

Institution: Stranmillis

Unit of Assessment: 25 - Education

a. Context

Stranmillis University College (SUC) is focused on research-led and research-based teaching, applied and evaluative research. It produces research with high impact and extensive reach. 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. To realise these aims consideration was given to sustained long-term planning, research management and goal setting.

Non-academic user groups: Established in 1922, SUC has forged strong links with policy makers, educationalists, stakeholder groups, teachers and pupils, business and industry. Research undertaken by Stranmillis academic staff has had a direct impact on education policy and extensive impact on the preschool and early classroom experience of pupils across NI. Evidence from Early Years research conducted at SUC advanced 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). Seminal research conducted by Quinn and Hanna located in SUC (The Effective Preschool Provision in Northern Ireland project, 1998/2004) continues to influence Early Years policy and decision-making at a national and international level. Affecting policy and practice, research conducted by SUC (Walsh) in association with QUB has made significant changes to the Foundation Stage of the revised NI 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). This play-based curriculum will change the experiences of approximately 75,000 children over the next 10-15 years. Findings from the evaluation of the Linguistic Phonics Approach (LPA) undertaken at SUC (2007, Gray, Mitchell and Dunn) led to the roll out of this synthetic phonics approach across NI (2008/2009), directly impacting the teaching and learning experience of approximately 1000 teachers and 125,000 children. Cummins (2010) explored the learning styles of 55 entrepreneurs in NI. Demonstrating the disparity between learning styles and teaching approaches, he was invited to extend this work into institutions of further education across NI (2011/2013). Funded by the Department of Education and Learning (DEL), his remit was to determine whether the learning environment fosters or hinders the development of entrepreneurship. In exploring the diverse learning needs of students at FE colleges, this research has the potential to advance understanding and impact learning in applied, vocational courses. Diversity and Special Needs is further enriched by research examining Violence and Sexual Abuse (McKee in collaboration with Women's Aid NI, 2013/2014). This research seeks to produce materials for teachers and Early Years practitioners across NI alerting them to the non-verbal cues which suggest signs of abuse that warrant further investigation.

Community: The Sandy Row initiative is an ongoing partnership between the Sandy Row Residents Forum, Blythefield Primary School and SUC. It seeks to promote the value of education within the community, raising aspirations and creating opportunities for life-long learning, and was developed to address the poor levels of educational attainment within the community. To raise educational aspiration, student volunteers in SUC operate a homework club for local children. In recognition for the success of the initiative the partnership was awarded the Community Education Partnership Award (2012) by the Housing Executive NI. A number of staff actively contribute to the initiative (Cummins, Heaslett, Curry, Boyd, Gray).

Stake holder groups: Early Years and Special Needs stakeholder groups meet at SUC on an annual basis. Research conducted within the College is disseminated and round table discussions held to identify areas of potential research in terms of application, outcome and impact. Stakeholder groups comprise policy makers, education advisers, representatives from the NI inspectorate and non-profit organisations including Mencap and Barnardos and representatives from school and preschool settings.

Steering groups are an integral part of all externally funded research projects undertaken at SUC. These groups comprise representatives from the funding group, members of the beneficiary groups, and members of key stakeholders. Meeting on a regular basis throughout the lifespan of a project ensures that outcomes are

Impact template (REF3a)

responsive to changing political and social demands. Importantly it ensures the sustainability, reach and impact of the outcomes of the project.

Engagement: Academics in SUC are engaged in a range of activities that affect the future direction of education in NI, including acting as advisers to the NI Literacy and Special Needs steering committees (McMurray, Purdy), the NI Numeracy steering committee (Moffett, Bell), the Sports Council for NI (Delaney), the NI Anti-Bullying Forum (Purdy), the steering group of Generation Innovation at the Northern Ireland Science Park (Ievers), Women's Aid NI (McKee), NSPCC Stay Safe in Primary Schools (McKee) and PRAXIS Care (Gray). Walsh and McConnell also act as associate assessors with the NI education inspectorate (Walsh, McConnell).

b. Approach to impact

Although SUC is academically integrated with the Queen's University of Belfast (QUB) it has organisational and financial autonomy. A proposed merger with QUB in 2008/2012, since abandoned, proved disruptive and unsettling. Anticipating merger, a number of staff took early retirement. This group comprised four RAE 2008 returns. The College response was swift. It embraced a programme of rejuvenation to re-shape its research structures, energize its research culture and further promote research achievements. To build critical mass, a Research Office was established to support the development of research activity, research was more closely aligned with programme/module portfolios. Academic staff without a doctorate were encouraged to pursue doctoral research which would inform teaching and learning. The outcome was a leaner institution with a younger staff profile in terms of age and research experience. Subsequently, the number of staff with a doctorate increased to 54%, exceeding the 2008 RAE target and a proportionate increase of 1% evidenced in the number of staff returned in the 2014 REF. SUC continues to offer sabbatical leave in the form of a reduced teaching time-table, a six-week break from teaching, or a full semester's leave to support the production of international research articles. On completion of their doctorate staff receive one-to-one mentoring from an experienced academic to progress their research activity and to support the dissemination of their research findings. The focus is impact and sustainability with funding avenues explored to extend and develop the work. 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. The appointment of two internationally acclaimed Visiting Professors provides further scope for the development of the University College's research profile at a national and international level. 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'.

c. Strategy and plans

The realization of strategic goals places SUC in a strong position. Our research strategy places a clear emphasis on research-led and research-based teaching, applied and evaluative research. In this way the outcomes of our research are relevant to the challenges faced by pupils, teachers, schools, communities, educationalists and policy makers. Our first RAE entry 2008 affirmed our standing within the academic community as a small institution which produces high quality research. We are not complacent. A small University College with a number of early career researchers, we aim to develop a larger corpus of research active staff. To secure our current position and develop an international profile, our strategic aims focus on support, development and the extension of high quality research.

- We aim to continue to develop a sustainable and ethical research culture;
- Follow advice and guidance from our two Visiting Professors to develop an international profile;
- To continue to focus on applied high quality research with application, sustainability and impact;
- To strengthen key areas of research and respond to emergent themes;

Impact template (REF3a)

- Continue to audit staff research to determine areas of strength and weakness;
- To set clear expectations for academic staff to contribute to our research at a national and international level of quality;
- To provide support and guidance to individuals on preparing external funding applications;
- To nurture talented early career researchers who will help to promote and sustain our national profile and contribute to the development of our international performance;
- To monitor the quality of research output for the beneficiaries of the project;
- Build on the outcome of REF 2014

In the next REF period we expect to realize investment in four on-going projects including:

1. The CREDIT project (Eaton, Richardson, McKenzie) (£839,589.00, 2010/2013) funded by the International Fund for Ireland which 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. This project is in the process of producing resource materials which will be disseminated to all 841 primary school in NI.
2. The SEN Literacy project (McMurray £3.4million, 2011/2014) which seeks 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.
3. The alternative pedagogy project which focuses on co-teaching and the implementation of digital resources in the classroom aims to raise achievement levels and inform pedagogy (McCullagh) supported by funding from the AstraZeneca Science Teaching Trust (£88,000, 2013/2015) at Stranmillis with partners in QUB.
4. The Daisy project. A cross-community project that seeks to develop mutual respect and understanding in preschool children will produce early years resource materials for children in preschool settings in areas of religious and racial division. This project is supported by PEACE III (£40,000, 2012/2014) funding. (Gray, Walsh, Eaton, McConnell and Quinn)

Each of these projects is focussed on the needs of user groups, the development of resource materials and demonstrate reach and impact. It is anticipated that the outcome of these projects will secure the return of a larger group of research active staff in the REF 2019/2020 return.

d. Relationship to case studies

The case studies submitted in this research exercise reflect SUC's strategic imperative to produce high quality research with reach and impact. The submissions indicate that our research activity is sustainable and impacts the teaching and learning of children across NI and is a significant influence on national policy. The case studies are underpinned by research conducted over a timeframe that is longer than the assessment period, but which continue to show sustainability and impact. Dr Gray and Walsh support the extension of research in SUC through one-to-one mentoring sessions with early career researchers and offer advice on the development of research articles for publication in international peer reviewed journals. Research funding applications undertaken by Gray and Walsh involve newly active research staff to offer them insight and experience in the development of research proposal, field work and report writing. Gray with Mitchell, Dunn and Moffett are currently involved in an evaluative project that seeks to determine the impact of handheld electronic devices on teaching and learning in early years classrooms (2013/2015, £18,750 funded by the Belfast Education and Library Board). Walsh with McConnell (2013) recently completed a project in the Republic of Ireland that examined quality pedagogy in Early Years classrooms in areas of deprivation (£10,000, funded by Child Care Ireland). In sharing their expertise, Gray and Walsh seek to develop a corpus of researchers with the skills to secure and progress the research activity of the University College on the national and international stage.