



American Chamber of Commerce Ireland Submission to the Department of Education and Skills consultation on Statement of Strategy 2016-2018

How well does the Education service meet the needs of children and students?

(a) What improvements can be made within existing resources?

(b) What improvements can be made through new provision?

The American Chamber's mission is to keep Ireland as the global location of choice for US business investment and our policy focus is on measures that support that aim. Critical to ensuring that we remain a globally competitive location for US business investment is the ongoing ability of organisations to recruit talented workers in Ireland, and the Irish education system has played a crucial role in supporting that. Our members are consistently seeking to attract, develop and retain talented employees. If the Irish education system is to support the continued expansion of the US business sector then it should be responsive to the shifting needs of the modern workplace.

Our members are keen to see a best-in-class curriculum delivered across primary and secondary levels. We welcome the reforms in curriculum at second level in particular and are keen to see those changes implemented in full. Improvement in provision of ICT at primary school level would be very welcome to lay the foundation for future generations. While there are positive changes occurring at second level, the ability to engage primary age pupils in programming or other ICT related learning is patchy for a number of reasons, including, among other things, availability of broadband and the skill-sets of teachers.

Investment in digital infrastructure is critical to ensuring that every school child has the opportunity to engage in a digital learning environment. We are encouraged by the objectives of the *Digital Strategy for Schools 2015 – 2020* and urge a continued focus on delivering that plan. Adapting the UNESCO ICT Competency Framework for Teachers to ensure schools have greater clarity around the concept of ICT integration was a positive aspect of the Strategy and one that we wish to see implemented within the indicative timeline of 2016-2017. In addition, it is critical that the infrastructure commitments under the strategy are delivered within the five year time period. Full implementation of the Digital Strategy should allow for the level of digital learning that all pupils will require in the increasingly connected 21st century society and workplace.

Comment on work currently being undertaken by the Department in your area of interest and/or expertise. (What are we doing well, what could we do better)?

Efforts to reform the curriculum to keep it current with the changes in the economy and in society have been very welcome. The commitment in the National Skills Strategy to the production of employability statements by further education and higher education institutions is very welcome. Employability is a key aspiration for all learners and is the basis on which school leavers and graduates can take a fuller part in the economy and society. We suggest that a set of metrics to test employability in practice are global indicators on employee engagement.

The review of guidance counselling presents the education system with a unique opportunity to reset the approach to the career guidance aspect of that role. Beyond that review it will be vital that career guidance functions are better supported with the tools and resources they need to support students in their decision making. In addition, we believe it will be important to track the public perception of future career opportunities to identify knowledge gaps as against projected skills demand from industry.

It's important to balance breadth and depth in the curriculum. The breadth of our curriculum has been a positive, but there is a danger that adding more content will compromise the depth of a student's understanding – particularly on the fundamentals of a subject. Specifically, it appears that many students are entering third level STEM courses without a strong grounding in mathematics. They often struggle to keep up with the course content, and for those that do, the Higher Education Institutions are providing extra tuition to educate them to the required level. It is important that we measure success not just on the numbers progressing to third level but also their ability to thrive there.

How should success on achieving our strategies be measured?

Important international indicators such as the OECD PISA scores and Digital Literacy report are the benchmarks for measuring outputs in some key areas. These reports remain essential for measuring progress in a number of areas, particularly around literacy, mathematics and the digital strategy for schools.

Increased numbers of students taking STEM subjects at Leaving Certificate and particularly at third level will be important indicators. In addition, the National Employers Survey and Irish Survey of Student Engagement can be critical in assessing progress of, and satisfaction with, reforms.

We provide further input on specific ways to measure success below.

Comment on any issues relating to the continuum of education and skills, in addition to your particular area of interest and/or expertise

As an organisation with a view of global trends in future employment, it is important to the American Chamber that the education system is enabled to support an expanding economy to grow both incomes and jobs. Progress in the implementation of the new Junior Cycle curriculum is a priority for our members reflecting the capacity of Ireland's education system to respond to a rapidly changing working environment by embedding problem solving, collaboration, and entrepreneurship into the curriculum.

A practical work experience approach across the continuum of the education system is essential. In regard to the STEM subjects, encouraging interest and learning as early as possible is critical to the output of those graduating in STEM subjects in the future. Accessibility and visibility to practical

work experience to compliment theoretical learning will create and foster interest at an early stage. Integrating the creativity of the arts and design disciplines into the delivery of STEM subjects – to create STEAM - should be a priority for the education system. This will enable graduates to be equipped with practical, theoretical and innovative skills as they enter the workforce.

Diversity and Choice for Parents

Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account).

As the American Chamber member companies are employers of a diverse workforce, the Chamber supports efforts to provide for a greater variety of educational provision. A critical competitive factor for our members is the need to develop, attract and retain talented staff. Providing access to a more diverse range of schooling options will certainly aid our members in attracting staff and their families from abroad and to retain them in Ireland. Issues such as patronage arrangements for schooling and the ability of parents to ensure education for their children that reflect their values should mirror the diversity of Ireland's population in every region of the country. The American Chamber welcomes the centrality of transparency of the draft Education (Admission to Schools) Bill as an aid to parents in making decisions on schooling and as means of bringing clarity to the admissions process. In addition, the signals that have been sent from Ireland in the past year on equality in law and in the workplace have been warmly received globally. It is important that we continue to support diversity and equality in the workplace.

How should progress on Diversity and Choice for Parents be measured?

- Pass legislation in the areas of equality and access to schooling
- Greater provision of a more diverse range of schooling

What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

- Delivery of a Schools Admission Bill

Promoting Excellence and Innovation in Schools

Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account).

The American Chamber welcomes the commitments in the Programme for a Partnership Government to the establishment of a pool of experts to advise the Department, investment in continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers, the preparation of new Principals for school leadership, and the aim to introduce technologies to facilitate remote learning as part of the Digital Strategy for Schools.

The establishment of a pool of experts has the potential to be a useful forum for assisting the development of an open culture of engagement and innovation to support teachers and students.

The Higher Education system in recent years has witnessed a concerted effort to establish the parameters and aims of enterprise-education engagement. We expect this process will lead to long lasting and mutually beneficial relationships between academia and the enterprise community. Similarly, the development of a broad based pool of experts has the potential to steer the process of enterprise engagement with schools in a positive direction, support the initiatives that are already taking place between businesses and schools and establish the path forward for further collaboration.

The American Chamber is supportive of CPD as a critical enabler for teachers. We believe that Ireland's performance in Lifelong Learning must improve significantly in the coming decade and as the most important educators in a student's life teachers should be enabled to acquire the skills they need particularly in response to changes in the curriculum. We note that the draft framework for teacher education, Cosán, will facilitate recognition of a broad base of learning by teachers alongside supporting the ongoing acquisition of knowledge and skills. This approach is suggestive of a welcome, holistic culture of self-reinforcing learning and development. It will be important to establish the connection between the new framework and existing initiatives to support CPD, particularly in the STEM area.

The objectives of the Digital Strategy for Schools for improvements in ICT Infrastructure are essential to enable the current and future generations of learners in a world of pervasive technology. Greater access to remote learning technologies will aid teachers in the delivery of the curriculum, accessing a wider variety of content and imparting 21st century skills. We note that this commitment is in line with the aim of the Digital Strategy to provide multi-annual grants for equipment and, more broadly, guidance on the use of ICT for teaching and learning.

How should progress on Promoting Excellence and Innovation in Schools be measured?

- Establish the pool of experts and set their objectives by the end of 2016
- As the parameters of spending on the provision of multi-annual grants for ICT equipment have been set (€210m budget) it will be important for delivery of that spending to follow best practice in terms of procurement, interoperability of technology and through the identification of greatest need
- Commencement of Section 39 Teaching Council Act 2001 in support of the Cosán framework once finalised
- Establishing a budgetary framework for the delivery of the Cosán objectives

What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

- Delivery of spending on ICT equipment, particularly to schools with poor existing ICT provision should be the priority area
- Establishing the pool of experts should be expedited by the end of 2016
- Ensuring the support of all stakeholders for the Cosán framework

Promoting Creativity and Entrepreneurial Capacity in Students

Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account).

Embedding entrepreneurship education and skills into the education system will develop a talent pool that has acquiring generic and entrepreneurial skills, in addition to their academic attainment,

to produce rounded graduates more attuned with the world of commerce. The American Chamber supports the position that promoting a national spirit and culture of entrepreneurship is an essential part of having a strong pipeline of future skills, innovative businesses and new start-up enterprises. Education plays an essential role in shaping the attitudes and culture that encourages and values that attribute. From primary school level up, endeavours in enterprise and innovation should be celebrated, recognised and rewarded.

The focus on innovation and enterprise should start at an appropriate level in primary schools and build and grow right up to Level 9 attainment. Providing an early introduction to small-business concepts will foster and develop business acumen and challenge students with real-life experience. These concepts can be introduced in the classroom, with sponsorship from businesses within the industry.

The American Chamber welcomes the commitment in *Ireland's National Skill's Strategy 2025* to the delivery of an Entrepreneurship Education Policy Statement and the HEInnovate review of entrepreneurship in higher education. These outputs will be important in establishing a route forward for integrating entrepreneurial approaches across the education system. In turn we welcome the broad approach signalled in the Programme with an emphasis on the arts, mental health awareness and core abilities in literacy and maths. Supporting the talents and creativity of our students must be a key function of the education system and is essential in producing the T-shaped learners valued by business.

How should progress on Promoting Creativity and Entrepreneurial Capacity in Students be measured?

- Employ the Survey of Student Engagement and National Employers Survey

What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

- Delivery of the Entrepreneurship Education Policy Statement in 2016
- Delivery of the Country Review of Entrepreneurship in Higher Education in 2016

Meeting the Skills Needs of the Future

Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account).

The American Chamber welcomes the continued commitment to deliver Technical Universities to aid and boost regional competitiveness. The development of regional clusters is another welcome means by which our regions can maximise their potential. Industry's role in delivering on the potential of these new institutional arrangements will be critical. More broadly we have long advocated higher levels of mutually beneficial engagement between our members and academia. The commitment to establishing connections in this area is very welcome.

The delivery of critical skills for our future economic welfare and incentivising their delivery is also very welcome. The past eight years have witnessed many examples of the ability of the higher education system to respond to a new economic environment. Many of our members benefited from, and in turn contributed to, that responsiveness through Springboard, regional upskilling collaborations and the Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Practice, to name but a few examples. As we enter the third year of strong economic growth, and with an expanding workforce

and declining unemployment rates, our focus must now be on putting in place the infrastructure to support the skills needs of new, growing and established businesses.

Our members are uniformly of the view that lifelong learning is of significant value to employees and will be of even greater value in the future as their career paths take them through a range of business sectors with constantly evolving skills needs. The need to maintain or upgrade skills alongside acquiring new skills and knowledge throughout their careers will be an ever present requirement. The American Chamber therefore welcomes the objective in the National Skills Strategy of promoting lifelong learning “to all people in Ireland and a target to increase participation from 6.7% in 2014 to 10% in 2020 and to 15% by 2025.”

Our ability to forecast future skills needs will always be limited by a number of factors such as the business cycle and new business needs driven by innovation. To that end it is essential to ensure that there is both sufficient capacity to support lifelong learning and the promotion of a culture of lifelong learning. The institutional arrangements to support this will be important in ensuring that new areas of critical need can be addressed as rapidly as possible.

In addition, the support in the Programme for an increase in the number of flexible courses and opportunities is welcome, as is the aspiration to introduce mid-degree “sandwich year” courses. It will be important that the Department and other stakeholders involved in delivering on this commitment are enabled to assess the capacity and resource needs of the relevant parties.

We welcome the continued development of, and ambition for, the Apprenticeship model, the commitment to create financial incentives for the third level to respond to skills gaps and recognition of the role of industry in curriculum development at third and fourth level.

How should progress on Meeting the Skills Needs of the Future be measured?

- Annual statements of Regional Skills Fora on skills needs by region and delivery of programmes in response
- Annual review of uptake of lifelong learning opportunities
- Employ the National Employers Survey to measure satisfaction levels with the provision of flexible course delivery

What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

- Delivery of a statement on financial incentives for third level providers to address skills gaps/needs
- Inviting industry to partner in the delivery elements of the curricula at third and fourth levels
- Creating a strong system for the delivery and renewal of skills in newly emerging technical areas (including apprenticeships, traineeships, and in service progression)