

Richard Bruton T.D.
Minister for Education and Skills
Marlborough Street
Dublin 1

Dear Minister Bruton,

Thank you for your invitation to submit the views of our College on the new DES *Statement of Strategy 2016-2018*. We are delighted to accept this opportunity. First of all, however, I would like to convey the warm congratulations of my institution on your appointment. We are heartened by the fact that a deputy who has publicly expressed a keen interest in education has been provided with the crucial responsibility of being Minister for Department of Education & Skills. We wish you every success.

We have read both the DES *Statement of Strategy 2016-18* and the new coalition document *A Programme for a Partnership Government* and I have asked my colleagues to pay particular attention to the dimension of teacher education in both documents and I attach their considered responses. I would like to provide you with a more general response from our institutional perspective and from the view-point of the HEI sector.

To begin *A Programme for a Partnership Government*, we note that the document states that "(i) *investment in education is a prime way to grow our society and economy in tandem.*" We would go further by saying that education is the essential means to quality of life for all people living in our society and that society itself is positively enriched by inclusive participation in education. Concomitantly, we believe that engagement with education is of innate value and for these reasons is worthy of investment by the State as one of its key provisions for the wellbeing of our society. We share the view that investment in education is an investment in our economy, although we see this as a secondary benefit rather than the primary effect, which is the flourishing of the individual person. Well constructed investment strategies in higher education will enable the continued recovery and stabilisation of our economy. Of this there is no doubt, and the capacity of our State to generate capital from within, as well as to offer high value service and commodities, externally, to the international economy, will be heightened by supporting our considerable intellectual resource base.

In short, raising the potential of our higher education system will serve our society well and provide the pre-requisite underpinnings for a long-term and robust economic model.

I would challenge you, though, with the argument that insufficient attention has been paid to higher education in *A Programme for a Partnership Government*. Given the uncontested importance of higher education – and, moreover, the ubiquitous concern with the damaging effects of such a prolonged lack of investment in higher education – the sparseness of references to higher education in the document is alarming. We note that the Irish turf-cutting industry commands almost a full page of discussion within the document while a comparable measure of substance in respect of higher education is missing.

You will know that the higher education sector, as a whole, has engaged fully and steadfastly with the reconfiguration of the Irish higher education landscape that commenced with a new strategic dialogue in 2011. Quite frankly, massive efforts have been made to re-structure the system in a way that provides greater efficiencies, enhanced coordination of delivery and, most importantly, a well-differentiated and high quality menu of provision for learners. Improved transparency and accountability are now in place and the majority of institutions have been deemed by international peer reviewers to be performing very well, Mary Immaculate College amongst them, I am proud to say.

What is needed now is financial investment in our core mission: teaching and learning, and research. I could write at length about the risks that are appearing in our foreground in terms of the viability of the Irish higher education system to do its work, but instead I will say only this: the system is at an unprecedented level of over-stretch (no better example than the current student-lecturer ratios can be given) and fast approaching breaking point. If action is not taken, our society, and our economy, will suffer.

I would like to turn my attention to the DES *Statement of Strategy 2016-2018* and I want to say that, in broad terms, this document is to be commended. In particular, the five core values and four key goals that are set out are very well reasoned and it is clear that great care has been given to their articulation. We especially welcome the statement that learning “*is valued as a public good and (that we) recognise its role in the development, cohesion and wellbeing of society* (page 5).” The desire to create an education system that is aimed at “*learning for life*” and, equally, the recognition that “*inclusion and diversity*” (page 6) are of critical importance attests to the progressive thinking underlying this document. As you know, these are fundamental tenets of our institutional ethos at MIC and you may also be aware that we have been engaged in fostering innovative approaches to wider participation at all stages of the education cycle as well as the broadening of access to the College for people who are amongst the most marginalised in our society. I offer you the example of our *Certificate in*

General Learning and Personal Development which, although not one of our Level 8-10 programmes, is a mainstream opportunity for learning at a higher education institution by people with intellectual disabilities. More than forty adults with intellectual disabilities have had a student experience at MIC in the last five years and in October 2015, for the first time, a cohort of students who achieved Level 4 QQI accreditation were presented with their parchments alongside their peers from our other degree-level programmes. This was a very special day for our institution and one which we hope will be a recurring event for the foreseeable future.

Unfortunately, there is no financial investment by the State for participation by adults with intellectual disabilities in the opportunity that we have made available to them on our own initiative. Our programme is wholly funded from outside the Exchequer and, as a result, participating students do not enjoy the privilege of knowing that their programme is supported by the Government and is financially sustainable.

And so it is that our major concern with the *Statement of Strategy 2016-2018* is not with its conceptual underpinnings, where are very sound, but with absence of referencing to how the acute need for resourcing is to be met. We also feel that there is a paucity of new ideas in the substantive part of the document (perhaps as a consequence of the former). For instance, while we welcome the references to regional clustering of higher education partners and to the Centres of Excellence in Initial Higher Education (ITE) (page 11), it should be acknowledged that these initiatives are already well advanced within the Shannon Consortium cluster, while at the same time, the full scope of our potential in these areas is severely constrained by the continuous absence of operational funding. This is despite repeated efforts to pinpoint the essential resource requirements, of which your officials will be very well aware.

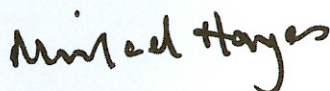
I do want to offer you some further positive feedback, particularly because I want to assure you of our commitment to the goals in the Strategy Statement and to illustrate how we are bringing our capacity for innovation to bear in respect of their accomplishment. Combining two of the key objectives of the Strategy Statement, as well as the principles outlined in the *Programme for a Partnership Government*, let me tell you about our initiative for widening access to initial teacher education. Three years ago, recognising that the obstacles facing people who want to become primary level teachers included financial adversity as well as the lack of attainment especially marginalised school-goers face in terms of academic pre-requisites for entry to the professional programme (such as Honours Level 'C' at the Leaving Certificate), we decided to confront these problems directly. In brief, we provided a 'Foundation Certificate' programme (Teacher Education Access Programme / TEAP) that offered a very low fee threshold and a programme designed to accelerate preparation of mature students for direct entry to our Bachelor of Education (BEd) programme. We are

providing tuition in relevant broadening modules as well as equipping students with the knowledge and skills to acquire the Leaving Certificate subjects (including Irish) needed by them to participate in the BEd programme following completion of the TEAP. We achieved this by partnering with the Limerick and Clare Education & Training Board (LCETB) which provided resourcing and tutor expertise, and also by targeting participants with our own academic support services in order to provide them with day-to-day scaffolding for engagement at higher level. More recently, the Community & Voluntary sector has become involved in the support of the TEAP programme and the model has been adopted by other higher education institutions as an instance of best practice.

I hope that you find that this vignette gives you reassurance that we at MIC, and without a doubt, many of our partners in the higher education sector, are working hard and imaginatively in order to deliver our shared objectives. Nevertheless, you should also note that our exemplar programme operates at a considerable cost to the College which cannot be borne indefinitely – especially where our resource base continues to be eroded rather than enhanced by Excequer investment. And while I am delighted to tell you that the retention and success rates for the TEAP programme stand at nearly 90% (an exceptional achievement when one considers the context), the transfer rate to the BEd, while high, is less than this, wholly due to the inability of students to absorb the costs of a full-time, four-year programme. This too should tell you where the real problems lie in higher education; not in the quality of accountability or the presence of strategy or utilitarian collaborative initiatives, but in the sheer cost of providing programmes and, for students, of financing their participation. I do note that you have indicated that a review of higher education engagement will be carried out and this is welcome.

May I finish by saying that I believe, very strongly, that Ireland already has a world-class higher education system and I would declare MIC to be a fine example of the quality of our higher education institutions. Please, let us protect and nurture our system with the investment it needs so urgently.

With every good wish,



Prof. Michael Hayes
President
8th June 2016

Response of MIC to References to Teacher Education in A Programme for a Partnership Government & DES Statement of Strategy 2016-2018

We welcome the renewed emphasis given to Education in the Programme for Government (2016). Chapter 10 of the Programme begins by affirming that Education is, 'the key to giving every child an equal opportunity in life' and that Ireland should become, 'a leader in the provision of world-class education and skills' (Chapter 10, p. 86)

A major part of the work of MIC relates to the preparation of education professionals, in sectors as varied as early childhood, primary and post-primary, further education and training, as well as higher education. We support the view expressed in that 'Ireland is recognised as having a strong education system, with a well-trained and committed teaching profession.'

CPD:

We believe that continued investment in the preparation, induction and continuing professional development of these education professionals will enable Ireland to pursue excellence in its education provision and become world-class. Research on teaching and learning shows that, teacher quality is the most important variable affecting student achievement, even more so than demographic factors (for example, Darling-Hammond 2000). Given that the teacher has a crucial role in fostering learning dispositions such as curiosity, perseverance, and enthusiasm in their learners, there is a need to ensure that their own learning journeys as professionals support these same dispositions. We therefore welcome the work currently being undertaken by the Teaching Council in initial teacher education, teacher induction, and the development of the Cosán framework for teachers' learning. We believe there is a need to also focus on supporting the learning of those professional working in other sectors such as early childhood (birth to six years) and further education and training (FET).

Such investment in education professionals is crucial for addressing the eight themes identified in the Programme, albeit in various ways. It is particularly the case with prioritising early years; tackling disadvantage; promoting excellence and innovation; promoting parental involvement; creativity and entrepreneurial capacity; special needs education; and preparing children and young people with the skills of the future. As the Department develops the 2016 - 2018 strategy, we believe this continued investment will advance the achievement of its mission, vision and objectives across the continuum of education and skills.

We welcome the emphasis placed in the documentation on paying close attention to the effectiveness of the strategies being adopted. Evaluation which draws on quantifiable indicators such as grades and participation rates are very useful in helping to target scarce resources and to ensure optimum results. However, we would also like to emphasise, that given the nature of education and learning, in many cases much of the benefit will not be readily obvious, let alone measurable, and that the real influence of education professionals and the quality of their work can often only be fully realised years later.

Early Childhood Education

Providing access to high-quality early childhood care and education experiences for children enhances and optimises children's learning and development, develops and sustains learning dispositions and impacts positively on their future attainments. Increasingly research has demonstrated that in the early years 'interactions drive development' and central to this finding is the role of the early years' educator.

While we welcome recent policy developments in relation to early years education such as the establishment of an Early Years Inspectorate and the Access and Inclusion (AIM) model, research also suggests that pre-primary education and the early years of primary school are in danger of 'schoolification', leading to an overemphasis on academic preparation at a stage in children's development, where a focus on these skills is inappropriate and potentially damaging. While this has potentially detrimental consequences for all children in the early years, the consequences for children with additional needs is even more damaging. In this context we suggest that attention is directed towards promoting a play-based pedagogy in the early years that focuses creating learning situations that are meaningful to children and increase the likelihood of children learning, mastering and consolidating a range of knowledge, skills, dispositions and values. This approach can be promoted through the inspection process; the development of guidelines and providing programmes of continuing professional development focused on appropriate early years pedagogy and the inclusion of children with additional needs in the early years. We further suggest that consideration is given to lowering the pupil:teacher ratios in infant classes. Critically the professional status of early years' educators requires urgent attention in relation to the low levels of remuneration received by graduates who have completed a four-year degree in early years' education.

DEIS

The provision of high quality pre-schooling and schooling (primary to third level) is a major component in ensuring that all children reach their full potential and a mechanism by which to address the inequality which is currently evidenced in our society. The current DEIS review offers an opportunity to review, strategise and plan

the delivery of educational services so that all children reach their potential. This aspiration has practical implications at both school and college level.

The demographic profile in Ireland has changed dramatically in recent years. This is strongly reflected in our DEIS schools. A strategic and funded system-wide educational response to the changing demographic profile and to the changes taking place in Europe is required if we are to ensure that we do not create a divided and segregated society but rather an inclusive caring society in which each person is valued and enabled to play their part as an active citizen.

Arts and Physical Education

The quality and quantity of physical education at primary school level is inadequate in many schools where delivery continues to fall short of the aspirations of the curriculum. To address these deficits the following is suggested:

- Investment in facilities and resources to support delivery of the primary school physical education curriculum
- Greater investment to support implementation of the aims of the National Physical Activity Plan
- Initiatives to explore new approaches to teaching physical education in primary schools:
 - to take advantage of the opportunity provided by newly qualified teachers with a 'specialism' in physical education
 - use of specialist teachers in the delivery of primary physical education

The Arts have a significant contribution to make to the development of children as creative thinkers and innovators. Suggested action areas include:

- Embedding visual arts education within STEM: STEAM
- Greater investment in artist/ teacher partnerships
- Greater support for teachers is delivery of the Arts Education curricula through PDST and community initiatives
- Initiatives to explore new approaches to teaching The Arts in primary schools to take advantage of the opportunity provided by newly qualified teachers with a 'specialism' in The Arts

Tacaíocht d'oidreachas I suímh Lán Ghaeilge

Ní mór tacaíocht chuí a chur ar fáil chun freastal ceart a dhéanamh ar ullmhú abbhar múinteoirí chun dul ag múineadh i suímh lánGhaeilge, sa Ghaeltacht agus i nGaelscoileanna sna céimeanna B.Oid. agus sa Mháistir Gairmiúil san Oideachas.

Tá géarghá le breis acmhainní chun freastal ar FCÁT - Foghlaim Chomhtháite Ábhar agus Teangacha (CLIL).

Ní mór don Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna an cinneadh a tógadh breis is deich mbliana ó shin faoi chlár Gaeilge do scoileanna T2 a ghníomhú láithreach agus an t-airgead a cuireadh ar fáil ag an am chuige seo a thabhairt chun beatha láithreach.

References

Darling-Hammond, L. (2000) 'Teacher Quality and Student Achievement,' *Education Policy Analysis* 8(1).