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New Minister for Education and Skills

Richard Bruton, TD, representing the constituency of Dublin Bay North, was appointed Minister for Education and Skills on 6 May. He had served as Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation since March 2011 and was previously Minister for Enterprise and Employment from 1994 to 1997. John Halligan, TD, representing the constituency of Waterford, was subsequently appointed Minister of State for Training and Skills.

It is customary for officials of a government department to prepare a briefing document for an incoming minister. The 2016 education document gave an overview of the department's functions, resources, policies and current issues (Department of Education and Skills, 2016d). It noted that pupil numbers in primary schools are projected to increase by 25,000 between 2014/15 and 2017/18 to 569,000, peaking in 2018/19 at 574,000, while projections for second level indicate an increase of 12,000 pupils over the same three-year period to 350,000, peaking in 2025/6 at 405,000. At third level, numbers of full-time students will increase by almost 9,000 over the next three years to 174,000 and will continue to increase until at least 2028.

The briefing document noted that these trends would continue to place considerable pressure on places, funding, teaching numbers, related supports and capital infrastructure. Among the issues highlighted were the consequences of reduced funding for schools. The document noted that inadequacy of capitation grants, intended to

cover current running costs such as insurance, heat and light, could result in the closure of some schools regardless of class size. It indicated that the capitation and related grants were reduced by 11 per cent in aggregate in the period 2011–15 and that annual funding would need to be increased by about €40 million to restore these grants to pre-2011 levels.

Programme for partnership government

Following several weeks of negotiations, a programme for government was agreed in May between Fine Gael and several independent politicians, who together formed a minority government.

The education section of the programme contained a commitment to invest an extra €500 million in education by 2021. Other commitments, in line with ongoing policies and developments, included:

- publishing a new, updated action plan for educational inclusion within twelve months, with particular focus on DEIS schools;
- setting out capitation rates to schools on a rolling three-year basis;
- enacting school admissions and excellence legislation for the start of the school year 2017;
- increasing the number of non-denominational and multi-denominational schools, with a view to reaching 400 by 2030.

Future funding for higher education

In July the report of the expert group on third-level funding was published (Department of Education and Skills, 2016c). The group was established in 2014 by the Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairí Quinn TD, and was chaired by Peter Cassells, former general secretary of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions.

Over the past decade or so the third-level sector has faced unprecedented challenges, which has included rising student numbers, a reduction in state funding and a steady decline in the international rankings of Irish universities. The report indicated that investment was required to support national economic and social development, as well as facilitating public access to higher education. Having established that the status quo was not sustainable, the report presented three main options:

- i. a state-funded system in which higher education is free and the student registration fee is abolished;
- ii. a considerable increase in state funding with retention of the existing €3,000 student contribution/registration fee;
- iii. an income-contingent student loan scheme where fees are deferred and state funding is increased.

It was widely accepted that only the third option, the student loan scheme, offered the most realistic means of ensuring the level of funding required in the medium term. However, from a political perspective there appeared to be little appetite for pursuing this option. At the publication of the report, Minister Bruton stated that all options would be considered by the Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills with a view to forming a consensus. The committee commenced consideration of the report in October.

School-leavers: What next?

In March the Department of Education and Skills published two reports on the 2010/11 cohort of school-leavers, one tracking those who completed secondary school and the other tracking those who left school early (Department of Education and Skills, 2016e, 2016b).

The main findings of the survey relating to 54,760 students categorised as school-completers in 2010/11 were that 52.3 per cent had enrolled in higher education, 28.2 per cent had enrolled in second-level/further education or training, 7.3 per cent had employment activity, 6.9 per cent had social welfare activity and 5.4 per cent were classified under 'other' (including emigration, seasonal employment). Of the school-completers who were in higher education in 2011, 88.1 per cent were still in higher education in 2012.

The main findings of the survey in relation to 7,572 students categorised as early leavers in 2010/11 were that 50.9 per cent had enrolled in second-level/further education, 15.7 per cent had enrolled in education outside the state, 6.6 per cent had social welfare activity, 4.4 per cent had employment activity and 21 per cent were classified under 'other' (including emigration).

At the publication of the surveys the Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O'Sullivan, TD, noted that the number of early leavers was declining year on year and that school retention data indicated that 90 per cent of students who began second level in 2008 had completed their Leaving Certificate in 2013 or 2014.

Fitness to teach

In July Minister Bruton commenced the ‘fitness to teach’ provisions of the Teaching Council Acts, 2001–15. Under these provisions any person, including a member of the public, an employer or a teacher, will be able to make a complaint to the Teaching Council about a registered teacher. A complaint may be made under a number of headings, including professional misconduct or poor professional performance.

The ‘fitness to teach’ process is not intended to replace existing procedures in schools dealing with issues of professional misconduct and competence: these will continue to be dealt with in the first instance at school level. Complaints under ‘fitness to teach’ may proceed to an inquiry held by the Teaching Council but there will be several steps designed to exclude less serious complaints from a full inquiry, including initial screening and, subsequently, consideration of the case by the council’s investigating committee. Following the inquiry the Teaching Council may find that there is no case to answer, or else a number of sanctions are available, ranging from the removal of the teacher from the register to the provision of advice to the teacher.

Back-to-school and college costs

While primary and secondary education are free, the increasing burden of school-associated costs on households was highlighted during the year by two sources.

In a survey of 1,000 nationally representative adults, the Irish League of Credit Unions indicated that a sizeable number of households have difficulty in meeting these costs over the school year (Irish League of Credit Unions, 2016a). It estimated that parents of children attending non-fee-paying primary schools will spend an average of €967 per child. The costs consist of uniforms, school books, lunches, extracurricular activities, school trips, voluntary contributions, transport and sports gear. Of these items, extracurricular activities were considered to be the most expensive element, which had risen sharply in recent years. The results of the survey estimated that parents of secondary school children will spend an average of €1,474 per year. Overall, four-fifths of parents of schoolgoing children indicated that the costs were a significant burden and almost one-third indicated that they were likely to have to borrow money to meet these costs.

In its eleventh annual school costs survey, based on 1,500 parents, the children's charity Barnardos pointed to the inequality and unfairness in the education system (Barnardos Ireland, 2016). It indicated that parents of children in senior infants class will spend, on average, €340 as compared with €395 for children in fourth class and €775 for children entering secondary school. The survey noted that the absence of uniformity in the system meant that some parents benefited from low-cost book-rental schemes and access to relatively inexpensive generic school uniforms, while other parents were obliged to pay for books and designated uniforms. It also noted that for just €103 million the government could provide all primary school books, remove the voluntary contribution, eliminate classroom resource fees, restore the capitation grant rates to 2010 levels and provide free transport for those using the School Transport Scheme. This minimal investment, according to Barnardos, would ensure a level playing field for all primary school children and substantially reduce the financial burden on parents.

A survey carried out by the Irish League of Credit Unions among a representative national sample of 1,000 adults indicated the average parent spend is €447 per month to support children attending third-level institutions through the academic year (Irish League of Credit Unions, 2016b). The research indicated that 87 per cent of parents will financially support their children attending third level, with 60 per cent getting into debt to do so. The average amount of debt parents will accrue is estimated at €4,300, down from €4,670 in 2015. The research also found that parents save for an average of eight years to cover third-level costs, saving on average €8,150 over that period. Results indicate that students living outside the home will spend €1,048 a month while those living at home will spend €530 a month. It also established that more than two-thirds of students work throughout the academic year for an average of seventeen hours a week and €12 per hour.

Progression in higher education

Among the publications of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) during the year was the fourth in a series of progression reports on students in third level (Liston et al., 2016). The report analysed the progression rate of students in HEA-funded higher education institutions for 2012/13–2013/14. The following are some of the key findings:

- The overall proportion of new entrants in 2012/13 who did not progress one year later was 16 per cent; this proportion has remained stable since 2007/8 and compares favourably internationally.
- Females are more likely to progress to the next year in all sectors (university, institute of technology and other colleges).
- The non-progression rate is linked to socio-economic group, with the lowest rate among farmers and higher professionals at 10 per cent, while the 'others gainfully occupied and unknown' group had the highest rate at 17 per cent.
- A strong relationship exists between prior educational attainment, based on Leaving Cert points, and non-progression rates.
- Rates of non-progression vary across fields of study, with construction and related disciplines having the highest rate at 29 per cent, while education disciplines have the lowest rate at 5 per cent.

Action Plan for Education

In September the first *Action Plan for Education* was published (Department of Education and Skills, 2016a). It incorporates the department's strategy statement and outlines a range of actions and sub-actions to be implemented, with timelines and lead responsibility assigned. It is not a comprehensive list as it is intended that at the start of 2017, and in each subsequent year, an updated action plan will be published which may contain further actions to be implemented in that year. It is based on the successful model of the *Action Plan for Jobs*, first published in 2012.

One of the purposes of the plan is to ensure that there is adequate training for jobs in growth areas of the economy in the future, rather than the traditional reliance on apprenticeships in construction. It set out a target to create 100 new apprenticeship schemes and 50 new training programmes by 2020, as well as increasing access to work experience for higher-level students.

The plan also recognises the need for greater diversity of schools and more open enrolment policies. It commits to the publication of new school admissions legislation for the start of the school year. It also commits to the establishment of 400 multi- and non-denominational schools to provide greater choice to parents in the types of schools available. The issue of school costs for parents is also included in the plan, which indicates that a circular will be sent to all

schools, requiring them to take into consideration the needs of parents when making decisions that have a financial impact, including the costs of uniforms and books.

In the preparation of the plan, Minister Bruton and departmental officials engaged with 125 stakeholder organisations and with members of the Oireachtas, and received 600 submissions. The action plan is to be referred to the Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills for further consultation in advance of its formal adoption as the department's strategy statement.

The Fianna Fáil spokesman on education, Thomas Byrne, TD, indicated that the plan lacked ambition, especially in relation to making third- and fourth-level education more accessible.

University rankings

The downward slide in the international ranking of Ireland's top universities continued with the added embarrassment of the temporary delisting of Trinity College Dublin (TCD) from one of the most prestigious rankings. The rankings include a total of almost 1,000 universities from 79 different countries.

In the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) world rankings 2016, published in September, Trinity was the only Irish university in the top 100 but it and all other Irish universities, except NUI Galway, were rated lower than their rankings for the previous year. The QS ranked Trinity at 98, down 20 places from its position the previous year, while University College Dublin (UCD), the second-highest-ranking Irish university, fell 22 places to 176. NUI Galway was the only Irish university not to drop in the overall rankings, rising to 249 from 271.

In the *Times Higher Education (THE)* rankings, also published in September, Irish universities failed to rank in the top 200 for the first time. TCD, so long Ireland's top-ranking college, was omitted from the *THE* rankings at short notice when it emerged the college had supplied incorrect data. The error is understood to have been discovered when the college, which ranked in 160th place in 2015, fell even further in the 2016 rankings.

In 2009 TCD was ranked at 43 in the world in a joint survey by QS and *THE*, with UCD at 89. In the first *THE* ranking in 2010/11 Trinity was ranked at 76 and UCD at 94.

While it is recognised that the rankings have limitations, it is also recognised that their significance cannot be ignored. They have important roles such as attracting research and international students.

The Irish university sector has consistently linked the decline in rankings to the decline in public funding in recent years.

A report by the Higher Education Policy Institute, which describes itself as the UK's only independent think tank devoted to higher education, referred to the inherent unreliability of the data used and the flawed nature of the rankings (Bekhardnia, 2016). It indicated that they measure research activity to the virtual exclusion of other important university functions, notably the quality of tuition.

Entrants to the teaching profession

Issues associated with entry to undergraduate and postgraduate teacher education courses were the focus of a report by the Economic and Social Research Institute (Darmody & Smyth, 2016). The findings of the study, which drew on a number of data sources, dealt with three main areas: demand for college places on teacher education courses, the profile of entrants and requirements for entry.

The report indicated that there is a high demand for places in teacher education programmes, resulting in strong competition for places on both primary and post-primary programmes. Only health-related courses have a higher level of demand.

Despite difficulties in accessing teaching jobs, the number of CAO applicants who have listed teaching courses as their first preference has remained relatively stable in recent years.

Due to a very high level of demand for places, entrants to initial teacher education courses have very high achievement levels. A significant proportion of entrants to primary teaching courses secure 500 or more Leaving Cert points. Entrants to primary and post-primary courses are disproportionately female, though slightly less so at post-primary level. Diversity remains a challenge, with relatively few men or people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering the profession.

In response to potential concerns about teacher quality, there have been proposals to change the entry criteria used for selecting student teachers in Ireland. At primary level, this proposal would involve higher grade requirements in Maths, Irish and English. Analyses indicate that without sufficient notice to the applicants, this would dramatically reduce the number of school-leavers eligible for entry to education courses and would particularly reduce entry rates among more disadvantaged groups.

The report was commissioned by the Teaching Council to inform its advice to the Minister for Education and Skills regarding the minimum requirements for entry to programmes of initial teacher education.

Irish education indicators in OECD context

A report by the OECD, published in September, provided data on the structure, finances and performance of education systems in thirty-five OECD countries and a number of partner countries (OECD, 2016). Among the key findings in relation to Ireland were the following:

- The level of expenditure on educational institutions for primary to tertiary institutions is the same as the OECD average of 5.2 per cent of GDP, but Ireland spends proportionately more on primary education (2.0 per cent of GDP compared to the OECD average of 1.5 per cent) and less on tertiary education (1.2 per cent of GDP compared to the OECD average of 1.6 per cent).
- Overall, expenditure per student for primary to tertiary students is slightly lower in Ireland than the OECD average, and has fallen between 2008 and 2013 as student numbers have increased.
- Ireland invests less in early childhood education as a proportion of GDP than most other OECD countries.
- Ireland has higher than average rates of tertiary attainment and these increased significantly between 2005 and 2015. In 2015, 52 per cent of Irish 25–34-year-olds had attained tertiary education as compared with the OECD average of 42 per cent.
- The under-representation of women in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics remains an issue in Ireland, as it does in most OECD countries. While 22 per cent of men studied science, mathematics and computing courses, only 11 per cent of women studied the same subjects.
- Teachers in Ireland are younger than average and earn more than colleagues in many other OECD countries after fifteen years' experience. However, Irish teachers teach for longer hours.

Budget 2017

The process of reversing education cutbacks over the past decade or so was continued in Budget 2017. Minister Bruton announced that measures in the education budget represented the start of a major

programme of reinvestment in education and were an important step on the road to Ireland having the best education service in Europe. The department's budget will increase by €458 million in 2017 as compared with the 2016 allocation. The total education budget for 2017 is €9.53 billion, representing over 16 per cent of government total spending.

Some of the key measures were as follows:

- **Additional posts:** Some 2,515 posts will be created in 2017 at primary and secondary level. These include 900 additional resource teachers and 115 additional special needs assistants. Some of the mainstream posts will go towards meeting the needs of a growing school population.
- **Higher education:** An additional €160 million in total current funding is committed to higher education over three years. This represents the first significant increase in spending on this sector following a decade in which spending was reduced by 33 per cent. Over 3,000 students from disadvantaged groups will benefit from an additional package of €8.5 million to support their access to third level.

Reactions to the budget among some key stakeholders were muted. The Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) noted that Irish primary classes remain the second most overcrowded in the EU with 25 pupils per class as compared with an EU average of 20, and that more than 100,000 pupils in classes of 30 or more have been abandoned by government. It also noted that the failure to increase capitation fees meant further reliance on voluntary contributions from parents. The Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI), representing teachers at second level and lecturers in institutes of technology, indicated that the budget did little to reverse the effects of several years of austerity cutbacks to the education system, and it described the additional funding for third level as wholly inadequate.

Results of PISA 2015

The OECD PISA (Programme for International Assessment) study is a three-yearly study and aims to measure how well students, at age fifteen, are performing in the key subjects of reading, mathematics and science. PISA 2015 was conducted in a total of seventy countries, including thirty-five OECD countries, and the results were published

in December (Shiel et al., 2016). The key findings for Ireland were as follows:

- In reading, Ireland ranked third out of the thirty-five OECD countries, second in the EU countries and fifth out of all participating countries.
- In science, Ireland ranked thirteenth out of the OECD countries, sixth among EU countries and nineteenth out of all participating countries.
- In mathematics, Ireland ranked thirteenth out of the OECD countries, ninth among EU countries and eighteenth out of all participating countries.
- Gender differences were evident, with girls performing better than boys in reading, and boys performing better than girls in mathematics and science.

Ireland's performance in science marked a significant drop when compared to PISA 2012. This may be partly due to the introduction, in PISA 2015, of computer-based tests (as compared with paper-based tests used previously), which involve more complex scientific inquiry. More than half of Irish students had never completed tests of this kind on computer before. Furthermore, Irish students' usage of computers in school and for homework is significantly less than that of students across OECD countries.

Teachers' unions

Ongoing issues, on a number of fronts, mainly between second-level teachers' unions and the Department of Education and Skills, continued in 2016. However, the two unions involved, the Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI), and the TUI, held different positions on some of these issues.

The opposition of the ASTI to junior cycle reform continued and in March the union warned of strike days in the autumn if these issues were not resolved. However, the TUI had voted in 2015 to support these reforms.

Issues concerning working hours had implications for both the ASTI and the TUI. Both unions had agreed to work extra hours and carry out additional supervision and substitution duties under the Croke Park Agreement, while the one that succeeded it, the Haddington Road Agreement, expired in June. However, both the

ASTI and TUI had voted to reject its successor, the Lansdowne Road Agreement. Under financial emergency legislation, this could result in teachers losing out on increments worth up to €2,000. Motions concerning the extra hours were put to membership of both unions at their annual conferences. The two unions subsequently adopted different approaches to this issue.

The ASTI voted to cease working additional hours of non-teaching time agreed under the Croke Park Agreement, resulting in a series of pay freezes for their members. This led the ASTI to ballot their members on the withdrawal of supervision and substitution duties. Meanwhile, a new mandatory procedure regarding teaching posts/hours, agreed between the TUI and the department in May, was accepted by TUI members in a national ballot. Acceptance also meant that TUI members were covered by the Lansdowne Road Agreement and that they became entitled to payments for supervision and substitution.

Both unions also had concerns about the pay gap between recently recruited teachers and established colleagues. In 2012 qualification allowances were removed from new entrants to teaching and this amounted to a pay cut of approximately 20 per cent as compared with their colleagues. The TUI and the INTO engaged in discussions on this issue with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the Department of Education and Skills. The ASTI did not engage in these discussions and agreed to ballot its members on this issue.

In October the results of an ASTI ballot indicated that members had voted overwhelmingly in favour of industrial action on two issues: the withdrawal of supervision and substitution duties (78 per cent in favour), and the restoration of full-pay equality for newly qualified teachers (80 per cent in favour). The ASTI announced that it would withdraw from supervision and substitution duties from 7 November onwards, in addition to holding seven one-day strikes between the end of October and the first week in December.

On 8 November the ASTI agreed to suspend further industrial action to allow for talks with the Department of Education and Skills at the Teachers' Conciliation Council. These talks ended in late November with proposals for a resolution that were broadly in line with those accepted by both the TUI and the INTO. However, they were rejected by both the central executive and the central executive council of the ASTI. The proposals are to be put to a ballot of the 17,000 members in January 2017 with a recommendation to reject.

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