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| Institution: Stranmillis University College |
| Unit of Assessment: 25 - Education |

### a. Overview

The promotion of a rich and vibrant research culture is at the heart of the strategic operation of Stranmillis University College (SUC). With a distinctive position and a strong profile in Northern Ireland (NI), SUC is recognised as one of the country's foremost providers of education for the public services; particularly in research-led and research-based teaching, applied and evaluative research. The success of our 2008 RAE return was based on tactical decision-making which sought to raise the overall standard of research outputs in the College. This provided a foundation on which to proactively focus our research activity to achieve reach and impact in the REF 2014. In meeting these aims consideration was given to sustained long-term planning, research management and goal setting. Although academically integrated with the Queen's University of Belfast (QUB) in 1998, SUC has organisational and financial autonomy. The disruptive impact of a proposed merger with QUB in 2008, since abandoned, was unsettling and distracting. Nearing the age of retirement, a number of experienced research active staff elected to retire. Consequently, the profile of academic staff is now younger. Though leaner, despite four of the original six returns having retired, the SUC REF return shows a proportional increase of 1%. It also reports our success in attracting two of the largest funding awards in recent years in NI.

SUC's vision is to be a centre of excellence in educational, professional and vocational development and its mission is:

> *'To sustain a critical community of educational excellence in teaching and research in a shared environment where diversity is welcome, in order to meet the professional needs of society in Northern Ireland.'*

The REF period has been an exciting time for the development of educational research in NI. The restoration of the NI Assembly in 2007 led to the publication of a number of policy developments and debates about the future of education in NI. Academic staff at SUC provided the research evidence to advance reform through the *Early Years (0-6) Strategy* (2010), the Consultation on *Every School a Good School -The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs* (2010) and Educational Disadvantage and the Protestant Working Class: A Call for Action (2011) **[1,2,3]**.

### b. Research Strategy

The College's achievements in the 2008 RAE, for a first entry based on the research output of six members of staff, was outstanding. Building on that foundation, SUC has made a significant investment in establishing the infrastructure to build its scholarship and research capacity. Our strategic goals are to continue to develop a sustainable and ethical research culture, to extend and develop high quality activity across the Collage and to develop research of national and international quality in a number of clearly defined areas. The three research themes which underpinned our RAE 2008 submission have developed over the current assessment period into two key areas of research. Early Years and Inclusion and Diversity provide the overarching framework within which individuals and teams develop their research activity. These research groups are not mutually exclusive and a number of staff are actively engaged in one or both areas (Gray, McMurray, McCullagh, Walsh, McKee, B, McKee, D). This provides the basis for a strong and cohesive research environment, evidenced by our research achievements within the REF period. In adopting a collaborative strategic approach the College has significantly increased the generation of publications, contributed to the development of policy and offered a critique of dominant ideological discourses to inform teaching and learning. Totalling 72, publications include 32 peer-reviewed journal articles, 4 books and 16 book chapters with a further 20 invited articles published in professional teaching and learning periodicals.

### c. People, including:
   i.   Staffing strategy and staff development

SUC continues to evolve and grow. It remains a strategic imperative to develop a larger corpus of highly qualified research active staff by offering 100% funding to enable them to achieve doctoral qualifications. The target articulated in the 2008 RAE to increase the number of staff in the College with a doctorate by 24%, has been exceeded. In total, 54% of SUC academic staff have a doctoral qualification. By REF 2020, the fourteen members of staff currently engaged in doctoral study will have completed. On receipt of their doctorate staff are allocated a mentor from a pool of experienced academics to support the dissemination of their research in international peer reviewed journals, as presentations at national and international conferences, and to develop funding opportunities to extend their research. It is anticipated that these support strategies will substantially increase the corpus of high quality outputs returned in the 2020 REF.

Since RAE 2008, research activity and targets have become part of the College's bi-annual appraisal process. A new system of annual appraisal, which applies to all staff engaged in doctoral studies supported by the College, will be introduced in 2013/2014. The process will involve an annual report outlining progress made on the research programme and programme of research training. Further strategic recruitment will serve to enhance our research profile in future years in the field of 'Early Years Pedagogy' and 'Diversity and Inclusion'. Research experience and expertise remains a recruitment objective in the appointment of new staff. New appointments are required to hold a doctorate and to engage in research (e.g. Jones, Doherty,) or to study for a doctorate (Brown). The College adopts an inclusive approach to research and actively encourages all members of staff to engage in research and scholarship. Staffing decisions show continuity with the priorities articulated at the time of the last RAE, allied with the 100% funding available to support doctoral studies, and 100% funding for staff to present papers at national and international conferences. SUC adopted a self-selection approach to REF entry.

In 2011 the Head of Research Development conducted a mid-term interim audit to gauge the likely potential of submissions to the REF. Findings from this audit informed the College's strategic approach to REF. A single unit comprising two distinct areas of research, Early Years and Diversity and Inclusion, were identified. Emails were sent on a regular basis to all members of the academic staff indicating the requirements of a REF return and inviting expressions of interest. A workshop on REF 2014 was held in College in 2011 and 2012 to determine interest. Mid-term audits to identify further potential returns continued throughout this period. Expressions of interest were received from seventeen members of staff. Each met on an individual basis to discuss the quality of outputs required by REF and the number of research outputs required. Support in the form of one to one mentoring was provided by established academics to progress the publications of early career researchers. Of the initial 14, four took early retirement and two elected not to proceed. Due to personal circumstances two subsequently withdrew. The final submission comprises six academics, two returned in the 2008 RAE, two early career researchers and two with emerging areas of interest. A larger body of non-returnable staff continue to develop their research activity.

### d. Income, infrastructure and facilities
**Income**

Since 2007, 36 research projects have been conducted at SUC supported by external research grant income. The spread of grant income is an indicator of the vitality of the research culture. Gray (**£41,294**), Walsh (**£24,600**) and Purdy (**£38,500**) have been principal investigators on a range of research projects funded by external bodies. Gray and Walsh were co-principal investigators of a project that sought to examine Early Years Pedagogy in the Republic of Ireland (**€90,000**)**.** The promotion of alternative pedagogy including co-teaching and digital resources continues to command large scale funding for McCullagh's work in primary science (total funding **£158,400**).

**Infrastructure & facilities:** Since RAE 2008 the institutional infrastructure has been substantially strengthened to enhance the development of the research culture. The Research Office was relocated to the Central Building where staff can more easily access support and advice with the development of research proposals, the production of reports and research articles and the preparation of conference presentations. Staffed by the Head of Research Development (0.5 FTE)

and a fulltime Research Officer and Administrative Officer, the office monitors the quality of research outputs, offers Continuing Professional Development courses in SPSS, NVivo and MaxQDA qualitative data analysis, academic writing for publication, PowerPoint presentations and conference poster presentations. As well as overseeing research policy, the Head of Research Development provides support and guidance to individuals on external funding applications, research assistance and research-related staff development. The IT department provides the framework and support for all IT activities. Research is supported and enabled through the network infrastructure where the services are available for staff at all times. Software specific to research is facilitated through the IT department to support research activities. The Research Office facilitates collaboration by overseeing research seminars and conferences. It organises and manages a series of well attended lunchtime research seminars within the College which are open to staff, undergraduate and postgraduate students. Prior to their first international presentation, staff are encouraged to hone their skills by presenting to members of the academic staff and student body. Offering a forum for intellectual debate, new research partnerships and the development of grant proposals, research seminars run on a regular basis throughout the academic year. Individual mentoring sessions are provided by established academics to support early career researchers in the production of research journal articles and funding applications. Sabbatical leave in the form of a reduced teaching timetable, a six-week break from teaching, or a full semester's leave is available to support the production of international research articles. In 2011/2012 the College introduced a series of public lectures (Wood, McLaughlin, Furlong, Richardson, Purdy, Sir Terence Brannigan), with sessions attended by policy makers from the NI Assembly, representatives from the national teacher unions, local teaching professionals, community representatives, members of the business sector, academics from a range of Higher Education Institutions, staff and students. These talks receive extensive local publicity. In 2012, SUC released funding (£20,000) to support a ground breaking project entitled *Go Berserk* that sought to teach computer coding to Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 pupils in NI. This small-scale project (Bell, Simons) recruited ten schools from the 91 responses from schools keen to participate and to equip their pupils with the skills necessary for a 21st century workforce. This work has been enthusiastically endorsed by the three major IT companies in Northern Ireland. The team are currently seeking external funding to develop the project which will be reported in REF 2019/2020 in terms of research, impact and community involvement.

Chaired by the University College's Principal, and meeting on a monthly basis, SUC's Research and Ethics Committee (R&EC) is responsible for the strategic direction and quality assurance of College research. It seeks to ensure the rigour and quality of research conducted by staff, to evaluate progress, impact and the outcomes of research. It recognises and validates problems and informed by the Head of Research Development offers resolutions and additional support as needed. The R&EC seeks to protect the rights, dignity and welfare of participant groups, particularly children and vulnerable groups. It also aims to consider the legitimate needs of stake holders and external funding organisations. The appointment of two internationally acclaimed Visiting Professors provides further scope for the development of the University College's research profile. Professor E. A. Wood's (University of Sheffield) expertise in the fields of Early Childhood and Primary Education, pedagogy and learning complements the work of McMillan, Walsh, McConnell and Gray. Similarly, Professor C. McLaughlin's (University of Sussex) work on bullying and vulnerable children extends research undertaken by Purdy (2012/2013) who examines 'disablist bullying' **[4]**.

**e. Collaboration or contribution to the discipline or research base**

The mutual benefits of intellectual and social influence derived from collaborative interdisciplinary research are well established at Stranmillis University College with a cadre of academics involved in large and small scale collaborative research projects.

**Early Years:** The Effective Preschool Provision in Northern Ireland project (EPPNI, 1998/2004) located at SUC (Quinn and Hanna) was a collaborative undertaking with internationally acclaimed academics at Oxford University (Professors Sylva, Sammons), Birkbeck University of London (Professor Melhuish) and the Institute of Education, University of London (Professor Siraj-

Baltchford, Taggart), funded by DfEE (**£1,756,875**). This joint project was the first major European longitudinal study to investigate the effects of pre-school education for three- and four-year-olds. The impact of this seminal investigation is evidenced by its continued influence on policy and decision-making internationally and nationally **[5,6,7].**

Walsh, with colleagues from QUB, (**£850,000**, 2000/2009) evaluated the Early Years Enriched Curriculum, a pilot play-based curriculum in approximately 120 primary schools in NI **[8,9].** Their results led to significant changes to the Foundation Stage of the revised Northern Ireland Curriculum which is now statutory for all children aged 4-6 in the first two years of primary school, embodied in the Education Order (2007). In collaboration with associates at QUB, Walsh (**£12,000**, 2008) examined transitions in Early Years education and for a project translating a developmentally appropriate curriculum into practice **(£16,000**, 2010) with funding from CCEA/DENI. Walsh's analytical Quality Learning Instrument (QLI) is used extensively as an evaluative tool to determine quality pedagogy in early years settings. To improve practice, PGCE (EY) students receive training in the application of the QLI. Its impact is evidenced further by the application of this tool in several large scale quasi-experimental projects (the Enriched Curriculum Intervention 2000-2009, **£850,000**) and Pedagogy in Early Childhood in Ireland (EPEC: **€90,000,** 2009/2010) jointly co-managed by Walsh and Gray with McMillan and Hanna **[10]**. Walsh's excellence in Early Years pedagogy is recognised in an invitation to act as an educational consultant for the Northern Ireland version of Sesame Street (2007/2010), known as Sesame Tree, which has been aired since August 2008 through CBeebies to a national audience **[11]**. Her contribution also led to the development of a series of professional development resources which have been distributed to all primary schools and preschools (both voluntary and statutory) throughout Northern Ireland. She collaborated with curriculum development officers to formulate and develop a pedagogical framework formulated in a poster and a series of information leaflets for parents that drew directly on the sub-study from the EC evaluation "Thinking Skills in the Early Years Classrooms" **[12]**. These resources were distributed to all primary schools and nursery schools throughout NI (approximately 1000 settings). In 2012/2013 she was a consultant to Early Childhood Ireland and Early Years: the Organisation for Young Children to inform the development of the All Ireland Centre of Excellence Award, and a self-evaluation tool for early years practitioners for use across the Early Years sector. Both Walsh and McConnell were invited to participate as associate assessors for the Education and Training Inspectorate.

Research Commissioned by the Belfast Education & Library Board (BELB), and funded by the Belfast Regeneration Office (**£54,150**, 2004/2007), conducted by Gray, Mitchell and Dunn has significantly contributed to the effective teaching of literacy skills to children aged 4-6 in the first two years of primary school. Informed by the research, the Linguistic Phonics Approach (LPA) is employed by 461 schools in NI, affecting some 25,000 children per year **[13, 14].** The research provided a cost-benefit analysis, created innovative assessment instruments to assess children's written skills and evidence of the positive impact of LPA on children's literacy development. SUC is the only institution in Ireland to deliver certified LPA training to 90 BEd and 15 PGCE students *per annum.* The team were subsequently funded by the North Eastern Education & Library Board (NEELB) to evaluate the impact of the Jolly Phonics approach on children's literacy development (**£10,000**, 2007/2008) and to evaluate the status of English in Irish Medium Schools by the Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) (**£20,000**, 2007/2008). More recently Gray, Mitchell and Dunn with Moffett (**£18,750**, 2013/2015) were commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the impact of handheld electronic devices on young children's literacy and numeracy in school. It is anticipated that this project will yield conference and peer reviewed papers and inform policy and practice at both a national and international level. A number of co-managed projects are in process including McKee's research with Women's Aid Belfast to explore the delivery of 'Preventative Education in the Early Years Classroom', supported by funding from DHSSPS (**£22,394**, 20013/2014).

**Diversity & Inclusion:** Collaboration on research of mutual interest is common with St Mary's University College Belfast (SMUC) and undertaken as joint activities Located within Stranmillis, the CREDIT project (Eaton, Richardson, McKenzie) **£839,589.00**, 2010/2013) funded by the International Fund for Ireland aims to help teachers in NI develop the knowledge, skills and confidence to deal with issues of division, diversity, inclusion and community cohesion in the

classroom and on a whole-school basis. In total **£67,000** is allocated for the evaluation of the project. Similarly located within SUC, in partnership with SMUC, academic staff (McMurray) secured **£3.4million** (2011/2014) of funding from the Department of Education in NI (DENI) to support a new initiative that will boost literacy in primary school-age pupils, particularly those with Special Education Needs (SEN). In total 4600 teachers have registered for the 20 hour online school based Master's level course with 812 teachers in 420 schools undertaking this intensive programme of study.  420 are in the process of being assessed for a Master's level qualification in teaching children with specific literacy difficulties (dyslexia). The evaluation of the programme **(£539,252)** is expected to show the extent of reach and impact this project will have on teaching practice in schools in NI. On completion, these large scale initiatives will produce research reports, international peer reviewed journal articles, conference presentations and materials for schools. It is anticipated that this will secure McMurray, Eaton and McKenzie's place in the SUC REF 2019/2020 return.

McCullagh and his co-principal investigator (Professor Murphy, Trinity College Dublin) have undertaken a number of projects examining 'the promotion of alternative pedagogy including co-teaching and digital resources' to raise achievement levels and inform pedagogy with funding from AstraZeneca Science Teaching Trust (2009-2015) and SCoTENs (2012) (total funding **£158,400**). Recognition for the groundbreaking work undertaken by McCullagh has led to the establishment of *The Primary Science Research & Innovation Hub* funded by the AstraZeneca Science Teaching Trust (**£88,000**, 2013/2015,) at Stranmillis with partners in QUB **[15].** Output from this high impact project will be evidenced in the REF 2019/2020.

Purdy's research portfolio exemplifies collaborative research. His early work (2008/2009) with colleagues in SUC (Dunn, Mitchell, Curry) included an evaluation of the reading recovery programme introduced into schools in London and Manchester. The project was supported by funding from Springboard (**£20,000**). He was co-principal investigator of an ESCalate project with MacBlain at the University of St John and St Mark (**£10,000**, 2008/2011) which investigated the demands of the *Every Child Matters* agenda. Both projects produced funder reports with the latter disseminated at national conference and as a co-authored journal article. Purdy's dynamic contribution to the field of cyber bullying (2011/2012) and disabilist bullying (2012/2013) undertaken in collaboration with McGuickan (Trinity College Dublin), funded by SCoTENs (**£4,000 & £4,500** respectively), attracted considerable media attention, including an interview on BBC Radio Ulster's flagship news programme, 'Good Morning Ulster' (2013) **[16].** Subsequently invited to write articles on cyber-bullying he was invited to submit an article to ni4kids(Jan/Feb 2013). His research directly led to an invitation to Chair the NI Anti-Bullying Forum, to join the Regional SCoTENS Steering Committee, and to his election to Vice-President of National Association for Special Educational Needs (NASEN). In a highly very positive review of Purdy's book entitled *Pastoral Care 11-16: A Critical Introduction*, Leaton Gray (Times Higher Education, 2013) notes that that the text 'will become a standard fixture for teacher trainees' **[17].**

Richardson, with colleagues from QUB (Mawhinney, Niens and Chiba) and funding from AHRC & ESRC (**£82,000**, 2009/2010), examined the views of young people of minority faiths on opting out of religious education. This innovative study was the first to consider the experience of minority faith pupils within the NI context. The significance of Richardson's contribution to the field of faith education was recently recognized with the award of PhD by publication from the University of Warwick (2013). Richardson's international reputation as a scholar of repute has led to frequent invitations to deliver an address at international conferences (including Denmark, Finland, Norway, Canada). As well as being a member of the editorial board of the *British Journal of Religious Education* since 2008, Richardson's expertise is also sought by a large number of inter-faith groups. He is currently a member of the International Seminar on Religion, Education and Values (ISREV), the NI representative of the European Forum for Teachers of Religious Education (EFTRE), a trustee and Executive member of the UK Inter-Faith Network, a trustee and Board Member of Christian Education (UK) and a member of the Religious Education Advisory Group NI.

Gray's research interest in the ethical implications of participatory research with young children

with a disability has led to invitations to chair an international special interest group in participatory research under the auspices of the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA, 2013). She was recently co-opted onto the board by the Centre for Research in Early Education (Birmingham, 2013) and, with a group of international scholars (Professors Bertram, Pascal, Formosinho), aims to produce the first ethical Guidelines and a Code of Conduct specifically for researchers, practitioners and scholars working in the Early Years field. The team will launch the Code at the EECERA conference in Cyprus, September 2014 and publish it in both the European Early Childhood Research Journal (2014) and the *International Journal of Early Years Education* (2014). It will also be available online on both websites. Gray's expertise in participatory research also led to an invitation to present a provocation at the University of Verona (September, 2011) and to submit book chapters on ethics and participatory research (Harcourt et al. 2011; Palaiologou, 2012). By invitation, she was appointed Visiting Professor to the University of St Mark and St John, Plymouth (2009/2013). Her appointment reflected the University's strategic imperative to strengthen its publication profile and increase the corpus of staff engaged in research. Gray gave bi-annual keynote addresses to invited audiences including local stakeholders, disseminated her research findings to students on the MEd pathway, led research workshops for staff, gave one-to-one mentoring sessions to early career staff, reviewed research proposals and advised on articles for publication. The success of her appointment can be measured in the extension of her appointment from 3 to 5 years and the increase in staff actively involved in scholarly activity. By invitation, Gray (2005/-) is a consultant on the research and ethics board of PRAXIS Care, the largest provider of services for adults and children with mental health and learning disabilities in Ireland. Working closely with their research team she advises on research involving young children. Her contribution has led young service users to become active participants in research that impacts their lives, and has informed methodological approaches to research involving young children with additional needs. She was Chair of the journal *Child Care in Practice* (2009/2012) and is the editor of the *International Journal of Early Years Research.*

Gibson challenges the boundaries of inclusion and diversity in four excellent papers each published in an international journal that examines work-placed learning in a range of settings. His publications have prompted SUC to offer students a wider range of alternative placements with a view to improving their understanding of the diverse needs and learning styles of pupils in second level education. Recognition of the quality of his work led to a direct approach for Gibson to join a panel of external examiners at the University of the West of England (UWE) Bristol (2013/2017). His work demonstrates the reciprocal relationships which have developed since the 2008 RAE between SUC and local businesses, industry and public services in NI. It also serves to highlight the synergy between the demands of a changing political landscape which will require reflexive practitioners and SUC's support for research which seeks to have impact beyond academia.

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