

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM OIDEACHAS AGUS COIMIRCE SHÓISIALACH

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Dé Céadaoin, 13 Márta 2013

Wednesday, 13 March 2013

The Joint Committee met at 1 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Joan Collins,	Senator Jim D’Arcy,
Deputy Jim Daly,	Senator Fidelma Healy Eames,
Deputy Derek Keating,	Senator Mary Moran,
Deputy Charlie McConalogue,	Senator Averil Power.
Deputy Jonathan O’Brien,	
Deputy Brendan Ryan,	

In attendance: Deputy Anthony Lawlor.

DEPUTY JOANNA TUFFY IN THE CHAIR.

Delivering Third Level Education Online: Discussion with Hibernia College and Schoolbag

Chairman: I welcome the officials from Hibernia College to discuss with us their experience in delivering third level education online, particularly teacher training. I welcome Dr. Seán Rowland, president, Dr. Nicholas Breakwell, executive dean, and Ms Anna Davitt, head of Irish.

By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the evidence they are to give this committee. If a witness is directed by the committee to cease giving evidence in relation to a particular matter and that witness continues to so do, he or she is entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of his or her evidence. Witnesses are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and witnesses are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise nor make charges against any person or persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. The opening statements the witnesses submitted to the committee will be published on the committee website after this meeting.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I invite Dr. Seán Rowland to make his opening remarks.

Dr, Seán Rowland: I thank the Chairman. We are delighted to be here and we are thankful for the invitation to attend. When my colleagues have introduced themselves, Dr. Nicholas Breakwell will give a short presentation on Hibernia College's experience and what it does. Dr. Breakwell is with us for 12 years and is our executive dean. Ms Anna Davitt is head of the Irish language and its promotion, particularly through the teacher education programmes at primary and second levels.

Ms Anna Davitt: Is mise ceann na Gaeilge, head of Irish, in Hibernia College. Táim ag obair leis an gcoláiste le dhá bhliain ag iarraidh cúrsaí Gaeilge a chur chun cinn ann agus an teanga a fhorbairt i measc na mac léinn agus na foirne. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis an gcoiste as bualadh leis inniu. Is mór againn an deis seo a bheith againn.

Dr. Nicholas Breakwell: I am the executive dean of Hibernia College. I will give a brief overview of the college and the programmes it offers, and perhaps say a little about our history and how we arrived at our current position. I will talk members through the document we sent them and pick out some highlights. We were established in 2000 and therefore have been in operation for approximately 12 years. We started our first HETAC-accredited programme in 2002, a master's degree in public administration in partnership with Dublin City Council. Our first teacher training programme was launched in 2003, which was a primary school initial teacher training programme, accredited by HETAC and, at the time, the Department of Education and Science, and now the Teaching Council of Ireland.

We are based here in Dublin and also have offices in Westport and in London, where we are delivering initial teacher training programmes in collaboration with the British Government. We have approximately 100 full-time staff and 300 to 400 part-time faculty members who do most of the delivery of the programmes, both here and abroad.

Hibernia College was established by Seán Rowland and Sara McDonnell to improve access to higher education for those who find the traditional access routes difficult, both in Ireland and elsewhere. That remains our mission today, namely, to develop and deliver high-quality, fully accredited postgraduate and undergraduate education at an affordable price to those who find it difficult, for family, geographical or other reasons, to access traditional modes of education. In order to do that, we make full use of the benefits of educational technology and we deliver all of our programmes in a blended fashion, where a significant proportion of the student learning experience occurs online, supplemented by face-to-face provision and, in the case of teacher training, by the in-school experience. We provide a range of programmes but our biggest programmes in Ireland are our initial teacher education programmes. We are the largest provider of newly qualified primary school teachers in the country. Approximately 35% to 40% of all newly qualified teachers come through our programme. We have also recently started a new post-primary initial teacher training programme and the first cohort of students will graduate from that programme this summer.

We are also accredited by the Teaching Agency in England, largely as a result of the success and high quality of the programme we offer in Ireland. We were able to persuade the Teaching Agency in England, or the Training and Development Agency, TDA, as it was at the time, to accredit us as an initial teacher training provider in that jurisdiction. We currently have an allocation from the agency to deliver maths, physics, chemistry and modern foreign languages initial teacher training programmes at second level. We are also working with the agency to expand that provision into other secondary subjects and into primary level programmes. We are the largest provider in England of what are known as subject knowledge enhancement programmes, which are fully funded by the British Government for the purposes of upskilling already qualified teachers who need additional skills in, for example, maths or modern foreign languages. We are currently delivering those programmes across England.

In Ireland, we also deliver our programmes across the whole country. Anybody in any county in Ireland can access our provision, and at every single graduation ceremony we have had students from every county in the country. We also offer a range of programmes in the health science arena. Our flagship programme is a master of science in pharmaceutical medicine, which is like an MBA for the pharmaceutical industry. That programme was initiated with Pfizer and now has students from 36 different countries and every major pharmaceutical company participating. As a result of that first programme, we now have a range of other programmes and are in receipt of FP7 funding from the EU for two major projects. The first project deals with this particular area of training and the other is called EUPATI, which is a series of patient advocacy websites across the EU for those suffering from various diseases.

We also offer a series of continuing professional development, CPD, programmes in this country for primary and post-primary teachers in the form of short courses, as well as a full master's degree programme. We have recently launched undergraduate provision in Ireland, in partnership with the University of London. We are a recognised centre of that institution and we also offer programmes under the direction of the London School of Economics and Goldsmith's College in finance, business and computing. Those programmes only started in October and we are hoping to grow that provision in Ireland and globally. We believe there is a fantastic

opportunity to assist those very high-quality and world-renowned institutions to deliver their programmes on a global scale.

In terms of the way we develop and deliver our programmes, we have a team of about 35 to 40 individuals who are content development specialists and they work with subject matter experts, under the direction of the course management team, of which Ms Davitt is a member for our primary programme. The content is developed under an academic framework which we call COACT, the aim of which is to enable students to get to a stage of critical thinking about the content on a session-by-session and module-by-module basis. The content itself is delivered in three main formats across the web. The first is on-demand content, which is pre-recorded, lecture-style material which can be accessed 24 hours a day, seven days a week, across the virtual learning environment. The second is live, online, synchronous tutorials, similar to a WebEx conferencing tool, where students have to log in at a particular time and are facilitated through the tutorial by an online tutor. Those sessions run in the evenings for our provision in Ireland and at other times for our provision around the world. The third main type of content is asynchronous or non-time-dependent collaboration work that students engage in, which would include tools such as forums, blogs, Wikis, learning diaries and so forth, and all of our course content would involve tasks which require students to engage with that type of work.

We have built our reputation on the indigenous quality of our product and the HETAC accreditation, which assures that quality. We have also built it by partnering with a number of prestigious universities around the world and offering programmes in collaboration with them. Some of those universities are mentioned in the document circulated to the committee prior to this meeting and include the University of London, MIT, with which we are involved in research on blended learning, Peking University, which is China's top university, the University of the Western Cape in South Africa, with which we deliver an MSc in regulatory sciences in sub-Saharan Africa, the University of Plymouth, which provides accreditation services for our teacher training provision in England, and a number of others. I have already mentioned that three key quality checks for us are our academic accreditation provided by HETAC, now the QQI, and, in terms of our teacher training programmes, the two teacher training professional accreditations from the Teaching Council in Ireland and the Teaching Agency in England.

That is all I will say for now, by way of introduction but would welcome any questions from members of the committee.

Deputy Charlie McConologue: I welcome the representatives of Hibernia College and thank them for outlining to us the developmental progress the college has made in recent years. The witnesses have highlighted a very interesting development in terms of how it is providing its educational programmes and the fact that web-based learning is a very significant element of those programmes.

Regarding the primary education qualification at postgraduate level, how does the cost compare with the cost of such courses in the State colleges? Is Hibernia College cheaper or more expensive? I presume 100% of the costs are covered by the students themselves. The supply and demand issue is often raised with regard to the development of web-based courses. Such courses are obviously more convenient and flexible in terms of being able to increase numbers, in comparison with the more traditional, college and classroom-based system. What is the college's view on the fact that there are many students graduating with primary level qualifications who are struggling to find jobs as a result of the increase in the pupil-teacher ratio in recent years? The number of children at primary level is expanding and an additional 10,000 pupils are expected to enter the primary school system this year. I ask the witnesses to comment on

this. Is it an issue for the college's students? Is the college getting feedback from its graduates on this matter? Do the witnesses believe it is something that needs to be addressed? I also ask them to comment on actual employment numbers and the statistics for graduates of the college. There is an interesting point here. The college is a private one and the student pays. The college is providing approximately 40% of the primary teaching graduates, yet the State is contributing to the teacher training colleges through the universities. That is an interesting dynamic. With teacher training, the main objective is to produce teachers who are able to train in the classroom. As a lay person, one would expect it to be one of the courses in which one would expect far more contact time being required with the student to ensure they are well qualified as teachers at the end of the course. Ultimately, we are trying to train them to have the ability to impart knowledge to students and to get their message across. If the medium of the web is involved in much of the education Hibernia College is providing, I am interested to hear the witness's thoughts on how that impacts on educator training in general.

I am interested in hearing about the college's experience of how it developed its courses, not just in education but across the broader range as was outlined in the presentation. What impact does the college believe web-based learning can have in the wider education system in future? The college has been to the forefront in developing that and obviously that is the way our education system will increasingly be developing in the future. How does the college envisage the delivery of education, particularly at third level, and the development of that aspect over the coming years?

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: Deputy McConalogue covered most of the areas in which we are interested. Could the witness perhaps profile the type of student who accesses the courses? Is it an older student returning to education? It would be interesting to know if they are people who are changing careers or people who are out of work and seeking to return to employment. Using the facility to learn online is much easier for them than going to a college, particularly if one has been out of education for a long time. Sometimes returning to a college setting can be a little daunting and it might suit to do the course online. I am interested in hearing about the type of student involved as well as the number of students. The outstanding figure for me is that the college is producing between 35% and 40% of all newly qualified primary teachers. That is a huge number for a single institution to produce. There is also the issue of supply and demand. One of the criticisms levelled at Hibernia College is that it produces too many teachers when the demand does not exist. How would the witness respond to such charges?

Obviously, there are huge advantages to e-learning. Are there any disadvantages to learning solely online in terms of the personal development between teachers and students? Are there areas where it can be improved but the technology has not yet caught up with what the college wants to do? It would be interesting to hear how the college envisages the e-learning experience developing over the next ten years.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: I welcome our guests. It is nice to meet Dr. Seán Rowland again. I know a little about what the college does as I did supervised teacher practice for a time for Hibernia College. Will the witnesses give a breakdown of the percentage of face-to-face encounters for students versus the percentage of the course that would be totally online? Face-to-face encounters would include weekend tutorials, as well as the teaching practice. I congratulate the college. It appears to be a global provider of education now. It is good that it started here at home. The teachers bring an extra experience to the classroom, in terms of e-learning and digital learning awareness, which does not exist in other colleges. I have met the college's students and they are the same as students who go to the regular colleges, having

worked in one such college previously.

I will offer some criticisms to the witnesses to give them an opportunity to respond to them. Like Deputy McConalogue and Deputy O'Brien, I am frequently told that the Government should cap the numbers going into teacher training colleges, especially Hibernia College, because there is no hope of that number of teachers getting posts when they graduate. I am sure the witnesses will respond to that.

The witness said the college has gone into the second level sector. What is the position with that? Will the college use the same model? I feel bad for second level teachers. It sometimes takes them up to ten years to get a permanent position in this country. What will the college bring to that level that will be helpful, given the situation as it is? With regard to qualifications, Dr. Nicholas Breakwell said that academic accreditation is critical. Of course it is. How does the qualification rank *vis-à-vis* the traditional qualification from teacher training colleges? I realise it is a BEd postgraduate. Has any independent study been carried out in which the Hibernia College qualification has been compared with, for example, the qualification from Mary Immaculate College, St. Patrick's College or Marino College? If not, would the college be open to that in terms of, perhaps, even contributing to or sponsoring such an independent study?

To return to the schools' experience, what type of supports does the college give to the schools that take its teachers? I used to receive criticism in that regard. The schools felt that they had to do a good deal of the training of the teacher because the teacher did not have as much face-to-face experience. When the teacher came to the classroom, it was left up to the school. The chances are that the college has improved that aspect hugely, but I am anxious to know a little more about it. Has the college surveyed the students regarding their experience of distance learning and what was their satisfaction with it? Would they like a little more face-to-face time and how is the college working on that?

Are the college's students subject to the same external qualification examination as the students of Mary Immaculate College, St. Patrick's College and Marino College would be? Hibernia College has now expanded to the UK. How did the college get started there in terms of linking in with the government and so forth?

Dr. Seán Rowland: I will cover the questions by responding in a story-like fashion about all the issues and bringing them together. I will address them directly and if I omit anything, just pull me up on it, Chairman.

I thank the members for their questions. It is great to have the opportunity to discuss this. I will ask Dr. Nicholas Breakwell and Ms Anna Davitt to intervene as appropriate. We interview all of the candidates who will be accepted. We interview them in Irish and in English. They all hold level 8 or university college degrees already and they all must have a standard of Irish that we consider to be sufficient to sustain and develop them through a postgraduate level course. Most of the people who come to the college would have had a career already. They tend to be in their late 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s. A large number of them are regionally based throughout the country. They do not have to move to a city, rent an apartment and leave home. Many issues do not arise for them because they can study from home.

The cost is the same. All of our students pay their tuition, just as all the graduate students at other colleges pay their tuition to go to a teacher training programme. However, the one difference is that obviously the other colleges get State intervention for the students. We do not get that. However, the student pays the same amount, €9,000, for a two year course. It is the same

at the other colleges as it is with us.

With regard to numbers, more than 80% of the most recent class to graduate last autumn were working when surveyed at graduation. This is a worthwhile debate. Do we tell people to put their cheques away because they cannot be teachers when the world needs approximately 6 million teachers? We have a strong history of teaching people all over the world. Our missionaries and lay people travelled. A large cohort of people come to us for interview who say they are emigrating and they do not want to go without a teaching qualification. We also have people who go abroad for a few years or some for the rest of their lives. We do not promote that or engage in that because it is up to the people themselves. With regard to numbers, we look at the Central Statistics Office figures and talk to officials in the Department of Education and Skills, teacher unions and the schools. We come back to the programme for schools, which has been enriched hugely since 2003. No college can guarantee a job to a graduate in any discipline and we are in austere times. Do we stop preparing teachers? If a cap is applied, where is set? Is the cap set for Ireland? For example, our programme in England is growing rapidly every year and providing more and more qualified teachers. Why would we cap the number if people want to become teachers and we know, particularly at secondary level, it may take them eight to ten years to get a permanent pensionable job in Ireland? Whose decision is it? Is it the individual's decision in the context of his or her career advancement or do we have a broader spectrum to look at where we have a responsibility to Third World countries or to individuals in Ireland who want to upskill, are willing to pay their own money to do so and who are not asking for Government intervention? Do we say "No, ye can't do that"? I do not have all the answers to these questions. We have had larger classes but we have pulled them back a little because the worst thing that can happen is to flood the place with teachers. However, we are finding more and more that people want to do something, especially if they are unemployed, have a college degree and can qualify. They want to qualify while they have time. The largest cohort within our teaching programmes is mothers of young children who decide that they do not want to go back to the technology, pharmaceutical or insurance company or the bank and they want to go back to school with their children and teach. They make a lifestyle choice. People make the decision to earn a little less but to have more time with children, more leisure time and more quality time. They apply in their hundreds.

The next question was about how we started in England. We were at a conference on education and we met some departmental officials and they said they would like to come over to see what we were doing. They came over and they then invited us to present for the provision of teacher education with a blended approach. The blend tends to be 50:50. They spend time together in the Gaeltacht. We pay rent for the education centres around the country, which are invaluable, and we bring the students together in them for lectures and to meet their supervisors. They also have their online programmes, which, as Dr. Breakwell pointed out, are asynchronous live. They also have seminars, which are like chat rooms. It is interesting to see how they have formed such close relations by graduation because they can talk to each other every day online and they can make an appointment to talk to their tutor. There is human contact all the time because it is live online. All the faces are on screen and if a student has to leave the class to go to the bathroom, for example, he or she presses a button and a hand goes up. The tutor will ask what is up and the student will say he or she is stepping out.

It is fascinating to see how it becomes a live learning community. The feedback is enormously positive. These are adults who have all been to university. They have gone through the campus experience and there are fortunate that this is all done. They may not need that same experience again now that they are in their 30s or whatever and this course may be more tai-

lored for their needs. We listen to them all the time and we also meet the school principals and teachers regularly to get feedback. In Ireland, England and the US, schools are becoming much more integral to the preparation of future generations of teachers because the bottom line is the teachers, principals and so on are the ones who know what works at the coal face. That is why on interview panels we always have principals and teachers with ten years' experience or more. They are able to tell us if somebody will fit into their environment. We have the paperwork. We know they have the qualifications to get in but we want to see whether they have empathy, the psychological balance. The more we work with schools, the more we will get the proper teacher for the future generations together.

Dr. Nicholas Breakwell: I will first address some of the questions about the nature of e-learning perhaps with an anecdote. Massive open online courses or MOOCs are a phenomenon sweeping through higher education currently. The first was a course in artificial intelligence run by Stanford University. More than 100,000 first registered for the programme while significantly fewer finished it. The course was run concurrently on site at the university as well. Several thousand students finished the programme and of the top 100 performers in the examination, only one was in the on-site programme. Increasingly, the question is not how online learning can be as good as traditional face to face learning but how can face to face learning up its game to become as good as online learning. That is what we would say to anybody who has any doubts or who is seeking comfort in the value and the quality of online provision - not just our provision but high quality online provision anywhere else in the globe.

With regard to comparisons of our initial teacher training provision in Ireland with other providers of such training - we are talking here about the postgraduate programme - as far as costs go, we have benchmarked our fees against those charged by other providers but they also receive, in addition to the fee paid by the student, a considerable and variable amount from the Exchequer to supplement that ranging from €8,000 in the case of the large colleges such as St. Patrick's college and Marino college to €40,000 in the smaller colleges which only train a small number of students. As far as the students go, they pay almost the same at plus or minus 5%. We cost the Exchequer zero euro; all the other providers together cost €25 million a year. When comparing quality of courses, all our programmes are now validated by the Teaching Council of Ireland against its set of standards for measuring ITE providers. We meet those standards in the same way as any other provider of ITE. Beyond that, there is no formal objective measure of quality, no inspection system in this country which can tell us anything more than that. The Department of Education and Skills inspects the quality of newly-qualified teachers but, unfortunately, that information is not made public. Therefore, while we have our own views about where we rate - which is quite near the top of that quality measure - that information is not known because it is not subject to public scrutiny.

In England our provision is subject to Ofsted inspection. We are still a new provider in England so we have not as yet been subject to a first Ofsted inspection. We have engaged an external Ofsted consultant to carry out a pre-check. We believe our provision will achieve the highest grade of "Outstanding". That provision is based on what we do in Ireland so that grade will be an indirect score for the quality of our work in Ireland. On the assumption that the grade will be high, we are happy to share that assumption with the committee. The model of provision which is 50% online and 50% face-to-face, is exactly the same and is based on our experience in Ireland.

Chairman: We can take questions at this point.

Dr. Nicholas Breakwell: If I may just make one further point about supply.

Chairman: Yes, of course.

Dr. Nicholas Breakwell: There is no formal workforce modelling system in place in Ireland. This was a point raised by the Teaching Council of Ireland and in other fora. It would appear to be extremely difficult to achieve. Therefore, in the absence of any formal measures, Hibernia College, along with other providers, departmental officials and the Teaching Council of Ireland, is attempting to make a guesstimate of what the future demand for teachers might be. We have commenced our post-primary teacher programme because we believe that by the time the students graduate in any substantial numbers in 2014 there will be a demand for post-primary teachers because of the significant demographic explosion of which the committee members will be aware.

As members of the committee mentioned, there appears to be an over-supply of teachers in the post-primary market at the moment. That over-supply is being funded and provided by the State because Hibernia College has not yet produced any graduates from those programmes. There is a need to look at both State provision as well as private provision.

Dr. Seán Rowland: Since times have become more austere we have introduced dozens of scholarships to provide tuition at a greatly reduced rate, often 18% or 20% of the total. This came about because we found that successful applicants could not get the money together to pay the fees. We cannot be an instrument that allows only the rich to take these courses. We have literally given out dozens of these scholarships.

We also give scholarships to athletes in different sports from around the country. It has been the case that the more elite athletes tend to leave their communities in favour of an educational institution where the facilities are better for them. We have been pleased to facilitate more athletes staying in their own areas which they had been unable to do previously, while continuing to study for their qualifications.

Senator Averil Power: I thank the delegates for their presentation. I had the benefit of a briefing from Hibernia College last year and as a result I asked the committee to invite the delegates to attend today. It has been a very interesting discussion. In my view, e-learning has massive potential as an education system in general.

We have been overly conservative in our attitude to e-learning. The delegates explained that the students are visible online. There is a lot of myth and suspicion spread about e-learning. Some people think that the students will only click into a tutorial and then not stay for the duration of the class because it is online. That is a very conservative and unfair attitude. I have seen how the system works. I can see the potential for people who have had the experience of college life but who wish to upskill without the need to be physically present or to travel distances. It is most useful for lectures because all one needs to do is listen to the lecturer.

My questions have been asked by other members. I refer to Deputy O'Brien's question about age profiles. I ask the delegates to clarify that point more specifically. Are they people with families? I can understand why this would be the case in the primary teaching courses. Is there a younger student profile? I ask for the delegates' views on the progress of e-learning in Ireland in general. They may not wish to comment on the practice in other institutions. I think we have been too conservative in general.

There is potential for the use of e-learning at second level. I noted recent coverage in the newspapers about a school in west Dublin - in Deputy Tuffy's area, perhaps. The Minister

for Education and Skills, Deputy Quinn, referred to the school in a speech to the Seanad last week. He said that two schools were doing honours maths through an online platform. I think the delegates may have some advice in this area because there is a need to extend this form of teaching. Hibernia College has partnership arrangements with the pharmaceutical sector as a response to a business need. Is there potential for partnerships with other sectors that may be looking for similar programmes?

Senator Jim D’Arcy: I welcome the delegates. In my years as a school principal I had many students from Hibernia College doing their teaching practice in the school. I am thinking of the three students who were in the school in 2007 and 2008 who were excellent. They all have jobs now and one of them is a vice-principal after a couple of years. The other two are very well regarded. I visited one of them recently in my old school. Hibernia College is doing a good job training teachers and the standards are very high. The teaching practice examiners are also very good and they give good advice.

I have a couple of questions. The legislation for the new education and training boards is going through both Houses. Is there a role for Hibernia College to use e-learning to teach language skills? A jobs fair was held recently in Dundalk. Persons with language skills are in demand from companies such as PayPal which hopes to employ more than 1,000 people. Currently, PayPal employs 220 but only 35 of those employees are Irish. The company is advertising abroad for workers.

Tá Anna Davitt anseo agus tá cúram na Gaeilge uirthi. An féidir léi cur síos a thabhairt dúinn ar caidé atá ar siúl ó thaobh na Gaeilge de i gColáiste Hibernia? Tá an-suim agam san ábhar sin. My last question is whether Hibernia College would have any jobs for redundant Senators with a lot of experience in education. There is no such thing as a free lunch.

(Interruptions).

Chairman: The witnesses cannot answer that question. I have anecdotal evidence that there is concern among members of the teaching profession and in the teacher unions about the size of Hibernia College’s share of the market. The number of qualified teachers from the college is very high and concerns have been expressed to me about what that might mean for the quality of teachers in the future. While I agree that online education is very much a part of the future, having had a look at it myself, I believe students are losing something by not being in the lecture hall. I accept that with the technology, which is similar to Skype, one is seeing the person delivering the course but the lecturer is not physically present and in that sense, there is something missing. The Open University has that problem too but it has a certain amount of on-site tutorials built into its courses. Perhaps the representatives might clarify if they have on-site provision too.

Dr. Seán Rowland: It is about 50:50.

Chairman: What profit does the college make? What is the bottom line? The college is not a charitable organisation but a business, and I would like some information on the financial aspects, if possible. My final question relates to the education system in Finland. This committee examined the system in that country and has prepared a report for the Houses of the Oireachtas. In that country, they place great emphasis on pedagogy. I know it is part of the curriculum here, as it stands, but how much emphasis would the college place on that and how would it compare with the other teacher training colleges in that regard?

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: The college works with postgraduates in the main, which is good because, as the witnesses have said, they have had the university experience. Do the witnesses believe there would be benefits in working with undergraduates? Does the college have an interest in the area of second level education at all? As Senator D'Arcy mentioned, there are particular areas where our performance is very poor in this country, one of which is language learning. Our performance in digital learning at second level is also relatively poor because we do not have enough students with the confidence to apply through the CAO system for computer science and information and communication technology courses. This is happening despite the fact it is estimated that there will be approximately 900,000 jobs across the EU in those areas by 2015.

Has the college tracked the progress of its graduates, in terms of longitudinal work and whether they are staying in teaching? To elaborate a little on what the Chairman said about empathy, will we get empathy from a teacher who does not have much face-to-face interaction with students? I think 50:50 is pretty good but empathy is a key ingredient in relationship building, and relationships are the key factor for children and teachers. If there is not a good relationship between teacher and student, there will be no learning.

In these austere times, would there be a temptation on the part of the State to move the majority of students to the private education sector so that the State would not have to pay for their education in the teacher education colleges? It might save State funding to the public colleges like Mary Immaculate College, Saint Patrick's College and the Marino Institute of Education. Do the witnesses have any thoughts on that?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Some students who are doing postgraduate courses can get assistance towards fees if they attend State colleges. Does that also apply to Hibernia College? I ask the witnesses to expand on what has happened in the last ten years since the college became involved in providing postgraduate courses at primary level, in terms of the numbers of graduates and the number of jobs available in that period. During that period, have the numbers graduating from the State training colleges remained constant? If they have remained constant and Hibernia College is graduating 40% of new teachers, that implies there are 40% more graduates now than there were ten years ago. I ask the witnesses to compare the increased number of graduates with the demands within the system. The witnesses said that 80% of their graduates are being hired, according to the college's own internal survey. I am seeking figures for the number of jobs available and the number of graduates qualifying. While Hibernia College has been increasing the number of primary teaching graduates, the State has been paying the same money to the traditional teacher training colleges. If there is a big gap between the total number of graduates and the total number of teachers in the education system, then perhaps the State needs to reassess its funding of teacher training.

Obviously, the representatives are here promoting their own case. Hibernia College is a profit-making education provider and there is nothing wrong with that. Obviously, the programmes it provides must be of high quality in order to attract students. I was interested in the points made about the additional costs involved in educating students in the State colleges. The estimate provided was that it costs an additional €8,000 to €10,000 to educate students in the larger teacher training colleges. I ask the witnesses to give a breakdown of those figures and explain how they arrived at that estimate. The estimate given for the smaller training colleges was up to €40,000 per student, which is very high. I ask the witnesses to elaborate on that figure too.

Dr. Seán Rowland: The Department of Education and Skills is the source of information on the public funding of teacher training colleges. We would not be able to drill it down to very

detailed levels. When we ask a question of the Department, we are given an overall figure, so to speak. We would not be able to drill it down to *per capita* funding, per course, per college. We do not have that sort of information.

Dr. Nicholas Breakwell: A recent report by Ms Áine Hyland contains all of the relevant figures, at a gross level. I am sure the committee is aware of that report or can obtain copies of it. It was written in preparation for the report by the Finnish group which was mentioned. It was a preliminary, state of the market type document, and all of those figures are in there, including the amount of State subsidy to all of the different colleges.

Dr. Seán Rowland: When we talk about pedagogy, we must recognise that it is at the core of the teacher curriculum. When one looks at the history, psychology and sociology of education, as well as the philosophy of education, all of these courses contribute to the core of the curriculum that student teachers must successfully complete and be examined on in order to graduate. In looking at our provision, we have been very fortunate to attract the input of some international experts. The dean of the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University, Kathleen McCartney, is on our board, for example, and she offers great insights into education in Finland, a country she frequently visits, as well as education in the United States. We also have many colleagues in the United Kingdom and here in Ireland too. I know that Senator Healy Eames has been in the United States and got her doctorate there. We have great leaders in education at home, with people like Mr. Brian MacCraith at DCU, who is a leader in his field. His contribution to education is equal to or better than those of most people in Finland. It is great to get international input and examine best practice but it is also great to be able to come back home and see that many people are doing it right here and engaging at the highest levels. As we move forward over the next ten years, as mentioned by committee members, if Ireland can engage, as a small island off the coast of Europe, there are hundreds of millions of potential students that can be reached.

We are in 36 countries with the pharmaceutical medicine programme, which is a master's degree programme at the highest level. To get into the programme, one needs a master's degree, a medical degree or a doctorate. It is not shilly-shallying around with low academics. This concerns doctors, pharmacists, researchers and statisticians, who can be incredibly demanding. They do not waste even an hour so if there is a hint of three minutes not going productively, one would immediately be slammed. With regard to faculty, we mostly hire in Ireland, but there are also some world-class experts who would satisfy the intellectual appetites of these people. Those people would fly to be on-site in Ireland.

We need institutions, either public or private, to work more closely together. We are a for-profit group and any surplus we have made in any year since our establishment has gone back into the programme. Nobody has ever taken a profit.

Chairman: What kind of money is involved?

Dr. Seán Rowland: We absolutely do not discuss that. It would not be appropriate.

Chairman: It is a matter of-----

Dr. Seán Rowland: Do companies come here and discuss it? There is competition law, etc.

Chairman: It would not necessarily be the norm that companies would come to the Oireachtas, as much of the general business deals with public providers or services. It is a matter of interest to us.

Dr. Seán Rowland: Of course it is. It is a matter of interest to our competitors to as well.

Chairman: It gives an important contextual point.

Dr. Seán Rowland: It is policy.

Senator Jim D'Arcy: I do not think it is an appropriate question.

Dr. Seán Rowland: We have to report everything under Irish law, which is as it should be. The information would be accessible through freedom of information provisions. That is the way we direct people who are interested in that area.

Chairman: That is fair enough.

Dr. Seán Rowland: I have lost my train of thought, as I got a fright.

I went to St. Patrick's College in Drumcondra and taught in Beaumont for five years. I first heard the word "pedagogy" in the 1970s; this is the core of every teacher education programme. Teacher educators and teachers share a respect for it, but it is multi-faceted. It must be consistently nurtured through theory, practice, research and common sense. Going back to what Senator Healy Eames said, it is all about the relationship and whether a person can nourish a relationship with children in the classroom as individuals and as a group. The pedagogy around the curriculum would support the person if he or she is the right person, which is why everybody must be interviewed face to face. We also have a system under which approximately 25 people are on interview panels; these are rotated so that the same three people are not on any panel. If a person comes before them whom they know or whose parents they know, the person on the panel must recuse himself or herself. A different panel would do the interview.

We have had cases in which letters were sent supporting applications. If an interviewer is ever contacted on behalf of a candidate, he or she must step back. We are incredibly rigorous about interviews; a member of my family has been turned down. The interview is where the door to the career is opened, and it can be a long and difficult career for the wrong person.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: That is key.

Dr. Seán Rowland: Absolutely.

Chairman: Senator Healy Eames and I raised the issue of physical space. What physical facilities are there so that people can go to one campus and mix?

Dr. Seán Rowland: We do not have a campus. We have a virtual campus.

Chairman: That is one reason for much lower costs.

Dr. Seán Rowland: That is a good thing.

Chairman: There is an argument for it.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: There is work with education centres for weekend tutorials.

Senator Jim D'Arcy: I must go to another meeting, but I had asked a question or two. Will more questions be asked before mine are answered?

Chairman: I apologise. That was not another question; I was going through unanswered

questions, including the Senator's. I was going to ask that the question be answered.

Senator Jim D'Arcy: Supplementary questions are being asked. I would prefer if the witness would answer the questions before supplementaries are asked.

Chairman: I have the prerogative, as Chairman, to make decisions on that.

Senator Jim D'Arcy: I have the right to question those decisions, which is all I am doing.

Chairman: I appreciate that.

Senator Jim D'Arcy: It is not personal. I have explained that I have another meeting and I would like an answer to the questions asked before other questions are put. The Chairman may do it another way but I am putting in my own request.

Chairman: I am not doing it another way. I have specifically said the Senator's question would be answered. I have to run this as best I can as Chairman.

Senator Jim D'Arcy: I agree.

Chairman: We will get to the Senator's question immediately after Dr. Rowland finishes.

Senator Jim D'Arcy: Your question.

Chairman: No; it was a question asked by both Senator Healy Eames and me.

Dr. Seán Rowland: I am not sure what to address.

Chairman: Are there any other points?

Dr. Seán Rowland: The bottom line for any teacher education provider is how a child will be educated and treated as a human being. We need to look at a potential teacher as somebody who can absolutely enrich, educate and support a child or children. We must build tools around our programme to ensure we make that person the best teacher possible now. We cannot predict what those people will be in future, as different people engage in long-term careers in different ways. We must start with the right ingredients by building empathy and relationships while having the academic and intellectual capacity to be an education leader. The worst thing to hear in a staff room is a conversation about "Coronation Street". I want to hear about the latest research on pedagogy or child development from Yale, etc. That is professional education. We are in a strong place with teachers and we have managed to keep the quality of people going into teaching, particularly in Irish primary schools, very high.

Chairman: Senator D'Arcy has left, but perhaps Ms Davitt can answer his questions.

Ms Anna Davitt: Freagróidh mé an cheist trí mheán na Gaeilge. Is trua nach bhfuil an Se-anadóir anseo ach d'fhoilsigh muid aiseolas faoin méid mic léinn ó Choláiste Hibernia atá ag obair. Chuir sé ceist freisin faoin nGaeilge i gcoitinne sa choláiste, agus an ról atá ag an teanga.

Táimse ag déileáil go sonrach leis an gclár don bhunscolaíocht. Na mic léinn a thagann isteach, déanann siad agallamh trí mheán na Gaeilge chun áit a fháil ar an gcúrsa bunscoile. Reachtálann an coláiste agallamh trí mheán an Bhéarla agus agallamh trí Ghaeilge chomh maith. Leis na daoine is oilte agus is cumasaí a aimsiú le teacht isteach agus tús a chur leis an gcúrsa, tá riachtanais iontrála ann don chúrsa agus tá sé tábhachtach go bhfuil an leibhéal cumarsáide ag na daoine a thagann isteach.

Déanann na mic léinn ar fad staidéar ar an nGaeilge acadúil, ar an bhfilíocht agus ar an litríocht i léachtaí agus ranganna teagaisc ar-líne. Tagann siad le chéile mar phobal beag ar-líne timpeall na tíre. Chomh maith leis tá gné “ar an láthair” ann freisin. Caitheann siad trí lá iomlán le chéile mar chuid den mhodúl sin. Tá gné láidir “aghaidh le haghaidh” i gceist leis an modúl seo go háirithe toisc gur teanga atá i gceist agus go bhfuil gné na cumarsáide thar a bheith tábhachtach.

Cuireadh ceist faoin gcomhthromaíocht idir ranganna ar an láthair agus ranganna ar-líne. Maidir leis an nGaeilge, caithfidh na mic léinn teacht le chéile sna hionaid oideachais ar fud na tíre ach chomh maith leis sin, caitheann siad trí seachtaine sa Gaeltacht freisin. Beidh sin ag méadú anois i gceann dhá bhliain agus beidh orthu ceithre seachtaine a chaitheamh sa Ghaeltacht. Tá sin ag fás agus ag forbairt.

Déanann siad cleachtadh múinteoireachta chomh maith sna scoileanna. Sin cuid mhaith den duine le duine agus teagmháil leis na scoileanna, múinteoirí agus páistí scoile.

Maidir leis an nGaeilge go ginearálta sa choláiste, luaigh me an Ghaeilge acadúil, ach déanann mic léinn staidéar ar mhodhanna múinte na Gaeilge freisin agus caitheann siad cuid mhaith ama ar an gcuid sin den mhodúl. Tá foireann oilte againn leis an modúl seo a chur i láthair, ar líne agus ar an láthair. Tá oiliúint á cur ar fáil againn do na teagascóirí atá againn, do mhic léinn agus do dhaoine a bhfuil spéis acu cur isteach ar ár gcúrsa ach b’fhéidir nach bhfuil an Ghaeilge chomh láidir sin acu.

Faoi láthair, tá Seachtain na Gaeilge á reachtáil againn sa choláiste. Tá an suíomh beo anois agus beidh roinnt imeachtaí á reachtáil againn. Bhunaíomar cumann Gaelach ansin le déanaí agus tá oifigigh Ghaeilge againn sna grúpaí difriúla. Beidh scoláireachtaí á mbronnadh againn amárach, scoláireachtaí Gaeltachta, ar mhic léinn. Tá an Ghaeilge ag fás agus ag forbairt sa choláiste agus tá an-béim ar an nGaeilge mar theanga bheo agus mar theanga chumarsáide. Ba mhaith linn an meon sin a thabhairt do na mic léinn le go gcuirfidh siad an Ghaeilge chun cinn go dearfach sna seomraí ranga timpeall na tíre. Is dócha gur sin an phríomhaidhm atá againn mar choláiste agus agamsa mar cheann na Gaeilge freisin.

Chairman: Thank you. That answers some questions about being on site as well in the Gaeltacht. Senator Power asked about whether many of the students had families.

Senator Averil Power: The college does some undergraduate programmes and I was wondering if the profile of students on the undergraduate courses is similar or different.

Dr. Seán Rowland: In the past year we started offering B.Sc. courses in business, management, finance, IT and software design. They are outside the CAO. The person applies directly to the college and if the application gets through us it goes into the University of London. The person ends up getting a B.Sc. from the University of London, the London School of Economics or Goldsmiths College, which are unquestionably world class. It is very hard work. These people work really hard. The application pool has been older. They are from people who have decided that they must get a degree because they do not have one, because they started one and did not finish it or for whatever reason. There are thousands of people who do not have a college degree and some of them decide they want one and are willing to do the time.

Yes, they are older. Most of them would not be able to afford to give up work, go back to college, pay rent for an apartment and pay tuition and all that goes with it. It is just not possible for them. With this, they can still work. To be fair, some of them work part time. They

can stay at home and if they have child care needs they can attend to those as well. This is not generally for the 18 year old. The last thing one wants to do is send an 18 year old up to his or her room to click Skype and go on seminars. There is a social personal development dimension to going on campus. We do not argue with that at all. However, that is not an option for some people, so one is denying them access in a way or they are denying themselves, whether it is for financial, geographical, age or job reasons. Basically, the two words we live by are “quality” and “access”. Access is very possible when one can access this from anywhere in the world.

We have been focusing primarily on the teacher education programme, which is very important. However, we must also look at Ireland as a resource for course work that could be delivered into countries that do not have those courses. It is huge and we have the technology to do that. We just need to get the team together. The team members at present are all playing their own game on their own pitch, and we will not win unless we get together and play an Ireland team game. I really believe that is possible. There are some talks now in progress among institutions, that would not have been a regular occurrence in the past. We are beginning to realise that whether one is a State, private or public concern, we are all Irish, we all want a quality product and we all want to go out into the world and sell it. There is nothing to be ashamed of, so sell it. We gave it away for a long time, but there is no reason not to sell it. It creates jobs here, which is what we are supporting. Our M.Sc in pharmaceutical medicine is in 36 countries and is delivered out of Mayo. It is a remarkable opportunity.

Chairman: The representatives of Schoolbag are due to appear before the committee so I will ask Deputy O’Brien and Deputy Ryan to put their questions before asking the witnesses to conclude.

Deputy Jonathan O’Brien: Dr. Rowland might have covered this when I was out and if he did, I will read the transcript. Where does Dr. Rowland see the concept of e-learning going over the next ten years? It is an important development. He has been involved for the last decade so he has seen the advantages. How does he envisage it progressing over the next ten years? Will it be based more on research? Will the technology itself hinder the progress that can be made?

Deputy Brendan Ryan: With regard to teaching practice opportunities for the college’s students, traditionally many primary schools have had relationships with St. Patrick’s College, for example, and the more traditional teacher training locations. Are those relationships getting in the way of finding opportunities for Hibernia College’s students for teaching practice?

Dr. Seán Rowland: I will address the last question first. “No” is the answer. There are more than enough schools that are interested in taking student teachers for every college. Traditionally, it is fair to say that some schools would claim they would never take a student from college X or would only take students from another college. That is fine. That is the way life is in most countries. However, there is ample opportunity and the teachers and principals are very engaged. They are extremely supportive. There are many new schools in suburban areas that have never had student teachers and they are eager to participate as well. We tell our student teachers that they must be prepared to travel for teaching practice, because we cannot always give them the school around the corner from their house. That said, one finds that many students tell us that they have already asked the principal of the school down the road. It is a community event; it is a piece of everything. We tend to follow the students’ lead on where they want to do the practice. However, there is a variety of experiences that they must have in different teaching practices, so they cannot get the cosy third class for the entire period. Does that answer the Deputy’s question?

Deputy Brendan Ryan: Yes.

Dr. Seán Rowland: I will return to Deputy O'Brien's question. It is a case of gazing into a crystal ball, but the technology keeps evolving so one must keep abreast of what is going on at MIT and with social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter. We have some international names as students, including one of our international rugby players; it is already in the public arena that he does PR for us. When he tweets about something, 145,000 people read it. That is incredible. Five such people are more influential than any newspaper. We need to find out who are the opinion makers and make sure they are informed with the facts, not biased opinions. As we move forward, the shape and reach of technology will evolve. No one can predict where we will be in ten years' time. The Teaching Council and Quality and Qualifications Ireland, QQI, are very important in respect of not diluting standards and quality. That goes back to pedagogy, which is the core. Technology is only a tool to help deliver the core. If the core is not right, nothing will be right. We do not have to get lost providing a historical programme that is out of touch. We need teachers who have had a substantial, rigorous teacher education and who are digitally prepared to go into the classroom and meet children who are digitally prepared from the age of one. Anecdotally, we hear that children are told to put things away and told that nobody uses them in the classroom and it turns out the person is referring to an iPad, which is the greatest source of knowledge one can find as long as it is used in a disciplined fashion. We need teachers who can exercise discipline and use the technology. That is what we do at Hibernia. Our students have graduated using technology. Online, they can access the largest body of research in the world. They are great teachers; there is no question about it.

Dr. Nicholas Breakwell: I will summarise some of the themes by reading this brief letter from a student on the primary programme, on which Ms Anna Davitt teaches. This addresses the quality of provision, access and flexibility. I did not make it up.

I would like to take this opportunity to say thank you to you and your wonderful staff. I have enjoyed immensely my course to date. Without doubt it has been one of the most challenging things I have undertaken. Balancing working full-time and four children under nine, on top of a postgrad, has been tough going but I don't think I will ever find the words to explain how satisfying and fulfilling it has been. It has given me the opportunity to fulfil a dream that, without Hibernia, would not have been possible.

Chairman: I thank the witnesses for their presentation, which forms part of the committee's consideration of digital literacy and online learning. Professor Brian MacCraith from DCU was invited but was already scheduled to be out of the country. We have met witnesses from the public and private sectors and the committee is not endorsing the companies that have appeared. At the same time, they are part of the picture, and it is important to look at it.

I welcome the witnesses from Schoolbag to discuss their experience in using technology in schools. I welcome Mr. Con McMahon, director, and Mr. Philip O'Callaghan, financial director. By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the evidence they are to give this committee. If they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence in relation to a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise nor make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

Mr. Con McMahon: I thank the committee for inviting us. I am joined by Mr. Philip O’Callaghan and my presentation is on ICT and e-portfolios in schools. The name of our system is Schoolbag or An Mála Scoile. Some of the key principles on which the new junior certificate is built include the idea that people learn best when they work collaboratively with others, take greater responsibility for their learning, deepen learning by embedding key concepts through active engagement in their learning and can reflect on their portfolios of work. It is recognised that limited assessment techniques undermine the goal of achieving collaborative learning and the objective of embedding student learning. The priority today is repeating information and, to a more limited extent, applying and analysing information on examination day. The current assessment techniques are built around working out the right answer. Individual achievement is generally only valued for assessment purposes and collaborative effort, in most cases, is considered a form of cheating.

Therefore, central to the success of the new junior certificate is to broaden not just the modes of learning but also the modes of assessment. The need for a change in assessment is accompanied by a need for a means for schools, teachers and students to create and store work. The current tools available to teachers to record evidence of learning, which are all paper-based, are unlikely to meet the needs of schools or the needs of the economy. Schoolbag looks to meet the challenge of a change in assessment. It was built to create a digital workspace where students can create and store work and teachers can provide feedback. It is a cloud-based solution and students’ work will never get lost. Schoolbag provides a technology infrastructure which facilitates the broadening assessment modes of the new junior certificate. With further development, it can allow for greater external moderation of student work.

Schoolbag is a 100% Irish-owned company which was founded by me in 2011. The platform is now being used by more than 20 schools. An Irish language version of the system, An Mála Scoile, is also in operation. The Schoolbag software solution provides particular features. Schoolbag is an online e-portfolio in which students can place their online work and present it for feedback or correction by teachers. Teachers can post questions or projects online. The input of all students can be seen and this encourages and directs collaboration. It works to provide a better understanding of individual contributions in group work. It improves and speeds up communication with parents as they can receive e-mails directly from teachers about issues concerning their children. The teacher can automatically assign homework to students or groups of students. If students are absent, they will know what has been covered in class. Teachers can provide students with electronic notes that are permanently available and never get lost. This significantly reduces the cost of photocopying for schools. Teachers can share resources and lesson plans with colleagues within their own school. Regarding monitoring of students, student attendances can be recorded online to facilitate the submitting of the October returns and the NEWB returns online.

This week, Peak Learning acquired Schoolbag. Philip O’Callaghan is the managing director of Peak Learning and he has been working in the education sector all his life. Peak Learning acquired Schoolbag as it sees it as an opportunity for schools and learners. It will allow schools become more learner-centric and also allow them to develop courses and for students to do projects and assignments which reflect their individual interests. This is a very positive development for education in Ireland and Schoolbag is a platform which can facilitate students showcasing their achievements.

E-portfolios are flexible and will allow students to create multiple portfolios to showcase their skills and achievements to different audiences. There will be an assessment portfolio

section of Schoolbag where users can share the projects and work which is assessed as part of the State assessments. Students can use the career portfolio section to make available certain projects for future employers to see. Students will be able to set, review and revise goals related to their education. There is strong evidence that when students set their own goals and are committed to them, their performance improves. We hope to build on the work of The Super Generation and embed the principles of goal setting into the planning software.

On external assessment and moderation, Schoolbag will facilitate the online moderation of assessment. There will be further development of the resource-sharing capability so that teachers can share resources with teachers in other schools. On monitoring learning, the reporting functions of Schoolbag will be significantly enhanced to provide the school, and parents and guardians with a unified view of the young person's performance on a real-time basis. This will allow the school and parents or guardians to monitor the progress of the young person in a non-intrusive manner but to intervene, where performance is suggesting there are issues which need addressing.

We hope to build an e-portfolio solution to meet the needs of Irish schools and in particular the broadening assessment needs of the new junior certificate and other courses. We can only do this by working collaboratively with the designers of the new junior certificate assessment models so that we understand fully the needs of these models. We can then build a technology framework around these needs. We hope the committee can help further with this collaborative work.

I founded and have been managing director of Schoolbag since 2011. I have eight years' teaching experience and hold a degree in business studies, H. Dip Ed from Trinity College, diplomas in special education and so on.

Chairman: I ask Mr. McMahon to stop at this point because the members have some questions. As I said to the previous group, we will publish Mr. McMahon's presentation online, which contains his full details as well as those of Mr. O'Callaghan.

Senator Averil Power: I thank Mr. McMahon for his opening presentation. I apologise in advance, as I will need to leave this meeting shortly to attend another appointment. I met Mr. McMahon last year and discussed this in detail. It is a really interesting initiative for students to be able to have all that content there and also for parents. In this day and age we need to move away from homework journals and notes going home in the physical schoolbag. We need to give parents a way to check in with what their children are doing, particularly at primary level in an online space where they can do that from work and can check in and out at different times. I will not pose any questions because it would be rude to do so when I know I will not be here to hear the answers. I hope other members found the presentation interesting and I am sure they will have questions for him.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: I do not know very much about Schoolbag, which is why some of my questions might seem very basic. I know that it offers a service to the more than 20 schools in which it is being used. How does it work? Do the schools get a software package from Schoolbag? Do they pay for that? Obviously Schoolbag is a new initiative and that may be why only 20 schools work with it. Are they all based in a particular region in order to try to develop it first or is this something that can be delivered to any school anywhere provided they have the technology to use it?

The homework diaries etc. are all online and a teacher can upload it from the class. Even a

student, who is away on holidays or out sick, can access work online. Is there a facility to do the homework online and submit it to the teacher to assess it? While it might not happen often, a student might fall ill or be involved in an accident and miss a few weeks of school. Particularly in the exam years in post-primary education missing a few weeks can be critical. Are the schools with which Schoolbag currently works primary, post-primary or both?

Deputy Brendan Ryan: My questions are similar to Deputy O'Brien's and relate to the software and its cost. What kind of hardware is required? Does everybody need a laptop in the classroom? What kind of hardware is required at home to facilitate parents interacting with this? Some working class families may not be in tune with modern technology. Will that be a barrier for entry in getting those families involved?

Deputy Anthony Lawlor: I thank Mr. McMahon for his presentation. Approximately 18 months ago I requested that he would appear before the committee and I am delighted to see him present. I was not a member of the previous committee. I have sat in a schoolroom with him and seen the entire operation at first hand. I am really disappointed that the Department of Education and Skills has taken an individual on secondment from a major multinational company to advise the Department on the way forward on issues such as this. There is a huge conflict of interest given the company for which that individual works. There is a lack of foresight in not picking up on an operation such as that of Schoolbag. I know some of the schools in which it is involved and some in County Kildare are quite positive towards it.

What are Mr. McMahon's views of e-books which would be part and parcel of the ongoing learning process? E-books are more expensive than printed books because the VAT rate and EU-wide VAT rate. We cannot solve the problem in Ireland - it can only be done at EU level. What is the best way to reduce the costs in future?

On Deputy Brendan Ryan's point on availability, I note that all first year students in Piper's Hill school in Naas are using tablet devices. The bulk of the costs associated with these devices arises from the use of e-books as opposed to hardware. Funds are raised locally to ensure every student in first year at the school who come from all socioeconomic backgrounds has an iPad. Those who visited the Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition may have encountered research undertaken by students from a school in Celbridge on the impact of carrying heavy books in schoolbags in terms of back pain and injury. I cannot understand the reason officials in the Department of Education and Skills will not get their heads out of their arses and accept that technology is the way forward. The joint committee should invite departmental officials before us to answer questions on the wisdom of the advice they are receiving.

Chairman: The joint committee was only established in June last year, which is less than one year ago. It is rare that we will invite a private company to appear because issues of fairness arise as we cannot cater for everyone. The purpose of this meeting, therefore, is to identify what we can learn from different private sector organisations involved in the education sector. This is being done with a view to identifying the bigger issues, rather than promoting their respective businesses. The purpose of these meetings is to examine issues related to e-books and so forth, after which we will compile a report that will address some of the issues raised. What size is the Schoolbag company? How many staff does it employ and with what percentage of schools does it engage?

Mr. Con McMahon: I will answer members' questions on how the system works, whether schools pay for it and how many schools are involved. The system is cloud based, which means we visit schools and offer them the system. Previously, there was no such system operating in

Ireland and we spotted a gap or need in the market and sought to service this need. We visit schools and offer a pilot service free of charge because it is hard to charge for something that no one has heard of and which does not have a track record. The past two years have been a process of bringing schools along by educating and learning from them. We take a pilot group of perhaps five or six teachers who are interested in innovation and bringing more information technology into their classrooms. We then sign up each teacher with his or her own online schoolbag - we do what it says on the tin - and they, in turn, sign up their students with their schoolbags. This creates a connection between the teacher and students and their work can be completed online or offline. Students and teachers can communicate and store and complete work in their individual e-portfolios. It is a requirement of the junior certificate curriculum that continuous assessment work be stored in portfolios. We have tried to develop a vehicle that can take us from the current position where not much information and communications technology, ICT, or portfolio work is being done in schools and the majority of students and teachers are not sufficiently ICT literate to where we need to be in the a few years from now. Schoolbag has been working to achieve this objective.

In terms of the hardware in place, we have never specifically targeted advantaged or disadvantaged schools. Schoolbag has always been offered as another medium in class. Handouts, textbooks, copybooks and online work can be facilitated by our technology. Leaving certificate applied programmes are provided in some disadvantaged schools. Much of the work in these programmes is done online, for example, maintaining curricula vitae and so forth, and can be facilitated and stored in Schoolbag. Many schools are organising events to raise funds for software and asking parents to fork out money to purchase a new device. Some are forsaking the information technology their students already have, namely, smartphones, which provide access to greater amounts of information. Schoolbag seeks to control, monitor and curb this access in order that social networking and so forth can be promoted and used positively by schools, rather than getting out of control, as is sometimes the case.

Mr. Philip O'Callaghan: I will address some of the other issues raised. Deputy Brendan Ryan mentioned the digital divide. Last year, approximately 50 schools had iPads for first year students and the view is that this number will increase significantly in the coming years. The feedback many schools are receiving is that if students are to have an iPad, people do not want the added expense of buying hard copies of books, journals, etc. What Schoolbag does is digitise some of the resources that have been used thus far in hard copy. As Deputy Jonathan O'Brien suggested, homework can be accessed online, including by students who are off school for reasons such as sickness.

In terms of employees, Schoolbag was taken over by the Peak Learning company earlier in the week. Peak Learning has between ten and 12 full-time employees and a number of seasonal staff. We have been working in education for approximately ten years under a number of divisions, including the mock examination area. We see great scope for synergy in the first schools division and are focusing on the provision of hard copy student journals in that area. As schools go digital in the years ahead, they will require a digital solution. The way in which schools can process data is an issue of great significance. If students have information written in hard copy books and there is no centralised means of accessing this data, it is difficult for principals, form teachers and so forth to intervene at an early stage if an issue arises. With the type of system we provide, which offers parental access and so on, early intervention becomes much easier if there is an issue.

As we indicated, approximately 20 schools are using the system, essentially on a pilot basis.

On the fees charge, to date, none of the schools in question has been charged for our service, although that model will obviously change. The reason we have engaged with Schoolbag is our belief that it offers enormous potential. The market will decide whether I am correct.

Deputy Anthony Lawlor suggested the most expensive part of the entire process is e-books. If one looks forward, the nature of the e-book will change. It currently comes in standard book form, perhaps in a PDF format with some additional resources. The new junior certificate curriculum will offer many short courses. What one will probably find is that there will be many more teacher-generated resources and much more sharing of these resources. The nature of learning on the Internet is different from the nature of learning from a hard copybook in that it is a more interactive experience. We will find that the types of resources being used in schools will change over time.

Obviously the e-book is expensive and there is no secondhand market for an e-book. That adds significantly to the cost, or at least to the whole cost of ownership but over time that will change. Are there any other questions that I have missed?

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: I now have a better understanding of how the system operates. Does the witness go into primary and post-primary schools?

Mr. Con McMahon: It is mainly post-primary but we go to two primary schools.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: The witness goes to a particular school, brings a number of teachers together and explains the product and how the system works. Is the software registered to the school or to the teacher? I understand the teacher has the portfolio set up online and then signs up the students to their own individual portfolios. Is there an issue with maintenance and technical support? I presume it is not a case of going into the schools and selling the software to the teachers or the schools as ongoing support must be available to those teachers. In the event of an issue with the software whom they can contact? After the school decides to sign up to the software and receives it what is the connection with the company?

Mr. Philip O'Callaghan: If we put the software into a school it is in our interest to support it and to ensure it is imbedded. Part of that process is training of the staff and part of that process is online support on a just in time basis. If a school requires particular technical support it will contact us and we will address that issue. In a school environment, the initial training is essential to imbed the system and continual assistance is available if there are IT issues.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: Is the teacher the registered software user?

Mr. Philip O'Callaghan: We sell to the school.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: Schoolbag sells to the school rather than the individual teacher.

Mr. Philip O'Callaghan: The school purchases. Within the school there are teachers and students.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: In his opening remarks Mr. Con McMahon referred to the proposed changes to the junior certificate examination and mentioned the development of short courses. Is it the case that Schoolbag can tailor the tools for particular courses or is a one-size-fits-all model provided to schools?

Mr. Philip O'Callaghan: We believe that Schoolbag provides the infrastructure because all the resources can be centrally located. Therefore, if the school creates a short course on a par-

ticular topic, those resources can be centrally located within Schoolbag and any classes doing those short courses can access them. It certainly provides a framework to help with the assessment and the e-portfolio area. It provides a framework for the communication between teacher, student and the home. It provides a framework for that early intervention, which is very important, and it provides a framework for the sharing of resources between teachers within a school, teachers cross-schools and between the teacher and the student.

Chairman: As a committee, correspondence was referred to us from the Joint Committee on Public Service Oversight and Petitions from a member of the public, Mr. Stephen Dwan, on the use of video games in the English curriculum in second level schools. My child goes to a school where a video game is used for the teaching of mathematics. I am not sure whether it is run by a private or publicly owned company. Would Schoolbag use video games to assist in the teaching process?

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: During the recent trip to Finland to view its education system we saw that one of the tools used in its anti-bullying programmes was online video games. It was interesting to note that more schools appear to be going down that route.

Mr. Philip O'Callaghan: It is not an area in which I have a personal specialism. We are aware, particularly in the teaching of mathematics at primary school, that video games are becoming more imbedded and games are becoming more imbedded as part of the teaching methodology. I do not have any expertise to-----

Chairman: It has not been used by Schoolbag yet.

Mr. Philip O'Callaghan: We provide a framework to facilitate communication and the various things that go on within a school environment from assessment to communication. We are not providing educational content for that area.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: In his presentation, Mr. Con McMahon spoke about the junior certificate examination and said he wanted to work with those who develop the curriculum. Has he had initial discussions or contact with them or is it an issue he is hoping to progress?

Mr. Con McMahon: May I respond to the question on video gaming? In essence it brings competition into learning. Students excel when they have to compete against themselves and against others. It is a very valuable way to encourage learning. Schoolbag is involved in an ICT policy unit with the Department of Education and Skills which is seeking to develop technical specifications for a national e-portfolio system. Within those specifications it looks for collaborative learning which is a feature we have in Schoolbag, a discussion area that in essence is competition where a teacher might post a question or put students into a project group and they will see each others' learning. This has a huge influence on students. When they see that somebody else is able to read their post they can delete it and rewrite it. It puts a whole new emphasis to what they are writing. It will not just be corrected by the students, it is peer-to-peer learning. It brings in competition which has been one of the most successful features in Schoolbag which is a feature that the ICT policy unit in the Department of Education and Skills is promoting along with many others.

Chairman: I note that the witness sees potential. I note also that Schoolbag is collaborating to a certain extent with the Department which is an interesting development.

Deputy Brendan Ryan: Recently I had a conversation with a teacher friend who was extolling the virtues of something called Moodle. Is Schoolbag operating in a similar space to

Moodle or is it a different offering? As the witnesses are here to speak about Schoolbag I do not want them to divert to Moodle but just in general terms.

Mr. Philip O’Callaghan: I suppose they are all operating within the IT space. That is a learning platform. We would see our offering as being distinctly different in that we are offering an opportunity for students to present their own work and form a new portfolio which is not something that can be done in Moodle. Ours is also student centred while the Moodle model is a teacher centred model and is used primarily as an online learning facility and in many ways would be closer to model in Hibernia College. I presume it has different technology but it would be in that type of space rather than our space. Moodle is in the online learning space.

Deputy Jonathan O’Brien: When a school signs up and a teacher gets an e-portfolio do they have the ability to develop the portfolio, the content and how it is presented? Is that all down to the individual teacher in the school and that Schoolbag is providing the infrastructure to allow them do that?

Mr. Philip O’Callaghan: That is correct.

Chairman: I will conclude unless there are any concluding points to be made. I thank the guests. The discussion has been very helpful because it will inform our future deliberations in this area.

In regard to the petition I mentioned, which was circulated to Members, we have to reply to the Joint Committee on Public Service Oversight and Petitions. It was referred to and circulated to members. In our reply to the Joint Committee on Public Service Oversight and Petitions I suggest we acknowledge receipt of the letter from the committee to say that the letter was considered by this committee at today’s meeting and also at last week’s meeting. It was noted that while the use of video games has educational benefit, the content of such games is a matter for those authorities who set the curriculum. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee adjourned at 3.10 p.m. until 1 p.m. on Wednesday, 20 March 2013.