

Minister Richard Bruton
Department of Education & Skills
Marlborough Street
Dublin 1

8th June 2016

Re: DES Strategy

Dear Minister Bruton

Once again congratulations on being appointed to the role of Minister of DES. It is an exciting time for education and skills but also one that has many challenges ahead. We welcome your call for inputs to a new strategy for education and by virtue of this letter we want to show our commitment to furthering the cause of education and skills in this country and to work closely with your department and the HEA to further those aims.

Firstly we have to register that from the Statement and the 8 key areas the role of the 3rd level is very underrepresented. There is a clear emphasis on the primary and secondary levels but the 3rd level is treated cursorily. From your own previous role you will be better placed than most to understand the key role the 3rd level plays in responding to the needs of business and industry also as an attractor of FDI and the evolution of indigenous companies. Whilst there may be bulges emerging at the primary and secondary levels it is huge risk by the Department to seemingly ignore the 3rd level.

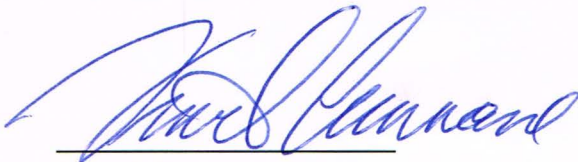
You will also be aware that the 3rd level is now chronically underfunded particularly in relation to the IOT/DIT sector. Only 5 of the 14 institutes are running any surpluses, the rest are running deficits and some without the safety net of financial reserves. This is an unsustainable situation. IT Sligo manages to survive by virtue of its innovative and class leading approach to on-line learning but this is not the solution for all. We would urge you and the department to give the 3rd level the parity of esteem that it deserves with other education sectors. The notion that the 3rd level will be there by the time the next bulge hits and be fit for purpose is now not tenable.

An initial reading of the 8 areas of priority could suggest that the 3rd level is but represented in the final part: Meeting the Skills Needs of the Future (future tense, the need is NOW). We know however that as an institute that, on a daily basis, deals with the most underrepresented groups in our society that the training of Early Year practitioners is of huge importance (1), that tackling disadvantage is something we do constantly but we believe deeply that access and retention are two sides of the same coin. Retention is an investment issue and we know that more funding put into retention will yield results (2), (We have proven this time and again but need to expand the services we provide to ensure that the increasing number of underrepresented students we have receive the supports they require, otherwise we are setting them up for failure. It is a huge benefit to society in the 'whole of life' equation), that engaging with our primary and secondary schools is a priority here (4), that the use of our facilities for local, and regional communities on a year round base is also something of importance to us and that we ARE meeting the needs of the skills requirements and are firmly focused through our many engagement strategies to develop the skills needs of the future. In short Minister we have a role to play across most of these 8 priorities. However it is deeply disappointing that there is not a much clearer strategy for the 3rd level and in particular the funding of that sector.

In terms of the Goals again we have many reservations. Research is barely mentioned. This is coupled to the fact that there is now no Junior Minister for Research & Innovation. The tone of the goals where the 3rd level is mentioned is about accountability and improving performance (but with decreased budgets). There is an obvious and apparent lack of trust displayed that is unsettling.

We are available to go into detail at any time. We very much welcome the opportunity for dialogue and we remain committed to the numerous stakeholders we serve.

Yours sincerely



Vincent Cunnane
President