Dear Mr Dornan MSP,

We are writing in receipt of your letter dated 11 May 2017. We appreciate and welcome the opportunity to inform members of the Education and Skills Committee concerning aspects of our Initial Teacher Education (ITE) provision at the University of Aberdeen School of Education.

Firstly, the University of Aberdeen has the following Initial Teacher Education programmes: BMus (Education); Distance Learning Initial Teacher Education Professional Graduate Diploma in Education (DLITE PGDE); MA (Honours) Education; MA Gaelic with Education; and PGDE. All of these programmes are co-constructed with our stakeholders: Students; Local Authorities; and Professional Associations - and accredited by the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) and meet the GTCS’s stated requirement for the total time spent in school on placement. Every programme is designed to ensure clear connections between: University and school-based learning; individual study; and collaborative peer-learning, to meet the quality assurance requirements of the University and the GTCS. The MA programme has 31 weeks (over 4 placements) and the PGDE has 18 weeks (over 2 placements), in accordance with the GTCS requirements. An integrative model of campus and placement time educates students through reflective practice, professional enquiry, and engagement with research, policy, and practice.

All University-based learning pivots around developing Student Teachers: educational and curricular knowledge; skills; and positive dispositions, to support adaptability, resilience, and confidence for entry into the teaching profession. Through well-established partnership arrangements, we are continually developing this broad range of ‘practical experience’ throughout the continuum (From Student Teacher to Newly Qualified Teacher). As such, there is not a delineation of study time used for ‘practical experience’, due to the integrated nature of the student experience. We are always seeking ways to enhance our students’ school placement experience, and are open to further discussion with stakeholders about this.

In common with the agreed Student Placement System guidelines, students may be placed in schools that require a travel time of up to 90 mins each way. We are concerned that with the current School Placement System, where students are placed does not always seem to be the best fit - taking into account the wide geographical area of the North East of Scotland. In addition, the widely dispersed geographical location of schools in the North East, coupled with the national priority to increase Student Teacher recruitment, results in an increasing budgetary challenge for the School of Education in terms of Tutor: time; travel; and accommodation when visiting students on placement.
Student travel costs may be claimed, retrospectively, for any increase in expense beyond normal travel to campus which is incurred during school placement. This arrangement is of concern to us, as it can cause difficulties and stress for students. Some students have successfully applied to the University Student Hardship Fund for support.

At the University of Aberdeen, a large number of students (60 in 2017) had placements beyond the 90 minutes maximum (one-way) travel recommendation; consequently, they were required to find accommodation. As we do all that we can to avoid this situation, these students are often the last to know where their placement is (as we seek to avoid having to place them at such a distance). These students may then have to find accommodation at very short notice, which can add to their stress and anxiety. Subsistence and accommodation costs are claimed back retrospectively by the students, which can add to the financial burden they face as a consequence of where they are placed.

Secondly, in continuing to build from the pioneering Inclusive Practice research project, all programmes are under-pinned by an inclusive practice approach, which seeks to create safe and positive learning environments for all. This includes both explicit and implicit learning activities about, for example: Social Justice; Inclusive Pedagogy; Planning for Inclusivity; supporting English as an Additional Language learners (EAL); Autism; LGBTQI; and barriers to Literacy and Numeracy.

In keeping with the Scottish Government (2011) strategy for Autism, we have been systematically increasing the time given to inputs across the MA Programme. The design of the input is based directly on feedback from students and tutors, so they are fully responsive to their needs. Crucially, there is not a delineation of programme content and time - as this learning is integrated throughout the student experience. All students are provided with GLOW accounts, which includes a full induction about: internet use; etiquette; online safety; and the GTCS’s Code of Conduct for Student Teachers.

Thirdly, regarding numeracy qualifications for entry to Primary education programmes, we feel that the current requirements are satisfactory as a basis for entry and further learning. We are not aware of research evidence which suggests that such a move towards increasing the entry qualifications would improve outcomes for children and young people.

An increase in the entrance requirements for Mathematics is highly likely to have a detrimental impact on student recruitment, which, in the context of the North East of Scotland, could have the knock-on effect of exacerbating teacher shortages. We are aware that some students lack confidence in Mathematics, despite meeting the entry requirements; this is true also of some students concerning English. While we already collaborate with Local Authorities on the continuum of the development of Numeracy, we

Fourthly, and finally, our University perspective, and Initial Teacher Education programmes, are research-informed. As such, rather than ‘training’ teachers in a particular approach, our education programmes are sufficiently flexible to enable any student to adapt their practice to align with the Local Authority/school-based resources - as opposed to preparing students for a particular scheme of work, which has been implemented by a Local Authority. It is our expectation that whilst on placement, schools will support student learning about any specific schemes being used.

While we already collaborate with Local Authorities on the continuum of the development of Literacy and Numeracy, we are open to further discussion on how to enhance the students’ experiences in Literacy and Numeracy with stakeholders.

Upon entry to the Initial Teacher Education, students are assessed on their academic literacy skills, so that early intervention may be provided, if required. MA and PGDE students undertake an online assessment for Mathematics, which is then supported by online study sessions. The University Student Learning Service provide group and individual support for: written assignments, and academic writing generally; English as an Additional Language (EAL); and specific learning needs, such as dyslexia and dyscalculia. In the MA programme, specific courses are offered on Literacy and Numeracy as electives. In both the MA and the PGDE, Literacy and Numeracy are core.

The School of Education at the University of Aberdeen welcomes the Teacher Workforce Planning Enquiry, and looks forward to the report from the Education and Skills Committee. We would like to express our willingness to further support the work of the Committee. From our perspective, an essential part of our continued desire for improvement in Initial Teacher Education provision, as is reflected in our track-record of learning innovation (E.g., DLITE, Online Access, STARS, TEPL, etc.), depends on continuing and deepening the partnerships which we have developed with Northern Alliance Local Authorities over many years. We look forward to the continuing strengthening of these partnership relationships, and to our work with stakeholders more broadly.

Yours sincerely

PP. [Signature]

Prof. Ruth Irwin
Head of School of Education