improve retention and progression rates in higher education among students from disadvantaged backgrounds. My Department will continue to recognise the additional costs associated with the recruitment and retention of students from disadvantaged backgrounds through the payment of premium funding based on the number of identified widening participation students attending the relevant institution. Higher education providers will be expected to provide supplementary support systems for those students as they enter into and progress through higher education. That support will be tailored to individual needs and based on identified multiple disadvantages. The emphasis must be on value for money in each support initiative, rather than large cash bursaries for individuals. Targeted bursaries are a legitimate way to pursue fair access, but they should be payable only to students on the lowest household income levels.

Student loans represent a significant cost to the Northern Ireland Budget. The focus should be on fee waivers and other forms of direct support, as those would lower the cost to the student and the public purse and can be much more effective than bursaries. In addition, community-based scholarship programmes have the potential to help break down community barriers to participation in higher education and improve university and community liaison. My Department will work with motivated communities to help build capacity at local level, identify private sector bodies as potential sponsors and develop an operational model for delivery, including application, adjudication and selection criteria.

The development of the widening participation strategy has been conducted in tandem with the development of the higher education strategy and policies on tuition fees and student support. Care has been taken to ensure that the consultation document is aligned with other departmental strategy approaches, such as Success through Skills, FE Means Business and the Executive's economic and social development strategies.

The starting point for institutional expenditure on widening participation from 2012 onwards will be the current levels of expenditure. Departmental funding will be directly linked to widening participation activities and achievements. Institutions must ensure that their widening access and participation support is clearly set out and publicly available and that students are advised of that support for the duration of their course before they begin their studies. The overall thrust of the widening participation strategy will be to focus, as much as possible, on individual students. Universities will be expected to reduce blanket bursary programmes in favour of more tailored support for targeted individuals. The recording and reporting infrastructures around widening participation will be simplified but will also be expanded to cover all funded institutions offering higher education courses, including the further education colleges. I propose to rationalise the existing requirement for higher education institutions to submit annual access agreements and separate strategic assessments to the Department to a single document that will outline the institution's widening participation strategy and its achievements against specified targets. Since the fees regime in Northern Ireland has not changed, there is no proposal to change the current sanctions for non-compliance. However, my Department will continue to monitor the arrangements in Great Britain and in the Republic of Ireland to ensure that neither our institutions nor our students are disadvantaged in any way. It is envisaged that the projects would phase in the necessary changes to existing widening participation structures between 2012 and the end of March 2015.

Today is about retaining Northern Ireland's commitment to widening participation in higher education, raising aspirations and promoting opportunity. I trust that the House will join me in that undertaking.

Mr B McCrea (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): The Speaker will appreciate that this is a comprehensive statement by the Minister; it is some five pages in length.

The Minister will be approaching the Committee tomorrow, and I have no doubt that members will wish to bring up some of the issues in detail. However, there are a number of points on which the Minister might like to expand.

Page 1 of the statement states that, specifically, the strategy will target young Protestant males in areas of high deprivation. The Minister also mentions students with a disability and others. Can the Minister tell us the current baseline figures for participation in the areas that are being specifically targeted. What does the Minister anticipate the participation level will be as a result of his strategy? I note that, towards the end of his statement, he proposes to revamp the reporting structure in all of this. I am interested to know how we are planning to do that.

My second point — I will only make two points, Mr Speaker, because I know that others will wish to speak — is that it seems to me that the crux of all of this about participation is environmental and family support. I think the Committee would be interested to know, Minister, how we intend to get to individuals and, specifically, to their parents and people in their peer group to encourage them to take forward education. I do not think that it is enough to merely say that, aspirationally, we want to do this; the Committee would be interested in how, specifically, you plan to reach those people.

Dr Farry: I thank the Chair of the Committee. We will certainly be happy to explore this tomorrow, and my officials will be happy to attend the Committee in the future for even more detailed scrutiny of the new strategy. The Chair raised three issues, not two, but I will endeavour to address all three.

The first point relates to the specific areas that we seek to work with. The point that I want to stress is that, first, we have to talk about multiple disadvantage. If we talk about people from areas of deprivation or people with disabilities etc, we are, very quickly, talking about 70% of the population of Northern Ireland. If we are talking in those terms, we will not have a targeted strategy. We are, therefore, talking about people who will tick a number of boxes. Within that, there are particular pockets that we need to address. Let me take the issue of young Protestant males from the socio-economic groups 5 to 7. At present, 3.7% of enrolments in 2008-09, which are the most recent figures I have available, come from that cohort of society. That is clearly a sign of considerable under-representation. We are not setting formal targets for the universities in that regard, because we have to respect that they are autonomous bodies will base their decisions on admission upon attainment. However, be in no doubt: we have to drive up those levels of engagement and ensure that we give everyone in society a fair opportunity to access higher education. We will all benefit from that.

I will jump ahead to the third question; I think this goes to the crux of the matter. This is a strategy that has been approved by the Executive. It is cross-cutting. Virtually all the actions directly in the strategy pertain to my Department, but, of course, that will work only as part of an overall initiative from the Executive to address issues regarding deprivation and lack of opportunity in Northern Ireland. The Executive now have the framework in the Delivering Social Change agenda, and this very much reinforces that. Obviously, there is work to be done by the health sector in addressing health inequalities. There is also work to be done with regard to employment, and that is something to which my Department can contribute by providing people with proper jobs and incomes. Clearly, there is also a major task for the education system to drive up levels of attainment and encourage people to think of higher education.

The final point that I will make about how this all operates is that each university is required to produce an access agreement. Any university in the UK, in return for the ability to charge tuition fees that — I speak from memory — are above about £1,300, is required to produce an annual access agreement. Those agreements have to be approved by my Department, and those are the means by which we will police it and ensure that universities will deliver on those very important commitments.

Mr Buchanan: Mr Speaker, if you will give me the latitude, I have two issues to mention. I welcome the statement. As the Chair of the Committee said, it is comprehensive. I note the Department's key strategic goals, which are to target and focus on students from disadvantaged backgrounds, those with disabilities, those with learning difficulties, those from under-represented areas, those who have not traditionally benefited from higher education and those who suffer from multiple disadvantages, but one thing that is missing from the statement if we want to see those key objectives delivered is the whole issue of community —

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to come to his question.

Mr Buchanan: — of community transport. That is a big issue in rural areas. While we have the programmes here, we do not have the transport available. What discussions has the Minister had with other Departments to ensure that the proper community transport is in place to get these objectives delivered? I have one other very brief issue, and that is on —

Mr Speaker: Order. I have given the Member quite a bit of latitude.

Mr Buchanan: OK, Speaker. Thank you.

Dr Farry: The Member can hold that thought until tomorrow morning, and I look forward to his second question then.

Obviously, community transport is an area that the Department for Regional Development can help us to deliver, and we are happy to take such discussions forward as part of the implementation of the strategy. However, the point that I will particularly stress to the Member at this stage is that we recognise that access and ease of access to higher education is an issue. That is why we are keen to develop higher education within the further education sector, and we have increased the number of places in recent months in that regard. We also have major plans for significant increases in the provision of foundation degrees, which can also be taken forward through the FE sector. The Member may also recall that in the higher education strategy we talked about trying to find a local point from which university services could be delivered as a pilot. That is likely to be taken forward in the next number of years, and I am sure that the Member will make a bid for the south-west and west of Northern Ireland in that regard.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the statement. It is a hugely important issue. I have two points. Students from the North not being able to gain admission to universities in the South because A levels are disregarded is a huge issue, and something needed to be said in the statement about that. I have e-mails from students who are trying to get into universities in Dublin, but the CAO will not accept the additional points.

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to come to his question.

Mr McElduff: Will the Minister make a commitment to tackle that issue in a thorough way? Secondly, there are rural communities and areas west of the Bann that are furthest from a university presence, such as Omagh and Enniskillen. Can I get an assurance that there will be a greater university presence in the regional college there?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr McElduff for his questions. We are acutely aware of the issue about the recognition of qualifications in the South of the island. My colleague John O'Dowd and I have raised the issue with Ruairi Quinn, the Minister for Education and Skills in the Republic. John O'Dowd is leading on that issue on our behalf, and I am keeping a close eye on it. I believe that we are making some progress in that regard, though we have not got the issue over the line just yet.

Access in rural areas was mentioned, and Mr McElduff made points to reinforce Mr Buchanan's points. We are very much committed to rural access.

That is why we are keen to expand higher education within further education and why we are doing a pilot whereby one of the universities delivers one of its services in a different part of Northern Ireland. Obviously, the south-west, including the area that the Member represents, will be a very clear candidate for that.

11.00 am

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's statement. Like him, I thank the steering group for its work. One area that I discussed with the group was regional disparity. Minister, given that your focus has clearly been on empowering those who are able but least likely to access higher education, how do you propose to do that in my constituency, when Magee is turning away so many young people from low-income families who cannot afford to send their children away to study?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Ramsey for his question. That is a common theme that we have been discussing over the past number of months. There is considerable interest in applying to universities in Northern

