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Education

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AN ROINN

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Dear Jim

COMMITTEE FOR ENTERPRISE, TRADE & INVESTMENT - INQUIRY TO CONSIDER THE POTENTIAL FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH AND JOB CREATION FOLLOWING REDUCTION IN CORPORATION TAX IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Thank you for your letter of 23 January 2015 inviting the Department of Education to respond to the Committee's Inquiry considering the potential for economic growth and job creation following a reduction in corporation tax.

The Department of Education recognises that economic growth will be greatly dependent upon the delivery of high-quality education within our own education system. We have to have confidence that our young people are developing the skills and attributes, and securing the qualifications that will enable them to take their place as contributors to society and the economy.

To that end, the Department's priorities are to improve educational standards and address underachievement wherever it occurs. There are a number of key drivers in that effort – some of which are within the remit of Executive Departments, and others which are not.

At the core of our endeavours is our **curriculum**, which combines knowledge, skills and understanding. Recognising that the experience of employment for many of our young people may be very different to that we see today, the curriculum seeks to ensure that they leave school with the kinds of skills that will enable them to apply themselves to jobs that may simply not yet exist; thinking skills, team working, creativity, problem solving, and so on are all explicitly set out in the statutory curriculum. Likewise, the area of learning called

'Learning for life and Work' is compulsory throughout Key Stages 3 and 4. This covers careers education, local and global citizenship, and entrepreneurship, all of which are relevant to the employability of our young people.

Underpinning the delivery of all learning are the **cross-curricular skills** of communication, using mathematics, and using ICT. Without these, children will not be able to access the other parts of the curriculum, and low levels of attainment in these skills will have a continuing impact on an individual's capacity to contribute to the economy. That is why parents, the wider public and the Executive need to be assured that schools are delivering the necessary progression in children's attainment in these skills. DE will continue to press ahead with new assessment arrangements which will demonstrate how our education system is delivering against stretching targets to improve attainment at KS1, KS2 and KS3 at system level.

It is important that all children are given access to **high-quality teaching and learning in school**. Our school improvement policy – *Every School a Good School* – sets out the qualities of a good school, and through inspection by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and support from the Education and Library Boards (and soon the Education Authority) drives improvement.

In order to fulfil their potential, children must also be able to **access appropriate courses**: courses that interest and engage them, and which offer progression to the next stage of their education, to training or employment. Under the Entitlement Framework policy, all schools are obliged to offer a minimum number of courses at Key Stage 4 (KS4) and post-16, including a mix of 'general' and 'applied' subjects (at least a third of each)¹. From September 2016, the minimum at KS4 will be 24 and at post-16, 27. In support of the Entitlement Framework, schools work together with partner schools and Further Education colleges locally in Area Learning Communities. By organising to deliver the curriculum on an area basis, the provision to young people is broadened and children have access to high-specification plant and expert teachers.

The curriculum and Entitlement Framework are supported by the work of **qualifications** regulation and accreditation by the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). DE believes that the best interests of pupils are served by maintaining an open market for qualifications, subject to local accreditation. We will continue to require that qualifications reflect the needs of employers as well as confirming the attainment of pupils against the statutory curriculum. It is essential that all key stakeholders engage with the current process of revision of GCSE and A level specifications – schools, FE and HE, learned societies, employers *etc.*

Within the parameters of the statutory curriculum, individual courses of study at school are a matter for schools and families to decide. It is essential that those decisions are well-informed, and DE is committed to the joint **Careers Strategy** with DEL, so that careers education in schools is supported by careers advice through the Careers Service. The

¹ The distinction between general and applied courses rests largely in their assessment: general subjects are assessed primarily by reading, recall and extended writing; applied subjects through some practical application of other skills. 'Applied' subjects may be related to employment, but in the school context do not lead to a professional or technical qualifications, and also include some 'traditional' school subjects such as music and art.

broad outline of that strategy is sound, and the recent independent review contains recommendations to improve it further.

The local management of schools and the great degree of autonomy with which schools are able to operate in terms of the delivery of the curriculum means that the Executive cannot demand the delivery of certain subjects or specify courses of study. It is, therefore, essential that delivery of economically-relevant subjects for the labour market is also reflected in **parental demand and through the engagement of employers with schools** through careers education and Boards of Governors. Personal – and very often parental – choice will be the ultimate determinant and there remains a task to turn around the attitudes of parents towards education and career options, to reflect the changing realities.

Where schools and parents are well informed about the labour market and the employment opportunities for young people, we would expect there to be appropriate demand for specific qualifications, courses and skills. The Department recognises the **particular importance of the STEM subjects as being of economic relevance**. Subject to the availability of resources, the Department will lead Executive departments in providing support at a regional level to targeted interventions in the STEM field, as well as business and entrepreneurship.

All schools are required to deliver the same statutory curriculum and all schools operate within the same qualifications landscape. International evidence points to the weaknesses of education systems in which children are divided on the grounds of socio-economic status, which is demonstrably the case as a result of academic selection here. In the context of the contribution of education to economic development, **academic selection** serves only to prevent young people benefitting from the advantages of all-ability schooling, with the consequential negative impact upon levels of attainment and the creation of a long tail of underachievement.

From an Education Workforce Development perspective, the requirement for school leavers to have the skill set that employers need may impact on the demand for experienced teachers in specialist subject areas. We may need to consider how we select students for initial teacher education and how employers recruit graduate teachers to specialist posts.

Yours sincerely



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