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**Access, Equity, Funding and a Responsive Culture**

**The following is a submission to the Minister for Education and Skills  
Richard Bruton T.D. for the development of the Strategy for Education  
& Skills 2016-2018**

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## **1. Introduction**

The decisions made in the next several years will be crucial in determining how Ireland's education system develops for decades to come. As the state finances slowly begin to improve after an extended period of economic malaise and resulting austerity policies, it is incumbent upon Ireland's legislators to prioritise investment in all levels in education and make a commitment to restoring the education sector's funding to pre-crisis levels after years of budgetary cuts, particularly for higher education.

However, a restoration of funding cannot be the only aim of the Department going forward. New capital investment and substantial improvements in the quality of public education services provided must be of equal priority. While education services at all levels have coped well with the decreases in public funding, the provision of a well rounded, fully developed and diverse public education service has not been possible under the current financial regime and this must change.

In deciding a strategy for the future of education policy, it is clear that improvements can be made in how we administer and educate our young people, particularly at secondary level. This is not just limited to changes in a curriculum but also includes changing the culture of our secondary schools and ensuring that our young people learn in an environment that supports them fully and that makes their non-academic wellbeing as much of a priority as their academic performance.

This submission recommends how future education policy should lay out a vision for an education sector that is well funded, accessible to all our citizens and is fully cognisant of the well being and socio-economic backgrounds of Irish students. It will set out two sets of recommendations relating to second level education. The first relates to ensuring that teachers are trained to recognise the socio-economic context in which they are teaching in order to improve student outcomes. The second aims to outline how a pre-existing structure aimed at

dealing with youth mental health can and should be used as a national model for secondary schools. It will then make two sets of recommendations relating to third level education. The first calls for the Department of Education and Skills to prioritise the restoration of funding for third level education. The second outlines how access to third level education by disadvantaged and minority groups can be improved.

## **2. Second Level Education – Teachers as ‘Carriers of Change’**

**2a. The shift from a focus on discipline to one on student welfare by supporting and training teachers to be drivers of change, particularly those who work in areas of deprivation.**

**Senator Lynn Ruane and Dr Fiona O'Reilly**

In 2012, I became aware of a general practitioner training programme run by Dr Austin O'Carroll and Dr Fiona O'Reilly. The aim of this programme is to train GPs with the desire and capacity to work in deprived areas and with marginalised groups.<sup>1</sup> It does this through creating a cultural shift that enables them to gain a deep understanding of the social context in which they are working i.e. areas of deprivation, homelessness and addiction.<sup>2</sup> This programme is the first of its kind internationally. Through a strong social medicine curriculum and placements that take the GP out of the standard GP practice and exposes them to marginalised and vulnerable groups, it has challenged and changed their attitudes and made them better doctors and better able to help

<sup>1</sup>[http://www.icgp.ie/go/become\\_a\\_gp/training\\_programmes/B6A4FA53-19B9-E185-83CAFD6FC0B651A8.html](http://www.icgp.ie/go/become_a_gp/training_programmes/B6A4FA53-19B9-E185-83CAFD6FC0B651A8.html)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.healthequity.ie/#!/education-ndcgp/w4hs9>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.healthequity.ie/#!/education-1/baowo>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.healthequity.ie/#!/education-1/baowo> in Ireland (Zhang, Larkin & Lucey, 2014)

those who require their skills the most.<sup>3</sup> The model also had further, unintentional benefits. For example, as a result of the programme's development, the Irish College of Medical Practitioners decided to include social medicine in their curriculum. Furthermore, an applicant to the scheme decided to stay in hospital medicine and develop the concept of 'inclusion medicine' for marginalised groups in St. James' Hospital based on the ethos of the training programme. This captures how a scheme that represents the issue of social inequity can bring about further change in the wider system by championing that issue. I believe that, in many ways, this model can be adapted to create a similar programme for teachers.

A person's health is determined by the socio-economic, cultural and environmental conditions in which they grow and live. The same is true for educational attainment and student wellbeing. It is important that we provide education in a holistic manner to maximise potential in all students. This proposal lays out how we can learn from the North Inner City GP Training Programme and how a similar programme could be incorporated into teacher training. I will demonstrate how we can improve on teacher training that will equip teachers to respond to and recognise the often complex lives of the young people in our class rooms. This proposal supports the implementation of the principles endorsed in the Education Act 1998 and the Education (Welfare) Act 2000.

#### **Understanding of social context: poverty, inequality, disadvantage.**

When you arrive in school as a child full of pain, it's difficult to learn. Whether that pain is present due to mental health issues, domestic abuse, poverty, social exclusion or addiction within the home, we must be in a position to provide social and holistic education to support students not only educationally but also emotionally and psychologically.

It is certainly true that teachers cannot be all things to all students. However, it is important that a teacher is trained and supported to fully understand the social context present in their classroom. Many teachers are

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.healthequity.ie/#!education-1/baowo>

drivers of change in their students' lives and many more have this potential. However, often this potential and power is undermined through fear or through being overwhelmed and burnt out. The GP training programme was cognisant of this and embedded self-care modules through the four years of training. Using examples from that GP Training programme, I will make the case that the same can be achieved with teachers, allowing them to get as close as possible to the lived experience of young people. This can be achieved through exposure. Exposure in this way has been shown to reduce stigma as well as change attitudes. Gaining deep insight and understanding into the life of a child outside the classroom can better equip the teacher to provide relevant support and adapt teaching plans to suit the student and act as a sign posts to other services. Equipping the teacher in this way will enable a response that emphasises student's wellbeing over discipline. Providing the tools to respond to trauma in the child's life and to account for it in the class room will allow the creation of an educational space for children who otherwise are likely to shut down or disengage from educational opportunity.

### **Recommendations**

- We need to establish the need for this type of training and identify where teachers currently sit on issues like this. I would first recommend instigating an audit of teachers' attitude, skills and awareness of these issues.
- Review the current teacher training curriculum and syllabuses to identify timetable gaps where training could be provided that would give teachers a thorough understanding of the social determinants of educational achievement. This training would focus on themes such as social constructionism, labelling, stigma and discrimination. The aim of this would be to teach them the art of deconstruction, and allow them to deconstruct stigma, prejudice and also fallacies about 'intelligence'. Modules could focus on information on inequalities in educational opportunity, community connectedness and development and their impact on education as well as the 'Paulo Freire' pedagogy i.e. to treat the learner as a co-creator of knowledge. Teachers should also be informed

about the community-based services often existing in disadvantaged areas that can be used to better support pupils.

- In order to encourage and acknowledge continuous professional development, it should be common practice for a teacher already in the school system who participates in extra training to be formally accredited for that training.
- Establish placements for teachers in training outside the classroom. This could be done as part of their block placement. These placements would allow them to familiarise themselves with the challenging social contexts of their pupils e.g. youth groups, after-school clubs, young offenders' centres, youth centres, mental health services, family resource centres, travellers groups and migrants groups and to experience it outside their traditional teacher role. This would also aid in alerting teachers to the full range of extra-classroom services available within the community and provide context for challenging behaviour within classrooms.
- Introduce new assignments to teacher training such as:
  - Writing a case study based on an in-depth interview that demonstrates the lived experience of a person from the service in which they are placed e.g. a young offender centre. This is a powerful tool in the GP training programme and increased the understanding of the links between social deprivation and educational attainment.
  - The mapping of Community services and groups in the areas of their school placement.
  - Produce an essay where you apply inequity theories to cases they have encountered built around the theme of 'educational disadvantage'.
- Ensure that teachers are empowered and introduce a new focus on teacher wellbeing.
  - Introduce self-care module for teachers. Self-care and support for teachers in the classroom is crucial for the wellbeing of the teacher. We cannot expect teachers to be the carriers of change if we don't provide them with the



tools and supports to mind their own wellbeing by reducing cases of burn out and work over load.

- Self-care management can be integrated into existing teacher training. Teachers need reflective practice where they can air their concerns and avoid repressing them.
- Establish a peer mentoring system for teachers.
- Empower teachers to be able to deal with the diverse experiences in the classroom by acknowledging the invaluable role they play in a young person's life.
- Equip teachers with knowledge on social inequities and how they affect educational engagement and development.
- Equip teachers with the skills to manage the behaviours of disaffected students so that they are engaged by rather than rejected by the educational system.
- Introduce adequate pay and resources for teachers.
- Reduce pupil teacher ratio.

Teachers play a critical role in shaping student expectations and they play a central role in raising academic aspirations. This makes it vital that the value of that role is understood during initial teacher education and there are opportunities in continuing professional development (CPD) programmes for teachers to reflect on the diverse needs of the students in the classroom. It is envisioned that extending the current Initial Teacher Education programmes by allowing teachers embed themselves in the communities that students are from will have a positive impact upon the teacher-student relationship. This will transform the student's experience of school and raise students' achievements and aspirations.

Students from low progression communities often have negative family histories of education, where parents and grandparents experienced rigid environments often unsuitable to diverse communities. This negative experience is passed on through generations, with students developing "defiant individualist characteristics" that limit help-seeking behaviours and produce social isolation, and impedes academic progression. Changing the dynamic in the teacher-student

relationship will reduce these characteristics and allow students to participate more in the classroom and accrue the benefits of education. This empowering of teachers in terms of understanding where their students are coming from will improve the students' perception of the teacher, the school and education as a whole. We envisage over time increased third level participation due to this intervention at second level.

**2b. The mainstreaming of the Jigsaw network's 'Wellbeing in Schools: An Integrated Approach' secondary level mental health programme.**

**Senator Lynn Ruane & Dr Tony Bates**

For the past decade, the Headstrong organisation has designed and implemented community-based mental health services for young people between the ages of twelve and twenty-five. Through their Jigsaw network, they have developed a presence in over 140 secondary level schools in Ireland across ten counties and are providing an excellent whole-school approach to strengthening mental health and wellbeing amongst pupils. The Jigsaw Schools Project began as a pilot programme across four schools in Co. Meath in 2009 and was designed to promote the involvement of young people in their communities and create a collaborative approach across community stakeholders in promoting good mental health. The results of this pilot programme and the subsequent expansion of the Jigsaw network make it clear that the model created by Jigsaw is one that operates excellently, provides a robust and vital service and is easily transferrable between secondary schools. At a time when national conversations regarding the state of mental health in Ireland are coming to the fore, particularly amongst our young people, this programme is one that should become a model of best practice in terms of promoting mental health within our schools.

In practical terms, the Jigsaw model works by creating a collaborative structure across the school community. Each school in the Jigsaw Meath Schools project established a steering committee comprising of key school personnel such as principals, guidance counsellors, teachers, students as well as parents, community representatives, National Educational Psychological Services staff, CAMHS staff and a local Jigsaw school coordinator. The committees would meet bi-weekly and establish goals and strategies relating to mental health culture, training and events and would often collaborate with their corresponding committees in other schools. This 'Jigsaw Health' team worked in conjunction with a 'Student Jigsaw' team, made up of two representatives from each year. This committee would discuss their concerns and priorities relating to the mental health of their peers and was a key part of strengthening the student

voice in dealing with mental health difficulties within schools. Two student members would then attend the Jigsaw Health team meetings to ensure a strong student voice was always present in formulating strategy. The work of these two teams was supplemented by the work of a 'care team', made up a school principal, guidance counsellor, nurse and chaplain, who met to discuss specific vulnerable students and to decide how best to support them. Finally, each school year nominated four students as peer mentors to provide on-going support to their classmates.

In 2012, the *Jigsaw Meath Schools and Youthreach Project Evaluation Report* was released and made several findings regarding the impact of the programme on the pilot schools. It found that the project created a forum for teaching staff, students and NEPS to work collaboratively to promote mental health and that it reduced stigma relating to mental health and caused an increase in students self-referring for support. It pointed to a significant positive impact on school culture in terms of their explicit concern and support for mental health and that staff gradually reframed the ways they interpreted student behaviour, seeing difficulties in learning as more often reflecting mental health issues. Furthermore, teachers found they understood behavioural problems better and felt better able to deal with them and overall, there was significant opportunities for shared learning for staff and students alike through engaging with student perspectives.

## **Recommendations**

- Investigate the feasibility of incorporating the programme operating within the Jigsaw network as a national model for mental health promotion within secondary schools.
- Support Jigsaw in its moves to expand to fifty post-primary schools over the next five years.
- Adopt the collaborative and integrated approach taken in the Jigsaw network in promoting mental health for future planning on mental health services in second level education.

### **3. Third Level Funding**

#### **Senator Lynn Ruane**

During the lifetime of the last government, the funding of higher education remained firmly at the bottom of the political agenda. Despite the fiery rhetoric of Labour's 2011 general election campaign and Eamon Gilmore's famous sound bite - 'Labour is opposed to fees through both the front door and the back', it was through the back door they came. A system whereby a student must pay several thousand euro to attend university is, without a doubt, a fee, even if it is called a 'student contribution charge'.

Since 2011, we have seen this contribution charge climb to €3,000. This increase coupled with a corresponding decrease in state funding to higher education has had a noticeably negative impact on the quality of Irish third level education. We are seeing poorer graduate outcomes and a diminished global reputation; two crucial factors in attracting a diverse range of students from across Ireland and around the world. The outputs of third level institutions provide 10 billion to the Irish economy with international students providing a further 1.3 billion.<sup>4</sup> Increasing investment in higher education has a huge social impact but it is also a strong, noticeable and positive economic impact.

The wealth and progress of a country relies heavily on the level of educational attainment within the population. We therefore must ask the question: why are we seeing a move towards an education funding system built on debt rather than investment? The benefits of a publicly funded and accessible higher education system clearly outweigh the benefits of education enjoyed by the individual, yet state investment does not reflect this. When you move to commodify education, universities are transformed into training centres influenced by industry, which then requires a faster and faster return on their investment.

This commodification is exactly what was proposed to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform in a recent document prepared by the department's officials. The move to a €4,000 annual fee, supported by a student

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<sup>4</sup> The Economic Impact of Higher Education Institutions in Ireland (Zhang, Larkin & Lucey, 2014)

loan system, will put higher education further out of reach for those who need it most.

The document also references the expected drawn out nature of the introduction of a student loans system. If we are looking to expend energy and valuable political capital on solving the higher education funding crisis, we should look towards a strategy that benefits higher level institutions and students equally and doesn't bury our young people in debt.

In a centenary year that encourages us to reflect on the past one hundred years, it is my strong belief that the egalitarian themes espoused by the 1916 Proclamation includes, at it's heart, equality of access to education. In a period of ostensible economic recovery, it is now time for the state to reinstate third level education funding to pre-crisis level over the next three years.

Indebting our young people limits opportunity and choice and pushes graduates into employment to meet loan repayments rather than pursuing a career they want or from moving employment as they wish. We must continue to treat education as a public good.

Over the past several years, it has become almost a given that the state can no longer afford to publicly fund third level education. This is not true. It is becoming more and clearer that the state cannot afford not to.

### **Recommendations**

- The equal prioritisation of funding for third level education, compared to funding for first and second level education.
- A commitment from the Minister to rule out a move towards an income contingent loan scheme for third level students.
- A restoration of third level education funding to pre-recession levels over the next three years.
- The introduction of multi-year budgets for third level institutions, similar to those for the HSE, in order to allow for prudent and long-term financial planning.
- The use of funding from other governmental departments to create educational initiatives with dual educational and economic benefits.

- The introduction of a national survey of third level students to evaluate education quality and subject choice with a view to developing a common set of performance indicators and objectively assessing the sector in light of student needs.
- The examination of a separate funding model in conjunction with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government for student accommodation which would allow for lesser reliance on the private rental market.
- To continue efforts to increase further education progression from those from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds. This will be dealt with further in section four of this submission.

#### 4. Access to Access

Senator Lynn Ruane & Dr Katriona O'Sullivan

##### *The Problem of Equity*

The Higher Education Authority's National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education recognises that there has been extensive work done to increase access to education in traditionally under-represented groups. Considerable progress has been made in the last three decades; participation in higher education has risen from circa 20% in 1980, to 44% in 1998 and to 52% in 2011.<sup>5</sup> All groups in Irish society have experienced increased levels of participation in higher education, especially students with a disability and students experiencing social disadvantage. However, there remains large disparity in the numbers of students who will progress to higher education across national postcodes, with a student who is schooled in Dublin 6 having a 99% chance of progression to post-secondary education in comparison to students schooled in Dublin 17, who has a 17% chance. Equity of access is now identified as a core national objective for the higher education system in the Department of Education and Skills' *Higher Education System Performance Framework (SPF) 2014–2016* and findings like these have laid the foundation for a more committed and strategic approach to equity issues.

When considering educational disadvantage, there is a tendency for policy makers to take a blanket approach and assume that all underrepresented groups 'fit' into the similar categories. For example, a mature student undertaking a computer science degree, who already has a degree and has decided to change their career from architecture to IT consultant, has completely different needs and motivations to a mature student who worked as a labourer for 25 years and has been unemployed for three years due to an economic downturn. Similarly, a young man who does not get the CAO points needed to go to college as he is a refugee and has little English and money, is different to a young man who does not sit his Leaving Certificate due to a negative family history of education and a high level of criminal activity within his family and wider community. However,

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.hea.ie/en/policy/national-access-office/national-plans-equity-access-higher-education/2015-2019-access-plan>



mature students are often considered one group and the socio-economically disadvantaged are considered one group, and interventions are developed based on these assumptions. When these approaches are taken, there is a tendency for those with the higher motivation to accrue the benefits of the equity policies.

For example, the mature student, who has a degree and knows about the structure of higher education, is more likely to avail of the places allocated to mature students in universities than those who are less knowledgeable and motivated. Similarly, when considering school leavers with educational disadvantage, there is a likelihood that the student who has the financial deficit but the motivation to pursue his education will avail of the access routes that are available to them, leaving little or no work being done to engage the student who has more levels of disadvantage than just finance. This approach has been successful, with many students successfully navigating the higher education structure and accruing the benefits of higher qualifications. However, there is a clear need for a more diverse approach to equity. There is a need for policy to address the needs of communities where there are high levels of entrenched socio-economic disadvantage; these communities include but are not limited to Prisoners, Travellers, Lone-Parents and communities where progression to higher education has remained below 25%. This section proposes a scheme through which education policy can be developed to enhance the education opportunities of specific groups by building coherent pathways from community education schemes to further education and higher education, and to foster other entry routes to higher education.

### **Prisoners and Lone Parents**

Lone parents are a group that are especially marginalised in terms of equity of access. For example, they experience the highest rates of deprivation with almost 60% of individuals from these households experiencing one or more forms of deprivation<sup>6</sup> and the rate of unemployment is higher (14.7%) for this group, compared to the unemployment rate for all persons age 18-74 (9.8%). The rates of education level and social class vary; there is evidence to suggest that never married lone parents are the most at-risk of poverty. Only 35%

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<sup>6</sup> EU-SILC, 2014

reported having some experience of tertiary education, with 50% not having completed the Leaving Certificate.<sup>7</sup> <sup>8</sup> A study of never married births in the National Maternity Hospital found that the “average social class” of non-married parents was ‘skilled-manual’. Thus, evidence suggests that education & poverty are interlinked for lone parents.

Similarly, there is very little social mobility for prisoners. Many offenders are ill equipped to break the cycle of recidivism because they lack the education and workforce skills needed to succeed in the labour market. Over half of the Irish prison population have no formal education qualification, and are 25 times more likely to come from, and return to, seriously deprived communities.<sup>9</sup> A growing body of evidence shows that providing offenders with education and training increases their employment opportunities, addresses their cognitive deficits, and helps reduce their likelihood of recidivating (Aos, Miller, and Drake 2006; Cecil, Drapkin, MacKenzie, and Hickman 2000; Fabelo 2002; Gerber and Fritsch 1995; MacKenzie 2006; MacKenzie 2012; Steurer, Smith, and Tracy 2001; Western 2008; Wilson, Gallagher, and MacKenzie 2000).

The existing schemes which support progression to higher education from under-represented groups include individual HEI access programmes and initiatives such as HEAR, which offers higher education places to students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds on reduced CAO points. It is proposed that we can build on these resources and build initiatives targeted at Prisoners, Travellers, Lone-Parents and communities where progression to HE is below 25%.

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<sup>7</sup> [https://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/chaps4\\_5-fam-form.pdf](https://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/chaps4_5-fam-form.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> <https://onefamily.ie/wp-content/uploads/Lone-Parents-Employment-Report-Summary12.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.iprt.ie/prison-facts-2>

## Recommendations

- Developing Access-to-Access schemes, specific to targeted group, in partnership with community education programmes, further education programmes and individual HEIs. This would involve:
  - HEI's building partnerships with community education initiatives that are specific to prisoners, lone parents, travellers, and low progression communities
  - Building visible pathways from community initiatives, to the further and higher education institutions for example – Level 4 personal development course, linked to social care FE course, linked to social studies degree in HEI.
  - This would be an extension of the current outreach programmes run through HEIs that link with schools from low progression communities, the link would now be with community education schemes which are specific to Travellers, prisoners and lone parents.

A specific challenge to education uplift in certain groups is restrictive entry requirements. There is also the perception that some institutions are not suitable for less affluent groups. There is often limited identification and recognition of non-formal education within the formal education structure. Thus, a lone-parent who completes a community employment scheme, or a prisoner who takes a course in woodwork in prison, who has shown dedication, commitment and resilience, cannot use this non-formal learning as a means to progress to further or higher education. This can result in these groups having lots of level 4 or 5 type qualification but no formal route to progress further. This can be addressed in two ways;

- HEIs to recognize and accredit learning that has been achieved in a non-formal or informal educational context.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> QQI (2013), *Green Paper on the Recognition of Prior Learning*.

- This would require building a national framework that allows non-formal learning and life-experience be considered a 'skill'.
- It would require the development of clear, connected pathways from non-formal education, to further and higher education (see above point 1:b)
- HEIs could offer opportunities for non-formal education within its structure, which in turn could break down the perception of the university as inaccessible.
  - A Norwegian national report on prisoner education found: "... that learners start out with non-formal courses but as they become more confident with learning environments separated from their daily life, they gradually build up courage to enrol in formal education. By offering formal and non- formal training, HEI's are able to cater for both needs, possibly in the same learning institution" (Stensen & Ure, 2010).
- Making the HEAR and DARE<sup>11</sup> schemes available to further education graduates could also make a significant contribution in this area.
- Moving access courses into the community
  - Access programmes for mature students and young adults within HEIs have proven an effective route for entry in to higher education, often barriers to educational uplift for such groups include identifying with the HEI community itself and the location of the HEI. Having Access courses that are run within the community, through the HEIs, may overcome this barrier and provide alternative entry routes

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<sup>11</sup> HEAR and DARE are two schemes operated by several HEIs that offer higher education places on reduced points for school-leavers with a socio-economically disadvantaged background or a disability – see [www.accesscollege.ie](http://www.accesscollege.ie).

**in communities where progression to higher education is below 25%.**

- **HEIs and FEIs should reserve places for targeted groups across their institutions. Prisoners, lone parents, travellers and people from communities with lower than 25% progression to higher education.**
  - **This could include HEI Access courses and HEAR and DARE. All of which must reserve places for targeted groups.**

## **5. Conclusion**

I hope that this submission can be of use to the Department of Education and Skills in formulating a national education strategy for the next two years. It is entirely possible that by making some changes to how teachers are trained and how mental health services are organised in schools that we can make a huge improvement in the educational experiences of our second level students.

Furthermore, I believe that a well funded and easily accessible higher education system to be the strongest driver of social mobility. The positive economic and social impact of a strong third level sector cannot be overestimated and I urge the Minister to keep this in mind when making decisions about the future of the higher education system.

I look forward to the publication of the strategy and working with the Minister and the Department in the future.

**Senator Lynn Ruane**