

Tom Buchanan (DUP), Deputy Chair for the Committee for Employment and Learning

Tom Buchanan, DUP Assembly Member for West Tyrone, which covers Omagh and Strabane, currently sitting as Vice Chair of the DEL Committee.

Changes to funding for further and higher education

One of the issues we have been looking at today has been financing for further and higher education. We're gravely concerned about the cut-backs to the funding in that this year alone. 2015/16, the department has cut the funding to further and higher education by £16 million. That has to be met then by the colleges, by the universities. That means cuts in programs, cuts in classes that it's going to be running, which then has a knock-on effect on the students.

Again, there are not going to be the same number of students that's going to be taken into the colleges. And it's a matter of grave concern, something that we're getting lobbied about, not only in the committee as a committee, but also as individual Assembly Members. One of the issues to try and overcome this, the minister has launched The Big Conversation, which is to go out to see if we can get representation and open up a debate from all sectors of society, to see how we can better fund FE and HE forward into the future in a more sustainable manner.

Student Fees

Student fees is another burning topic for the committee. We actually had representation from the Student Union today at committee on this particular issue. And, again, it's a big issue for the students.

In Northern Ireland, you'll know that the executive has capped the student fees at around three-and-a-half thousand pounds. In England, they're £9,000. In Scotland, it's free. And the students would be looking at that we should follow the Scottish model. However, to follow the Scottish model would mean that we'd have to find £55 million per year up until 2020, which would then increase to about £80 million a year. So, at this moment and time, that's not feasible.

But we are keen to keep the student fees low, because we believe it's good for the economy. We want to get our young people to go to universities to train and we want our universities to stay at the cutting edge of technology in the world leading class. That's where we are at the minute, and we want to stay there, so... There is merit for a discussion around this whole matter, but we're not keen that student fees would increase in any manner, any way at all, you know.

Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships is a program that's been brought forward by the department again, to assist young people to get out into employment. So, I think this is one of the things that I would encourage young people to get involved in, because they can do their apprenticeship, or their higher level apprenticeship, whenever they're still studying, and it doesn't cost them anything.

And we get quite a number of businesses who come before the committee, and their difficulty and their problem is, they need electricians, they need welders, they need scaffolders, they need pipe fitters, they need all these types of people and they haven't got them. We haven't got them trained up to the level they need to be at for these people to take them on.

So, you know, it's not only academics that we're looking for, it's people with skills like welding and plumbing that we need, and this is the course and the way forward for them. And I would encourage young people to look at that and to look at going forward and that... in the apprenticeship model because there is plenty of work out there for them.