



Teachers' Union of Ireland

Response to invitation by the Department of Education (DoE) regarding its consultation process on the literacy, numeracy and digital literacy strategy.

Introduction

The TUI would like to thank the DoE for the opportunity to make this submission.

The TUI represents teachers, lecturers and staff (21,000+) in Education and Training Boards (ETBs), voluntary secondary schools, Community and Comprehensive (C&C) schools, Youthreach, institutes of technology and technological universities and those working in out of school services.

Background

Ireland has an internationally acknowledged, high-performing education system and a respected teaching profession (Teaching Council, 2010; OECD, 2013; DES, 2018a; OECD, 2015a; NAPD, 2016; Comhairle na nOg, 2017; Growing Up in Ireland, 2017; IPSOS MRBI Trust in the Professions Survey, 2017; Boyle, 2017; Boyle, 2019; Scanlon & McKenna, 2018; EU Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018; Kantar Millward Brown, 2018; EU Commission, 2018; EU Commission, 2019a; EU Commission, 2019b; Social Progress Initiative, 2018; United Nations Development Programme, 2018, Irish Survey of Student Engagement, 2018; HEA, 2019; Coolahan, 2017; Eivers, 2019; CSO, 2019a; McKeown et al., 2019; CSO, 2020b; OECD, 2020a; Eurofound, 2020; McNamara et al., 2020; Clerkin and Perkins, 2020; Clark & Kavanagh, 2021; OECD, 2021a; CSO, 2021; EU Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021; Indecon, 2020; Purdy et al., 2021; CSO, 2022a; DE, 2021b; Smyth et al., 2022; Gabriel et al., 2022; Clark et al., 2022; Delaney et al., 2022).

That is despite Ireland spending relatively little on education (OECD, 2015b; SJI, 2018, NERI, 2018, OECD, 2019a; UNDP, 2019; OECD, 2021a; Kovacic et al., 2021; CSO, 2022a; Clark et al., 2022) and experiencing historic underinvestment (DES, 2018b). The CSO (2022a) has stated that real expenditure per student in post-primary fell 5.8% between 2008 and 2018, and real expenditure per student in higher education fell 35%. Ireland also has the 8th largest class sizes in upper secondary in all of the EU/EFTA and EU candidate countries. In higher education, Ireland has extraordinarily large class sizes by international comparison i.e 23:1 compared to 15:1 (OECD, 2021a). Despite this, citizen satisfaction with the education system in Ireland is the highest of any of 22 European countries studied by Boyle (2018) whilst parent satisfaction with the Irish education system was the second highest out of fifty-six countries in Clerkin et al. (2020). Boyle (2021) found a high level of citizenship satisfaction with the education system in Ireland as well as Ireland being fourth in Europe in its ability to meet the needs of a competitive economy and also a greater ability by students in Ireland than the European average to deal with unusual situations and to overcome difficulties. Boyle et al. (2022) made broadly similar findings.

It is also worthwhile noting that 2019 data (OECD, 2019b) shows that both citizen satisfaction with the education system, and the economic return to the taxpayer of investment in education, are both extraordinarily high in Ireland compared to international norms (see also Smyth et al., 2022). An Ipsos MRBI survey in 2019 found extraordinarily high levels of public trust in teachers, much higher than for journalists, Gardai, civil servants, politicians, business leaders, social media influencers, bankers or even the “ordinary person in the street” (Irish Times January 31st, 2019). ESRI (2020) found very high levels of trust of young people in the Irish education system.

Ireland has a very young population (Eurostat, 2015; Government of Ireland, 2019; DCYA, 2020). In 2008, we had the second highest proportion of 10–14-year-olds in the European Union (CSO, 2009). The high birth rate in Ireland (CSO, 2017; Eurostat, 2017; Government of Ireland, 2019) and rate of natural increase (CSO, 2022c; CSO, 2022d) indicates that the population of young people is likely to remain high for the foreseeable future. The DE

(2021a) has estimated that the student population in post- primary will rise by approximately seven thousand students per year until reaching a peak enrolment of c.408k in 2024/25. It should be noted however that recent population data indicates that student numbers in post-primary may continue to rise beyond then (CSO, 2022c). Student numbers in higher education are also projected to rise substantially (DES, 2018d). In this context, it is not sufficient to suggest that a world- class child-centred society can be achieved with inadequate resources of time or personnel. In terms of overall expenditure on education, Ireland and Greece were the only EU member states in 2015 to spend significantly less than the UN SDG 4 minimum of 4% of GDP on education (UNESCO, 2022). The DES (2018b) has itself acknowledged “historic underinvestment”.

The growing economy (ESRI, 2021; EU Commission, 2021; OECD, 2021b; IBEC, 2021; Central Bank, 2022; IMF, 2021; CSO, 2022b; ESRI, 2022a; ESRI, 2022b) means that Government is in a good position to make a meaningful contribution to continue supporting students with additional needs or from under-represented target groups and/or migrant and refugee communities.

Current PISA and TIMSS results

As outlined above, Ireland has a well-respected education system despite historic under-investment. In spite of this Ireland performs well on international comparisons. Of course it is important to highlight that international comparisons come with all the provisos associated with trying to measure educational outcomes.

In PISA 2018, performance was assessed in science, maths and reading literacy. Students in Ireland were significantly above the OECD average in all three domains, with performance in reading literacy amongst the highest across OECD and EU countries (McKeown et al., 2019).

Equally performance by students in Irish schools was strong in PIRLS 2016, with students in Ireland performing very highly in reading achievement and digital literacy (Delaney et al., 2022).

Second year students in Ireland were amongst the highest performers, in both science and maths, among the over thirty countries who participated in TIMSS 2019 (Clerkin and Perkins, 2020)

In terms of international comparators the one notable negative for Ireland is our performance in PIAAC 2012. Adult students in Ireland performed poorly, by international standards, in both literacy and numeracy (CSO, 2013). This goes to show the need for substantial investment in adult literacy and numeracy services such as adult literacy and crucial adult guidance services within the ETB sector.

Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy

The TUI shares the ambition of the DoE that “every child and young person in Ireland should have the necessary skills to fully participate in society” (DoE, 2022a: 2). In fact the TUI would like to go further and urge the DoE and DFHERIS to ensure that all adults are given the opportunity, should they so wish, to also attain such skills. The TUI agrees with the DoE (2022a: 3) that there has been, and needs to continue to be:

- Continued prioritisation and strengthening of numeracy
- a focus on children and young people experiencing educational disadvantage
- strengthening literacy for and through the Irish language
- developing and enhancing digital literacy skills, and
- co-ordinating and collaborating with key stakeholders so as to welcome opportunities to reinforce and resource the literacy and numeracy message.

In relation to educational disadvantage specifically, the TUI would like to draw the attention of the DoE to the submission which the TUI made to the then DES in March 2020 regarding DEIS and the recommendations contained within that submission. Copies can be accessed at [TUI Submissions/Policy Developments](#).

As noted by the DoE (2022a: 4),

“Parents and families are the single biggest influence on children’s early learning, including their cognitive, social, emotional and behavioural development. The home learning

environment and the active support of parents, guardians and families can have a significant positive impact on a child's learning and development, especially in relation to literacy and numeracy. Children and young people achieve better learning outcomes when their parents and families take an active interest in their education, supporting and encouraging them and creating achievable expectations."

The TUI would like to strongly concur. Educational settings such as schools need the support of parents/guardians who are, after all, the primary educators. Schools can only address some problems. Parents and communities also have a role to play. The importance of parents in the children's education cannot be overstated. Two things occur there, one is family literacy. The other, one of the recognised wider benefits of learning is that when the primary care giver, often the mother, of a child engages in education, even at a basic level, it improves the educational outcomes for children.

Taxpayers must also play their part in providing adequate resources to an education system that is significantly underfunded (OECD, 2015b; SJI, 2018, NERI, 2018, OECD, 2019a; UNDP, 2019; OECD, 2021a; Kovacic et al., 2021; CSO, 2022a; Clark et al., 2022). Adequate resourcing of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy is essential for all students including those with EAL needs. There should be substantial, and discrete, funding for EAL in schools and community settings. That funding should not be included, as is currently the case, as part of the SEN allocation to schools. We also need to take account of the large number of students accessing ESOL support in the community and FET sectors. Solas (2021) data outlines how it provides support to almost 27,000 part-time adult literacy learners and almost 16,000 part-time ESOL learners.

There has been a significant reduction in young people reading for enjoyment (OECD, 2021c). There has also been much discussion about students and young people being 'digital natives'. However, there has been considerable debate about whether students and young people have digital skills that are really compatible with employment-required digital skills and productivity software. Indeed the OECD has gone so far as to suggest that the concept of 'digital natives' is a "myth" and devoted a chapter of a report to this "myth" (OECD, 2020b).

There is a need to focus on literacy and numeracy in all areas and not just in English/Maths. There needs to be a broad definition of literacy/numeracy to include financial literacy/ digital literacy etc (and digital literacy doesn't just mean social media). The definition of literacy provided by the ALOA may be useful here (Grummell, 2022):

“literacies’ in the broadest sense, includes reading, writing, spelling, speaking and listening, numeracy and an ability to navigate the digital world, as well as a critical competence in all of those spheres.”

In developing a strategy across all subject areas, it would be very useful if the DoE could substantially increase the number of middle management posts in school and allow the appointment of L+N coordinators to recognise the importance of same. The DES has itself described the lack of middle management posts as “unsustainable” (DES, 2018c).

Where parents can't help their children then we need to have more HSCL officers to encourage parents with literacy problems of their own back into schemes through adult education and/or FE. Courses in FE colleges that foster literacy and other skills such as childcare, first aid, numeracy, nutrition, Internet etc can foster an interest in learning especially in disadvantaged areas. A parent who finds that they like to learn will pass that enthusiasm onto their children.

For parents who do not have literacy problems more general routines such as reading to, and then with, their child from an early age can be included in the post school activity at home and sensitively monitored by the school. When this does not happen then weaker students often fail. Simple procedures that include parents in the intervention where a child has difficulties will have far better outcomes than school efforts alone. Parents working with the learning support teacher using email to communicate progress and set goals can address much of these problems.

We do need more learning support teachers in the general allocation (as the majority of literacy issues do not arise from special needs) to identify children with problems and plan and implement interventions with the cooperation of parents.

We must however also take note of existing pressures on schools and other educational settings. It is important that we not fall foul of *initiativitis* (Fullan, 2008) and that we are careful not to overburden schools with ‘more things to do’. *Initiativitis* is defined by Fullan (2008: 1) as

“the tendency to launch an endless stream of disconnected innovations that no-one could possibly manage. In Change Without Pain, Abrahamson (2004) calls this the “repetitive change syndrome”: “The symptoms? Initiative overload, change-related chaos and wide-spread employee anxiety, cynicism and burnout” (p.2)”.

The DoE itself highlighted the fact that new initiatives can lead to teachers “feeling significant pressure to implement new projects, while also delivering on curriculum objectives and assessment requirements” (DoE, 2022b:269). It is also important to note that such pressures also press down especially on already overworked school leaders. Fullan (2001) has argued that schools can rarely cope well with more than approximately six changes at one time.

A study by the TUI in May 2022 found approximately sixty-six large changes happening in the education system through new or revised frameworks/strategies and guidelines. Furthermore, in a timeframe of slightly over two years there had been 177 circulars issued by the DoE. This is within the context of posts of responsibility being cut over the last decade or so from over half of all teachers previously to just 27% in 2022 (data supplied to the TUI by the DoE payroll section in September 2022).

Impact of Covid-19

It would be remiss of us not to mention the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people. Despite the fact that the pandemic started three years ago, it is unlikely that we have yet experienced the full impact of the pandemic. Some studies have attempted to assess some of the impact (see for example Carroll and McCoy, 2021; OECD, 2020c; Oireachtas, 2021, Dempsey and Burke, 2021, Darmody et al. 2020; NFER, 2022). The general consensus is that the pandemic has had an impact on the academic attainment of most students but that students with SEN or from disadvantaged communities have been hit hardest. However, research also appears to indicate that student performance in literacy and numeracy in particular is recovering across the board. However, it is important to note significant attainment gaps existed before the pandemic (NFER, 2022). MacGiolla Phadraig (2022:1) has noted that the pandemic “highlighted real issues of equality of access to education and brought existing social inequalities into sharp focus”.

Waters et al. (2021) have described the enormous impact on mental health that the pandemic has had on educational institutions and their students:

“Schools have also suffered via widespread shutdowns, with up to 91% of the students across globe experiencing remote learning on account of country-wide school closures in 2020 (UNESCO, 2021). Research shows that for many students, the move to remote learning has increased student loneliness (Loades et al., 2020), decreased student wellbeing (Nanigopal et al., 2020), and has harmed learning effectiveness (Owusu-Fordjour et al., 2020; Di Pietro et al., 2020). The negative effect of school closures is amplified for students who were already experiencing intersecting vulnerabilities (e.g., war, displacement, poverty, and weak healthcare and education systems; Banati et al., 2020). Those who live in marginalized communities or are economically disadvantaged are also at greater risk for negative outcomes due to the ‘digital divide’ (Eyles et al., 2020) and other factors, such as having no dedicated study space at home or having parents who are more likely to need to travel to work and are more at risk of contracting the virus (Andrews et al., 2020).

At the same time that students are struggling, the rapid move to remote learning has increased the workload and stress of teachers, school staff, and leaders/ administrators (Alves et al., in press; Suryaman et al., 2020) and has put pressure on parents trying to help their children with learning while also working from home (Ahrendt et al., 2020; Fontanesi et al., 2020).”

To compound matters further, research has shown that the burden of difficulties arising from Covid-19 has fallen disproportionately on SEN and disadvantaged student communities (Holt-White et al., 2022; Darmody et al., 2020; SJI, 2021; EEF, 2022). It must also be borne in mind that mental health difficulties were, even before Covid, more likely to occur in students from disadvantaged communities (Kim and Hagquist, 2018; Danielson et al., 2020), and in students with SEN (Cree et al., 2020) than in their peers who do not have SEN and don't come from disadvantaged communities. Time needs to be provided to all staff in all settings to enable a focus on literacies but also the associated organisation/administration that comes with it. There is a danger that other educational initiatives, such as SSE and Wellbeing for example, can take time away from vital tasks connected to literacy/numeracy.

Meeting the Skills Needs of the Future

The adult and further education sector has a long and productive history of meeting the needs of adult learners, students recently out of school and of the workplace. Education and training serves an important need in the development of a skilled staff workforce. However, it also serves the personal development needs of many people. It is vital that both strands continue to flourish. The adult and further education sector is diverse because of the diverse needs of learners. Such diversity is a strength that must be protected.

The TUI sees the establishment of SOLAS as an opportunity to locate FET within the mainstream education system, based on the established expertise and capacity of the vocational education sector, completed by particular strengths of other agencies that will come under the remit of ETBs. The TUI considers that current ETB models of delivery of FET which are characterised by a holistic learner-centred approach should form the basis for the development of future FET. The TUI believes that success of the ETB system of further education and training should form the point of departure for the development of an integrated system of FET.

Recommendations

The TUI would like to make the following recommendations:

- Substantial investment is needed in the education system in order to fulfil the promise of young people. This needs to include restoration of middle management and pastoral posts.
- Young people experiencing personal or health difficulties should be able to access out-of-school supports in a timely manner.
- Children should not be living in consistent poverty.
- The impact, socially and psychologically, of Covid-19 should be factored into Government decision-making over future years.
- Programmes of upskilling for adults are also required where those adults currently lack literacy, numeracy and/or digital literacy skills. Capital and current investment in Youthreach and adult education programmes such as adult literacy is vital.
- Government departments and relevant agencies need to encourage students, and their parents, to support reading for enjoyment. An expansion of the JCSP library service would be very helpful here.
- An updated national plan to improve literacy, numeracy and digital literacy in schools is overdue and, therefore, welcomed by the TUI.
- The draft discussion paper overall suggests a limited interpretation of literacy and numeracy and fails to truly reflect the complexities of the multi-lingual context as well as the technological digital age in which we now operate.
- The TUI is disappointed that targets and actions that appear to be envisaged by the draft discussion document are directed primarily towards schools, teachers and teaching. There is little reference to the 'agency' and disposition of learners or the multiplicity of out-of-school factors that can have a negative impact on student progress.
- Of particular note is the absence of any overarching targets to move towards a more equitable system of education which has proven to have positive long-term effects on performance levels and diminishes wide variation in achievement.

- Access to relevant CPD will be critical for all teachers. Proper investment in CPD will be key to success but high priority needs in one area should not undermine or compromise priority needs in another.
- The TUI endorses the view that all teachers could have some responsibility to support the development of literacy and numeracy skills. This will require sensitivity, time and resources to change attitudes and build an appreciation of the benefit and potential of such an approach. It will be critical that efforts to support improvement in literacy and numeracy do not overly compromise specific subject knowledge or displace the broad learning experience young people deserve. Access to on-going and well supported continuing professional development opportunities through external support services and on-site experts will be essential. However, the TUI is concerned about such CPD becoming a requirement for on-going registration. This requires detailed consideration and discussion. The TUI has been clear in its discussions with agencies such as the Teaching Council that a mandatory form of CPD is absolutely unacceptable and would in fact discourage teachers from engaging meaningfully in CPD.
- The TUI believes specific measures to target learners at risk are important. Some of the actions presented will benefit individuals or specific groups. However, the Union notes resources to some groups have been severely curtailed for example, Travellers and those for whom English is a second language. Of further concern is the lack of attention to special educational needs.
- Increase the number of middle management posts in schools.
- Increase the number of HSCLs.
- Invest substantial additional resources in adult literacy and guidance services.
- Make special provision for EAL learners fleeing conflict zones.
- Funding for psychological supports to help with diagnosing students is needed.

Ends

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Glossary

ALOA	Adult Literacy Organisers Association
C&C	Community and Comprehensive
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs (now DCEDIY)
DE	Department of Education (Now DoE)
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills (Now DoE)
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
DoE	Department of Education
EAL	English as an Additional Language
EEF	Education Endowment Foundation
EFTA	European Free Trade Association
ERC	Educational Research Centre
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Board
EU	European Union
FE	Further Education
FET	Further Education and Training
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison
HEA	Higher Education Authority

IBEC	Irish Business and Employers Confederation
IMF	International Monetary Fund
JCSP	Junior Cycle Schools Programme
L+N	Literacy and Numeracy
NAPD	National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals
NERI	Nevin Economic Research Institute
NFER	National Foundation for Educational Research
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PIAAC	Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies
PIRLS	Programme in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SJI	Social Justice Ireland
SSE	School Self-Evaluation
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
TUI	Teachers' Union of Ireland
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation

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