

Teaching Council Response to #edchatie discussion on “What should the Teaching Council be doing”

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Thank you to everyone who offered comments and suggestions on what the Teaching Council should be doing during Monday night’s #edchatie discussion on Twitter (15th October).

As Director, I am keen to engage with the profession, to explain why regulation matters, and why the Teaching Council is the best structure for this regulation. I am committed to improving our relationship with the teaching profession and that is why I am delighted to take this opportunity to respond to the #edchatie discussion.

I’ve taken some time to consider the discussion and I would like to offer the Council’s response to a number of the main themes which emerged during the discussion.

I was particularly taken with the quality and tone of the debate. A deep understanding and appreciation of professionalism and what it means to teachers was very much in evidence. I like the idea of recognising excellence in teaching, and think that it may offer intriguing possibilities for World Teachers’ Day in 2013.

For those of you who would like to know what we do for the fee that you pay, a full description of our various areas of work is given in the body of this document. It is quite long but this is necessary due to the wide range of points raised in the #edchatie discussion. I would ask that you take the time to read it, and then come back with any questions you may have by tweeting @teachingcouncil or emailing info@teachingcouncil.ie

[Why a teaching council?](#)

[Why is self-regulation so important?](#)

[Promoting teaching as a profession](#)

[The role of the Teaching Council](#)

[Staffing issues, phone line opening hours and updates to teachers](#)

[Code of Conduct](#)

[Fitness to Teach](#)

[Employment conditions](#)

[Continuing Professional Development](#)

[Research Bursaries](#)

Why a teaching council?

Before we come to the “what”, I think it is important to clarify the “why”. Why do we do everything we do? It is about maintaining and enhancing the trust that the public places in the profession. The Council did not create that trust, teachers did. But we know in the Ireland of today how easily trust can be lost.

As far back as the 1970s, teachers foresaw that an independent statutory regulator would be needed to maintain trust in the profession. It took until 2006 for that vision to be realised, and we still have a lot to do in a relatively short space of time. But everything we do - from registering teachers, to garda vetting, to accrediting programmes of initial teacher education, to assessment of overseas qualifications, to induction and probation, and ultimately to

Fitness to Teach - is about ensuring the continued trust of the public in the profession of teaching.

The fact that teachers created the trust in the first place, and not the Council, can offer one insight into the importance of self-regulation. The Teaching Council is now almost unique in the Irish context in that a majority of Council members are teachers. 16 are directly elected and 6 are nominated by the teacher unions. This is an incredibly privileged position for the profession of teaching to be in. The Medical Council has a lay majority. A teacher majority on the Teaching Council is an indication of the high level of trust which the public placed in it through its elected representatives in the Oireachtas.

Why is self-regulation so important?

Teachers wanted a regulatory body where guardianship of the profession would be vested in its own members, i.e. teachers, rather than the Church or the State. What this means for teachers is that every chapter of the story of their professional development, from initial education in college, through induction, probation and lifelong learning, will be written and overseen by their own profession. Who better to tell that story than teachers themselves?

A summary of the volume of work which we do would include the following:

- Over 77,000 teachers on the register. We are now preparing for the commencement of Section 30 in this school year which will see an influx of applications.
- 10,000 applications for Garda Vetting processed in 2011. We are on course to process up to 15,000 applications this year.
- 8 programmes of initial teacher education (ITE) reviewed and accredited to date. All courses of ITE must be accredited by the Teaching Council. We now have to review and accredit 45 programmes from 19 providers over the next 2 years. This will involve co-ordinating the work of 9 different review panels with an average of 4 members each.
- 1,200 applications per annum for qualifications assessment for teachers coming to work in Ireland from other countries.
- Development and approval of policies in areas such as the continuum of teacher education, and criteria and guidelines for initial teacher education.

Promoting teaching as a profession

Some tweets said that the Council should promote teaching as a profession. This is an ongoing area of the Council's work. It includes attendance at conferences, careers fairs and information sessions for career advisors. It also involves writing articles to mark certain occasions (e.g. [World Teachers' Day](#) or to engage in [debate](#) about the values underpinning teacher education).

Some of you have said that we should get out and visit schools. That is something we have done in the past, and I would be very keen to continue that. I will not be able to accept every invitation - there are 77,000 teachers and only about 29 staff! But I will visit as many as I can. We are also working on a series of videocasts for our website where we will try to provide information in a way that anybody, including teachers can access anywhere, anytime.

The role of the Teaching Council

As all teachers will be aware, the Teaching Council is the statutory body responsible for promoting and maintaining high standards in the profession of teaching, for the benefit of the public and the profession.

What is important to note in a discussion about what the Teaching Council should do is that the Council was established under the Teaching Council Act, 2001. Our role and functions are clearly laid out in the Act. As with every other statutory body, the enabling legislation determines everything the Teaching Council does.

Fair and transparent regulation is the mechanism through which the Teaching Council promotes and maintains high standards in the profession of teaching. This is all with the aim of maintaining and enhancing the status of the profession in the eyes of the public, so that there will be no doubt but that teaching will be acknowledged for what it is – the most important profession in society. Indeed, we in the Council believe that it is second only to parenthood in terms of its importance for our social well-being and economic progress.

So what is the Teaching Council doing to fulfil its role? Here are a few examples:

- By establishing and maintaining the first register of teachers in this State, at primary, post-primary and further education level. There are over 77,000 teachers currently registered. As part of this registration process, we coordinate the Garda vetting process. Last year, this involved the processing of 10,000 applications and this year, we are on course to process up to 15,000. The establishment of this register was a vital step in maintaining and enhancing the trust of the public in the profession in a transparent manner.
- We assess approximately 1,200 applications every year for registration from teachers coming to work in Ireland from overseas. This involves an assessment of qualifications to make sure that they meet the same standards as teachers who studied here in Ireland.
- We have reviewed eight existing Initial Teacher Education programmes (for example, the B. Ed. in the colleges of education or the PDE in Universities) and recommendations from those reviews are being implemented by the colleges of education.
- Over the next two years, we will review and accredit the reconceptualised programmes of Initial Teacher Education (i.e. those programmes which have been extended in duration). This will be a significant piece of work involving eight review panels examining more than 45 programmes. These programmes are the first gateway of entry into the profession, and thus it is critically important that the highest standards permeate every aspect of them. The Teaching Council has legal responsibility for making sure that this is the case. Reconceptualised is another way of saying that these new programmes will not be more of the same. Each provider of ITE is being asked to reimagine all that they do, and clearly articulate their rationale or values base for so doing. This is all to be done with the singular intent of enhancing the quality of preparation for new entrants into the profession of teaching.
- We have also published a Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers.

Staffing issues, phone line opening hours and updates to teachers

I fully understand the frustration experienced by some teachers in trying to make contact with the Council by telephone and teachers are entitled to an explanation.

Even though the Council is a self-funding body, we are subject to the Public Service Employment Control Framework which means we cannot recruit additional staff. Consequently, we found ourselves in a situation where we were spending so much time on the phone dealing with queries from teachers that we were unable to process registration applications, or advance our other work, as speedily as we would like, even with staff working additional hours. For that reason we had to make the difficult decision to curtail the hours during which our phone line is staffed.

We are, however, actively seeking to resolve this problem as soon as possible with a view to having the phones open during normal business hours.

In the meantime, if any teacher has a query for the Council they can email it to info@teachingcouncil.ie and we will reply to it as soon as possible.

We will also continue to issue regular e-zines to teachers for whom we have email addresses. These e-zines keep readers up-to-date with the activity of the Council. The Council's website is another useful resource for teachers, www.teachingcouncil.ie and the [latest e-zine is available here](#) on the website.

Code of Conduct

All teachers should now have now received a hard copy of the Code of Conduct. This document has important legal standing and that is why it was vital that the Council issue the Code in hard copy to each teacher. I would be the last person to print documents for the sake of printing them. But it was necessary to send the hard copy because the Code will be a critical element of Part 5 (Fitness to Teach) when it is commenced. The legal standing of the Code will be evident when Fitness to Teach is introduced because it will be used by the Council as a reference point during investigations and inquiries.

This new Code replaces the first Code of Conduct published in 2007. It was developed in consultation with teachers and other partners in the education sector.

The Code serves as a guiding compass for teachers throughout their careers so as to uphold the honour and dignity of the teaching profession, especially in the eyes of the public.

Our hope is that it will be used by the education community and the wider public to inform their understanding and expectations of the teaching profession in Ireland.

Fitness to Teach

The commencement of Section 30 of the Teaching Council Act (dealing with the requirement to be registered in order to be paid as a teacher from State funds) must take place before Fitness to Teach can be introduced. The profession must be registered in order to be regulated.

The Minister for Education and Skills has stated his intention that Section 30 will be commenced during the current school year. This is a serious commitment to enacting

Section 30. Past delays in enacting Section 30 included the legislative process of drafting and publishing the Education (Amendment) Act, 2012 which included an amendment to Section 30 of the Teaching Council Act.

In the meantime, the Teaching Council is progressing with work to prepare for the introduction of Fitness to Teach and I would like to make a couple of important points.

Firstly, Fitness to Teach is about reinforcing the integrity of the profession by investigating complaints made in respect of individual teachers, and it is important to note that the vast majority of teachers will never have a complaint made against them.

Secondly, the Teaching Council provides for a “triage” system to eliminate vexatious complaints – as Director, I will have responsibility for dealing with this aspect of the work. Thirdly, the Council will provide information to teachers on what to do if a complaint is made against them.

Employment conditions

Some tweets say that we have been silent on the issue of teacher pay and conditions. This is inaccurate. The Teaching Council has highlighted its concerns about the recent changes in employment conditions for newly qualified teachers on a number of occasions (for example, see [“In My Opinion”](#) article in the Irish Independent on Wednesday 3rd October and [this news item](#) about the Council’s communication with the Minister for Education and Skills expressing its concerns at the impact of the series of changes to teachers’ remuneration and the need to maintain the attractiveness of teaching as a career option).

The Council acknowledges that the last few years have been very difficult for serving teachers in terms of the pay cuts that they have suffered, and also for new entrants to the profession with the elimination of qualifications allowances in particular, and that the morale of the teaching profession has been greatly affected.

Under the Teaching Council Act, the Council has no statutory remit in relation to employment conditions. (This is a role for the teacher unions. I often differentiate the role of the Council as working for the profession as a whole and the role of unions as working on behalf of teachers.) We do however have a remit in ensuring that high calibre individuals continue to be attracted to the profession and have made it clear that we are concerned as to the impact these measures on pay and allowances will have on the attractiveness of teaching as a profession.

Continuing Professional Development

CPD is a central element in any profession. Indeed, one of the things that attracted me to this post was the model of learning espoused by the Council for the profession – the idea that at the heart of a great teacher will be a great learner. It seems to me that this offers an insight for our country as a whole, as we strive to not only recover from the crisis that we are in, but also to make sure, in so far as is possible, that we will not make the same mistakes again. The best way to do this is to make sure that we are always open to new, continuing learning. Teaching can blaze a trail for everyone else on this by realising the vision outlined above.

Under the Teaching Council Act, the Council is charged with advising the Minister in relation to the professional development of teachers. The Council's policy on CPD is explained in the [Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education](#). We believe that CPD should be a right for all registered teachers. We also say that effective CPD provision requires the adoption of a coherent national framework that caters for individual, school and system needs.

There should be a partnership approach to policy development and planning involving all the key stakeholders and the Council will be consulting with all the partners in education and in particular practising teachers. An update on this area of work will be available in 2013.

Research Bursaries

The Council's commitment to the continuing professional development of teachers is in evidence across all of its functions. Of particular relevance are its [research bursary schemes](#). The Council launched its first scheme of bursaries in May 2007. A further three schemes followed and 106 research bursaries have been awarded to date. The majority of awards (75%) were practising teachers. Other bursary recipients (25%) were awarded to those carrying out research in the area of teaching, learning and assessment, e.g. NCE-MSTL (National Centre for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching and Learning),

This research has the potential to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in Ireland. We have begun publishing summaries of bursary recipients' research on our website. This will be the main focus of our research work for now. Due to our staffing constraints, it has not been possible to commission new work in this area. This is a cause of immense frustration for us, as we are acutely aware of the benefits and importance of research by teachers for teachers. We are working hard at developing a new model for the commissioning of research, and hope to be in a position to give further updates on this in 2013.

[Summaries of research](#)

ENDS