

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ FOSTAÍOCHTA AGUS COIMIRCE SHÓISIALACH

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT AFFAIRS AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Déardaoin, 7 Nollaig 2017

Thursday, 7 December 2017

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 10.30 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 10.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

| | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Teachtaí Dála / Deputies | Seanadóirí / Senators |
| John Brady, | Alice-Mary Higgins. |
| Willie O'Dea. | |

I láthair / In attendance: Senator Lynn Ruane.

Teachta / Deputy John Curran sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: Before we go into private session, I remind members to ensure that mobile phones are completely turned off. I propose to go into private session to deal with some house-keeping matters. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee met in private session until 10.50 a.m.

Labour Activation Measures: Discussion (Resumed)

Chairman: I welcome Dr. Katriona O’Sullivan from Maynooth University.

By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the joint committee. However, if they are directed by it to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to 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 asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or an entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

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

I ask those present to turn off their mobile phones or switch them to flight mode as they interfere with the recording equipment and the broadcasting of the proceedings.

I invite Dr. O’Sullivan to make her opening statement, a copy of which has been circulated. It will be published on the committee’s website after the meeting.

Dr. Katriona O’Sullivan: I thank the joint committee for inviting me to give my views on job activation, views which have been framed by my experiences and those of my family and friends and, most recently, by my experience of education, academia and research and the impact it can have on a person’s life. I was long-term unemployed as a young mother and for many years was in receipt of the lone parent’s allowance. I worked part time, often with cash-in-hand, for which I hope I will not be arrested, as a cleaner or a waitress in the early 2000s in Dublin 1. JobPath or JobBridge as it was at the time might have been ideal for a person like me. Had I taken up such a programme I would have been somewhat better off financially and perhaps my self-esteem might have been improved as I would have been seen to be contributing to the economy. There was a lot of criticism of lone parents in the early 2000s. Luckily for me, these programmes were not around and instead I was encouraged by those involved in some lovely community projects to think about returning to education which I had left at a very young age -15 years. The reasons for my lack of employment were far deeper than the availability of work. I had come from a welfare mindset and saw poorly paid jobs as a waste of time. If I was not going to get good money for the work I was doing, why do it was my mindset. I was also stuck in a child care trap. I was lucky enough to participate in the Trinity access programme, from which I graduated with a first-class honours degree in psychology. I now work as a lecturer in Maynooth University and as an associate researcher in Oxford University.

The reason I bring my story to the committee is that I want to ask it to consider the importance of allowing people to explore their potential, through education, alongside programmes such as JobPath. If I had taken that route, I definitely would not be earning my current salary and know that I would not be here speaking to the committee. I would probably be in a low paid service-based job and my sons who are now heading towards higher education and, it is to be hoped, well paid meaningful jobs would probably be heading into apprenticeships or unemployment. While I admire anyone who works in a trade, it seems unfair that only people in some quarters of society are destined to end up in trades or the JobPath programme, while others are allowed to accrue the full benefits of higher education which for me and many others like me has transformed my capacity to live and engage with the world.

I see the value in programmes which attempt to address the issue of joblessness. Many of my family and friends are still on the dole after many years and even with the increase in prosperity, there has been little shift in their progress. I do, however, wish to highlight the benefits of offering a full range of alternatives to those in long-term unemployment. Education is a key area where there can be both financial and personal benefits if people are supported correctly. There are certain groups among whom unemployment levels have historically been high and work schemes are less effective. For example, the rate of unemployment among lone parents is higher than it is for all persons aged 18 to 74 years and historically their participation in return to work or JobBridge programmes has been low. Similarly, prisoners are more likely to be unemployed and less likely to engage in employment programmes. However, these groups benefit specifically from access to higher education, with a growing body of evidence showing that providing offenders with access to education and training increases their employment opportunities, addresses their cognitive ability deficits and helps to reduce the likelihood of recidivism. Growing Up in Ireland research highlights the influence of parental education; it shows that a child's well-being is directly linked with the education level of the mother and that education is an important influencer on the poverty level of the family, as well as the well-being of the children within it. Offering education as an alternative to long-term unemployment for mature students is particularly transformative and can impact on financial and personal well-being. Research shows that older graduates are almost 4% more likely to be in full-time employment six months after graduation than younger graduates and that the average starting salary for most mature graduates is 20% higher than for younger students. Graduates are also more likely to enter lower and higher professions, meaning that they are not only transforming their lives but also those of their families. Offering education may be a longer game, but in many cases it can have more of an impact and move people completely out of poverty.

While I am advocating for the offering of education as an option for the long-term unemployed, I do so with caution. Adequate support structures need to be put in place before we can fully embrace this option. Those who are looking to move into education, as opposed to a low paid job, are not provided for in the social welfare system. The choices are often to work or be educated and poor. In my work with the Trinity access programmes I have seen many students who cannot go to college because they left a bad low-paid job the year before and are now being told they cannot receive back-to-education allowance or SUSI support. We also see those entering university on access courses not being entitled to grants and financial assistance. Last year I met a student who had been called to a local job centre to justify studying ancient history and archaeology. Those in the centre wanted to know in what type of job this would result before they would support the person's move to the back-to-education allowance. We all know that a good education has the power to change a person's life, yet we are making it very hard for people who need it to access it.

My final point concerns into what we are activating people. JobBridge should be a catalyst, not necessarily a destination. If people are being activated into surviving just above the poverty line, we are doing nothing for social mobility and failing to recognise that a good life is way more than being in a low paid job. We should be considering how the programmes should support people beyond employment and provide opportunities for development, especially in higher education.

Chairman: I thank Dr. O’Sullivan for her opening statement and sharing some of her personal experiences. I will allow her to respond to members individually.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: I thank Dr. O’Sullivan for coming before the joint committee and for her presentation which was most interesting. A lot of what she said resonated strongly with me. The committee has discussed these matters occasionally and I note the points she is making. It is not just a question of providing access to education. I take her point about the difficulty in receiving SUSI grants, jobseeker’s allowance and so on when one is returning to full-time education because I regularly deal with this issue on a constituency basis.

During the years I have known people who had to forgo access to further education simply because they could not afford it. The issue is wider than access to education or being in a dead-end job. I strongly believe activation services should not be linked with compulsion. In this country we have an activation service which is directly linked with compulsion. I know of no evidence that a person placed in a low-paid job will be incentivised to improve himself or herself. As Dr. O’Sullivan said, that policy does not help social mobility.

As I said, it is not just a question of providing access to education. I have come across cases of people who were interested in getting involved in a particular line of work but were forced by the system into another type of job that had absolutely no relevance to them whatsoever. They did so on pain of incurring the relevant penalties if they did not take up a particular offer. We have been trying to argue those policy points with the Minister and the Department and we have been trying to get the Department to understand what we are saying. Dr. O’Sullivan’s personal experience, which she was good enough to share with us today, will be a powerful additional argument because it shows how what we are saying theoretically works in the real world. I thank Dr. O’Sullivan for a very interesting presentation.

Dr. Katriona O’Sullivan: There is evidence to show that if people are activated into low-paid jobs their children will be lower paid than they were. There is a cost to society of placing people in jobs that are limited, for example, service jobs. There is evidence that people who are moved into apprenticeships do not get uplift for their family and there is a generational impact. While job numbers might be affected now, which is positive for lots of reasons, there is a long-term cost to society because the next generation is more likely to end up unemployed. There is a societal benefit in investing in meaningful pathways. It is costly to do it but the long-term benefit outweighs the cost. I am glad the Deputy recognises that and has heard it on the ground. In the work I do, we hear it consistently. I have had mature students who actively left work nine months before commencing their studies. They had to decide to leave in order that they could find a path into education because they were sick of being stuck in a job they were unhappy with. They wanted to have the potential to be whatever they dreamt of but the system would not support them to do that. People are being strategic about it to try to ensure they have the supports to be able to get to where they want to go. We should not have a system like that. It should be the other way around.

Deputy John Brady: I welcome Dr. O’Sullivan and thank her for a very informative open-

ing statement and for dealing with her personal situation and circumstances. Having read over her submission and having listened to it again this morning, one line jumps out at me. We, like Deputy O'Dea, come across such cases in our offices weekly and from speaking to people in the real world. The line that jumped out at me was when Dr. O'Sullivan said that JobBridge, and I suppose, by extension, JobPath, should be a catalyst and not a destination. That sums it all up in one sentence. Unfortunately, the mindset within the Department and that of the Taoiseach, Deputy Leo Varadkar, who was previously Minister for Social Protection, is that people should partake of the JobBridge or JobPath schemes. Instead of trying to get one's dream job, to use the Taoiseach's term, people need to get into the real world because holding out for one's dream job will not work. Unfortunately, that is the mindset that exists. Dr. O'Sullivan gave many examples of people who have gone through education and into all sorts of programmes and courses, got the qualifications and were then herded onto schemes just to get any job. It does not matter what type of job it is or the terms of pay.

At the beginning of her contribution, Dr. O'Sullivan said she was lucky to have escaped JobPath or JobBridge. Will she elaborate on that? Did she mean escaping it gave her the opportunity to get into the Trinity access programme? Could she tease that out a little bit? We have dealt with the situation of lone parents comprehensively. We have had many of the advocate groups in here, such as SPARK, and they have dealt with it extensively. From Dr. O'Sullivan's perspective, what are the main barriers in terms of seeking work? What kind of pressures did she feel under? Will she elaborate on the barriers to accessing education? That might be useful. Dr. O'Sullivan also mentioned other groups. She mentioned lone parents and young people among whom there are high levels of unemployment. We know that right across the State and even in places such as Arklow in my own constituency there is huge youth unemployment. What are Dr. O'Sullivan's suggestions? Many of our young people came through education and have qualifications. What are Dr. O'Sullivan's views on that?

That is it for now. I might have a couple of other questions to ask at a later stage.

Dr. Katriona O'Sullivan: I will respond first to what the Deputy said about the Taoiseach's comments about dream jobs and getting real. The reality is it is not the truth for everybody. A person is allowed to get his or her dream job if that person comes from a certain sector, but if he or she does not come from that background, it seems that person is not allowed to get his or her dream job. For me and for many of the people in my community, there is no chance of that and their dreams are limited by their backgrounds. In the schools in Dublin 1, for example, the boys are dreaming of being soccer players and the girls are dreaming of being Kim Kardashian because their exposure to the kinds of jobs they can have and the things they can do is limited. It is not just about a dream job, it is about how a person dreams and the fact that he or she cannot dream certain dreams. I will not go on a rant about that because I will be here all day.

The Deputy asked why I feel lucky to have escaped from JobPath. In the early 2000s, what was primarily offered to me were community employment, CE, schemes because that was a big thing then. I actually did a CE scheme. I signed up because it was really great. I got money, a bit of an allowance and could keep my rent allowance and lone parent support. I felt rich doing it so there was no incentive for me to upskill. It was more about how I could get by day to day. I did not stay in that very long because when they started to tell me I needed to learn something I was not interested in, I left. I am still good friends with some of the girls I was in that scheme with and they have gone on to do more CE schemes. People can apply again to do a second one and extend it. It is a kind of trap because there is no destination at the end. The analysis of the outcome for CE schemes shows that 15% of people move from them into employment. That

does not mean they are not meaningful. They can be meaningful but there needs to be work done on supporting people beyond the schemes and providing guidance on where they can go and what they can be. It should not be seen as a failure if people do not become employed full time straight afterwards. They could move into further education and extend it.

If I had stayed in that area I would probably have ended up with a lot of level 3 and level 4 qualifications and I might have ended up working in the local shop. I have nothing against that. If I was succeeding really well, I would have ended up working in the community sector which is very beneficial but it has limits. The alternative is that I am thinking things I never thought were possible and I am living a life way beyond anything I could have imagined. I own my own home, I pay taxes and I am happily married. I am no longer a statistic. Sometimes the structure of these schemes means that a person is still in that circle and there is no guidance or way out.

The Deputy talked about lone parents and the challenges they face. It is like a broken record we talk about child care costs. To go to college, I had to find €200 a week for my son to be cared for. I got an allowance of €75. I was supported by the St. Vincent de Paul and the Dublin Port Company scholarship, which are individual agencies external to the Government. I am not an anomaly. There are lone parent women and men, but particularly women, who see that challenge and that cost, and they are completely cut off. Child care is a major issue. There is also the point that if a person goes to higher education as a lone parent, he or she is not allowed the same child care benefits as if that person went to further education or a community employment place. The person has more child care support for a lower qualification than for a higher qualification, which seems unfair. In addition, the new child care scheme, which I herald and which I think is fantastic, depends on where the person is living and the crèches or nurseries that are available. It also does not talk to a woman who has a ten year old, a seven year old and a three year old. Last year I raised money to support lone parents who put their children in camp for a week while they were in college because there is no one to mind the children during the summer holidays. There was a lone parent who was in Trinity and who had five children under the age of 14. I wondered how this woman managed it and thought what an amazing person she was to be battling through.

The challenge is child care but it is not only child care. The lone parent is in a trap of poverty and that poverty is not just financial but is sometimes a poverty of mind. I am not criticising because I was that person, but we do not see anyone who escapes. For the odd few we see escaping, like myself, Senator Ruane and some others, we think they are too distant and that something happened to them. There are no role models who are heralded and people are taught to be ashamed of their status in some way.

I am on the board of the charity, One Family. It is the least likely to be funded and it finds it very hard to get donations. Lone parents in particular are seen to be responsible for where they are. It is as if the break-up of their family is something to do with them and, therefore, their poverty is something to do with them. I could go on for ages on that.

On the suggestions for young people, one of the experiences I have seen in young people who get the qualifications is that they do not have exposure to specific jobs and they are only exposed to certain jobs. We have been limited for a long time in terms of jobs availability. There is no path into higher professions for young people who may be coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. We have specific institutions that are linked with schools that run pathways to law or to specific professions, but there is no targeted Government programme where we tell people where they can go. Each school is tasked with that itself, so young people who have the potential to move beyond where they are currently do not know how, and guidance counselling

in schools is limited and not supported.

My suggestion is that part of the activation process would be individualised guidance and support around where people can go and what they want to be, and then to have paths created for them. While that costs a lot and is very individual, what we are doing right now is not necessarily working. Even though unemployment is reducing, we are still not seeing mobility and the same people are staying in the lower levels of jobs.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I thank Dr. O’Sullivan for her presentation. I want to pick up on a couple of the themes that have come up. As we will produce a report, we want to gather data to inform the recommendations we bring forward. I want to focus on two areas. The first, which was touched by Deputy O’Dea, is the question of compulsion. This has been a key debating point and Dr. O’Sullivan talked about it very eloquently. It centres on the importance of options and how that fits in terms of the idea of compulsion and fear of sanction as a motivator. In terms of what Dr. O’Sullivan finds to be a motivator, is it around producing options through casework? We are seeing a higher density of caseworkers, for example, with JobPath, but there are still questions around the quality of that casework. How do we ensure casework is effective and that options are being presented? In terms of Dr. O’Sullivan’s experience of that casework, does she find in her work that people are being given a range of choices and that education is one of the options?

On another key point, one witness from the Department spoke about some of the outcomes from education and training not being as they would have wished. However, when we had a witness in from the Labour Market Council, he said that a lot of the problem was due to people being placed on inappropriate courses, and he felt that some of the shortfall in education outcomes was around this inappropriate placing. Do people have that as an option and, even if education and training is an option, what is Dr. O’Sullivan’s experience of how the placing might be improved in terms of ensuring people are given the options that will work for them and which they will stick with?

Second, Dr. O’Sullivan touched on some of the practical obstacles and I would be glad if she could talk further about them. She referred to the question of level 6 qualifications and the associated difficulties. Of course, when some people are coming back to education, and Dr. O’Sullivan spoke about leaving school at 15, they may not always be going straight to a degree and may need to build a pathway to education. We have to ensure we keep that pathway available. There are also practical issues which have arisen around the back to education allowance and how it intersects with rent allowance and SUSI grants. Dr. O’Sullivan might also tease out those issues.

On the question of choice and compulsion, which is the nub, an important point is the question of timing. Is it the case that the time at which a person happens to be called into a meeting or the time a person may go onto the live register could affect the options they are given? Is there something we could do to address that in order that we do not have a situation where, for example, because the person happens to come in during November, they will make sure the person is on some course by March, and that means the person is not in on the September round of education? Does Dr. O’Sullivan have a practical suggestion on what we should do to bridge the gap whereby people may be in circular low-paid employment and unemployment, which in itself can stop them accessing a better education option? It would be great if Dr. O’Sullivan would touch on those issues.

The figures given by Dr. O’Sullivan were very interesting. With regard to mature students

and that idea of second-chance education, which is very important, from the figures suggested by Dr. O’Sullivan, will she tell us where these students are coming from and the outcomes for themselves and their families, given she mentioned a 20% higher salary and so on?

Dr. Katriona O’Sullivan: First, I will address the issue of compulsion. It is funny when I think about my own personal experience, but many people I know, when they get the dreaded letter from the job centre, think, “Oh no, they are on to me”, and it is immediately a case of, “I am going to lose my benefits”. I know that seems a negative mindset to have, but if people have not lived that life, it is very hard to place themselves in the mindset of a person who is dependent on welfare and State benefits. People do not wake up and think, “I can’t wait to get the dole when I am 18 and be unemployed for a long time and have to search around for money”. There are consistent experiences that lead people there, so compulsion does not work. Compulsion does not equal engagement and they are not the same thing. My personal experience, having worked in this area and read a lot about it, is that people do not respond well to being told they have to do something, and there are other ways in which people can be encouraged to move out of unemployment.

With regard to the suggestions I have around compulsion, I know we have to do something because there is this fear that if we do not make it compulsory, this will go crazy and everyone will be unemployed. There is a suggestion that there is no motivation in certain individuals to want to move. That is not correct. It is just that they do not recognise how they can move and the benefit of it. Some education element or supportive element has to be put in place to showcase how people can move from unemployment into happiness and meaningful employment. My suggestion, which relates especially to care workers, is that there need to be role models working within these organisations. People need to relate actively to the people who are giving the messages. When a teacher who is middle class and generally does not really know what it is like to be in a DEIS school stands in front of students in a DEIS school, the hard cases step back and say, “I am not listening to this person, they do not have a clue about me.” It is a defensive mindset. The caseworker is seen as the State and as the person who is trying to restrict them or tell them they are wrong and acting with the teacher mindset. In the context of casework I suggest having more people working in that environment who have come through and come out of poverty. That path could be supported, and perhaps being the caseworker could be the job path. Initiatives could be developed with role models where people can experience at first hand how to move out and where they can get to know people who have moved out of unemployment.

Much work also has to be done around the relationship. I have read some of the critical work around JobPath caseworkers and the relationship. This is a hard thing to change. When a person is being evaluated by a caseworker and the outcome could be a potential loss of benefit payments, it is very hard to make this a positive relationship. I do not have the answers for that but providing people with exposure to others who have succeeded in those environments may support that.

With regard to the timing issue, it is paramount to remove the restriction on the back to education allowance. If a person has been in work, he or she must be on benefits for three, six or nine months, depending on which benefit, before he or she can move onto the back to education allowance. If a person goes onto JobPath in November, he or she cannot go to college in September because of being on a scheme. While there is restriction on the back to education allowance, it needs to be clarified whether it counts towards JobPath. I am aware that if a person is not on a benefit within that period, he or she is not allowed to access the back to education allowance. It means that if a person is in work, he or she cannot leave that work to further his or

her education. It is an either-or scenario. The person can either stay in a low-paid job or choose education. If the person chooses education over the low-paid job he or she will not get support to do that. The State is communicating that work is much more important than education. This restriction has to be removed.

The change in the casework around back to education needs to be reflected upon. We have a situation now where people are required to justify the degrees they are doing. People are being asked about what jobs they will get after their degree. I blindly went into university with no clue and thought I was going to get kicked out of Trinity College Dublin in the first year. I had no idea what I was getting myself into, but I saw how the lives of a number of other individuals had been transformed, so I trusted the system. If I had been asked what job I was going to get, I would not have known. Asking a person to justify an art history degree in terms of job outcomes is not possible. We are all aware that a degree increases a person's likelihood of good income so it should be taken as a given, whether it is a STEM degree or not, but people are still being pushed into certain types of jobs.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I wish to elaborate on that. It is perhaps the case that people are not able to be part of the vanguard of the jobs of the future. We know that in some cases people are getting degrees now for jobs that have not been invented yet because the workplace is changing. This is something we afford to all our young people when they choose their courses through the CAO but we do not do it for others.

Dr. Katriona O'Sullivan: Yes. We as a society are not being very creative in thinking we need to fill certain professions now. Ireland is heralded as the country that develops intellect and is innovative. If we are moving to a situation where education is like a train track into specific professions, then we are limiting society's capability to develop those new jobs in art history or archaeology. There must be some reflection in that regard. It should not be so hard for somebody to want to improve his or her life. The reality is that education improves lives.

Reference was made to whether education is offered equally. The investment for activation is much smaller for education and training than it is for work programmes. This suggests that the lower investment means it is less important. I believe it is around one third and the rest is on work programmes or placements. If we then break down what percentage of that is within education and training, some of it is for the back to education allowance and some is specific to particular job types. The investment is lower, however, and therefore education is not being offered as much. I am not against work programmes if a person wants to do whatever job they want, but education should be equally heralded and offered. There is lower investment in education and training and individual institutions are tasked with the job to promote education as a path. When I was invited here today, I was quite nervous because I saw the topic of "work activation", and I thought about education activation and asked why it was not in the title of the topic for discussion. I have read up on it and education and skills are very low down. There needs to be some consideration of how it is being funded and who is tasked with promoting it. If a caseworker's job is to get a person in to employment, then there needs to be space for education to be equally as important.

The UK research on mature students was published in 2015 and I can forward it to the committee. It contains much quantitative and qualitative evidence to show that mature students are uplifted and perform better than younger adults in further education. They also have better outcomes financially. I include this information because if a person has already done a degree or has done some training at level 6, unless he or she is progressing onto the next level, that person is not eligible for back to education allowance or Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI. For

example, friends of mine left school, did a further education course, because they did not push that way, and 20 years later they hate their job, they are stuck and they cannot get promoted. If they try to upskill or change their lives there is no support for them because they are limited in accessing supports such as the back to education allowance or SUSI supports. The rent allowance under the back to education allowance is also restricted. When I was in college I felt kind of rich. It is only now that I realise I was living way below the poverty line, although it was easier for me. I got my back to education lone parent allowance and I received a grant. I also got rent allowance. I thought I was on the pig's back. In comparison with where I am now, that is completely changed. A person can get either the back to education allowance or the SUSI grant. If a person gets the back to education allowance, he or she receives the initial payment of some €3,000 but not the SUSI grant, the regular payments or the €500 book grant. If the student is a parent, however, he or she does. There are so many hurdles to jump through if one wants to change, upskill or retrain, and these should be reflected upon.

Senator Lynn Ruane: I thank the Chairman for allowing me to come in. I do not sit on this committee but the topic and the witness brought me here today. Dr. Katriona O'Sullivan and I have worked together for some time in the area of access to education. When I heard that she was coming to the committee today to discuss labour activation, I was intrigued to come to the committee to hear the discussion. Our paths have been quite similar in the context of access to education.

Reference was made to the dream job. I remember being in school and my dream job was to be a vet, until I got to the age of eight and looked around at my neighbours and friends and asked how the hell I get to be a vet. That aspiration quickly disintegrates. I found that the education system reinforces inequality and belittles aspirations. Nobody empowers a person to continue to search for that dream job. Before second level school there is talk of apprenticeships and hairdressing but no mention of veterinary or medicine. It reinforces inequality in society. I came in to speak about case workers. I remember being the student parent officer in Trinity before I was president of the students' union. Parents came to see me for that reason. Their case workers were trying to gear them towards degrees in science. These were mature students who were early school leavers. They barely had junior certificate level mathematics. They would never have managed to walk into a science degree given the high level of mathematics required. Dr. O'Sullivan will know from her experience with the Trinity access programme, TAP, how much mature students struggle with leaving certificate level mathematics. They have not done it for a long time. I want to draw this out because the committee has a role in social protection and how case workers can be better trained to understand individual cases. A philosophy degree can get one just as much as another degree. I am here today with an arts degree but case workers tell people not to study arts.

People see community education, higher level education and various levels of education as means through which needs in the market can be met and how people can be fitted into employment, whether it is in a factory or elsewhere. My very first introduction to community education was An Cosán. I could not tell the committee a single thing I learned. I did not walk out of there employable in any shape or form but I did learn the foundations of the skills I needed to understand my own value and worth and to be able to think critically and reason. This gave me the framework to set out a plan for the next ten years on how I would move through higher education and into employment. For people like me, coming from disadvantaged areas who have experienced hardship and an inadequate level of second level education, a healing process is needed prior to education as activation. There almost has to be a reintroduction in a light way to the education system. Over time people will end up in long-term employment with better

well-being and health outcomes. It has many positive effects.

I have another meeting in a couple of minutes so I will have to leave. People speak about pathways. My pathway took 12 or 13 years but it was worth it in the end. It was not a quick fix. We have spoken a lot about pathways and it is not always through an access programme. People see an access programme as a route into higher education but some people are not at a level where they are ready for an access programme. There almost needs to be an access to access programme to get people to a stage where they can engage at a full-time level. We have spoken about pathways for prisoners and how we can introduce accreditation and link in access programmes with prisoner education and Traveller education. Will Dr. O'Sullivan expand on what a pathway would look like? Someone who does not understand the impact of low levels of education will think access is the most basic entry level with which people should be able to engage but in fact it is not. There are other steps below it. From Dr. O'Sullivan's work so far, and the conversations we have had over the years, will she identify what is needed in the pathway to reach the access level?

Dr. Katriona O'Sullivan: With regard to case workers, in my new job in Maynooth we are creating a programme, the turn to teaching project, which is funded by the Government. It recognises we do not have enough diversity in the classroom. There are not enough teachers from DEIS backgrounds teaching children from DEIS backgrounds. It has been recognised that it is very important to have exposure to one's own people in various professions to move into those professions. My colleague, who started at the same time as me, would describe himself as being from a very middle-class background. He is a primary school teacher. Yesterday, when we were speaking, he said he did not know about my people. He was very frank. He said he does not understand why DEIS schools do not just improve Irish. I told him I was really glad he said that and that we should go visit a few DEIS schools where we can meet the children and they can tell us why they will not do Irish and why it will not happen.

Part of case workers' training should be to have not just a module on equality but actual meaningful engagement with the people with whom they will work in order that they understand the challenges fully before they become case workers. It is the same with regard to teachers. Nordic models require this for people in a service position. People there will not get a job as a case worker unless they demonstrate clear understanding, empathy and an ability to relate. This is something we can think about with regard to case workers.

I am not criticising case workers. I genuinely think the majority of people going to these jobs do so because they want to make a difference but sometimes they just do not know how and without an understanding, it can be harsh. My suggestion for case workers is to immerse them in the community in order that they understand the challenges because they are very complex. It is not the case that someone is not motivated to work and that he or should been made to work. We can see people do not move into employment generally when they are told they have to.

The issue of pathways is complicated. There is a lack of trust in people and certain groups. There is an idea people need to be monitored or shepherded. I query this in some ways. I query the mindset that we need to shepherd people in a particular way because otherwise they would be crazy and ruin society. We have spoken about access to access. Long-term unemployment is nuanced. Long-term unemployment is not caused by the same reason for everybody. From 2008, carpenters, builders or blocklayers might have been unemployed for three years because there were no jobs for them. They are not the same as prisoners who think they could earn more money by doing something else. There is a difference. We need to think about the nuance of

unemployment and long-term unemployment and how we tackle it. A builder is probably easier to deal with. He would probably need options to change his life if he wants to because he was probably put on that track but that is a different story.

With regard to access to education, we need to have targeted programmes for specific hard-to-reach groups. We have a number of communities in Ireland where we know unemployment is high. These include Tallaght and Dublin 1. Unemployment is high and progression to third level and higher education is low and has remained below the national targets for 30 years. We need to ask what is the need of this community and how do we develop access to access or an access to work programme that is specific to the challenges they face. It is similar for lone parents. They lack child care and motivation. Prisoners are defiant sometimes and might have problems with authority. They might not have role models. Access to access in work and education is good but it needs to be nuanced and there needs to be central well-being, personal development and guidance elements. We have spoken about this. I have written a programme if anyone wants to fund it.

Chairman: I was taken by the start of Dr. O’Sullivan’s opening statement, when she stated quite simply she came from a welfare mindset. When I was reflecting and listening to the questions I was very conscious that a welfare mindset is an individual mindset but it can be a family mindset and in disadvantaged areas it is certainly a community mindset.

Dr. O’Sullivan spoke about access to education. I have often made the point that I represent some areas that are very disadvantaged. I have lived in the same area all my life so I have seen things evolve over a long number of years. Areas that are significantly disadvantaged today are the same areas which experienced that disadvantage ten years ago, 20 years ago and 30 years ago. It is regrettable, and this is not a political charge against anyone, that, despite all of the various programmes, we have not made the significant steps that are necessary. Dr. O’Sullivan mentioned Tallaght but there is the same issue with regard to progression to third level education in other areas. I do not have the statistical evidence but certainly the anecdotal evidence is that we measure progression to third level, which is published in the newspapers. However, not all third level education is the same, including various FETAC levels. I also have major concern over the capacity to stay and complete third level education. While we are measuring a certain amount of the statistics, the real challenge is posed by areas and communities that have never seen significant progression. I have gone into classrooms in certain schools knowing that no doctor will come out of that classroom. It is not because they do not have the capacity but because a doctor never came out of that school. I have always felt frustrated. If that bundle of students were placed in a completely different school, one could look around the classroom and believe a doctor, a barrister or whatever would emerge from there. How can that long-term mindset in certain communities be broken? It is more than just giving the individuals the opportunity. It is a question of how we can give the community the hope and desire to realise that potential. I may feel downbeat about it because it is an intergenerational issue. While more people are going to school and on to third level education, the community is still experiencing significant levels of disadvantage. I may have gone off on a tangent.

Dr. Katriona O’Sullivan: No. If I had the answer to that I believe my life’s work would be done. The Chair stated there have been changes in government and changes in policies but some places remain as they are. I will make a few observations on that. The people who end up making the decisions are so distant from those communities that those decisions should be questioned. We all have to meet metrics and prove we are good. Politicians are in a similar situation in that they have to remain successful. The people who vote for them are not neces-

sarily those people. We are in a culture where the incentive is not always there. The feeling is there - I feel it from the Chairman - to have uplift but the meaningful investment is not always there. The decisions are made by the wrong people. Someone like me is invited here to have a conversation but how close I would get to this meeting if I was still there? It would not happen.

Regarding welfare mindset, when I told a friend that I had got into Trinity College, she asked me if I would lose my social welfare benefits. I told her that I did not know because I did not ask. There is no malice in that. People are not living in poverty thinking they want to take from this and have a free life. There is no level of consciousness around it. Sometimes the assumption that it is a choice or there is a negativity around it makes it difficult to relate to the people because they are defensive and are being accused of something they are not necessarily doing. I do not know if there is anything that can be done; it is just my observation.

It is possible to do some things. We need to showcase success in a way that does not make the person responsible for their own success. A few months ago a newspaper article referred to me as having been aged 15, homeless and pregnant, and making a change in my life. I did not make a change in my life on my own; a lot of things were in place to put me where I am. I am very grateful that the Trinity access programme and lone-parent benefit were in place for me and that I got rent allowance. There was a whole structure. There was some of my own individual input but we need to create environments where people have all the supports to move and then showcase that, rather than making individuals responsible on their own, because they are not responsible. My family, who are still in the same mindset, do not choose that; it is chosen for them and there is no way out. When we herald people like Senator Ruane, me and others, it looks like it is easy but it is not. It has been a very tough battle. One of my suggestions would be to create an environment of support and showcase how it is done overall and not individually.

As for the mindset of the Trinity access programme, it is very hard to change an elite institution like Trinity College. I have heard highly negative things said about working-class people even in theatres where I lecture. I am one of those people. I have heard really derogatory terms. The motive in the Trinity access programme is to get as many as possible in and then have them infiltrate the system in some way. I do not know if the same can be done in communities in order that more individuals are changed and are supported to stay in their community in a more meaningful way. I know people like Senator Ruane and me, along with certain politicians, are regarded as a token gesture of equality in terms of the voice that asks "What about the poor people?". It is about supporting people to remain in their community and be a success story but I do not have the answers. However, education and supporting people to think critically and reflect are key to change. If we improved the education system within those communities, it would be a good step towards change.

Chairman: We should probably redouble our efforts on DEIS.

Dr. Katriona O'Sullivan: Yes.

Chairman: I thank Dr. O'Sullivan for attending and drawing on not just her academic background but also her personal background and experience. It is much appreciated.

The joint committee adjourned at 11.47 a.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Thursday, 25 January 2018.