

**A CO-PROFESSIONAL APPROACH TO INSPECTION FOR
ACCOUNTABILITY AND IMPROVEMENT:
PROGRESS AND PROSPECTS IN THE IRISH CONTEXT**

**Inaugural Public Lecture
to mark the incorporation of the
Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection
within the DCU Institute of Education**

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**Dublin City University, St Patrick's Campus
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INSPECTORATE

OSCAILT

Is mór, go deimhin, an onóir gur iarradh orm an chéad cheann de shraith phríomhoráidí a thabhairt atá a eagrú ag an Lárionad Meastóireachta, Cáilíochta agus Cigireachta in Institiúid Oideachais DCU in Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath.

[OPENING: It is indeed a great honour to be asked to give the first in a series of key note lectures that are being organised by the Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection at the DCU Institute of Education at Dublin City University.]

Establishment of DCU Institute of Education

The establishment of DCU's Institute of Education is a hugely significant landmark in the development of Irish education. This audience will know that the policy context in which the Institute had its origins was outlined first in the *National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2011-2020*.¹ The Strategy drew on key recommendations made by earlier expert committees (one of them under the chairmanship of the recently deceased Dr Tom Kellaghan, founding Director of the Educational Research Centre at Drumcondra), regarding how the nature of teacher education needed to evolve in Ireland. The Strategy committed the Government to implement many of these recommendations and to bring about a further range of reforms.

The subsequent Sahlberg Report² set out a vision for the coming together of larger-scale institutes of higher education, that could provide in each institution comprehensive, research-informed centres of excellence in the initial and continuing professional development of teachers and other educational practitioners. It envisaged that the professional programmes in these institutions would cover the spectrum of early years, primary and post-primary education. Since the Sahlberg Committee reported, considerable progress has been made to establish the sort of centres of excellence that were recommended, and DCU has been to the fore in establishing the new DCU Institute of Education on this campus.

The DCU Institute has inherited strong historic commitments to excellence in teacher education from the Mater Dei Institute, St Patrick's College, and the Church of Ireland College of Education. It represents a major advance in establishing the type of world-class third level institutes of education that Sahlberg challenged us to create in Ireland. Leading such change, which can often be viewed as controversial, is challenging, because of the

¹ Department of Education and Skills. 2011. *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020*. Dublin: DES.

² Department of Education and Skills. 2012. *Report of the International Review Panel on the Structure of Initial Teacher Education Provision in Ireland*. Dublin: DES. The international review panel was chaired by Prof Pasi Sahlberg. Available at: <https://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2012-Press-Releases/Report-of-the-International-Review-Panel-on-the-Structure-of-Initial-Teacher-Education-Provision-in-Ireland.pdf>

burden on leaders to foster trust and confidence in the process of establishment and in the new institution itself.

However, I think that it is good to remember, too, that the foundation of at least some of the original institutes that now find their home in the DCU Institute was both controversial and radical in its day. St Patrick's College, for example, owed its existence not only to the commitment of the Vincentians to education but also to the Roman Catholic Church's strong opposition to the official educational policy of the State in the mid to late nineteenth century. The origins of the oldest of the constituent bodies that forms the DCU Institute stretches back to the foundation of the Kildare Place Society in 1811. That Society certainly challenged the hegemony of the Established Church's control over state-funded education in the early nineteenth century. The principles that it espoused were viewed with considerable reservation by some members of the Establish Church (the Church of Ireland) prior to its foundation and in its early years; within little more than a decade, it had also evoked strong hostility from the Roman Catholic Church. Yet, in its day, the Kildare Place Society pioneered a radical approach to educational provision; it established the largest educational publishing house for children's textbooks and children's literature in Ireland; it founded the earliest state-funded teacher education institution in the British Isles; it established a professional inspectorate of schools; it supported the establishment of over 1600 elementary schools, and it laid down the basic administrative structures for a state-funded education system over half a century earlier than comparable developments in Britain.

This new DCU Institute has the potential to be equally radical and trend setting, not only for the Irish education system, but also in a wider international context. I am glad to pay tribute tonight to Prof Brian McCraith's leadership of this development at Dublin City University, to Dr Andrew McGrady and Dr Anne Lodge, and especially to Prof Daire Keogh whose relentless energy and commitment were critical in bringing about the foundation of the Institute. I would also like to pay tribute to the outstanding leadership that Prof John Coolahan gave as chair of the Governing Board of St Patrick's College. John's contribution in this forum, as in every other context in which he works in Irish education, is immense.

I also want to take this public opportunity to welcome the recent appointment of Dr Anne Looney as the Institute's new head and Executive Dean. The Institute is indeed fortunate in having a person such as Anne at its head. She brings to DCU a reputation for outstanding scholarship, a deep commitment to excellence and equity in education, and above all a respectful understanding of the diverse founding traditions of the constituent institutions. I congratulate her warmly on her appointment and wish her every success in what is a most exciting and challenging role.

Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection

The Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection began its work in DCU in 2006. I am particularly pleased to give this, the first in a series of public lectures following the incorporation of the Centre within the DCU Institute of Education.

Irish teachers have an enviable international reputation – one that we can be immensely proud of. But this Institute – if it is to serve and challenge Irish education to be among the leading education systems of the world – will have to ensure that the practice of the wide range of professionals working in the Irish educational system and the services that we provide are innovative and world-class. Many professionals, not only early years practitioners, teachers and lecturers, but evaluators, inspectors, psychologists, researchers, developers of educational materials and assessment tools, developers of curricula, and policy experts should be able to look to the DCU Institute for their professional grounding and they should have their ongoing practice challenged and enriched by it.

As someone responsible for at least one element of evaluation in the Irish educational system, I warmly welcome the commitment of the Institute and the University that is demonstrated in the work of the Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection, and I wish Prof Joe O’Hara, as its Director, and Prof Gerry McNamara, Dr Martin Brown and their colleagues every success with their important work.

OVERVIEW OF LECTURE

When the Centre invited me to give this lecture, they suggested that I might like to re-examine the state of inspection and school evaluation in Ireland, five years on from a lecture that I gave in 2012 at Maynooth University.³ They gently suggested that having recommended self-evaluation to others, some self-reflection might be no bad thing for the Inspectorate and me personally!

The work of the Inspectorate as a whole in the period from 2010 to the present has been subjected to at least one independent academic review. It appeared earlier this year in *Towards a Better Future: A Review of the Irish School System*, a wide-ranging examination of the Irish education system written by a number of academics led by Prof John Coolahan.⁴ The volume devotes one chapter to the work of the Inspectorate. Its findings were largely positive about many developments in our work but the authors also concluded that the pace at which we have attempted to introduce innovations may have been too rapid. I found the conclusions of the study, and the interviews that Prof Coolahan and his team conducted with me and my colleagues in the Department as part of their research, to be

³ Hislop, H. 2012. “The Quality Assurance of Irish Schools and the Role of Evaluation: Current and Future Trends: The Professor Séamus Ó Súilleabháin Memorial Lecture 2012”, NUI Maynooth, 2 May 2012. Available at <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Evaluation-Reports-Guidelines/The-Quality-Assurance-of-Irish-Schools-and-the-Role-of-Evaluation-Current-and-Future-Trends.pdf>

⁴ Coolahan, J et al. 2017. *Towards a Better Future: A Review of the Irish School System*. Dublin: IPPN and NAPD.

very thought-provoking, and there is much in their analysis for me and the Inspectorate to reflect upon.

Tonight, however, at the invitation of the Centre, I will be presenting an internal perspective on the work of the Inspectorate. So, this paper is limited by the “insider” perspective, but at the same time, I hope that it provides some additional insights into questions regarding policy and practice in the area of evaluation and inspection in the Irish education system.

At the outset, I think it is worth repeating two maxims that are relevant to this discussion: first, that the Inspectorate believes that *the* most powerful factor in ensuring children’s learning in schools and other settings is the quality of the individual and collective practice of teachers and practitioners; and second, that *a range of complementary features* are needed to provide an effective quality assurance process for an education system. Inspection, of itself, cannot insert quality into any system or process. A consistent theme in the research on evaluation and improvement, and a strong finding from the OECD’s extensive study on evaluation and assessment in the education sphere⁵ is that high quality teaching and learning in schools is enhanced through a range of measures, including

- effective initial and continuing teacher education programmes;
- relevant and challenging curricula;
- a broad range of well-thought through student assessment arrangements;
- excellent school leadership and investment in preparation for school leadership;
- the use of national and international surveys and monitoring; as well as,
- external inspection and effective internal self-evaluation.

While acknowledging this range of measures to be necessary for a comprehensive approach to quality assurance, I also note the view of Melanie Ehren, of the Institute of Education in London and a forthcoming speaker in this series of lectures, that “inspections [of schools] are here to stay and have become important elements of education and accountability systems, particularly in Europe.”⁶ So, at the prompting of my colleagues in the Centre, I am going to confine my remarks in this paper to just one of the elements of quality assurance listed above: to external inspection and self-evaluation. I am also going to speak mainly about how these processes are being used in the Irish system, largely in the school sector but also in the early years sector. I should also note that for the most part, the paper does not discuss changes to purely internal and administrative issues; rather it focusses on those aspects of our work that directly affect the schools and settings in which we provide inspection and advisory services.

I will look, firstly, at how the Irish Inspectorate has sought to develop both inspection and self-evaluation since the beginning of this decade. I believe we have made considerable

⁵ OECD. 2013. *Synergies for Better Learning: An International Perspective on Evaluation and Assessment*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

⁶ Ehren, M. “Introducing Inspections” in Ehren, M C M. (ed). 2016. *Accountability and Educational Improvement: Methods and Modalities of Effective School Inspection*. Switzerland: Springer. p.1.

progress along a journey but some aspects have progressed less quickly than might have been expected, while others remain to be tackled.

In the second part of the paper, I will outline briefly some current challenges and tasks in the years immediately ahead. I will speak about how the Inspectorate has sought to identify these tasks and challenges, and how they might be tackled.

Finally, given that we are in an academic institution dedicated to the study and development of the activities about which I speak, I will pose some questions about how researchers and teachers at third level might further the evaluation and inspection challenges before us.

WHAT HAVE WE DONE?

Since 2010, I believe that a number of themes have informed and shaped the development of evaluation in schools.

We committed to a particular purpose and a distinctive approach to inspection

One of the most important decisions that we made in the Inspectorate – and one that I spoke about in the Maynooth lecture – was the conscious decision that we took to recognise that inspection had to serve both accountability and improvement functions; that a greater emphasis needed to be placed on encouraging school improvement; and that an inspection system focussed singularly on high stakes accountability would fail to exploit the particular benefits that external inspection could bring to the quality assurance of schools.

Writing last year, Melanie Ehren outlined the sort of benefits about which I am thinking. She described the particular contributions that they can make to improving educational practice. She wrote:

They [school inspections] have an important role in providing information about the quality of schools, particularly on wider, less easily measured goals such as school culture and climate, safety and well-being and effective pedagogy.....As the key for improving performance lies in the quality of classroom teaching, school inspections are by nature well positioned to look at what works best in thinking about effective pedagogy and are also well placed to disseminate such effective practice. During their visits of schools, as well as in follow-up activities in failing schools, school inspectors can use a much more refined approach to address school failure than the approaches we would find in monitoring and accountability systems that only make use of test data and other quantitative performance indicators.⁷

A second and equally important commitment that the Inspectorate made concerned the manner in which we would carry out our role. Determined that our work would encourage

⁷ Ehren, M C M. 2016. *Methods and Modalities of Effective School Inspections*, pp. 1-2

improvement, we built upon an approach to inspection that had been adopted following the passing of the Education Act of 1998 – that the Inspectorate would work in a collaborative and co-professional way with teachers, school leaders and others in school communities.

So how have we lived up to these twin commitments regarding *purpose* and *professional engagement*? Both have been incorporated into three of the four guiding principles in our new *Code of Practice* published in 2015.⁸ The principle of “Development and Improvement” underpins our emphasis on promoting improvement in schools and settings; the principle of “Respectful Engagement” commits us to working cooperatively with school communities in a spirit of mutual respect and reciprocity; and the principle of “Responsibility and Accountability” commits us to providing “the public with an assurance of the quality of teaching and learning in publicly funded schools and other educational settings”, and that we will “report objectively and fairly... having taken the context of the school or setting into account.”⁹

In evaluating and reporting on schools, we have continued to avoid the narrow measures of tests and examination scores as the sole determinant of the value of schools’ work, and we continue to place a strong emphasis on evaluating the work of each school within its particular context. Our inspections seek to affirm positive practice in schools and to identify poor practice where it exists. As I will discuss later, post-evaluation surveys conducted among principals tell us that a high proportion believe that our recommendations make a positive contribution to school improvement.

It is really for others to judge how successful we have been in fostering a collaborative and co-professional approach, but we have certainly thought long and hard about the way we work in schools and the other settings that we inspect, and we place a huge emphasis through induction and continuing professional development on instilling this approach in newly recruited and serving inspectors. We have changed the methods of inspection that we use quite considerably, as I will discuss later, but rather than relying solely on formal consultative processes, we have chosen to engage in trials and experimentation with the agreement of schools and settings as part of the development process for proposed changes. These trials and experiments have led us to change aspects of our original plans, but more importantly, I think they have served to mitigate fears and anxieties among practitioners, teachers, school leaders and their representative bodies about proposed changes. I feel, too, that they have engendered greater trust in the formal consultations and informal conversations that we have had with partners in advance of changes being formally introduced to the system, and perhaps greater confidence in the validity of inspections.

⁸ Inspectorate, Department of Education and Skills. 2015. *Code of Practice for the Inspectorate*. Dublin: DES. Available at: <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Evaluation-Reports-Guidelines/Professional-Code-of-Practice-on-Evaluation-and-Reporting-for-the-Inspectorate.pdf>

⁹ Inspectorate, Department of Education and Skills. 2015. *Code of Practice for the Inspectorate*. Dublin: DES, pp.4-5.

We have led a collaborative effort to set standards for educational provision

In 2012, I discussed how modern evaluation systems need a clear statement of the set of standards that we expect of schools and other settings. I spoke about the Inspectorate's development – then underway – of standards for *teaching and learning* in primary and post-primary schools. It was envisaged that these standards for *teaching and learning* would be complemented in due course by standards for *leadership and management*, and standards for *student supports* to provide a fully comprehensive set of standards for the Irish school system.

The standards for teaching and learning appeared in guidelines for school self-evaluation in autumn 2012 and provided the first published set of standards for this dimension of the work of Irish schools.¹⁰ Their publication drew on school effectiveness research and on research about the construction of such frameworks, and followed an extensive, and at times, a challenging consultation process. The standards informed inspectors' judgements in inspections and a majority of schools engaged in the school self-evaluation process in the period 2012-2016.¹¹

However, feedback showed that the standards had proved unwieldy for schools, and the Inspectorate accepted that a significant re-writing of the standards was required. Detailed work was carried out with key partners, including the professional bodies for principals, school management authorities, parents, students and teacher unions as well as groups within the Department working to establish the Centre for School Leadership. The work was informed by further research from national and international sources. A radically different set of standards was published in September of last year, as *Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools* and *Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools*.¹² These are the first fully comprehensive set of published standards for Irish schools.

Instead of the originally conceived three dimensions, two survived in the revised documents: *teaching and learning* and *leadership and management*, with content relevant to *supports for students* integrated fully into the two remaining dimensions. The content of the standards has been pared back considerably, and the standards are presented as

¹⁰ Department of Education and Skills. 2012. *School Self-Evaluation: Guidelines for Primary Schools*. Dublin: DES.

Department of Education and Skills. 2012. *School self-Evaluation: Guidelines for Post-primary Schools*. Dublin: DES.

¹¹ By 2015, 95% of primary schools and 88% of post-primary schools had reported that they had engaged in the self-evaluation process. Source: data reported to Department of Education and Skills by schools.

¹² Department of Education and Skills. 2016. *Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools*. Dublin: DES. Available at: <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Evaluation-Reports-Guidelines/Looking-at-Our-School-2016-A-Quality-Framework-for-Primary-Schools.pdf>

Department of Education and Skills. 2016. *Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Post-primary Schools*. Dublin: DES. Available at: <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Evaluation-Reports-Guidelines/Looking-at-Our-School-2016-A-Quality-Framework-for-Post-Primary-schools.pdf>

statements of practice (or descriptors) that provide an accessible picture of what each standard means. More significantly, however, each standard is now presented at two levels of practice: what constitutes “effective practice” and what might be expected at the level of “highly effective practice”. The decision to present the standards in this way is deliberately intended to encourage schools to think about and improve aspects of their practice from “good” to “excellent.”

The quality framework is really that – a framework that provides a shared understanding of what effective teaching, learning, leadership and management practices look like in the Irish school system. It adopts a broad, balanced and challenging view of learning – one that is responsive to learners’ needs, concerned with learners’ well-being and determined to foster the balanced learning of knowledge, skills and dispositions. The framework sees high quality teaching as a powerful influence on achievement, and reflecting the work that Fullan, Hargreaves, Hattie and others have produced, it points to the importance of *teachers’ collaborative practice* as well as *teachers’ individual practice*.

Looking at our School 2016 is not a prescriptive formula for standardisation. We recognise the limitations of such frameworks. Very tightly defined standards may have their advantages in terms of reliability, for example, but some of the most valuable aspects of inspection and evaluation deal with features of school life that are not amenable to checklist like criteria. The standards are written in a way that respects the professional autonomy of the teacher and school leader, rather than providing a checklist of mandatory requirements. Of course, over time, we have work to do to ensure the ongoing validity of the framework and indeed of the inspection models linked to it.

Time will tell whether these standards prove more user-friendly than the partial and overly-complex set of standards published in 2012, but they have been developed in a collaborative way with a wide range of partners – and for a broader range of purposes than simply inspection and school self-evaluation. They make explicit the standards that inspectors’ use in coming to judgements about the work of schools, and already school leaders have spoken to us about having used them as the starting point for reflective practices with their staffs. We also know that they are being used (as was intended) to inform the development of recruitment policies for school leaders and middle management, to inform the content of continuing professional development for school leaders, and within management authorities and boards of management.

We have developed a range of inspection models that enable us to make inspection more responsive to need

A third task that I talked about in 2012 was the work that we had commenced to give us a range of inspection models for use in schools. Since then, we have put in place a number of new inspection models and revised older ones, and last September the range of models listed in Table 1 (overleaf) came into effect.

As we envisaged, the shorter inspections, particularly the unannounced inspections, enable us to monitor practice in a larger number of schools. In addition to the evaluation work undertaken in the school, information from these inspections is an important factor in planning where a proportion of our more intensive inspections are deployed. This information, combined with a range of other data, enables us to target our resources where a more thorough engagement with the staff, board and wider school community can be more beneficial, and we can minimise the disruption of inspection where it is less necessary.

Table 1: Inspection models approved for use in schools, September 2016.

INSPECTION MODELS IN USE IN SCHOOLS FROM SEPTEMBER 2016		
Length/intensity	Inspections in primary schools	Inspections in post-primary schools
Short, unannounced inspections <i>(one in-school day)</i>	Incidental inspection	Incidental inspection
Medium-scale inspections, covering an aspect of the work of the school <i>(typically one or two in-school days)</i>	Curriculum evaluation	Subject inspection
	Evaluation of provision for pupils with special educational needs	Subject inspection of special education
		Programme evaluation (TY, LCA, LCVP)
Whole-school type inspections <i>(typically three in-school days)</i>	Whole-School Evaluation: Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE-MLL)	Whole-School Evaluation: Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE-MLL)
	Whole-School Evaluation	Whole-School Evaluation
	Evaluation of action planning for improvement in DEIS schools	Evaluation of action planning for improvement in DEIS schools
		Evaluation of Centres for Education
	<i>(normally, two in-school days)</i>	
Follow-up inspections <i>(typically one or two in-school days)</i>	Follow-through Inspections	Follow-through Inspections

Putting in place this range of inspection models has not been without its challenges, especially as their introduction was accompanied by a shortening of many of the notice periods for notified inspections. I think this is a good example of how our co-professional approach has paid dividends. We have succeeded in introducing the models with the collaboration of school communities who facilitated and aided our development work.

National advisory groups, such as that for self-evaluation assisted in forging understanding as did the considerable time we spent in bilateral discussions with education partners. Our partners, for example, told us that while the range of models was intended to lessen the inspection burden on most schools, the development of so many inspection approaches was potentially confusing and overwhelming for teachers and schools. So, we worked last year with them to present the full range of inspection models for mainstream schools within simplified single guides to inspection at primary and post-primary level – guides that were well-received by the education partners.¹³

Having this range of inspection models available to us has helped to ensure that we engage with post-primary schools on a reasonably regular basis and for a diversity of purposes. Some models, such as incidental inspections and follow-through inspections are proving to be particularly beneficial at both primary and post-primary levels in fostering detailed co-professional discussions between inspectors and school leaders regarding school improvement. We also believe that shorter or no-notice period inspections help to reduce the risk of “teaching to the inspection.” However, a remaining worry is our level of engagement with primary schools. Despite the use of this range of inspection models, staffing resources for inspections in the very large number of primary schools in the system need to be increased to provide the sort of advisory and inspection service that we believe to be desirable.¹⁴

We are aware that other inspectorates are seeking to develop approaches to inspection that address the complexities of systems with greater school autonomy and systems where groups of schools operate in formalised networks.¹⁵ These conditions do not exist in the same way in Ireland, but we have evaluated a group of mainly DEIS schools at primary and post-primary level in a single urban area with the intention of looking at the effectiveness of the linkages between the schools and how these were impacting on student learning. The project provided considerable insights for the individual schools and for the schools collectively, we intend to repeat this approach in other areas.

¹³ Inspectorate, Department of Education and Skills. 2016. *Guide to Inspection in Primary Schools*. Dublin: DES. Available at: <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Evaluation-Reports-Guidelines/A-Guide-to-Inspection-in-Primary-Schools.pdf>

Inspectorate, Department of Education and Skills. 2016. *Guide to Inspections in Post-primary Schools*. Dublin: DES. <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Evaluation-Reports-Guidelines/A-Guide-to-Inspection-in-Post-Primary-Schools.pdf>

A third guide, *Guide to Inspections in Schools in High Support Units, Special Care Units and Child Detention Centres* was also published for this specialist provision. Available at: <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Evaluation-Reports-Guidelines/A-Guide-to-Inspections-of-Schools-in-High-Support-Units-Special-Care-Units-and-Children-Detention-Centres.pdf>

¹⁴ In the school year 2015/16, recognised state-aided schools totalled 3,124 mainstream primary schools; 138 special schools; and 735 post-primary schools.

¹⁵ See for example, Brown, M. McNamara, G. O’Hara, J. 2015. *School Inspection in a Polycentric Context: The Case of Northern Ireland*. Dublin, Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection.

See also Ehren, M C M. Janssens, F J G. Brown, M. McNamara, G. O’Hara, J. and Shevlin, P. 2017. “Evaluation and decentralised governance: Examples of inspections in polycentric education systems”, in *Journal of Educational Change*, April 2017.

We are evolving our inspection reports

Until recently, we have probably been less successful in making the inspection reports that we publish as a result of our inspections as accessible as they ought to be. School inspection reports have to fulfil both improvement and accountability functions: they have to provide guidance for improvement and affirmation of good practice, they have to speak to a professional audience, and they also have to report accurately to parents and others. This is not an easy balance to achieve in a single document.

Comments have been made to us from time to time that the language and style of our reports were not sufficiently clear, especially for a non-technical audience, such as some parents and other volunteers on boards of management or for readers who were not familiar with the reports. A published inspection report is a formal document and a certain formality of language will probably always be necessary if a report is to do justice to the complex dynamics that go on in schools. We believe that schools, and the culture and work that goes on in them, are not readily reduced to a single score or even a single statement of “Outstanding school/Satisfactory school/Failing school” and we have set our faces against such a simplified approach.

Nevertheless, we have taken steps to make reports more accessible. Since September last, each report opens with a standard description of what that inspection type is designed to examine. Each section of the report contains a clear evaluative statement about the quality of provision under that heading, and a grid is appended to each report showing the continuum of language that we use in reporting our judgements (see Appendix).

This continuum of language deliberately contains a wide range of terms to allow inspectors to record nuanced judgements about the school’s practice across the three, four, or more major dimensions of the school’s work that are evaluated in the inspection. And of course, it is perfectly possible – quite likely indeed – that the quality of the school’s work will vary across these dimensions: teaching may be highly effective; learning may have considerable strengths; leadership and management may have scope for development, etc. We hope that this allows us to provide a richer evaluation of the strengths and areas of development for the school, and we hope that this additional clarity will be helpful for the range of audiences that use our reports.

We have sought to advance collaborative self-evaluation in schools

At the beginning of this talk, I referred to the complementary nature of external inspection and internal self-evaluation. Much of the research on school improvement demonstrates that when teachers examine their own individual and collective practice in a constructive yet structured way, they can bring about significant improvement in the learning of students. I have discussed this in other papers and how initiatives such as school self-evaluation, the advent of the Teaching Council’s *Droichead* policy for the teacher-led induction of newly qualified teachers, and the inclusion of SLARS (Subject Learning and Assessment Review meetings) within the *Framework for Junior Cycle* are all designed to

facilitate the sort of deep professional engagement among teachers that can be challenging but very beneficial and professionally fulfilling.¹⁶

The adoption of these practices in schools is not without its challenges, of course, and the climate in which this agenda was being advanced in 2012 and subsequent years coincided with a most severe retrenchment in the funding of Irish public services, including schools. The introduction of *Droichead* and SLARS is beyond the scope of this paper. We can note, however, that school self-evaluation was re-introduced to the system and made a mandatory requirement in 2012; extensive guidelines were published for schools; online supports were provided; seminars were held for principals; advisory visits were conducted by inspectors to over 4,000 schools within an initial two year period; and regional seminars were organised at which schools shared their experiences and good practice. Research by Gerry McNamara and Joe O'Hara published in 2011 had demonstrated that the lack of similar supports had undermined an attempt to introduce school self-evaluation in 2003.¹⁷ I believe that there is some evidence to show that the 2012 initiative is gaining more traction in the system: by 2015, for example, high percentages of schools could self-report engagement with the self-evaluation process.¹⁸

Of course, there were weaknesses and shortcomings in the roll-out of school self-evaluation in the 2012-16 period. I have already mentioned that the standards contained in the guidelines were too complex. While some schools welcomed the initial requirement that literacy and numeracy should be reviewed during the initial four-year period, others felt that schools ought to have been freer to select their own areas for review. There has been a risk, too, that school self-evaluation could become exclusively associated with the literacy and numeracy strategy rather than with a wider agenda of school development and improvement. Schools also struggled with handling data and reporting school self-evaluation outcomes to parents. And, although the evidence showed that school self-evaluation was more advanced in primary schools, the implementation of school self-evaluation in that sector has been impeded in the 2016/17 school year by industrial action – an action, it should be noted, that was taken in pursuit of the restoration of middle management posts rather than any rooted objection to school self-evaluation.

Some of these concerns have been addressed in the review of school self-evaluation conducted with the education partners in 2015/16. Schools have been given greater freedom to identify their own issues for self-evaluation, provided they relate to teaching and learning; they can tackle a smaller number of issues, if they wish; the standards have been changed significantly in *Looking at Our School 2016*; and the reporting requirements simplified. More importantly, a conscious effort has been made to integrate school self-

¹⁶ Hislop, H. 2015 “Change, challenge, risk and opportunity: Leading for new Learning” in *Le Chéile: Journal of the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals*. No. 8, October 2014.

¹⁷ McNamara, G. O'Hara, J. Lisi, P L. Davidsdottir, S. 2011. “Operationalising self-evaluation in schools: experiences from Ireland and Iceland” in *Irish Educational Studies*. Vol. 30, No. 1, March 2011.

¹⁸ Data from a national survey of schools, covering 95% of primary schools and 88% of post-primary schools showed that by 2015, 95% of primary schools and 88% of post-primary schools had reported that they had engaged in the self-evaluation process. Smaller percentages reported completion of a school self-evaluation report.

evaluation more effectively with other initiatives, including the roll-out of Junior Cycle changes, the introduction of the Primary Languages Curriculum, DEIS action planning and the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme.¹⁹

In summary, school self-evaluation has commenced in many schools but one has to admit that there is much more work to be done to embed school self-evaluation in the practice of schools. This slow start was not unexpected: at its introduction, the Inspectorate envisaged that it would take at least ten years to develop robust self-evaluation in Irish schools. The pace of its adoption to date vindicates that caution, and we are certainly some way off being able to rely on evidence from school self-evaluation as part of the evidence base for external inspection as inspectorates do in some countries. It is also likely that school self-evaluation will become much more advanced in some schools rather than in others, given the skilled leadership that it requires. In that regard, it is good to see the emphasis being placed on school self-evaluation by the Centre for School Leadership and by the Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) which have regularly facilitated over-subscribed workshops on school self-evaluation given by inspectors and school leaders.

So, are our approaches working?

In summary, I think we can say that we have advanced at least some of the major tasks that I outlined in 2012, and I should note that this has been achieved at a time when the human resources available to the Inspectorate were at their lowest level for some years because of the public service moratorium and the employment control framework imposed during the financial crisis. As you can see, too, we have been more successful in some aspects of our development plan than in others, and lacunae and weaknesses remain to be addressed.

It's also fair to ask if inspection is making a difference to the operation of schools and to students' learning.

In this regard, we can note the positive findings in Table 2 drawn from the post-evaluation surveys that are now routinely deployed following whole-school evaluations to teachers and principals. These surveys, which are administered electronically by the Statistics Section of the Department (and from which we receive aggregate data only, to ensure the anonymity of the responses), show a high level of satisfaction among respondents with the way in which we work in schools.

¹⁹ The requirements for the second phase of school self-evaluation were set out in Departmental Circulars 39/2016 and 40/2016 and cover the period from 2016/17 to 2019/2020. The circulars are available at:
Primary: https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0039_2016.pdf
Post-primary: http://schoolself-evaluation.ie/post-primary/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2016/08/Circular-0040_2016_English.pdf

Details of the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme may be found in Department Circulars 33/2017 and 34/2017, available at:

Primary: http://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0033_2017.pdf

Post-primary: http://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0034_2017.pdf

Table 2: Satisfaction with inspections in post-evaluation surveys, 2015/16

POST-EVALUATION SURVEYS OF TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS 2015/2016 SCHOOL YEAR N=534 primary out of a possible 2,008 (26.8%) N=172 post-primary out of a possible 1,527 (11.3%)		
	PRIMARY Percentage of primary teachers and principals who agreed or strongly agreed	POST-PRIMARY Percentage of post-primary teachers and principals who agreed or strongly agreed
Feedback helped me to reflect on and develop my professional practice	88.3	84.0
The recommendations included in the report are relevant	86.1	84.4
Overall, the evaluation contributed in a practical way to our plans for school improvement	85.4	84.0

More recently, the Statistics Section of the Department has begun to administer similar confidential online post-evaluation surveys to chairpersons of boards of management and chairpersons of parents' associations. The initial returns, though very small in number, are also positive about the contribution that evaluations are making to school improvement, the manner in which evaluations are conducted and the feasibility of implementing the recommendations in the reports. As we obtain greater numbers of these returns, we will be monitoring the feedback that they provide very carefully.

Follow-through inspections are a further useful source regarding the impact of inspections. Follow-through inspections are intended to monitor the implementation of recommendations in published reports. Frequently, school leaders, teachers and school boards welcome follow-through inspections for the affirmation that they give when improvements have happened and they play an important role in the monitoring of schools where there are concerns about the quality of provision.²⁰ Data from follow-through inspections show that schools have acted upon a high proportion of the recommendations that we have made, and this is especially welcome considering that a proportion of the recommendations concerned were made in schools that had been inspected because of risks or concerns. In 2015, for example, follow-through inspections showed that schools had made very good progress or good progress in implementing 74% of recommendations at primary level and in implementing 79% of recommendations at post-primary level.

Of course, in an environment when a number of initiatives are being taken to improve educational provision, it is well-nigh impossible to disaggregate the effect of any one measure such as inspection on student achievement. I am also only too aware of the

²⁰ Where concerns are identified about the quality of provision, the school may be subject to monitoring by the Inspectorate or it may be referred to the Department's School Improvement Group which may implement a range of actions and interventions including requesting follow-up inspections by the Inspectorate.

limitations of data from national and international surveys of achievement. Yet it is good to see that the performance of Irish students in such surveys has been positive during the period about which we are speaking. The 2014 national assessments of reading and mathematics showed the first significant improvements in over thirty years.²¹ In the 2012 and 2015 rounds of PISA, Irish students scored at very high levels in reading literacy, and at above average levels for mathematics and science. The surveys of reading at primary level in PIRLS and of mathematics and science in TIMSS at primary and post-primary levels also show Irish students to be performing well overall.²²

Perhaps one further indicator that we are getting inspection and evaluation “right”, and particularly our commitment to co-professional evaluation of schools, comes from the fact that the approaches that we have been developing and implementing seem to resonate with actors outside the schools sector. Teagasc, the agricultural development authority, for example, sought detailed briefings from us on quality measures for agricultural colleges and ended up asking us to construct and carry out whole-college evaluations (WCEs) using the co-professional and collaborative approaches that we had developed for the schools sector. We completed a full round of WCEs for Teagasc by the end of 2016 and the feedback from the authority has been positive about their impact.

On a much larger scale, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs asked us in 2015 to develop an education-focussed inspection of early years provision within the ECCE scheme²³ that would complement the regulatory inspections carried out by TUSLA. In this task, we set out from the beginning to work closely with a sector that was wary of additional inspection. We recruited early years specialists from the sector as inspectors. We developed a research-informed quality framework.²⁴ We talked with and listened to around 2,000 practitioners at different fora across the country. In fact, the best advocates for our new inspections at those sessions were practitioners who had experienced our trial inspections. Our co-professional working has been praised and a model of inspection that was firmly focussed

²¹ Shiel, G. Kavanagh, L. Millar, D. 2014. *The 2014 National Assessments of English reading and Mathematics*. Dublin: ERC.

²² OECD. 2013. *PISA 2012 results: What Students Know and Can Do: Student Performance in Mathematics, Reading and Science*. Vol 1. Paris: OECD Publishing.

OECD. 2016. *PISA 2015 Results: Excellence and Equity in Education*. Vol 1. Paris: OECD Publishing.

Eivers, E. Clerkin, A. 2012. *PIRLS and TIMSS 2011: Reading, Mathematics and Science Outcomes for Ireland*. Dublin: ERC.

Clerkin, A. Perkins, R. Cunningham, R. 2016. *TIMSS 2015 in Ireland: Mathematics and Science in Primary and Post-primary Schools*. Dublin: ERC.

²³ The ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme) provides at least one year of state-funded early years provision for children from 3.5 years of age in privately operated, state supported and not-for profit community based early years settings.

²⁴ Inspectorate, Department of education and Skills. 2016. *A Guide to Early Years Education-focussed Inspection in Early-years Settings Participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme*. Dublin: DES. Available at: <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Evaluation-Reports-Guidelines/A-Guide-to-Early-years-Education-focused-Inspection-EYEL-in-Early-years-Settings-Participating-ECCE-Programme.pdf>

on improvement has been well received by the sector.²⁵ The challenge, of course, is to deliver that model of inspection in over 4,000 early years settings within a reasonable period of time, and as in the primary sector, it will be very challenging to deliver the programme with the current numbers of early years inspectors.

Our work has also attracted attention outside Ireland. We have developed strong collaborative links with inspectorates in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and within the Standing International Conference of Inspectorates. We were glad to be commissioned in 2016 to provide external quality assurance for the evaluation of an intervention project undertaken by the Education and Training Inspectorate in Northern Ireland.²⁶ We have also been approached by a number of countries to advise on the establishment or development of their inspectorates. For example, we have provided training and work-shadowing experience here in Ireland for newly recruited inspectors from places as far apart as Malta, Moldova and Tanzania, and we have been asked to present on the Irish approach to inspection in a number of other countries.

WHERE TO NOW?

Identifying priorities

Of course, we are very conscious that much remains to be done. We have looked at these new challenges as part of our strategic planning in late 2016 and early 2017. We were fortunate that this time coincided with the development of Minister Richard Bruton's *Action Plan for Education*²⁷, and our engagement in discussions with the Minister and his team ensured that our future work could be informed by the Minister's priorities and aligned with the broad range of actions that the Minister is advancing.

To form our thinking about the next steps in inspection and evaluation, we held detailed conversations not only internally among inspectors and with the Secretary General and officials within the Department with whom we work, but also with key external figures and critical friends. These critical friends included two academics – Prof Andy Hargreaves and Dr

²⁵ A report on the consultation process that led to the development of the education-focussed early years inspection model will be published shortly and a review of the first year of these inspections is due to commence in 2017. The creation of the education-focussed early years inspections was recognised when the initiative won an Excellence Award at the national Civil Service Excellence Awards in December 2016.

²⁶ The Promoting Improvement in English and Mathematics (PIEM) project was initiated by the Education and Training Inspectorate, Northern Ireland, to provide specific support for a small number of schools with the objective of 'closing the gap' between the individual school's achievement and the Programme for Government GCSE targets in English and Mathematics. The project was spread over a two year period from September 2013 to September 2015. The Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills was requested to quality assure the ETI's internal evaluation of the PIEM project. The findings of the ETI's evaluation were interrogated through: interviews with ETI personnel including Associate Inspectors; visits to a sample of the schools that were involved in the project; discussion with teachers, heads of department and senior managers in schools; lesson observation; discussion with students; and desk-based review of project documentation.

²⁷ Department of Education and Skills. 2016. *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019: Department of Education and Skills Strategy Statement*. Dublin: DES.

Anne Looney, who spoke with us about the nature of learning that we should be advancing in schools. The critical friends also included those who knew at first-hand about our work and impact on schools and teachers: a teachers' union leader, a key leader in a school management authority, and the chief executive of the National Parents' Council – all of whom challenged us in different ways to improve our work. We also invited a chief inspector from another jurisdiction to hold up the mirror of international practice to our work in Ireland, and we examined the outcomes from two doctoral research projects that we had sponsored into the views of children about schools and inspection.²⁸

Themes in the development of inspection and evaluation

From all of this, we have identified some key themes that will inform our work and the development of inspection and evaluation in the next three years or so. Among these are the following:

- **Embedding standards for educational provision in schools and settings** will be a key priority for us in the next period. We believe *Looking at Our School 2016 – A Quality Framework for Schools* has the potential to create a system-wide understanding of what constitutes good practice in teaching, learning, leadership and management in schools. The quality framework for educational provision in early years settings, developed in 2016, will be reviewed in 2017. Like *Looking at Our School*, it will provide a statement of standards for educational provision for our youngest learners.

But we know that we have much work to do to make these frameworks a practical reality for schools and settings, those who work in them, and the communities that they serve. Partly this is about communication, but it's much more than that. We have work to do to embed the standards in inspection practice and our reports. We have to use the frameworks to underpin our work to identify and disseminate good practice, to support self-evaluation, to encourage collaborative professional practice in schools and settings, and to inform the public about standards of educational provision. We hope to take a number of steps to encourage the use of the frameworks in this way.

- **We also think that we have work to do to increase the impact of inspection.** Our focus in the next three-year period will be to increase the impact of the models of inspections that we have put in place. We are asking ourselves if we can take steps

²⁸ Conneely, S. 2015. "Children's rights to be heard during whole-school evaluation in Irish primary schools: Students' and teachers' perspectives". Unpublished EdD thesis, Queen's University, Belfast.

Fleming, D P. 2013. "Student voice in Irish post-primary schools: a drama of voices". Unpublished PhD thesis, University College, Cork.

Fleming, D. 2015. "Student voice: An emerging discourse in Irish education policy" in *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*. Vol 8. Issue 2. December 2015.

Fleming, D. 2014. "Student Voice in Irish Post-primary Schools" in *Le Chéile: Journal of the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals*. No. 8, October 2014.

to ensure that our inspections impact positively for learners on the work of teachers, practitioners and setting leaders. We have already begun working on deepening inspectors' capacity in giving feedback following inspections, and we will be working with our partners on how best we can encourage commitment in school communities for implementing the recommendations in reports. We want to work more closely with other support services to ensure that schools access the assistance that they need. We believe that we can disseminate our findings and examples of good practice from inspection more effectively, including to parents and the general public. We have also begun work on extending the ways in which our own work is quality assured, and we will continue to use systematically collected feedback from schools and settings to inform improvement in our inspection practice.

- **Improving the ways in which we engage parents and students in inspections** is a challenging but important concern for us at this stage. We introduced extensive use of questionnaires and focus groups for parents and students in many of our inspections, and these provide important evidence for our inspections. But we believe that the time is right for us to review and improve the ways in which we access, analyse and use the experiences and opinions of parents and learners as we go about our inspection work. This will be an important element in the development of our inspection practice in the next few years.
- **Promoting and fostering excellence** is a fourth theme for us, and one that is very much informed by the *Action Plan for Education*. We also relish this as an opportunity to develop new ways of working collaboratively with schools and other support agencies, and a way in which we can encourage innovation in schools. We plan to begin work with a small number of schools in *excellence and improvement visits* to advise, challenge and support school leaders and teachers in their efforts to develop innovative approaches and to improve standards. This work will support the implementation of the *Minister's School Excellence Fund*, the revised *DEIS Policy* and the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education*. We have no pre-conceived or fixed view regarding how these visits and this work in general will operate; rather we hope that this will be a genuinely mutual learning activity.
- **Working with and supporting the quality of school and setting leaders** will be a further theme in our work. We know the critical role that leadership can play in the quality of the learning experienced by children and young people, and we want to reflect this reality in our inspections and in our advisory and support work. *Looking at Our School 2016* sets specific standards for school leaders, and the quality framework for early years will also set expectations for the leadership of early years settings – both for inspections and self-evaluation. We will continue to contribute to policy making in this area, and we also want to work closely with school leaders during our inspections to enrich our mutual understanding of good practice and evaluation. We believe that this could contribute significantly to the learning and work of principals and inspectors, and the *Action Plan for Education* commits us to engaging with principals and others about this development.

- **Improving how we use data to support both inspections and self-evaluations is an important priority for us.** We are very conscious that inspections examine and seek to improve many features of schools that cannot be captured in numerical data, and we know that an over-reliance on data-based and desk-bound evaluation has been problematical for some inspectorates in other countries. At the same time, we believe that we don't use data to best effect in the Irish school system, and we know that schools struggle to understand and use the assessment and other data that they have. While there is a considerable amount of information available on schools and settings and on the outcomes for learners, we need to make this information more readily available to inspectors and schools so that inspection and self-evaluation can be better informed and more context-sensitive. It is very positive that the Department is establishing a division to ensure better collection and use of data and research, and we will be working closely with that division. Within the Inspectorate, specifically, we want to begin to develop tools through which assessment and other data could be made available to inspectors, schools and settings in meaningful ways. This is certainly a long-term project.
- **Finally, we will continue to provide the loop of learning between schools and the development of educational policy.** Because it can bring information about the reality of schools and early years settings into the Department, and can monitor the effect of Departmental and other policies on the ground, inspection can add significant value to the education system. Some of our new inspection models – for example, the model to evaluate of SEN provision in primary schools and the evaluations of DEIS action planning – are specifically designed to monitor specialised provision in schools and to inform policy making. Our involvement in issues such as curricular change, STEM education, inclusion, and special education policy remain high priorities for us and we have acquired new roles in relation to education in the Gaeltacht and in early years. The assignment of inspectors to work with officials in various sections of the Department and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs is designed to assist the policy-making and implementation processes in these areas.

HOW CAN ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS HELP?

To conclude, I thought that it might be useful if I raise questions and suggestions regarding how academic institutions, such as the Centre and the DCU Institute, could contribute to the development agenda that we see not only for the Inspectorate but also for the schools, settings and individual learners, parents, practitioners and teachers with whom we work.

- I think the Centre and other academic institutions could fulfil a very beneficial role if they enable teachers, school leaders and other practitioners to understand the value that evaluation – both internal review and external inspection – can add to the work of schools and settings. Equally important, of course, will be the skills teachers and others should acquire in using the tools of evaluation. Greater evaluation literacy, if I

can use that term, could “normalise” self-evaluation within the practice of teaching and leading in schools. It could also reduce the genuine fear and vulnerabilities that professionals can feel, for example, in the relatively safe space of peer observation or the more challenging space of reviewing team practice or working on moderation tasks when assessing students’ work. So, in my view, making sure that the staff of the Centre of Evaluation, Quality and Inspection contribute directly to the initial and continuing teacher education programmes in the Institute will be really important. I believe that only when the leading researchers of this Centre and the Institute’s other research centres contribute routinely to the initial and continuing education programmes for teachers and other education professionals, will the Institute be able to claim truly to have become the sort of research-informed institute of education Sahlberg challenged Ireland to create.

- There is no doubt that we need to improve the understanding of assessment generally in the Irish education system. A greater understanding of, and ability to use assessment appropriately can only be beneficial for learners. More importantly, it has the potential to enhance the professional standing of teachers and their ability to argue cogently and convincingly for the sort of approaches to assessment that are in the long-term interests of students. DCU has also been to the fore here, in appointing Prof Michael O’Leary to the first chair in assessment in an Irish university. Like the Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection, the Centre for Assessment Research, Policy and Practice in Education (CARPE) will be invaluable if it makes a significant contribution to initial and continuing teacher education programmes. And I would suggest that there is now a further challenge and an opportunity for the Institute’s teaching and research in the complementary fields of evaluation and assessment to enrich each other, so strong linkages and synergies between the Centres could be really important and beneficial.
- The body of academic research on inspection and evaluation has grown considerably in recent years, but it remains a relatively new field of enquiry. Nevertheless, this academic research can and should challenge as well as enrich and support the quality of inspection in schools. It’s also worth noting that much of the published research in the area has its origins in examining the work and impact of Ofsted in England and the work of the Dutch Inspectorate.²⁹ To be fair, academics at the Institute of Education in London – notably Ehren – have widened the evidence base that they are drawing upon in their work, and the Standing International Conference of Inspectorates has encouraged wider research into inspection practice. I am also aware of active researchers within Belgian, German and Swedish universities in this field. A wider evidence base, that includes approaches to inspection that vary from

²⁹ For example, in a literature review concerning the impact of inspections covering 92 studies and 14 countries, 52 of the studies related to inspections by Ofsted and 10 to inspections conducted by the Dutch Inspectorate. The next highest country was Sweden with 6 studies and only one of the studies referred to Ireland. See Ehren, M. 2016. “School inspections and school improvement: the current evidence base” in Ehren, M C M. (ed.) *Methods and Modalities of Effective School Inspections*.

the paradigms used in the English and Dutch systems, would enrich this academic field. In this regard, I welcome the work already done here at the DCU Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection: it is contributing to a broadening of the international research base for inspection and evaluation practice, and has the potential to enrich discourse, scholarship and practice both here in Ireland and elsewhere in a most valuable way.

- Inspection is a skilled art. Within the Inspectorate we invest heavily in the initial and continuing professional development of inspectors. That professional development has itself altered significantly: it includes theoretical and applied elements, and it uses a wide range of learning approaches – seminars, workshops, peer observation, lectures, personal reading and study, as well as post-graduate academic research and placement with other inspectorates on exchanges. We regard all of this professional development as a really significant way in which we can ensure the quality, consistency and reliability of the work of inspectors. Staff from the Centre here have contributed to our professional development programmes, and at least one of our senior management team in the Inspectorate has been able to complete doctoral research on inspection-related topics here in DCU. Our most recent development is to identify formal taught post-graduate programmes on the theory and practice of inspection, and a small number of Irish inspectors have or are completing such programmes at the Institute of Education in London where there has been a significant tradition of this sort of provision. We would, of course, be open to considering the placement of inspectors on similar high quality taught programmes in institutions on the island of Ireland if they addressed the specific professional needs of inspectors in a focussed way.
- Academic institutions also serve a wider public duty to comment upon issues of national importance. It can be difficult for academic views to be heard in the media, but some academics have managed to carve out a space in the public discourse on educational matters. How we assess students' learning has profound effects on the education that young people experience as well as their well-being and subsequent life chances. I wonder if Irish academics in the field of education have considered whether the voice of academia has been sufficiently to the fore in informing public debate on issues such as junior cycle reform and especially the attempts within it to evolve student assessment? Have we had adequate public debate on the very unusual extent of public analysis devoted to state examinations in Ireland's media?³⁰ Or on the indirect impact that this has on student well-being and on the efforts of schools to provide broad and balanced curricula? Can I suggest that how we view the

³⁰ The unusual degree of media coverage of State Examinations in Ireland was examined in an academic study commissioned by the State Examinations Commission. See: Baird, J. Hopfenbeck, T N. Elwood, J. Caro, D. Ahmed, A. 2015. *Predictability in the Irish Leaving Certificate*. Oxford and Belfast: Oxford Centre for Educational Assessment and Queen's University, Belfast. Available at: <https://www.examinations.ie/about-us/Predictability-Overall-Report.pdf>

work of schools is an important topic, too? Is there a place for the Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection to inform public debate or comment on the appetite for, and the risks associated with, the ways in which schools are ranked in public media? Or to speak about better sources of information about schools and their work, including perhaps inspection?

These are merely suggestions from a practitioner who is outside the academic field. Yet for me, they demonstrate that evaluation and inspection must be just as deeply research-informed as any other activity within schools, early years settings and the system as a whole. Indeed, engagement by academic institutions with practitioners and *vice-versa* can only be to the good of both theory and practice. The Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection and other Irish institutions have the potential to contribute significantly to the achievement of this goal, agus guím gach ráth ar obair an Aonaid sna blianta romhainn. (and I wish the Centre every success in the years ahead).

Go raibh maith agaibh. (Thank you.)

APPENDIX

THE INSPECTORATE'S QUALITY CONTINUUM

Inspectors describe the quality of provision in the school using the Inspectorate's quality continuum which is shown below. The quality continuum provides examples of the language used by inspectors when evaluating and describing the quality the school's provision of each area. The use of the continuum below was introduced in September 2016.

Level	Description	Example of descriptive terms
Very Good	Very good applies where the quality of the areas evaluated is of a very high standard. The very few areas for improvement that exist do not significantly impact on the overall quality of provision. For some schools in this category the quality of what is evaluated is outstanding and provides an example for other schools of exceptionally high standards of provision.	Very good; of a very high quality; very effective practice; highly commendable; very successful; few areas for improvement; notable; of a very high standard. Excellent; outstanding; exceptionally high standard, with very significant strengths; exemplary
Good	Good applies where the strengths in the areas evaluated clearly outweigh the areas in need of improvement. The areas requiring improvement impact on the quality of pupils' learning. The school needs to build on its strengths and take action to address the areas identified as requiring improvement in order to achieve a <i>very good</i> standard.	Good; good quality; valuable; effective practice; competent; useful; commendable; good standard; some areas for improvement
Satisfactory	Satisfactory applies where the quality of provision is adequate. The strengths in what is being evaluated just outweigh the shortcomings. While the shortcomings do not have a significant negative impact they constrain the quality of the learning experiences and should be addressed in order to achieve a better standard.	Satisfactory; adequate; appropriate provision although some possibilities for improvement exist; acceptable level of quality; improvement needed in some areas
Fair	Fair applies where, although there are some strengths in the areas evaluated, deficiencies or shortcomings that outweigh those strengths also exist. The school will have to address certain deficiencies without delay in order to ensure that provision is satisfactory or better.	Fair; evident weaknesses that are impacting on pupils' learning; less than satisfactory; experiencing difficulty; must improve in specified areas; action required to improve
Weak	Weak applies where there are serious deficiencies in the areas evaluated. Immediate and coordinated whole-school action is required to address the areas of concern. In some cases, the intervention of other agencies may be required to support improvements.	Weak; unsatisfactory; insufficient; ineffective; poor; requiring significant change, development or improvement; experiencing significant difficulties;