



Submission on the Department of Education and Skills Statement of Strategy 2016-2018

Selina McCoy, Seamus McGuinness, Emer Smyth

Economic and Social Research Institute

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Introduction

This submission draws on a large body of research conducted by the ESRI which presents clear messages around the processes which facilitate the educational development of children and young people and the priorities for future policy development. The period of recession led to significant constraints in educational expenditure, resulting in, for example, an increase in the student-staff ratio within higher education institutions, the abolition of student grants for postgraduate courses and changes in the nature of resource allocation to schools for guidance counselling. This submission highlights areas where additional funding is a priority in order to enhance student outcomes, while, at the same time, indicating a number of areas where improvements in provision can be made within existing resources.

Prioritising Early Years

Recognising the returns to early years' investment, the Programme for Government highlights a number of key investments including a second preschool year, reducing the pupil-teacher ratio in the infant classes and enhancing in-school speech and language therapy and psychologist supports. Increased investment is clearly warranted, given that resourcing continues to lag well behind OECD averages and ESRI research highlights the potential for early years' investments to tackle educational disadvantage (Smyth and McCoy, 2009). However, progress has been slow on key reforms around the quality of provision, practitioner skill and qualification levels and the inspection system and the need to link these to future funding. Recent research (McGinnity et al., 2015) found that overall children attending different types of care at age three fared as well in terms of cognitive outcomes at age five as children in full-time parental care; further work will examine whether different care arrangements make a difference for the longer-term development of children. However, findings highlight the clear

need for further investigation of the quality of childcare settings at national level in Ireland. This would need to include a review of the free pre-school year.

Tackling Disadvantage

Evaluations of the DEIS programme point to improvements in some student outcomes, including attendance levels in urban Band 1 schools, retention rates and overall Junior Certificate grades (Smyth et al., 2015a). While literacy and numeracy levels have improved in DEIS primary schools, the gap in achievement between DEIS and non-DEIS schools has not narrowed over time. Findings point to continuing challenges in the area of numeracy in particular, indicating the need for a renewed focus on this domain in future provision for disadvantaged schools. The DEIS programme is currently under review and ESRI research indicates a number of potential changes which would improve its effectiveness. Firstly, urban Band 1 schools face a high concentration of disadvantage and greater complexity of need (with children with a SEN, those from the Traveller Community and migrant children over-represented among the student body). There is therefore a strong case for allocating additional funding on the schools serving the most disadvantaged groups and for ensuring that the scale of additional DEIS funding is sufficient to bridge the gap in resources between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged settings. At the same time, the majority of children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds do not attend DEIS schools, indicating the need for this intensive resource allocation to be complemented by dispersed supports.

There has been a significant increase in student retention over time (DES, 2015). Raising the school leaving age to 17, as proposed in the Programme for Government, is not likely to secure further increases in isolation from other measures to promote student engagement. ESRI research has indicated that funding cuts in the School Completion Programme have impacted on the ability of the programme to fulfil its aims, and has reinforced the case for rebalancing, or increasing, funding for schools with high levels of disadvantage and complex student needs (Smyth et al., 2015b). Research also points to a number of potential levers for further enhancing student engagement in DEIS (and other) schools, including a move away from rigid forms of ability grouping, improving the quality of teacher-student interaction and fostering high expectations for all students (Smyth et al., 2011; Smyth, McCoy, 2011).

Socio-economic differences in educational outcomes cannot be viewed in isolation from the broader social context. The recession has had a significant impact on the families of children and young people who attend DEIS schools in the form of unemployment and reduced living standards. The interconnectedness of different domains of children's lives points to the importance of integrated services which span the domains of educational and social policy, an approach which is reflected in the *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* framework.

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to rely on formal school-based guidance because of the absence of 'insider' knowledge about the educational system among their parents and siblings (McCoy et al., 2014). Even prior to the removal of the ex quota provision for guidance, resource constraints meant that guidance provision was focused on senior cycle, especially

sixth year CAO application completion. However, research indicates that aspirations to higher education are formed as early as junior cycle. Research indicates that both whole-school and specialist guidance play an important role in informing young people's post-school choices (McCoy et al., 2014). It is important therefore that disadvantaged students in particular (and all students in general) are provided with both whole-school and specialist guidance which will help them see further and higher education as feasible options and inform their educational choices accordingly.

Diversity and Choice for Parents

Research indicates a good deal of active choice of schools on the part of parents in Ireland, with half of the second-level cohort not attending their nearest or most accessible school (Hannan et al., 1996; Smyth et al., 2004). Although choice is evident across social groups, middle-class families are more likely to exercise such active choice. A good deal of the public debate around school choice has focused on provision for those with minority and secular beliefs. In contrast, the social patterning of school profiles has received less attention. The interaction of parental choice and school admission policies (where they are over-subscribed), along with residential patterns, have resulted in clear differences across schools in their profile. DEIS schools, for example, not only cater for more socio-economically disadvantaged groups but also have higher proportions of students with special educational needs or from ethnic minority (the Traveller Community or migrant) backgrounds (Smyth et al., 2015a). These differences highlight the importance of legislation to regulate school admissions procedures, and the need to move away from admission criteria (such as waiting lists, preference for past pupils, and preference for the siblings of existing students) which favour more advantaged groups of families.

The Programme for Government highlights the importance of a phased transfer of Catholic schools to new patrons. At the same time, even with large-scale divestment, it is important to recognise that all schools will continue to be heterogeneous in terms of the belief systems of parents and children/young people and the salience of religion in their lives, highlighting the importance of inclusive policy and practice across all settings (Smyth et al., 2013). The proposed Education about Religion and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics provides an opportunity to recognise diversity and facilitate inclusion within schools (Darmody and Smyth, forthcoming).

Promoting Excellence and Innovation in Schools

There is relatively little mention in the Programme for Government of curriculum reform and its implementation. There has been a good deal of innovation in the system, through, for example, the Aistear curriculum and on-going junior cycle reform. Continuous professional development is obviously crucial to the success of curriculum reform. This requires a programme of investment to support teachers in moving away from more didactic exam-focused methodologies to ones which promote student involvement, engagement and achievement. The lack of time has been a constraint on sharing good practice within and beyond the school (see Smyth et al., 2016, on the challenges for teacher induction activities) and highlights the need for planning and development time to be integrated into the school day. This principle has been embodied within the roll-out of junior cycle reform but would merit consideration on a broader scale.

While changes have been underway in relation to school-higher education transitions (with a change in the grading structure and commitment on the part of some higher education institutions to simplify admission routes), the nature of senior cycle remains largely driven by preparation for the Leaving Certificate exam, resulting in a narrowing of student experience of teaching and learning, relatively high levels of exam-related stress and a mismatch between the types of learning valued at second and third level (Smyth et al., 2011; McCoy et al., 2014). ESRI research findings point to a number of elements which should be considered in relation to senior cycle reform: ensuring continuity between junior and senior cycle in the standards expected of students and supporting them over this transition; moving away from the very detailed content of many senior cycle subjects, which currently contributes to a pace of instruction not always conducive to student learning and to a more teacher-centred approach rather than the kinds of active teaching methods which students find most engaging; the need to embed key skills, such as critical thinking, learning to learn and ICT skills, in the curriculum in order to equip young people for the future; a consideration of the possibility of making work experience available to all students, regardless of the programme they take; and the need to move to a broader range of assessment modes, which reflect the full range of skills and knowledge developed within schooling. Such a shift in approach is likely to enhance student engagement and provide young people with richer educational experiences as a preparation for adult life.

While innovation in education relies on the central pillars of curriculum reform, CPD and school practice, adequate levels of funding are crucial for such innovation to take place. Research indicates that a significant proportion of second-level schools, particularly those in the voluntary secondary sector, are reliant on voluntary contributions from parents to fund general building maintenance and other core functions (Darmody, Smyth, 2013).

As part of Ireland's National Digital Strategy, the government has invested in a national roll-out of high-speed broadband to all second-level schools in the country. Prior to the rollout, research showed an appetite for, and recognition of the potential value of, ICT within the classroom among teachers and principals alike, particularly in terms of facilitating a move towards more student-centred teaching and learning methodologies (Coyne et al., 2016). Follow-on research (McCoy et al, 2016), conducted shortly after broadband rollout, provides some evidence of such a shift towards more student-centred ICT usage and methodologies. The benefits in terms of enhanced student participation and achievement, greater collaboration among students and the development of higher order thinking skills and transversal skills were noted by school principals and teachers. However, a range of school structural and climate factors were found to play a role in shaping and supporting the change process. Effective leadership was found to be crucial to the smooth and effective integration of ICT within schools. Further, while high-speed broadband has removed a significant barrier for schools, namely inadequate and unreliable internet connection, other infrastructural issues have now become more salient (such as internal school network reliability, ICT equipment quality, the availability and accessibility of online resources, capacity to meet the requirements of the reformed junior cycle and technical support). There will be a need for ongoing investment in schools to address these issues.

Special Needs Education

The Programme for Government highlights the considerable expenditure on special education (€1.4 billion annually); yet uncertainty in access to services, both school and non-school based, persists. Research has examined the profile and distribution of students across different school contexts, in

order to assess the extent to which the current school funding model targets those most in need. The results show that while funding has broadly targeted students with special needs, there is room for greater differentiation in the allocation of funding, particularly within disadvantaged school contexts (Banks et al., 2015). Further research has examined the prevalence of special educational needs, pointing to an overall rate of 25%, largely in line with research internationally (Banks and McCoy, 2010). However, the results also show that non-normative special needs, particularly emotional/behavioural difficulties, often based on teacher judgement, are over-identified among boys and children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Banks et al., 2012). Special needs identification has also found to be context related – with an under-identification of learning disabilities and an over-identification of emotional/behavioural difficulties in the most disadvantaged DEIS schools (McCoy et al., 2012). Lessons can be learned from other national contexts where SEN classification systems have been harmonised across relevant government agencies or in some instances have been removed altogether and replaced with categories based on the type of support rather than need.

The effectiveness of current special needs education provision also requires further attention, both mainstream and more specialist forms of provision. Research examining special class provision (McCoy et al., 2014; Banks et al., 2016) finds that schools take widely varying approaches to the establishment and operation of special classes, with principals who adopt a positive whole-school approach to inclusion and teachers who have appropriate skills most likely to create an environment which meets the needs of students. Student experiences were most negative among students in classes with lower levels of need or no identified need, particularly at post-primary level. This research also points to school admissions policies creating ‘soft barriers’ to accepting students with SEN in some schools, thereby concentrating these students in often disadvantaged schools. Finally, reductions in funding for professional supports, including speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and psychologists, have impacted on the adequacy of provision for students in special class and mainstream settings.

Meeting skills needs of the future

Recent years have seen increasing challenges in sustaining adequate funding for higher education provision. ESRI research suggests that Ireland is well placed to introduce an Income Contingent Loan (ICL) system (McGuinness et al., 2012). How such a funding mechanism is designed requires careful thought, particularly in relation to whether it should cover tuition and living costs and whether a mix of ICL and maintenance grants is required to ensure equity. Fees are likely to represent a small part of the total financial burden for higher education students, so the value of means-tested maintenance grants is of particular significance for lower income families. The evidence shows that the proportions of young people in receipt of these grants varies considerably across different socio-economic groups, particularly across employee and self-employed groups, and the value of grant payments has declined over time (McCoy et al., 2010). Hence, the system of grant payments must be considered alongside any potential change in fees, and the research suggests that thresholds should incorporate a tapering of fee payments rather than a single threshold. Relatively little attention has been paid to the issue of funding and equity at postgraduate level. However, the removal of postgraduate student maintenance grants is likely to have adversely affected participation among disadvantaged groups, with particular

implications for equitable entry to professions (such as second-level teaching) which require postgraduate qualifications.

The strategy document makes a number of important commitments under the heading of “Meeting the skill needs of the future”, including (a) doubling the number of apprenticeships by 2020, (b) increasing the number of traineeships, and (c) creating financial incentives for universities to respond to skill gaps. A number of points can be made with respect to each of these commitments.

Increasing the number of apprenticeships

There are currently 27 apprenticeships in Ireland, mainly based in construction but also in the printing, aircraft maintenance and mechanics sectors. It is our understanding that the expansion proposals are centred around 25 new categories of apprenticeships, spread across a more diverse range of sectors. On the basis of the existing documentation, it is envisaged that the apprenticeships will have durations of between 2 and 4 years and will be offered at levels 5 to 9 on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). This policy can only be achieved with the buy-in of employers as clearly the number of apprenticeships can only be doubled if the level of employer demand is at a sufficient level to accommodate it. While it appears that each apprenticeship has been proposed by a major employer within each sector, this should not be taken as conclusive evidence of established demand. Furthermore, apprenticeships should not be employer dependent and should have a demonstrated employability value in the event of the closure, or relocation, of the host organisation.

Increasing the number of traineeships

Generally speaking, traineeships are centred around work-based learning leading to certification and are distinguishable from apprenticeships by virtue of the shorter duration, typically of between 6 and 9 months. The Council of the European Union have made a series of recommendation to Member States to ensure that traineeships meet a set of quality standards, including the following attributes:

- Be based on a written agreement concluded at the beginning of the traineeship between the trainee and the traineeship provider.
- Have defined learning and training objectives
- Have working conditions compliant with EU and national law.
- Be of reasonable duration, not usually exceeding six months.
- That acquired competencies be recognised and validated on the basis of assessment and certification.

At the moment it is not clear that Ireland has any substantial provision of traineeships to expand. There are currently programmes called “Traineeships” that are operational mainly within the Education and Training Boards (ETBs), which are occupational and industry endorsed programmes that combine training centre and on-the-job components, leading ultimately to a recognised qualification. However, given that participants on these programmes spend most of their time in classrooms, as opposed to the workplace, they cannot be considered traineeships in the usual sense. In fact, the JobBridge programme is the only aspect of current public provision that comes close to the accepted traineeship model. Furthermore, a brief internet search reveals that a significant number of “open market traineeships” advertised by privately owned companies and corporations are available in Ireland; however, there is no evidence of any current regulation of the sector or compliance with the QFT.

As is the case with apprenticeships, a successful traineeship programme will only succeed if there exists sufficient demand for them among employers. It is important that the scale of demand is accurately assessed before any traineeship is launched and the sustainability of any proposed programme firmly established. Furthermore, the department should ensure that any new public traineeship programmes should fully comply with the QFT and that “open market traineeships” are sufficiently regulated.

Creating financial incentives for universities to respond to skill gaps

Skill gaps describe the situation where existing workers do not have the required competencies to meet the needs of their current job. It is not clear that universities are well placed to tackle the problem of work-based skill gaps for the following reasons:

- No current data are collected on skill gaps within firms at a national level; therefore, it is not clear on what labour market intelligence framework the initiative will rely. The accurate identification of skill gaps is not a trivial issue; for instance, a recent study indicated a poor correlation between skill gap data collected by employers and workers within the same firm (McGuinness and Ortiz, 2016).
- Skill gaps refer to inadequacies among existing employees; therefore, initiatives of this nature would only impact the problem if delivered on a part-time basis and targeted at individuals already in employment. Even in this respect, there is no guarantee that the workers experiencing the skill gaps will access the course.
- Many skill gaps are firm-specific and can only be alleviated through organisationally bespoke initiatives. Generic programmes focused on the needs of sectors may not be sufficient to alleviate firm-level difficulties.
- There is little empirical evidence linking such reported gaps to firm-level performance. It should not be assumed that all reported skill gaps are genuine or that all genuine skill gaps are harmful to productivity. Policy should only seek to intervene in instances where a productivity impact has been verified.
- There is an increasing amount of evidence that some skill gaps have emerged due to poor work organisation and training practices within firms. In a recent report, Cedefop’s recommendations on tackling skill gaps were heavily focused on supporting work-based learning and improving organisational practices and worker flexibility (Cedefop, 2016).