

CREATE21

It gives me great pleasure to launch CREATE21, the Centre for Collaborative Research Across Teacher Education for the 21st Century, at St. Patrick's College, which will form a core element of the new DCU Institute of Education. It represents the coming together of an existing centre in the Mater Dei Institute with a centre in St. Patrick's. There are a number of reasons why it gives me a personal sense of pleasure and satisfaction. In the first instance, I am a past teacher-education student in St. Pats, from the middle of the last century. This gives me a perspective on how far we have come in the intervening years. It also happens that I was a founder member of the Educational Studies Association of Ireland (ESAI) in 1976, which continues to thrive, as was evidenced when I attended its Annual Conference last week in NUIG. I also happened to be co-founder of the Standing Conference for Teacher Education, North and South (SCOTENS), in 2002, which continues to be one of the most successful cross-border bodies.

CREATE21 is being established at a most timely juncture. We have been living through the most significant era of change and reform that has ever occurred for teacher education in Ireland. Under the guidance of the Teaching Council, and with the support of the Department of Education and Skills, teacher education as a continuum of lifelong learning over the teaching career is now established as national policy. Major reforms have been instituted for Initial Teacher Education (ITE) involving the extension of course durations, the reconceptualization of content, the deepening of the research dimension, the extension of teaching practice and new partnerships between schools and the H.E.I.s. New processes of induction for beginning teachers are underway, with much qualitative promise. New policies on Continuing Professional Development (CPD) are being designed, incorporating many forms of teacher engagement, linked to sustained registration. Furthermore, there has been a great expansion in the provision of post-graduate courses by HEIs, involving a variety of specialisms to enrich the expertise pool of the teaching force. National policy has been urging the co-ordination of many of the existing teacher education institutions to allow for centres of excellence for teacher formation and development, on the lines of best contemporary international practice. The DCU Institute of Education represents a very good example of this policy.

Within this inspiring context, research on all aspects of teacher education and the teaching career becomes even more important than in the past. I congratulate the initiators of

CREATE21 for their vision in conceiving it, and for the collaborative spirit in bringing it to fruition. Its conception is enriched by insightful international studies in the field. The range of objectives set out in its prospectus is well focussed and targeted at key aspects of teacher education. The outcome of the research, in due course, will greatly enrich both policy and practice in the field.

It is very encouraging that in CREATE21's gestation period there are already 30 research projects at various stages of completion. Also indicative of impressive future action is that already a tradition of holding research seminars has been established. Since 2015, researchers have engaged in nine such seminars. The range of topics being explored at present can be grouped into the following themes:-

- Student Experiences of Learning in Teacher Education;
- Policy Analysis and the Ideational Base of Teacher Education;
- Pedagogy of Teacher Education;
- Research Into Teacher Educators
- System Evaluation
- Collaborative Research with External Partners

Such themes are indicative of the relevant and targeted focus of the research.

The first word contained in the synonym - CREATE21 – is a revealing one – “Collaborative.” In the first instance, it reflects the collaborative thrust of staff in the four teacher education agencies being incorporated in the Institute of Education. However, one understands that the collaborative spirit will also be open to co-operation with researchers in other institutions, as appropriate.

In a small island such as Ireland, it is also desirable that collaborative links be established with agencies such as ESAI, SCOTENS, the Teaching Council, Education Committees of the Unions, The ESRI, the ERC and the DES, building on existing bonds for the greater public good. It is heartening to note that the CREATE21 prospectus signals its intention “to develop national and international partnerships and collaboration,” and this includes Northern Ireland. In the past, compartmentalisation and segmentation tended to prevail between research institutions. A problem which has also existed in the past in Ireland was the gap between the pursuit and production of educational research and its impact on policy. CREATE21 commits itself to disseminate the outcomes of its research and to “inform policy

development.” Good quality communication and pro-active partnership should nurture more reciprocal links between educational research and policy formation in Ireland.

We are now part of a global world, and international influences on educational policies, through agencies such as the OECD and the EU, have become much more prominent. There is also, a range of international educational research agencies, to which, no doubt, CREATE21 will relate. We have much to give as well as to receive from such agencies. The pool of research expertise which will be nurtured by CREATE21 should also improve the opportunities for significant external research funding for large-scale collaborative projects in teacher education.

In its immediate context, within the Institute of Education, CREATE21 provides a supportive environment to assist trainee teachers to draw on research, but also to develop research skills during their teacher education course. The fact that they study and operate within a community of active researchers gives them valuable exemplars, and also nurtures the reflective practitioner, as an enhanced but normal dimension of the teaching role. CREATE21 will also provide a great reservoir of expertise, skills, and training to be absorbed by participants in the extensive range of post-graduate programmes, in which the exercise of research skills and the production of research projects is a norm.

It is recognised internationally how fortunate Ireland is in the calibre of the personnel who opt for teaching as a career. Such a talented workforce finds its natural milieu in an environment which nurtures and values high level research. This greatly enhances the pool of expertise, and whether the personnel find themselves exercising their talents as educational practitioners, leaders or innovators in Ireland, or internationally, they are well equipped to make significant contributions to education globally.

While the teaching force will be key beneficiaries of CREATE21, we should also remember that long-term beneficiaries will be the young Irish citizens in our schools. Against the European pattern, we are fortunate in Ireland to have an expanding population of young people. Today, in our State supported schools there were about 1,000,000 pupils in attendance. The quality of the education experienced by this huge number of our citizens is crucial to the future well-being of our society. It may be something of a truism, but we should never become complacent as to the central importance, on a day-to-day reality in our classrooms, of constantly seeking to improve and renew the quality of education for individual children. The most crucial resource in this process is a high quality teaching force,

and it is in this context that I see CREATE21 extending its indirect, but very meaningful influence.

Thus, from a range of perspectives one extends a warm welcome to CREATE21 and one hopes that, in years ahead, our successors will look back on the launch as a landmark stage in the establishment of an agency which will have contributed hugely to teacher education and society in Ireland.

John Coolahan

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