

**Widening Participation in Higher Education – Department for Employment and Learning.
Tullyglass House Hotel, Ballymena – 19 May 2010**

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Okay we'll make a start; you're very welcome to this morning's event. We know you all have busy calendars and we're very grateful for you taking time out of those to be with us this morning.

For those of you who don't know me, my name's Andrew Hamilton, I'm Deputy Secretary within the Department of Employment and Learning and amongst other things I have a responsibility for higher education policy.

The purpose of today's event is really to provide an opportunity to you really to influence our thinking as we develop our strategy for widening participation in Higher Education. So really I suppose my message to you from the very outset is to make the most of this opportunity. I think it's very timely - I don't know if you heard this morning on BBC1, Sir Martin Harris of the Office of Fair Access talking about some work that they'd done in GB which identified a significant gap in Access between students from families of the wealthy compared to families of disadvantaged communities.

So this is an issue which doesn't only apply to Northern Ireland but across the U.K and obviously it's a very important issue because we are not just talking about the life experience now of people, but we're talking about policies which can influence the whole life experience of individuals and I think all of us have an obligation to insure equality of opportunity so that those life experiences can be maximised in terms of benefits for individuals.

We have arranged really for the Chairs of our working groups to be here to speak to you this morning about the work that they are doing and about the issues that they're addressing, but their role really today is not so much really to "tell", it's really to inform what we are doing at the moment, but really to be informed really by you and to listen to you. So it's really about prompting the debate and then the added value of the event this morning will really be determined by your contributions so, once again, please don't be passive - we want active participation - very wide participation might I say, from across the room this morning.

So maybe just then before we start some house-keeping. In the unlikely event that we need to evacuate the premises a continuous bell will sound so you should make your way immediately to the nearest fire exit, identified by the illuminated green sign - I think it's somewhere behind us. The assembly points are at the furthest point in the car park, so that's where we make our ways to. In the event of any other emergencies, a member of the hotel staff will communicate this at the time of the emergency. And then, just with regard to toilets; the toilets, they're out in the corridor, on the left hand side, the disabled facility is on around towards the reception area.

So, that's really all the house-keeping. It now gives me great pleasure really to introduce our minister Sir Ray Empey, who has kindly agreed to open today's proceedings. The fact that he's here demonstrates the importance to which he attaches to this subject and we're very grateful Minister for your coming this morning and making time to be with us. So, over to you, thank you very much.

Sir Reg Empey, Minister for Department of Employment and Learning

Thank you very much indeed Andrew, and good morning ladies and gentlemen. I'm very pleased to welcome you all this morning to the Tullyglass House Hotel and would like to thank you for taking the time to be with us, for this pre-consultation event.

Widening participation in Higher Education has been one of my Department's key strategic goals for many years. The widening participation vision is that any suitably qualified individual in Northern Ireland should be able to benefit from Higher Education that is right for individual, irrespective of their personal or social background. In short, all learners should be able to progress to a level which fulfills their potential.

There are three reasons why widening participation in Higher Education is critical for Northern Ireland. Firstly, the need for greater social inclusion. Too many of our people continue to experience disadvantage and exclusion. Secondly; the benefits which graduates, as individuals and which society generally derive from higher education. Thirdly; Northern Ireland's need for a highly skilled workforce to maintain and improve our international competitiveness.

I will come back to the issue of the workforce in a moment, but first I want to focus on inclusion and the benefits that participation in higher education can bring to the individual as to our society.

In the past two decades participation in higher education has increased steadily. Indeed overall participation in higher education in Northern Ireland is much higher than any other region in these islands. However, there continues to be groups in our community who are under-presented in higher education.

Evidence shows that factors including socio-economic background, gender, religion and disability can have an impact on educational attainment. For example; in the 2001 census, it showed that just over 45% of the Northern Ireland population came from the lower socio-economic classifications, that's groups 5 - 7, yet just 26% of the student population came from these groups. Almost three times as many young people with parents in professional positions will attend university compared to young people whose parents are from unskilled occupations.

The Northern Ireland Programme for Government, Building a Better Future, tasks my Department to, and I quote "make progress year on year towards fair access to higher education", so more needs to be done. With regard to the benefits to the individual and to society; research studies show, that the advantages graduates derive from higher education, cover not only better jobs, and higher pay, but also a wide range of social and personal benefits.

During their career those with a degree level of qualification will on average earn 30% more than those without a degree. There's considerable evidence that higher education can enable people to live longer and in better health. On average graduates are less likely to smoke, are less obese, have a higher sense of well-being and a lower rate of suicide. They are also more likely to hold more tolerant attitudes to other races and are even more likely to be involved in voluntary work for their local communities. And here I have a pun; in a similar vein; a greater number of graduates donate blood regularly compared to non-graduates. That's a piece of information that you didn't have before you came in today.

But as I said earlier, we're not doing this just because it's the right thing to do. It is also crucial to the economy that we harness the talents of all of our people. They are after all, our principle resource and principle asset.

Northern Ireland must secure a sustainable globally competitive economy, increasing workforce skills and in particular, increasing the proportion of the workforce with higher and intermediate levels skills. This will be the key to achieving our key economic objectives. However, to achieve the numbers of people with higher level skills that will be needed to make Northern Ireland truly world-class; we will need to reach out to groups which have not traditionally benefited from higher

education.

Under representation in Northern Ireland higher education institutions is particularly acute among young students with disabilities and learning difficulties. And among those the socio-economic groups five to seven in general, but in particular within the Protestant community. We should also bear in mind that the challenge to develop a highly skilled work-force is not just about providing new graduates, with the skills needed. Over seventy percent of those currently in the work-force will be in the work-force in 2020. Therefore, a major focus will also have to include the continuing up skill of our existing work-force and this applies I have to say, right across the board, in all sectors.

It is inconceivable to me that if 70% of our work-force today, 70% of the work-force of 2020 is in work today, it is inconceivable that that work-force will not require to be up-skilled over the next decade, if we are to compete with the particularly growing economic giants of the Far East. So, what that means is we've got to do more with those who are currently in work. This is not simply about preparing students to come into the work-force, it's that yes, but it's also very much about doing something about the people who are currently in the work-force, at all levels. And just because your in the workforce does not mean that you cannot access higher education at this stage people have that opportunity and it should be accessed.

So we have been addressing as a department the issue of under representation through a number of policy directions and a range of specific funding mechanisms. This includes special project funding to universities to test strategies and approaches to make higher education more available to the under-represented groups.

In the last academic year my department allocated almost £2.5m to various widening participation funding mechanisms for under-represented groups including £1.3m for a widening participation premium, over £300,000 for the disability premium and some £700,000 for special project funding. The University of Ulster Step-Up program which is funded by my department, provides an opportunity for young people from disadvantaged areas in Belfast and Londonderry, many with low attainment levels and relatively low expectations to improve their academic performance and to gain entry to universities.

This programme is extremely well regarded and with a completion rate of 95%, it has enabled over 700 students from disadvantaged areas to attend university courses. Indeed last autumn I attended the at the University of Ulster's Jordanstown campus, the arrival, of a large, about 80 students who had come through this particular scheme. They'd just got themselves into university and there they were in the Great Hall of the university at Jordanstown, complete with mortar boards, celebrating their arrival at university. And there were about 80 of them and that was the second of two ceremonies; there had been one up in Magee as well. And I think this particular scheme which we are trying to extend to other schools as well, is a fantastic scheme and to see those young people - many of whom never thought, or their parents never thought, they would have darkened the door of a university - to see them there and to see the enthusiasm, having a ceremony to celebrate their arrival at university, I thought was a tremendous thing and was very encouraging to see.

Also the 'Discovering Queens' initiative at Queens University, is a Northern Ireland wide programme of activities. The talented groups or pupils in non selective secondary schools, who have experienced disadvantage such as no family experience of a higher education or have limited family income. To date over 15,000 pupils have engaged with the programme and 87% have reported that the initiative had made them more likely to want to attend higher education.

These initiatives, have had their own degree of success and will undoubtedly help to address the

issue of under-representation. However, as I've outlined, I recognise that under-representation of various groups still exists. Clearly we need to do more; this is not an issue that can be dealt with by one department alone. Therefore my Department is now leading in the development and delivery of a regionally, a regional integrated strategy for widening participation. It had received commitments from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department of Education, the Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety and the Department for Social Development to work with it and other key stakeholders in the Universities, the University Colleges, Schools, Further Education colleges and Students Unions in the development and implementation of a fully integrated regional strategy for widening participation.

One of the key issues to be addressed within the regional strategy is the identification of all of those groups which are under-represented in higher education and which may require additional support, in a more strategically focused manner. The strategy will address the entire student life cycle. It will address the need to raise aspirations, to participate in higher education among under-represented groups, and to raise their education attainment levels to allow for participation. It will look to improve the recruitment process to ensure that students not only have the necessary information to apply for the right course; but that all relevant information is taken into account in the selection process.

Lastly it will address the need to ensure the retention of students in higher education and their progression into employment. And I just want to address this particular issue for a moment. The issue of drop-out rates within higher education has become a particular area of concern in recent years. The issue is a particularly complex one and research has shown that many factors may impact on drop-out rates, including finance, gender, the subject being studied and social and educational background.

I need hardly to point out to you that in more difficult economic circumstances in which we are now finding ourselves, looking forward to a probably much more challenging, scenario for public expenditure; our concern is that having got young people, in particular to university, that they do not have a very negative experience. And with the downturn in the economy, the temptation for many of these people, some of whom have to try and earn money to keep and help their families, that the temptation to move out and to do that will be even greater. So a lot of work has still to be done to ensure whether it's welfare, whether it's backup, whether it's involvement with the students - even before they get to university at school, which I think is vital. All of these factors will have to be taken into account as we wrestle with the difficulty of dropout rates. And of course the drop-out rates are higher in general, with people from those disadvantaged backgrounds when they go to university.

My Department is being supported in the development of the strategy by key stakeholders, including other government departments such as I've mentioned, the universities themselves, further education colleges and relevant stakeholder organisations. The regional strategy therefore represents the first inter-institutional and government attempt to address this issue. I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has contributed to the development of the regional strategy for their commitment and hard work on this extremely important complex issue. I'd also like to thank Andrew, those in the Department who have been working very hard on this, and the team there I know are very dedicated to achieving this regional strategy.

We are working to launch the regional strategy early next year, but before this there will be a full public consultation on the strategy in the autumn, hence this a pre-consultation conference this morning to get initial views from the key stakeholders and professionals who are here. And as Andrew said in his opening remarks, please let us know what you think and let us know what you think now. We will feed that in of course there will be the consultation over the next few months

and as we move to conclusions at the early part of next year.

This event is your opportunity as Andrew says to input into the future direction of the widening participation strategy and I hope you do. I would encourage you to participate and to take this opportunity to make your views known. I do believe that the establishment of a well researched and well considered strategy will be key as we move forward over the next few years.

As I said, the economic circumstances will be more difficult, naturally it's easier to bring about change when you're on a rising tide of public spending, when there's expansion taking place, but unfortunately, I think it's fair to say that our participation rates in higher education generally in Northern Ireland have probably reached as far as they can go and while we have the highest rates of participation in these islands from people from disadvantaged backgrounds, the mix is still not satisfactory and is not reaching out to certain groups within our community who are clearly very much under represented.

So, if we can, whether the use of roles models has a role to play, whether further engagements with schools which I personally think is important, whether we can expand and the step-up programmer even in difficult economic circumstances, I'm quite sure these are all measures that we can do, but we will be very much guided and will be listening very carefully to what people have to say today so that we can input that into the strategy which we hope to have probably, Kieran, by about the Spring of next year, all things being equal. And I would like to achieve that but I would like to know that what we are actually putting forward has in it the mechanisms and that the aspirations are not simply literal aspirations but that they are achievable aspirations. Because there is no point in having a strategy if you are not capable of delivering it. And we are not interested in having something that looks good and sounds good, we're interested in having something that works, so thank you very much for your attention and we look forward to your contributions later. Thank you

Applause

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Thank you very much Minister for those opening remarks and already I suspect prompting a lot of thought and big issues that we have to address in the future. It's now my pleasure to welcome Fergus Devitt. Fergus is Director of our HE Division in the Department for Employment and Learning. He's with us today, I have to say that Fergus is a busy man, he's not only responsible for this project, he's also responsible for our wider HE strategy work that we're doing. He's responsible for our review of fees, in between time he manages a budget of about half a billion pounds, which is made up of our contribution to universities and also the cost of student support. He manages the capital programme for the Higher Education sector and promotes R&D and innovation so in between times he has direct responsibility for this particular project so Fergus, thank you for coming today and we look forward to your comments now on the strategic vision for wider participation.

Applause

Fergus Devitt, Director of Higher Education Division of Department for Employment and Learning

Thanks very much Andrew and I'm glad my annual report is due any day soon. Good morning everybody, you're all very welcome and it's great to see so many people here who have a genuine interest in widening participation in Higher Education. I know in particular that the speakers have a very personal deep commitment to that aim and I'm very grateful to them all for being here today and sparing the time to be with us.

The Minister has already stated the widening participation vision for Northern Ireland but I think it is worth just repeating it. The vision is that any suitably qualified individual in Northern Ireland should be able to benefit from higher education that is right for them, irrespective of their personal or social background. The development and implementation of an integrated, regional strategy is seen as critical to the achievement of this widening participation strategy.

The Department for Employment and Learning has identified the need for a strategy which includes a clear articulation of the role for higher education courses delivered in the FE sector and to the greater involvement of employers, including a developing role for work-based learning in widening participation.

The strategy should also have linkages to other DEL and other government strategies and initiatives the involvement of appropriate government departments, a funding formula and management system to support delivery of the regional strategy and an effective mechanism for tracking students through school, further education and higher education.

Our Department is in the lead in this development and is being supported by other relevant government departments. Other key stakeholders such as the universities, further education colleges and organisations such as disability action are all playing an important role in the development of the regional strategy.

A steering group of relevant stakeholder experts has been formed to oversee the development and implementation of the strategy which has the commitment and confidence of all relevant stakeholders. Specifically the steering groups role is to identify target groups, explore ways to stimulate demand among under-represented groups, to participate in higher education and consider ways of increasing opportunities to access it. The steering group also has to establish challenging time related progress targets and outcomes and advise on specific interventions related to the attraction, retention and progression of students from identified target groups.

I chair the strategy steering group and I want to put on record my thanks to the members of that group; many of whom are here today, for their commitment and hard work to date. To assist it, the steering group has established four sub-groups and/or working groups to provide it with advice on a number of key themes, covering the entire student life cycle. These groups are Targets, Aspiration and Attainment; Recruitment and Selection; and Retention and Progression. The rest of today's event will consist of short presentations from each of the working groups outlining some of the key issues considered and the broad direction of travel set by each of those individual groups.

There will also be an opportunity for you to discuss and provide feedback on the issues raised and that actually is the most important aspect of this morning. We have already said this is a pre-consultation event, so this really is your opportunity to give us your views and thoughts about the direction on travel.

So after today, what happens next? The working groups will report to the strategy steering group in mid June. A draft widening participation strategy will be produced during July and August, which will be based on the working group reports and the outcome from this and other pre-consultation meetings. A full public consultation exercise on the draft strategy will take place in the autumn and, as the minister has said, it is proposed that the strategy will be finalised by around the end of this year and launched by the end of March 2011.

Andrew alluded there to another piece of work we're doing within the Department which is the development of a broader encompassing strategy for higher education to take us up to 2020. And within that piece of work, we're examining what the higher education sector should look like by

2020 and the contribution of higher education to the economy and society in general. And within that we have established a number of groups and one of those we have classed as society and people, so clearly there's a direct link between the work that is going on widening participation and the work of the broader HE strategy and we will ensure that that work dovetails so that there are no gaps, either in our widening participation strategy or in the broader, higher education strategy.

I want to conclude by thanking all of you for attending today. As I said at the start, the development and implementation of a regional strategy to widen participation in higher education is critical to the achievement of a widening participation vision for Northern Ireland. Your input today will play a key role in the development of our strategy. Thank you very much and I look forward to your contributions.

Applause

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department of Employment and Learning

Okay, thank you very much indeed Fergus for that strategic overview of the issues and how we're going to take the strategy forward. We're getting now to the part of this morning's event where we're looking forward to your participation. What's going to happen now is that we are going to have four presentations from each of the chairs of the working groups. We'll take about half an hour on each one and the format will be brief presentation from the chair's just to tell us a little bit about the work and the issues that are being addressed and then we open the debate and we'll have some questions that we will put up on the screen but don't feel confined to addressing those questions. This is really your opportunity to raise whatever issues you wish and to give us your views.

So the first of our presentations this morning is from Professor Denise McAlister, Denise you are very welcome. Denise is Pro Vice Chancellor teaching and learning at the University of Ulster. Previous to this she held positions as Head of School, School of Public Policy, Economics and Law and Dean of the Faculties of Business and Management. Denise was awarded a CBE in the 2010 New Year's honors for services to higher education and Denise is going to speak to us this morning on behalf of the 'Targets' group. Denise. Thank you.

Denise McAlister, Pro Vice Chancellor of Teaching and Learning at University of Ulster

Okay. What I want to do in this brief presentation is really just to share with you some of the issues that we have been identifying and to provide you with the opportunity to feedback to us as to whether or not as the Minister and Andrew has said and Fergus that direction of travel is correct. Obviously it's important to ask the right questions before you can come up with the right solutions.

I'm an economist as Andrew had said, actually a health economist, so I will start making the comment and the Minister has alluded to it and that is that resources are scarce. And in the future they are likely to become more scarce. So we have to ensure that those resources are used as effectively as possible. So a principle is you like governing our thinking is that those resources need to be targeted at learners who are under-represented in higher education. And overwhelmingly the evidence is that these learners are from lower socio-economic groups and disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. Research conducted in the early 1990's indicates that those households or those individuals earning the top 20% of income are five times more likely to achieve degrees by the age of 23 than those households and individuals in the lowest 20% income groups, so that percentage is five times less for those groups.

Although there has been improvement in educational attainment, through all stages of compulsory education, there is still a gap in relation to attainment between the highest and the lowest socio-

economic groups. And that gap is similar when we look at the data for participation rates by socio-economic class.

A youth cohort study in the early 2002 showed that 32% of 16 year olds will achieve 5 GCSE's from routine if you like occupations. And that compares to 77% of those from the higher managerial and professional groups. So there is huge gap here that the strategy, a strategy has to address.

We also know that those individuals whose parents or carers have experience themselves of higher education, are more likely to enter higher education. So there are lots, as I say, lots of challenges here.

One of the outcomes of the target group is to draw up a prioritised list, nor priorities are a function of cost and benefits. So we have to look at the capacity to benefit of the various groups and those capacities will vary. And also the benefit will have to be achieved at some cost and the resources we have heard in limited, so at what cost we have, so in some ways we have to make sure that the limited resource we have has maximum impact in terms of trying to achieve the vision in this strategy.

And that, I would suggest is not an uncontroversial task. Because in prioritising some groups, by implication you will be excluding other groups and at the same time we want to have an inclusive strategy. So there are challenges there for us in setting the targets. So, in summary, if you like, for the targets group, essentially what we are trying to do and it's if you like, the rationale for it is the need to target resources where they can have most impact and to get value for money, that's important for the tax payers.

So we need to focus on those groups where we know that there are persistently low rates of participation. We need to seek better coherence for widening participation activities in an area and how do we do that? We do that by building in many instances on good practice that delivers results. Thirdly, we have to provide the targeted groups, or the learners that we identify with a progressive, differentiated and coherent programme of activities. Not a scatter gun approach but a very targeted and focused approach that will deliver the results. And very importantly and there are huge challenges here as well; we need to improve data collection to support targeting and to measure our success.

So if you look at the work of the group to date, what we have done, is we have as I say, adopting an inclusive approach, we have looked at various statistical analysis of HE participation in Northern Ireland. And we have looked at under graduate participation, we've looked at in full time modes and part-time modes. And we've looked at it across the various higher education institutions in Northern Ireland, including the Open University and HE in FE because the regional colleges in Northern Ireland have a tremendous contribution to make to widening participation agenda.

This specific areas that we have focused in on; first group, is looking at the socio-economic classifications and there have been various references made already this morning to these statistics which classify, there's eight-fold if you like, occupational classifications system where classification one is the highest and eight is the lowest and we know that in terms of enrollments in undergraduate enrollments, that classification one to three, the top three constitute 60% of the enrollments in higher education. And by implication, the lower groups, groups, particularly five to seven have only 25% participation in higher education. So obviously this is a prime group in terms of our target setting process.

We also know that deprivation and measuring deprivation is not necessarily an easy thing so we

have been looking at, if you like, multiple deprivation indices or matrices and indices there would include things like eligibility for free school meals and educational maintenance allowances and so on. And we know that there's a high correlation between non participation and socio-economic deprivation.

If we look at religion, in many instances, what we've been focusing really are on this section 75 categories. Going the last census data, 2001 consensus, the Protestant community in Northern Ireland constitutes 46% of the population at that time and yet if you look at full time enrollments in higher education, whether we look at that on a part-time basis, or on full-time basis, just under 40% are protestant. So there is a gap there between the representation in the general population and their representation in higher education.

When we looked at ethnicity, here the total under graduate enrollments here are about 98% white and that compares within the census 99% white so you might say there's quite a good correlation there in terms of ethnicity. Within that, about one percent of the enrollments come from the Chinese community, which is one of the groups that is substantially recognised.

But although, if you like, ethnic groups are well represented in higher education, research shows that that representation is not evenly distributed. It is concentrated in certain institutions and in certain subject areas. So perhaps the issue here in terms of ethnicity is one of fair access to higher education, all right? And, we also find obviously that these ethnic groups are also represented in, if you like, the main target groups in terms of socio-economic classification.

In terms of age, 62%, in terms of full time undergraduate enrollments are under twenty, 8% are over 25, so predominantly the majority are young learners. That position is also reversed when we look at part-time participation, by part-timers in higher education. 5% are under twenty as you would expect, but 77% are over 25. And again there will be challenges as the minister has indicated when, if you like, most of the population will be in work and obviously there are challenges there for re-skilling and up-skilling.

In terms of disability, there are huge challenges here, not least in terms of definitions of disability. Because again, if we look at the census data, some 20% of the population self report a disability. Exactly what that means, in terms of actual disability or the nature of the disabilities is hard to unpack. But 95% of those under graduate enrollments in higher education have no disability or certainly do not declare a disability. And 2% have a learning disability, principally dyslexia.

Research here indicates that the critical factor is disability per se rather than social position or social class is the major factor. We've also looked at the geographical location of Higher Education participation and again some interesting patterns there in terms of the difference between urban, rural an even within urban areas, differences in those areas.

Finally, I'll just mention gender, just under 50% of the population are male, (49%). Again if we look at participation in Higher Education, in full time mode, 41% are males and essentially 60% are females, so females, if you like are over-represented in Higher Education, vis-à-vis their male counterparts.

So, really in summarising what we've been looking at in, from that data; as I've indicated, we need to target the resources for maximum impact. We need to focus on those groups where there are low rates of Higher Education participation and I've mentioned some of those, the data speak for some of that, but we have to remember that even using some of these measures, essentially there are proxy's - that's all they are; just proxies. And very often these proxies will have to be supplemented if we are to really focus on the target groups. By judgments, and those judgments we will be

relying on qualitative, if you like, information from those individuals and stakeholders who are closely associated with these individuals, which will be teachers and careers teachers and parents and so on etc so there are multiple ways in which we can collect the data here.

We also have to focus on how our widening participation activities can best work together to support progression, learner progression. And the other working groups and in the presentations this morning, you will learn about some of the barriers that there are to educational attainment and educational aspiration, affecting those groups.

Those activities as well will focus on recruitment and selection, because obviously the worst thing I think that we can do, in terms of being successful, in terms of a policy measure is to raise the aspirations to bring these learners into Higher Education and then to find that they get a back experience. Because that experience especially the first generation learners will color their experience for generations to come.

And as the minister has also indicated, there are huge challenges for us in terms of devising a strategy targeting these groups for the retention and progression of learners and Higher Education. Because again, we will find and I guess the presentation will tell us that a number of these groups are very vulnerable in Higher Education, particularly in their first year and they do not have very often the family backgrounds to support them in the transition that they make from school to higher education.

And then as I mentioned, we will have to develop monitoring data and other kind of data to enable us to measure the extent to which our policies and our strategies will be successful. So, some of this information, we will be targeting at if you like various levels, could be at schools or communities or particular geographical areas and in other cases some of the targeting may be at individual learners, because as the minister says, it is about enabling individuals to realise their potential so a lot of the targeting may have to be customised or tailoring. And then as I say, we have to measure the effectiveness of that.

So, emerging questions and issues then from the target group; we have kind of just put up a selection here and Andrew, I think will invite you to perhaps try and answer some of things for us, do the hard heavy lifting for us or indeed to pose other questions. Thank you very much.

Applause

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Thank you very much Denise. As Denise said now really it's time for us to sit back and hear your views. We have a couple of roving mics I think on the floors so maybe if, in terms of if you are asking or want to pose some questions or give us some of your comments, maybe you would first just say, just say who you are and where you come from. So, any general comments about what Denise said first before we go into any of the questions?

There's one here on the left;

Paul Donaghy, Head of Widening Participation Unit, Beeches Management Centre in Health Service

My background; I was also involved in equality issues and was one of the architects of Section 75, I have to say it hasn't been built according to plan, but a valiant initiative in my view. I've been very interested in looking at the issues and the messages that are being sent out around our widening

participation and the Higher Education strategy. And I have to say that so much of it is about the equalisation of chances for young people.

I think that's very important because inequality happens early, quickly and deeply and we need to close those gaps. But no matter how much they do there, we have to recognise that some people in their life will be left behind, not because of ability but for many other reasons. And what I would like to see therefore, is a strategy that balances the needs of workers and the needs of adults who very often don't get the opportunity to benefit from the richness of Higher Education, I think our current system is built around a rather out-dated notion of people leaving school and going to university and getting a job, getting married and then having a baby; but actually, for many, the reverse of this can be the order, or indeed any order.

So, one of the tests for me as to whether, even though everybody here is well intentioned, whether the higher education strategy will meet what is needed, is how it engages with those in the work place, how we ensure that the richness of higher education learning allows us to develop the world class work force of tomorrow. And I have to say to date it has largely failed in that test, in my view.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

OK. Would anyone like to respond to that? I think maybe I should say at the beginning, I really don't want the questions from the floor to the table and back, I would rather try and encourage a debate across the tables and the floor.

I suppose from a system point of view, if I've understood you correctly, is that what you're really raising is maybe looking at the pathways to education; there's the traditional pathway from school into full time higher education. But I suppose if you look at the demographic trends, whether that pool of the population is actually going to guarantee ultimately the income stream that's sufficient to sustain the universities is an issue. I think the universities themselves will want to be reaching out to people in the workforce, adults, who maybe have missed the opportunity in earlier life. So, really to maximize the pathways and gateways through into the higher education sector, not only through full time education but also part-time.

Myrtle Hill, Queens University

I agree very much with what's just been said, but I think the universities and colleges have been working very successfully together on access programmes for adults and I think that is an area of good practice which many people have benefited from and I do think we need to do more about providing for part-time entrance into those programmes and to, perhaps one of the things we need to do is ensure greater stability, in terms of funding and so forth - there are many questions around access at the moment. But it seems to me that is a established programme that works very well and needs to be built upon and developed for just precisely the reasons that have been given.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Any other comments, any general maybe, if could maybe just look at the questions here? Are there missing target groupings from the areas that we've discussed here?

Daniel Rooney, South Eastern Regional College

At the college I am responsible for our Access courses. We have in the region of three hundred adults coming to us, either full time or part-time, to do an access course with a view to progressing to university. Many of those adults are single parents, they come from say a background of unemployment and I would be very keen as Doctor Myrtle Hill has just said to ensure that the access courses continue and develop because if we don't provide a pathway for these groups to get into higher education; they'll never get there.

Adrienne Pelts, IT student, South Eastern Regional College

I'd just like to second what everybody's saying about accessing higher education, I think that I'm a parent for starters and from my experience, I think that parents and adult learners that fall into a particular age group are seeming to be left behind during all the consultation that's been going on and I would like to see something more that would be aimed at people. And on top of that I'm an international student and I think Northern Ireland has a lot to offer for international students as well. And in terms of the workforce; there are so many mums who are possibility left behind because there's an education gap and I think that that's something that really needs to be focused on and perhaps that's where colleges and further education can step in to close that gap for people in my position. Thanks.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Could I ask you what it was that, the college did which made it possible for you to take up the opportunity?

Adrienne Pelts

Well, first of all I was a mature student and I was a little but daunted by the fact of going to university to be in a class with people who have perhaps just left school, 18 years old. And the college sort of offered something that would be more aimed at my level of intellect, there was a very good pastoral service. I think, in terms of the way that it was advertised, it was aimed more at what I was looking for and I wasn't sort of afraid to make that step of going from you know working, being a mum and then entering higher education - it didn't frighten me and I think that is something that puts off a lot of people who necessarily have been left behind that you don't necessarily want to admit that you've missed the boat, but yet you do need to be maybe reached out to, so I think that that's something again that needs to be sort of focused on. Thanks.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Thank you very much. I think there's someone else from that table.

Max O'Brien

Chair, my name's Max O'Brien, my background is I'm a disabled person, I've been involved in the old, if you're old enough, to remember the C Dept committee's that operated back out of the 1944/45 act. My background is trade unions, I'm now retired 13 years, spending my pension and enjoying it but I still have a big problem for what the system is doing for people with a disability in relation to education. Now I put that alongside cares and I'm not sure whether Denise mentioned carers or not in her presentation but carers is a large group of people who are left out of the system and I mean again, Chair, there's a whole lot of reports in all this about disability, poverty and so on, that I'm not going to repeat, in fact I'll write because there's too many things I would have to say here.

But the main point, and again I take it out of Denise's, when she was asking you know, she mentioned disability per se, what the problem was. The problem is the system continues to use the wrong disability model. It is using the medical model whereas it is the social model that is the problem for disabled people. It's still going on in schools, we have the O Levels of education, university has spent a fortune - I know from the University of Ulster and the work that they have done to widen access from the physical point of view; but it's not just the physical point of view, it's the written point of view and how you access it for the five main groups of disabled people.

So until the system starts and recognises that the correct model you will not resolve it for disabled people. The old C Depts and even in the trade union movement, we have always tried to be positive to get disabled people into employment, why? Because their great benefit is that it stops those people going onto benefits. Now if there is a way of saving money that's surely should be one of

the areas that should be top of the list. Because it's going to save benefits. Now, not all people will want to and it doesn't suit all people, but my view would be there are enough people and again there's a reports on this to tell you how many of the 200,000 plus disabled people would want employment. But they are there and I believe that the universities should be doing something, the minister himself mentioned the Step-up programme and the success of it. Well if it's such a success and I don't know of Damian's still here but if it such a success, he's hiding in the top table, if it is such a success, why have they not extended it into the area of disability, the universities got files from me and letter and so has DEL; why has this not been extended.

And if you wanted to save money, well placed and of benefit to the general population and benefit to the individuals, because if this doesn't benefit an individual who is disabled I don't know what would. If gives them independence, the greatest thing a disabled person craves for. So if you start off right Chair, that's my general point and until you do that you won't fix it and I'll be writing to somebody that will get an address from - Denise promises me an address so I'll continue with the other points, Chair, thanks for the opportunity.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Okay. Thank you. Maybe just following up; if the ministers here, his policy advisers are here - if you wanted really to, you know, briefly say, what are the two or three key things that we should do in order to enhance access to people with disability. What is it that we are not doing at the moment that you feel that we ought to be doing? What policy measures could we put in place?

Heather Laird, Open University

I think one of the things that's an issue, certainly from our perspective for students who are managing either a medical condition or a disability, or a learning requirement; is the fact that the funding model isn't necessarily suited to the study load that the person can cope with and unless they are coping with a large study load, they are not properly funded in terms of support. So I think that makes it difficult for people to study at their own particular rate in relation to what they're trying to manage alongside of it. And I think there's a similar issue for carers, whether it be carers of children as single parents or carers of elderly relations, or carers of someone who is managing a medical condition or disability.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Thank you. Any other comments? Okay. Can I just maybe just take a few minutes on the final question about how might success be measured? How will we know when we've got this right? Denise was talking earlier about the fact that priorities is about a balance between the benefits achievable against the costs involved in trying to reach those benefits. So how do we know – yes?

Paul Donaghy

How do we know if it works? Well, the test that I will set are firstly is, 'have we made a significant shift in our thinking?' Because access courses are very good and I support them whole-heartedly. But, what they attempt to do is shoehorn adults into the traditional university model. What we need to do is ensure that the university model better fits the needs of our learners and I understand the challenges of that. But the test that I will set is firstly; is there a life-long learning approach to our widening participation in higher education strategy? Is it life long?

Secondly; is it built on a truly collaborative and partnership approach? So does HE talk to other bits of DEL? Does HE talk to FE? Does HE talk to employers and trade unions?

Thirdly; are we developing a credit framework that allows for more flexibility and more bite-sizes of learning and transferability of those bite-sizes of learning. Because all too often I'm told that because that bit of learning was with that institution or accredited by that awarding body, it doesn't

count.

So can we get the universities to talk to each other? Another test will be for me; 'how flexible and how much outreach there is' particularly to adults and workers. And the last test; is around this scarceness of resources because I think that's crucial but I know that if it wasn't plentiful, the poor folks would get none. So it is about using scarce resources wisely but I would argue if all of those tests that I have set are being met, well then what we will end up with is a much more clever approach to engaging our learners with the richness of higher education. And the ultimate test of that will be how we in Northern Ireland PLC, can compete globally.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Thank you very much. Any last comments on this topic? I think we just need to move on shortly to the next area but if there's anyone else would like final contribution to the targets group?

Joan McCoombe, Widening Participation, St Mary's University College

I just think when we are talking about widening participation and targeting and it was mentioned in the presentation by Denise, you know, the number of males in employment. Where then are they targeted, you know males who are coming into higher education, where are the target work related opportunities for them, because there is a danger if you bring people into education to study certain courses that there needs to be good careers advice, so that you have both widening participation in higher education, for widening participation in a variety of career opportunities. Because evidence would show that a lot of males will come into male orientated careers, rather than having males or females diversifying into other careers.

In terms of teacher education, there would be a shortage of males coming into the role of teachers and I feel it's very important that we engage as many people who have the ability to be teachers, not just to come from one gender group. So if you're going to target people, my view would be once you have them targeted to come into higher education, how are we going to harness those skills so that they bring that into a wide range of occupations?, that it's not just males into dentistry, medicine, engineering, but that we bring females into those occupations as well. Do you know what I mean? - that it's targeting opportunity to target further career employment and opportunities for them.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Now I think what you are touching on there is the need for a joined up approach really across the economy. We need to develop more high quality jobs in the economy and that would be a major objective of you know our economic policies. How we do that, in a time of recession is very very difficult but certainly we do need to try and make sure that the opportunities are there so that the individuals who we would be, through the widening participation strategy, offering opportunities to enhance their skills base ultimately then have the opportunity to apply those skills in the future.

Joan

But I also think it's very important in the terms of careers advice that is given to individuals at all levels, whether you're starting very early one in key stage 2 primary right through to end of key stage 3 careers advice to people who are adult learners, returning learners, good careers advice for people who are carers, people who are disabled. That people seriously look at the background where the person is coming from and give them appropriate careers advice because I do believe there is often a gap between what higher education and FE is offering and what is being told in certain careers advice.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Okay. Thank you. If you don't mind what I would like to do now is just move on then to the next

session which is going to be about raising aspirations and attainment and Deidre Gillespie from the Department of Education, is going to present to us on that issue so Deidre you are very welcome and thank you very much and over to you.

Deirdre Gillespie, Department of Education

I actually work for the Education and Training Inspectorate. I would be one of the managing inspectors and my remit would cover further and higher education.

It gives me great pleasure today to present to you the work of the aspirations and attainment solutions group. But before I do that I think it's very important to pay tribute to the work of that group without which we wouldn't be at the point to where we are today and that group is made up of a number of experts from commerce, from industry, the world of academia and relevant government departments and include Stephanie Harmer Smith from Queens University, Paul Donaghy, who you've heard this morning from the health trusts, Tony McKibben from the Department for Regional Development, Lex Hayes, Principal of Glengormley High School, our colleagues from the Further Education colleges, Liam Curran from the South West Regional College, Ian Huston, from the Northern regional College and our colleagues from DEL and Mallon and Kieran Mannion.

The expected outcome from our groups is that we develop proposals to improve the representation of under-represented groups in higher education through raising aspirations and improving attainment levels. And this group has made good progress in the short time that we have had. We've examined a range of recent research and shared our own expertise and information and have put together a range of barriers which would prevent under-represented groups participating in higher education. And we've tried to put together some solutions for a way forward and it's very important today that you can share your views on what we're presenting to you today.

But before I begin I think it's really important to highlight two things; one is that our group recognises the degree of inter-connectedness between each of the four sub-groups. They are not mutually exclusive and we also want to highlight that when we were referring to higher education we're not just referring to higher education in the higher education institutions, we are also referring to higher education in the further education colleges, who often provide a wide range of higher education opportunities to a very different profile of learner.

So, if I begin with a summary diagram of the barriers to aspirations and attainment into higher education; and you can see we've summarised these as dispositional, situational, informational, institutional, financial and a few others that just didn't fit into either of those categories. And I think it's important before we very briefly look at each of those in turn, that the characteristics under each of those barriers, aren't a separate tick box; they're all again inter-related and often interact differently dependent on the target group. And I want to reinforce the point that has already been made; this group were focusing very much on yes the need to increase participation for the under-represented young person in higher education, but also the adult returner and the work based learner.

Situational barriers are the situations that potential participants in higher education find themselves and if you look over to the last challenge, it would be a challenge for adult returners, often the barriers that they face would be family responsibilities, working patterns, lack of time, benefit entitlement, many of the things that we've already touched on.

Other barriers would include physical access, the reluctance to move out of their comfort zone. But the biggest and most important situational barrier would be that of attainment. And we have a gap as already has been alluded to this morning and our top end is September 2009, 75% of those young

people, who entered GCSE attained A* - C, but at the other end, 56% of our young people, of our 16 year old, only achieved 5 plus A*- C including English and Maths. There's already 44 % of our 16 year old at which of this point of their journey higher education isn't a realistic possibility.

So those situational barriers impact very much and attainment is a key factor but attainment on its own often masks other factors and we need to recognize that many of the other factors also have a considerable impact on whether a young person, an adult returner, or a work-based learner, can actually aspire and participate into higher education. And some of these barriers include dispositional barriers. Barriers of low self esteem, barriers of a poor educational experience. Barriers of a resistance to learning, attitudes often based around their own social experience, the lack of suitable role models. Its an interesting statistic that the proportion of school leavers continuing onto institutions of higher education has increased between 2003 and 2004 and 2007 and 2008 by 3.9%. But, if we dig a little bit deeper, only 8.7% of boys and 23.2% of girls in 2007/8 who entered higher education, were in a receipt of free school meals.

So there's a gap; not only at GCSE, but those entering into higher education. And it's interesting that in 2009, 29% of full time first degree enrolments in Northern Ireland were from the social-economic classification groups of 5-7 and this has been a broad pattern over this last 5 years. So setting that aside, what often occur is that once a person who often may not have any qualifications, perhaps coming from an area of social deprivation or social need - takes that step, takes that risk and re-engages in education, they find that there are other barriers that prevent them from progressing to more challenging learning and enjoying the richness of higher education.

And sometimes they can be institutional barriers - we have heard that this morning. Barriers which include the mode of provision which may not be fit for purpose, the lack of articulated progression routes. We've heard about careers education and we'll talk about that shortly. The whole notion of intimidating, facilities and buildings. So in addition to the attainment barriers, there are these other institutional barriers which are there, which don't help those under-represented groups participate fully in higher education.

Informational Barriers, and I think that's a point that has been very well made this morning. This is a key aspect and it's a key aspect not just for the careers service, it's a key aspect for many of us within society who are offering advice and guidance to our young people. It's the teachers in school, it's those employers where our young people engage through work-related learning activities. It's parents, the biggest influence on young people, what they can or what they can't attain; comes down to parents. So yes whilst we can say there's an important role for the careers service, careers teachers, there's a big role for many other partners and unless we tackle that we're not going to gain as much as we can in raising aspirations for young people, adult returners and work related learners.

Financial barriers - we have heard about that today and there are many financial barriers which will prevent learners from aspiring to higher education. Opportunities of cost and income forgone; often they are not prepared to take the risk of reducing income because of their own financial situations. And the other barriers that we've identified would be the lack of awareness of the needs of targeted groups and we've heard already from the gentleman about our awareness of the needs and classification of the group of learners who would have a disability.

We've also heard about the need for inter collaboration so that we are making the best use of resources and we've heard also about the need for employers support.

And we have put together then what we think are some idea's in which we can consider in which to remove those barriers and help those under-represented groups aspire and achieve so that higher

education is a realistic progression pathway. And if we look initially at aspiration; and as you are looking at it as if you're right hand side - raising aspirations is key and that's start at a very early age. That is something that starts with your year 12 guidance interview with your careers adviser. That's something that happens right back in pre-school. Broadening horizons through things like work related learning experience again - not in year 12, we need to move it right on down the curriculum, right down into primary school and the key stage 3 of post primary.

Level of achievement - we've talked about that - there is a big gap in our system and we need to identify how we're going to plug gap. There needs to be clear progression pathways. Often there are barriers in terms of parity esteem, between the types of qualifications that a learner will present with, vocational versus academic, applied versus general and if we're serious about this, we need to sort that out and ensure that there's a ladder of progression a realistic ladder of progression with multiple entry points that is fit for purpose.

Information advice and guidance, crucial but not as I said at year 12, year 13, year 14 - a life long strategy of advice and guidance which is fit for purpose.

And if we look at Attainment - if we're going to raise attainment, what do we need to do? We need early intervention, we need to be focusing in on literacy and numeracy at an early age. We need to be looking at high quality teaching and learning. That poor educational experience - whether it be primary school, post primary school or indeed, higher education; needs to be addressed so that experience is something that will ensure that the potential learner will want to engage in learning. We need a relevant and affirming curriculum, a curriculum that's fit for purpose, that is bite to size, chunks of learning, which you can build together into a profile that matches your learning style.

There needs to be structured learning support so that if you have a barrier, that those barriers are addressed and that you're getting the most out of the resources that are there and we've already said; there needs to be some linking with key partners so that we're making best use of resources and that the collaboration that exists, it's used to enable the learner to travel along that journey of progression.

We've left one question, and the question would be; 'how could we help learners overcome these barriers? In order to achieve their full potential and consider the relevant progression opportunities. But in particular, what is the role for the government departments? What would be the role for the providers? What's the role for the learner and what about the parents, the carer, the partner? And finally; the role for the employer, so when your thinking about that question if you could keep those key areas in mind. Thank you.

Applause.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Thank you very much Deirdre. Again a lot of food for thought there. I've some big big questions and issues to be addressed. Before we start answering that specific question can I just take us back to this slide and ask you whether you believe that the analysis is right? Is, are these the issues, are these the issues that need to be addressed? And then we can maybe move on as to how we actually address them.

I think the point that Deirdre made about parental involvement and starting this process at a very young age to start to remove barriers. There are a lot of parents who condone absenteeism from school at a very early age and if children are not in school engaging with the learning process and understanding who valuable that daily experience is, then you set up a culture where children start to think education is not important.

People will have ideas about their own education and give their misconceptions are handed back down to their children, whatever their reasons were for disengaging, but the level of truancy amongst some of our pupils is very alarming and I'm talking about children who go 'on the mitch' - but parents who actually condone that happening sets off a circle that does need to be broken - even children in nursery school - its wonderful to see how they can play out, you know, when I grow up I want to be and they have those aspirations. Later on they are afraid to articulate that because peer pressure comes in and says "you want to be what?" no you can't be that, but if you have good parental support and therefore you need education for parents on what is available for their children so I want to congratulate Deirdre on the presentation for the group I find it just spot on. Thank you.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Any other comments?

Paul Walsh, South Eastern Regional College

I very much welcome the QCF's the qualifications framework that is developing at the moment and I think there's a great opportunity in that for a lot of the wide range of qualifications that are available in the further higher education colleges to be given equivalents that'll make it easier for those that the universities and the higher education sector generally to be able to identify and recognise the learning that has taken place and I suppose one thing that I would request today is that articulate today is that we need to make sure that all parties and everybody involved buys into that concept and uses it to the benefit of those students.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Okay. Thank you. At the back table.

Unknown voice

Yes I'm particularly interested in the progression pathways and the need to intervene with alternatives and so forth and really I'm just re-enforcing what Paul said earlier - to me it's seems that there is a real contradiction between the need for creativity and flexibility. And we're all, we get lots of ideas about what we might or might not be able to do on the one hand and on the other hand we have the rigidity of funding mechanisms and institutional requirements and the institutions themselves are constrained by either funding or other factors and I really do think and access is a clear example of that - something that started out as reaching out to a particular cohort, but which has been and is continuing to be shoehorned standardised and you know, it's almost like another A level now and I think that's a real shame and I know it's a huge problem but it is at the core of what were doing.

Rodger Duncan, South Eastern Regional College

I think we also need to look at the curriculum and how in flexible it's becoming - especially in relation to pathways. We need to look at transferable skills potentially between different progression routes and how some body who has maybe following one particular area of study can use the skills attained within that area study or even within their career choice; maybe somebody has been working for ten or fifteen years in a particular area, can use the skills and qualifications that they've obtained there to actually maybe move potentially into a different career area. And it's how we educate people there and thinking sort of outside the box and moving from one area to another to avoid being pigeon holed to go down one particular progression pathway.

So somebody who's maybe doing an A level in business or IT or something like that can use the skills that they have there because peoples perceptions and peoples views and what they want to do whenever they're older change and how they can actually use the information gained from one particular curriculum area to help them develop within another particular area - I think that's

something as well that needs to be seriously looked at, to make sure we don't pigeon hole one person to go down one particular pathway and follow that from the minute they start education to the minute they actually retire at the age of 60 so it's using all of the skills, knowledge and experience that they've actually gains through their life. Education and work and actually being able to transfer that to maybe a particular career choice. Thank you.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Can I pose a question to you, let's assume we have a million pounds to spend, OK? Now, we've talked about or heard about the need for early intervention, we've heard about the need to help people address, if you like the immediate barriers which are preventing access. If the neutral position let's say, was £500,000 of that money going to early intervention, you know, pre thirteen year olds, into and focusing on family and the other £500,000 going to dealing with the barriers that existing 18 year olds are facing. Now if you were trying to then advise ministers as to where the change should be, should we point, should we put more than the £500,000 into early intervention or should we put more than the £500,000 into addressing the barriers that our existing 18 year olds face? On the knowledge that by putting more into one group, is putting at the same time, putting less into another. Just get a sense of your priorities here, is what I'm looking.

Lex Hayes, Glengormley High School, Principal

We're an ITC specialist college, one of the things that will determine that is to how quick you want the payback. Because if you want to payback in the next 6 or 7 years, then it's got to be put into if you like secondary level. If you're looking at a longer term payback, then you would maybe look at early years intervention and one of the things that i know the work groups have been looking at is certainly standard of standard of literacy and numeracy. And how that has a really, quite marked affect on one obviously the educational attainment, but secondly; how parents and how adult learners then get into the system for progression. So I think that's got to be something that you've got to look at if you're thinking about finite sums of money and you're thinking about you've got also then put, relate that to when you want the payback and if it's in the next 5, 6 even 7 years you've got to look then at the market that are coming into universities at that time.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Okay. Any other comments?

Paul Walsh

It struck me that looking at the current demographics, we have a rising number of youngsters, young children, five, ten year olds, there may well be an opportunity to start target that bulge, that demographic before it come to the higher education sector in ten years time. The only other comment I would make is that we also have to deal with the fact that there are a lot of people that have to have the opportunity to raise the aspirations and attainment. You don't really want to sideline a generation waiting for the next one to come along, so appreciate it is a difficult situation.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Any last comments? I'm conscious of time, yes?

Adrienne Pelts, South Eastern Regional College

I just wanted to say one thing; I was recently at a STEM event and something that seemed to be coming up quite often was the fact that the teachers that are providing the education aren't necessarily enthusiastic about the subjects that they're teaching. And I think maybe that comes back to the higher quality of teaching and learning and that teachers themselves are not necessarily prepared to be teaching the subjects that are going to be providing for the work force that these students are going to entering into. So maybe that's something that needs to be concentrated on, the actual, the quality of the teaching, because not everybody is suited to teaching maths and

engineering but it's something vital to drive Northern Ireland forward.

Just another thing about the adult learners, I have to fight for the adult learners, but as the President of the Student Union, I recently did a survey amongst adult learners and the number one problem was that although their incomes were higher, their disposable incomes were so very low because of children, mortgages, other expenses that they have that they don't fit into any category within the funding system and it holds people back to such a degree that they feel like 'should I just quit my job and start taking from the benefit system in order to gain the funding that I need to improve myself and I don't think that's a healthy situation where people think that they should forfeit a job in order to improve education. So maybe that is another area that needs to be addressed and if its not happening in the home with young people, it falls back onto the government and the teachers to push people ahead. Thanks.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Okay. I know there's lot's of you know, contributions still to come from the floor; I'm conscious of time - what we would plan to do now is maybe break, just have a short break and then if we could come back about twenty five past eleven. Okay, thank you there should be some coffee? Okay.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department of Employment and Learning

Okay, we'll make a start. Again you know, the one impression that I get really so far is that time is very tight but we just need to keep a wee bit of the momentum going on here so without more ado, I would like to introduce Wilma Fee, and Wilma is going to talk to us about her groups' work in enhancing recruitment and selection. Wilma is Director of Academic and Student affairs and leads major support service for students and academic matters. Wilma is Chair of the group, looking at improving recruitment and selection to higher education, so Wilma without more ado, you are very welcome. Thank you.

Wilma Fee, Director of Academic and Student Affairs, Queens University Belfast

Okay. Thanks Andrew. Well first of all I'll tell you a little bit just like Denise about the group. The group is fairly representative and broadly based. It represents the careers device, represents higher education, further education, schools, life long learning, disability organizations and very importantly and I'm very pleased to see a student here today, because I think it's very important that we listen to students as we devise strategies in going forward.

The focus of this group was very, how will I say; targeted, because as you've seen, there are lot's of over-lapping and interlocking issues. And some of what I'm going to present to you today, you will have heard little bits of this creeping though in both the targets group and also raising aspiration because these groups are finely knit. But we tried to keep ourselves very focused because the tendency was to look at the bigger picture all of the time and we had to keep ourselves very targeted on current methods of recruitment and current methods of selection to higher education and how we could look to ways of enhancing them.

We started with two guiding principals - and I think it's very important that we retain a focus on quality in devising a strategy for widening participation. And that the first principal was that widening participation is not about lowering standards and also higher education in it's term, in its broad term represents, in the province, in Northern Ireland, it represents university, university colleges and we have representatives here today and the regional colleges.

So we set about evaluating current methods or recruitment and current methods of selection and then we moved to identifying where the parameters existed for enhancement of those activities. And most important and it's coming though in the other groups - how we measure success and how

we measure impact.

Higher Education as all of us will know in this room, doesn't exist in a vacuum - it exists within an infrastructure which is set nationally by regulation and by audit and also in the area of widening participation by some of the recent surveys at national level which have produced recommendations to be implemented and observed by higher education institutions. We looked at some of those - the most significant start in this direction was the Shorts report which looked at the whole area of fair access. And arising from the Schwartz Report - the delivery partnership was established and the supporting professionalism and admissions group SPA which I've mentioned were brought into existence and they have been instrumental in working with universities across the country in making admissions totally transparent and fair and regulated.

The national student forum itself had comments to make on the area of widening participation. The select committee, the famous select committee of 2009 focused very much on the issues to do with access to higher education and then a specific report delivered last year looked at fair access to the professions and Alan Milburn lead that report, looking at some of the barriers to entry to some key professions.

So in starting from a contextual perspective to address the issues relating to the region, we started with the question - 'is there a problem?' because something which we don't do in Northern Ireland is identify where in fact we have been successful and widening participation in Northern Ireland as a region of the United Kingdom has been relatively successful and I think we should recognise that as we move to enhance what we are doing. But we do know that there are problems and there are targeted areas of under-representation. And so, it's very important that we keep to our brief that we've been targeted and we look at those areas where there needs to be targeted action.

Our solutions then in proposing a way forward for enhancing recruitment and selection have to be related directly to those targeted areas and in doing so we have to make sure that they are measurable.

And again this is where the link with some of our other groups exist; there is an overlap in this area with targets group so we presumed and number of areas of under-representation and you can see that arriving at these wasn't by chance because we looked at the very same sets of data which the targets group looked at and we identified as priorities the SEC's 5-7 and in particular the male Protestant youth, disability, adult returners and work based learners. And so we devoted the attention of the group very specifically on those targets.

Again we looked at recruitment separately and selection separately because they are two different activities although they're very much linked because for recruitment leads to the conversion activity which leads to admission. Raising two very important activities which have already been discussed and described both by the minister and by our speakers. At Queens, Discovering Queens, and at the University of Ulster Step-Up. Very active programmes out there in the community aimed at driving up aspiration and ambition among young people.

They realised other activities which exist which we drew on as benchmarks for our exercise - in the UK there's a HEFCE funded project sponsoring 13 research intensive universities called 'Realising Opportunities' and some of the work of that and in particular the success of some compact schemes is also under focused by our group.

Internationally the Texas experiment with 10% identifying that quota of 10% of disadvantaged students was set for entry to university - that project is underway. And we also looked at the role of careers information and advice and guidance and I think one of the emerging themes of today is we

cannot underestimate that power of good advice to students, especially down the chain and the earlier that chain starts and the advice starts and the framework for raising ambition among and confidence in young people about going to higher education - the sooner that starts the better.

Like the previous two groups, we also looked at barriers because if we have a problem we must have something which is stopping the growth of activity from that particular target group. So, looking at just a very bald set of statistics; of the students in Northern Ireland who go to university and this is a few years old, 14%, just over 14% come from the secondary school sector whereas 74% come from grammar schools, that's a very interesting statistic.

We looked at the issue then of selection and how do we hone down where the barriers might exist and how we might start becoming much more flexible probably might tease out the parameters where we might enhance these selection processes. Some of these are not new - the adjustment period has been introduced - again I refer to the national picture for admissions and the processes of admission and an adjustment period has now been introduced following the release of the A Level results, which allows students the chance to change their minds about the choice of degree course or their choice of university. And that's an important step in allowing those students who make judgments at seventeen that by the time they're 18, don't know that they can follow through.

The issue of the use of contextual data is one which is very topical at the minute. Contextual data as I was come onto describe to you is that set of hard information and soft information about an applicant background which could be taken into account in the selection process. At the minute selection processes are largely driven by formula, by requested grades at A Level or equivalent and then the formula of achieving those against either a quota of applicants or against a competitive process in some way. The contextual data would introduce a new aspect which would customise and personalise the selection process.

Other selection processes which might be adopted and in Queens already two very highly competitive areas - medicine and dentistry have introduced interviews as part of that process. Very meritocratic processes for admission in those two areas but recognising that other factors other than academic attainment are important in developing students for those professions.

Vocational qualifications we heard today that in the ladder of opportunity for progression to higher education there is sometimes a restriction or a lack of engagement with alternative routes to higher education and vocational qualifications are a very important route to higher education and a number of young people are following those qualifications. The new qualifications; Credit framework, drawing on from something which one of our members today mentioned earlier. It's very important that in this again, what I've referred to the 'ladder of opportunity' that we build a network of intra-related and interlocking routes into higher education. The new qualifications and credit framework should enable that and should enable students to engage with higher education, carrying with them what they have gained to date.

And the introduction of APEL - I know most of you will understand APEL means - but it's a recognition of attainment which is not necessarily conventional and curriculum and assessment based; but takes account of experience and attainment in other ways and there is a pilot underway at the minute in relation to foundation degrees through foundation degree forward, which has done some excellent work in helping to develop the model for APEL for foundation degrees.

Now, I have covered most of the issues which we've been addressing and looking at the barriers and some of the methods where we could stretch out the parameters for selection. And so I have framed the questions - 6 questions and I'm very happy just to run through them now because in some ways they touch at the very heart of some of the issues which we've been addressing.

So the number one question; 'Are there barriers to more inclusive recruitment and selection and if there are, how do we identify them and really go to work on them?' Are there interventions not being optimised because again if we talk about the ladder of opportunity, the ladder starts at an early years. So what are the interventions that need to take place - primary, post-primary, post-16, with adults and with workers? And what should the role of employers be in supporting training and education opportunities for progression to higher education? Employers have a very large part to play, they have an important voice and they also have a responsibility and I think we should address that in our strategy.

Then a direct question to you; which I'd be very keen to get your responses to; 'Is there a shared view that contextual data should be adopted?' and in principle I would imagine all of you will say "yes" but the processes that will allow that to happen are quite structural - they require data sets to be consistent, they will require information to be gathered which hasn't been gathered to date and supplied by the agencies and also it will require a quite significant change to the admissions processes in higher education. And a question which I pose - 'how does this sit with Section 75?' but perhaps we can work through that.

And then; setting aside the traditional routes to higher education, the A Level, the GCSE route, the academic route - are there other ways - are we not thinking cleverly or creatively about how we might identify the target groups and provide targeted access to higher education. Either in the spirit of the success of the previous programmes but new much more targeted and much more focused access programmes at different levels - full time and part time. New routes into higher education for the disengaged youth.

Foundation degree - are we really exploiting the potential of foundation degrees as proper access routes? and I know that the previous group talked about inflexible curriculum and it's very often that a foundation degree is a different animal - it's a very, very different type of product which has come from employer input and a perceived need in a qualifications or experience bracket and then we try to shoehorn that into traditional academic provision in higher education - do we need to go back to the drawing board with foundation degrees and design foundation degrees which map the front end and the back end and are there other routes that we have not thought which should be supported?

And then finally the question which of course I don't want to hear in my day job but - 'should we consider setting quota's for participation in higher education as they have in other parts of the world?' and more locally as they have in the republic of Ireland? Thank you.

Applause.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Thank you very much Wilma - over to you again. Any initial reactions?

Ian Houston, Northern Regional College

I think one of our problems really is that we're not sure at this stage - or at least I'm not aware of statistics that would prove one way or another - what is the most effective way in enhancing the life chances of people from disadvantaged backgrounds? For example, we don't know is it better to take full time or part time route? Is it better to be doing a full degree programme, foundation degree or an access course, which gives you the best route through this? We don't know relatively speaking which vocational area for example, or which vocational area's, are more successful in enhancing the life chances of people from disadvantaged groups. I think until we would know or have a better feel for which is that work best, it's very difficult to answer some of the other questions that are

being raised.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Okay. Any comments on those, can we just leave that behind because there is another lady here was going to make a contribution as well.

Beverly Bigger, from Dept of [inaudible]

Just the comments about barriers and interventions; in terms of barriers, consistent application of admissions criteria across universities I think would be welcome. We are finding - I work in neighborhood renewal strategy - and we're finding that students who complete some forms of further education and perhaps through caring responsibilities have to drop out and do their further learning in bite sized chunks say with other providers, for example, FE colleges, open university, whatever. And that then if they make the move as they, you know, get to the stage where they want to go onto a higher education, the admissions criteria is different and some universities are failing to recognise that previous learning and almost a form of elitism creeping that some universities won't accept that that is of a higher education standard of learning.

And then also in forms of barriers and interventions we talked about 44% of children aren't achieving 5 GCSE's at A-C and that we've only got 14.7% of secondary schools children going to higher education and we also talked previously about the access to high quality education - it seems to me that our intervention processes are failing those children who are not achieving their full potential and seem to be more focused on, you know, schools within intervention are more focused on the needs of developing the teachers as opposed to the fact that our focus, I feel, should be on providing the best quality of education for the children, not waiting for a period of say 2 – 4 or 5 years for those schools to be turned around. Because in that period of time we have lost a whole cadre of young people and in a lot of cases, you know, it's the young people who we would have hoped would have had access to higher education.

Okay. Thank you.

Stephanie Harmer- Smith, Queens University Belfast

Just to reflect on the point about do we actually know what works for young people, I mean widening participation has been around for a very, very long time and there is a lot of valid and reliable evidence out there on the mainland and the republic of Ireland models in the US in Australia, which actually shows that for a specific cohorts, these are the delivery models which have a proven track record of success, so we are not starting from a blank page here in Northern Ireland, even beyond the two programmes which have been funded for the last ten years, we actually know what can work so we don't need to invent as such but actually just innovate and look at what is already out there. So there are short-term, medium and long term interventions, there are ten year programmes which tend to be particularly successful and tend to be the models used in Scotland or there are 6 month, 18 month interventions which can be proven to have success with those which are a little bit further on in their education journey. So there is a lot of evidence out there and systematic reviews are underway and scoping studies also for the various targeted groups that we would be interested in working with.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

I think it would be very important that the recommendations from the strategy do have an evidence base so the teams will be drawing heavily from that body of research. Any other?

inaudible

Just on the question of contextual information on students; I think that again if you are working within a limited budget etc and a definite time span, it would not be a good idea to ask for extra

information in terms of putting the onus either in students, adult learners or schools to provide different kinds of information on top of what you're already getting - I think it needs to be 'instead of' therefore you would have to decide on something that are currently asked to drop out for further contextual information, but I agree that contextual information in particular, for the type of students and the adult's learners that we're talking about - it is important to bring in other things than just purely academic qualifications or interview or statement based interventions like that.

Can I just briefly pick up the point about quality, because I think quality is central but it's interesting to me that every time we talk about quality and equality and disadvantage; there seems to be some mind set that that means lowering of standards. Well actually our experience in widening participation in the health service is if you do widening participation correctly, it drives up standards. I'll give you an example; one of our most successful widening participation interventions is with our nursing auxiliary staff, working with the Open University, a work based route to their professional nursing qualification. The quality of those candidates is at least as good as the best that are coming out of the traditional routes. There are also other benefits; they are middle aged, so they don't use nursing and nursing qualification as a passport to go to America or Australia; they stay in area of social need which is where they have come from.

So, I think it's flawed to think about widening participation lowering standards, I think it actually increases standards if you do it properly and you need to ensure that you are continually evaluating what you are doing so that you know what works because I think, one of the earlier points about what does work, well you know, yes I agree with Stephanie we do have a lot of valid research, but we're not actually very good in terms of learning and evaluating what works, why does it work? and how can we promote best practice?

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Okay. Thank you for that. Can I ask a question of you, just to focus on one of these questions and maybe one of them was controversial - is the last one. Should quotas be set for participation levels in the HE? If we are reaching for an increase in participation from sociology-economic groups 5-7, should that be balanced by a reduction in Access for other sociology-economic groups? Or how do you achieve that in a context of limits to the numbers of students which the executive is willing to pay for?

Inaudible

Certainly, my impression at the moment is that the universities and the colleges are all very close, if not above capacity for HE. So if we widen participation we are going to have to change the cohort, that's already there. That's going to create, unless of course the department can come up with more money to fund more students, and I don't see any evidence of that at the moment, it certainly, David Cameron hasn't mentioned sending more money over! But that is the situation that we have, we're at capacity at the moment and if we widen participation some-bodies going to have to be displaced. And that's a very big political football that's going to have wide ranging implications.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Okay. Any other views on that? Monica?

Monica Wilson

There were quite a number of years ago quotas in the disability sector from employment and all that did was cream from the group the people who probably would have been able to make it on their own and who were counted in a different way to make the numbers add up. Personal opinion and an organizational opinion is we shouldn't have quotas, but I think the point needs to be made very firmly about how you deal with individuals who are disadvantaged and you don't deal with it in a

way that takes away from them as people. So a person-centered approach has to be the core of what happens and you can have frameworks and you can have structures but what you need to do is have with at the center of that the fact that you need to adapt the structure and for many organisations, in this field as well as in other fields, the issue is actually about trying to make the people conform to the structure rather than the other way around. So if we are trying to future proof this strategy, it really will need to have a personalised agenda at the base of it. Thank you

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning
Thank you

Rodger Duncan, South Eastern Regional College

I think as well in relation to quotas there should be some liaison with the likes of sector schools councils to see exactly what the career aspirations and areas in which there is going to be progressive employment in potentially 3,4, 5 years time and what could be done there is maybe not particular quotas in relation to sociology-economic groupings, but possibly where particular sectors are going to be developing within Northern Ireland, within the U.K and worldwide over the next few years and that could mean possibly reducing the amount of numbers coming into generic courses and focusing more per chance marketing of courses, whether it be foundation degrees, HNDs or otherwise.

In those particular sectors where there is going to be development over the next few years and directly liaison potentially with the Sector Skills Councils would help with that. So that you are not maybe looking at reducing the amount of people from the higher socio-economic groupings coming in but developing people who have vocational qualifications and even academic qualifications that are going to be useful in all sectors over the proceeding years.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning
Okay.

Max O'Brien

I would just underscore what Monica Wilson said in relation to the quotas - it never worked for people with a disability. I have to say if you do, if you want a comparison to watch this, our colleagues in the Republic of Ireland under the disability legislation have retained quotas so you'll have a comparison there to see how they have progressed it.

On the contextual thing could I just say you'll need to be very careful how you approach that when you're dealing with people with a disability. One of the problems that most people who have long term disabilities have is telling their life story and the assumptions that are made out of that is to what you can or cant do in, it will need to be done in a very positive way, in other words to get from the individual how do you want to us to change our system to suit you? So going back to your individual discussions here on fitting education that is very much to the fore when you're going to deal with disabled people.

And I feel the discussion today here has, and I know that I'm speaking for a particular silo - I'm only interested in the area of disability, but we're talking here about people who are at call-outs in education for example; I had no primary education at all - I started off at eleven and a half and to pick up - there's a lot of people like that, there's a lot of young people involved as carers at home so there's a big group of people out there at you're going to have to see how your going to attract them no matter what your promotional way is of doing it. There's a whole a group there and as I said to somebody earlier, if the area of disability is difficult in its own, what your trying to attain here in all the various facets of education, it's almost impossible and all you can do is knock a hole in it type of thing in the future. But please listen to disabled people before you start sending and asking

stupid questions, that's the only thing.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Okay. Any other comments? Okay well look let's move on then to the final session of this morning so having talked about recruitment and selection now we're moving onto improving retention and progression and Dr Damian O'Kane is going to give us a presentation on that. Damian is Head of Access and Educational Partnerships at the University of Ulster. He's been responsible for the design and development of the Step-Up programme which we've heard about this morning and he's chair of the group that's examining ways to improve retention and progression in Higher Educations, Damian, thank you

Damian O'Kane, Head of Access and Educational Partnerships, University of Ulster

..really what we want is your views as has been said throughout this and get consultation so I'm going to talk very little hopefully and anyone that knows me knows that that's very difficult for me. So it allows you to give us further comment.

In terms of the membership of the group, again the first thing I'll say; it is a wide ranging group, it's got representation from higher education within Further Education colleges, the university colleges as well. And its very experience group and it's been made up in that way. We have also representation from Swansea University, Professor Colin Trotman, he's not with us today, but he has probably one of the only surviving higher education adult education departments within the U.K. Certainly it was a point that I would have liked to have made earlier on, but within the last ten years 60% of adult education departments within universities have disappeared. And certainly, they did cater for a lot of students with disabilities, learners, young mums, minors so there has been a demise of that and really in terms of how we look at adult education certainly, I think that demise has had a major impact and it's something that potentially we could look at in Northern Ireland.

The terms of reference that we have and we agreed these terms of reference relatively early and these are you'll see later on are issues we want to specifically consult on. We are interested in higher education which obviously includes higher education courses within further education and we're concentrating on retention and progression. There is a lot of overlap between the groups and there's a great temptation to go backwards and say okay, this is having a major issue on retention and I think it's something that we need to bear in mind as we do go through some of the consultation.

Many of the problems in relation to retention are laid down many years before students get anywhere near higher education. And if we're going to do this properly and we're going to support target groups coming through then we have to look at making interventions as early as we possibly can.

Just running through the terms of reference, we wanted to identify the groups least likely to be retained. We wanted to identify possible barriers; the big point there is the possible barriers to completion among our target groups.

We wanted to look to see how those target groups can be supported and can be supported to be successful is probably the key message. And then in relation to guidance on a recent approach to improvement of retention and progression and completion - the idea that this is a partnership that if we're going to get this right if we're going to actually support target groups coming through then we have to do it in a collaborative partnership. This is not about silos, this is not about individual departments, individual organisations, it is a collaborative partnership.

So, in terms of the groups that we have identified and we're not saying by any means that these

groups are fully, this is fully inclusive. Certainly that's what today is about, but based on what the data we have available to us which is first year snapshot of students who enter university and are still there at the end of that year. Now again our group had a fair bit of difficulty with this because really there was no information available that gives you completion data. So if students are retained in the first year but drop out in the second, third or the fourth then you're taking as being retained.

So there is a major issue in relation to that and I certainly I would imagine some of the things that the group had great problems with and I would imagine that the audience would have great problems with it as well and certainly we will be making recommendation in relation to that.

But in identifying the groups, certainly the greatest predictor of non-completion within higher education is socio-economic class. No matter how you cut it, no matter what way you look at it, students male or female who are lower socio-economic classes tend to be drop-outs. Those with a disability from lower socio-economic classes tend to drop out. Same for age, same for religion. But within the sort of categories we have here; and there's some interesting anomalies; males are more likely to drop out, there's probably not a major surprise, bigger participation of females obviously. Disability; the likelihood of dropping out increases with the year of course. But a lot of that evidence isn't conclusive. We're basing this on statistics, but you do get contradictory information in relation to disability. In terms of age, adult learners, those with dependents, those with financial problems are more likely to drop out - again the impact of social class.

In terms of religion, Catholics are more likely to drop out but there are more Catholics participating in higher education and we've already heard about the under-participation of Protestant working class males which is a problem. And maybe they aren't showing up on the retention and progression figures because there are so few from the lower socio-economic groups going through into higher education to actually show up on the radar.

I will summarise the questions we want to consult on at the end but I just put them down on each slide so that you can think about them as we go through.

We also had a look at identifying the possible to completion among our target group and most of this was through literature and research, fiscal information we had and the knowledge of the group, your experienced group that we were able assemble. There probably aren't that many surprises here and we really were looking at this idea of the personal, social and academic interaction. All of those have an impact and it isn't just one aspect, it's all of those aspects combined

Finance - major problem as you probably would expect. Parental education again was linked very closely to social class. If your parents go to a higher education its around about 85% likely you will go into higher education. If your parents were successful in higher education, you are more likely to be successful in higher education. You have those social networks, you have motivated parents who are pushing you along saying 'this is where you should be'. A lot of young people an adults who've had a poor experience of education in school, won't take an opportunity to go into higher education unless they are encouraged in some way.

In terms of subjects studied; and we found this quote interesting; STEM subjects, the drop our rate tends to be higher. And we were trying to get sort of reasons and we may get some sense of that today - why is a drop out in STEM subjects higher and it's across all groups, irrespective of social class. It's higher with social class but its still, it's very high.

In terms of qualification and entry, we looked at the idea of misalignment of teaching strategies. For too long we assume higher education and further educational, we assume that students are coming through A Levels and that is their backgrounds. The A level system as principals, Lex will

tell you this better than in qualifications systems within schools have had traumatic change over the last 25 years. Universities have stayed relatively static. We assume the students are coming to us typically with A level preparation and when they get to university many of the students are coming through access routes or going through other forms of qualification, find that immediately in an academic environment and that is a major problem. So if we are looking to the future, should we be aligning what happens in schools within DE with what happens in terms of what happens, what we provide in university which comes under DELs remit.

In terms of pre-entry qualification or preparation, again we were able to bring masses of information in relation to target groups receiving inadequate information or careers advice, long before they get to university. And it places them at an immediate disadvantage. A lot of the time they are going into courses they know nothing about but it sounds as if it might be something they want to do. Or, it's something they see in the papers saying there are careers in these areas or there will be in the near future.

Interesting subject, seems very obvious, but a lot of students enter into university with very little interest in the subject area. Many come through clearing and typically students coming through the target groups have lower academic achievement. So I will say this; tongue in cheek, they are at the mercy of admissions. They are placed into courses to fill courses rather than to be placed into courses that best meet their needs.

And again post entry support, social and academic integration, there's been literature last 50 years, Tinto all of those guys saying that if you don't get social and academic integration, if you don't have both when you go into higher education then you're in the revolving door you're coming back out again with no success. So the question we are posing there is what barriers to completion within the target groups other than those that we have already gained information on?

We also wanted to identify the ways in which the target groups can be supported and again I said earlier on supported is the key word but we all have a responsibility in relation to this - if we are looking truly at a regional partnership approach, then we all have a responsibility and all the people that can make things happen are all sitting here in the room. What can government do? What can they do in terms of policy? If we're talking about data at the moment, it's a very simple one I mentioned earlier on but in terms of completion data rather than a snapshot, should we not have a method by which we can identify students who drop out across the full diet of the course. I mean I've said this before; if I was a Vice Chancellor, and I wanted to have a really good completion rates, I'd be saying to ask my academic colleagues, nobody fails first year. All immediately you have a 100% retention rate and you are wonderful.

Again this isn't just in terms of maybe what the Department for Employment and Learning would do, but what about the Department of Education; what can we do further down the system to raise standards? And allow potentially higher education to have an impact on performance within schools. We sit in sector at the moment but you know, that's an out dated model.

In terms of target setting, and it was mentioned in relation to some other area's - should we have targets for universities and colleges? If we can get completion data across 4 years or whatever it is for the further education should we not be saying that your retention rate needs to be within certain parameters? What gets measured gets done. But we've got to provide the resources and mechanism to that to happen. It doesn't just, we don't just collect the data routinely at the moment.

And again, funding - another big issue. Is there additional support available or are there ways in which we can use funding across a range of different organisations to support the target groups within higher education. What can higher education, further education do itself? We have a

responsibility to student that come across our door and really effectively - if we say no matter where that group of students come from but particularly those who are under-represented within higher education. If we say we're willing to accept the qualifications you bring to us then we are accepting that you are at a standard for entry to the institution and if you're at that standard you shouldn't really fail. If our teaching strategies, everything that we, our support mechanisms are in place, then no student should fail.

What can other stakeholders do? And as I said earlier on, dipping down into the early years as well because a lot of the problems I think are laid down in early years. Schools, what can schools do? Can we have pre-entry preparation for higher education, there's enough examples of it, I mean Step-Up is a good example. Of the pre-entry preparation that can make it more likely that young people will be retained within higher education. The Step-Up group are relatively small group but 95% retention and completion of degree rate goes against national trends which is about 87% for all students.

So we can do it if we approach it in the right way. What about careers service? Are we giving our young people the best advice early on? Are we directing them in the right way? Are all students, no matter what the background, no matter what school they go to, are they getting the best advice available to allow them to make informed choices? Community organizations; what about support for education within communities, within the community sector? What can we do there? This is an integrated approach and if we're going to support young people then we have to have that partnership approach.

So, in terms of the issues, specific issues for consultation; have we identified the right groups or the right sub groups that we should be considering because bear in mind we did take a lot of statistical information and the information take us one direction, that information is not 100% accurate and there is missing data in relation to it and is there other groups we should be considering. What barriers are there to completion among the target groups, apart from maybe the ones we've mentioned and I know there are probably a host of others and you guys will have more information than we may have had. And how do we improve retention and progression among the target groups? And what can we do collectively?

Applause

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Thank you Damian, again some big questions. Comments? Initial reactions from the floor? Yep.

Stephanie Harmer-Smith, Queens University

There's always a lot of research as to why students actually leave but I'm constantly amazed by some of the students who do progress to higher education and who make amazing achievements despite a multitude of factors and barriers and lots of reasons why they shouldn't actually be able to stay in higher education and I wonder is there something around retention about what we can do to help students at the pre-entry stage and through the transition stage and on course to develop resilience. There will be things come against them as individuals and for some targeted groups there will be a multitude of factors that will act against them of about family background, lack of peer support, perhaps they are care leavers, perhaps there are care providers, but what is it that can actually help make these students very, very resilient and I think some of the cohorts that both the universities have already been working with there are case studies there and there are systems and interventions that can be put into place and that work well to help them develop that resilience so some focus on what can be done - what makes graduates when all those students come in, those that really do succeed from disadvantaged backgrounds because we have been admitting a lot of students from SEC 4-7 in Northern Ireland, we are ahead of the game so what is it what really

works and how might maybe be rolled out a little bit wider across the student population.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Okay. A focus on a success factors, okay. Any other comments? Can I maybe just focusing on the questions then. If I can start at the bottom again, you know given the fact that we have the small window of opportunity to influence the policy development. What, if you were going to advise us, what would you be recommending to us in terms of what government can do which it's not doing well enough at the moment?

Paul Donaghy

Sorry, just at the chance of repeating myself, it's about more 'joined-up-ness' we have a fractured link between the learner, the provider and the employer/government/advisor. That's fractured, at least we need to bring some cohesion to the different bits of that, so my plea would be for a bit more joined-up-ness and within higher education, sorry, within DEL, would be a good starting point.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Are you thinking about your lunch?! Okay, well look, maybe can I thank you really for your contributions this morning, I think it has really been quite a rich contribution, we've talked about the barriers, we've got confirmation I think that the teams analysis is you know, really, I think, on the right pitch, if I can say that and we've got lots of contributions about where the strategy might take us in terms of policy proposals. We've got your views on contextual data, on the flexibility of provisions and the portability of the learning experience on pathways. We have a very important issue about making sure this is person-centric, rather than institution centric and getting the right balance between early intervention and dealing with the problems that are immediately facing us.

And then also looking at, you know the background really, you know, the responding to carers as a group and issues like that and also the importance of making sure that people have access to the right information at the right time so we'll be taking all of that back and it will go into the melting pot and out of that melting pot will emerge this consultation document on our strategy later this year.

But maybe before I close maybe I would ask the panel maybe whether they want to comment and give us some of their reflections on this morning's event.

Fergus Devitt

Just to re-emphasise what Andrew has said, I'd just like to thank everybody for coming here today for their views, opinions and helping us to shape what will be coming out in the Autumn. Just one point I would like to make; there's issues that have been addressed as we've gone through the morning. Particularly around flexible methods of learning and flexible methods of funding for students, particularly those who would normally access higher education. And certainly within the department our model at the moment for funding higher education is based very much on full time undergraduates and that is something that is coming through the work on our broader, higher education strategy as an issue for us to examine seriously. Because we are moving into an era where as Andrew has already alluded to, there may not be much capacity for further expansion of pure full time undergraduate numbers.

So if that is the case, then our funding model may need to reflect that and that may in turn give opportunities around widening participation so just to reassure some of you that that is an issue that we are looking at seriously within the Department.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Deirdre?

Deirdre Gillespie, Department of Education

Thank you. Just I suppose I want to sum up, in relation to the aspirations and attainments group. Really it's very clear from the discussions this morning that in order to raise aspirations and raise attainment levels, the higher education pathway must be learner-centered. And it must be built on a realistic ladder of progression opportunities for all sorts of qualifications are recognised. It needs to be fit for purpose, fit for purpose for the under-represented young person, for the work based learner and for the adult returner.

But I don't want to go away today without making the point that there are a number of strategies already in place which will address some of the issues that certainly that our group identified. From the Department of Education's side; raising standards is a central focus of their Every School a Good School strategy. Literacy and numeracy central focus's on raising standards, the entitlement frame work is there to provide opportunities for young people to engage in a broad and balanced curriculum which they will have the opportunity not only to engage in general or academic qualifications but also vocational qualification so that there is much time and much effort in addressing issues around attainment which will have an impact on aspiration from the dept of Education side.

On the other side of the house from DEL, quality improvement strategy, which is in place preparing for success is addressing many of the issues in terms of raising standards within the college and indeed training organisations. The FE means business and of course the essential skills strategy again is, is raising issues in relation to raising standards, raising attainment so that they higher education is a meaningful and progressive opportunity for a wide number of young people, adult learners and work based learners within our society. And for me it's very clear - this is a process, this isn't a series of bolt on activities, in order to reach targets, it's a process that starts at a very early stage, requires early intervention and it may take it a long time for it to turn but it's a process which will require a range of partners if we are to gain the successes that we need. Thank you.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning
Denise?

Denise McAlister, Pro Vice Chancellor of Teaching and Learning, University of Ulster

Again I welcome the questions and the comments and I think you provided some assurance to us in terms of we're looking at the right groups in terms of the targets, but one thing I think has come across this morning and we haven't had a lot of time to discuss it really is the multilayer-ed nation, multilayer-ed aspects to targeting, it's not just one group, but when you start layering gender and disability and all that together it becomes extremely, extremely complex. And that complexity, I think then is reflected in the extent which we are hearing this morning as well about the need for personalised interventions and whilst I would agree that is likely to be more effective, personalised interventions are not cheap, they do not come on the cheap. So getting, the one size fits all, it fits nobody but its still provides opportunities for some people but if you tailor everything then it may be expensive, but can we afford it so there's no point in raising aspirations and expectations in terms of what we can do to widen participation if at the end of the day there is not the resources there to realise our ambitions.

I think also gong away for institutions represented here, it's very clear and Fergus made mention of it; the whole discussion today cannot be seen in isolation from the broader debate on the higher education strategy in Northern Ireland. Every aspect of it I think affects the future direction of higher education. As far as institutions are concerned when we get the students in there's a lot of work that we need to do and some of that is about is changing our processes, changing our structures, but it's also about changing our mindsets, hearts and minds have to change here if we are

to be successful and well.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning
Okay. Wilma?

Wilma Fee, Director of Academic and Student Affairs, Queens University Belfast>

Just one observation I would make from today and it's virtually been reinforced by the work of each of the groups and that is the new strategy has to be action focused and it had to be targeted and in today's austerity I think we will have to look very, very critically in that strategy of the hierarchy of needs and what those, how those needs should be supported.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning
Okay. Damian?

Dr Damian O'Kane, University of Ulster

Yeah, I mean I think there's a danger in going to a wedding and turning it into a wake. I think we have had wonderful success in Northern Ireland and when you compare what we doing in terms of region already when you listen to what's going on, you know through England, we have had amazing success to the extent that they are now starting to copy what we do in Northern Ireland in England. We've been going ten years in a lot of things that we're doing so we have had great success. That said, we can do more and want to do more but I think that can only be achieved as part of a partnership and I think these forms of discussions are really helpful. I think we can target better, we can raise aspirations further, we can enhance recruitment and selection and we can improve retention. And it's there for us to lead rather than to follow.

Andrew Hamilton, Deputy Secretary, Department for Employment and Learning

Thank you Damian. Message there, it's almost like the Obama campaign - "we can you know." Okay well look thank you very much, just maybe before the end I should say that the presentations this morning will be put on the website, the Department website if you want to access them they will be available from tomorrow. And then finally if you would complete the evaluation forms and leave them on the table, so thank you very much, so can I thank our speakers this morning, can I also thank their colleagues who are participation on the working groups and most of all, can I thank you for coming and participating and I think you have really added value to our thought processes so thank you very much indeed.

Lunch is going to be served next door and there will be an opportunity maybe to continue the debate over a bite to eat. Thank you very much indeed.

Applause.