

**ALTERNATIVE
EDUCATION
ASSESSMENT &
REGISTRATION**

Section 14 Education (Welfare) Act, 2000

**Assessment of Education
in places other than Recognised Schools**

**Independent School
Review Assessment Report**

Name of School

Mater Dei Academy

Address

Farranferris Education and Training Campus,
Redemption Road, Cork, T23 YW62

Name of Principal/Director

Geraldine Heffernan

Name of Assessor/s

Paul Sloan

Jane Merriman

Date of Assessment

9th May 2024

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Section 1 Background Information

1.1. School Hours

Opening Time:	08:50		
Closing time:	15:00		
Main breaks during the day:	13:00	to	10:30
	12:50	to	13:30

Is school in operation for more than five years?

No

If no, please give date on which school commenced operation

01/09/2020

1.2. Name(s) of principal and/or other teacher(s) interviewed

(Normally interview should take place with the principal)

Ms. Geraldine Heffernan

1.3. Sources of evidence on which report is based

- Information furnished in the R2 Information Forms
- An interview with the principal Ms. Geraldine Heffernan
- Discussions with subject specific and classroom teachers
- Viewing of the facilities and classrooms during an onsite visit
- Observation of a sample of learning tasks completed by the pupils.
- Observation of the educational materials in use
- The school website <https://www.materdeiacademy.ie>

Section 2 General Information and School Context

Mater Dei Academy (MDA) is a co-educational institution located in Cork City. According to its website, it is described as *"an independent Catholic second-level school in the classical tradition"*. Established in September 2020, the Academy began with a First-Year class of 12 students and now has an enrolment of 37 students. The school's curriculum is structured as a four-year classical Junior Cycle, which aims to transition into a two-year senior programme, culminating in preparation for the Irish Leaving Certificate examination. The school is committed to a Catholic classical education that seeks to cultivate the intellect and nurture virtue, following the vision of St. John Henry Newman. The Academy's name, Mater Dei, reflects its dedication to the Mother of God, a dedication supported by all members of the school community. The Mater Dei Home Education online provision is an extension of the Academy's vision, and is described as providing a classical education aimed at forming the mind and spirit towards truth and virtue.

Mater Dei Academy was founded by a group of Catholic educationalists and parents within Cork's Catholic community. Their aim was to provide a higher standard of intellectual development through a liberal arts education. Key figures in its establishment include the Chairperson of the Board of Management, a local priest along with other teaching staff. The founders were motivated by their dissatisfaction with the existing second-level schools and their desire to return to classical educational principles.

The Academy's educational ideals are grounded in liberal and classical education, which the academy believes emphasises the intrinsic value of learning and the pursuit of understanding what True, Beautiful, and Good is. The curriculum is inspired by Saint John Henry Newman and seeks to integrate all categories of knowledge into a coherent vision underpinned by Catholic faith and morals. The school's educational philosophy is described as *"an education for life, rather than formation for work"*.

The governance of Mater Dei Academy is overseen by a seven-member Board of Management. The Board, which includes a parents' representative, meets monthly to make decisions on school policies, financial oversight, and staff appointments. Operational day to day decisions are delegated to the school principal.

The staff team with the support of the students' parents and the Board of management, is committed to delivering a classical education at post primary level.

Section 3 The Principal and Staff

At the time of the assessment the Mater Dei Academy has a total of 19 teaching staff, including a teaching principal. Among the teaching staff, two are full-time, while the remainder consists of part-time teachers and volunteers. In addition to the teaching staff, the school has a full-time school manager who oversees daily administrative operations.

To accommodate its planned expansion and enhance the quality of education, Mater Dei Academy has outlined a provisional hiring plan in its strategic documents. This plan includes the intention to hire an additional five full-time teaching staff for the 2024/2025 academic year.

Section 4 Time Devoted to Education

The school follows a post-primary school calendar and operates for 167 school days each year. The school day for students begins at 8:50am and concludes at 3:00pm. The day commences with a morning prayer. There is a morning break from 10:30 to 10:50 AM, lunch is scheduled from 12:50 to 1:30pm.

Timetabled classes are arranged with two periods in the morning before the break, three periods after the morning break and before lunch, and three periods after lunch. The school day begins and concludes with a dedicated prayer time

Section 5 The Learning Environment

Since its inception in 2020, the school has experienced growth and soon after it was established the school moved to the current location. The Mater Dei Academy is situated on the Farranferris Education and Training Campus. The campus also hosts a local Irish medium school and the administrative offices of the local Education and Training Board (ETB). The school provides an environment that effectively supports the education of its pupils. Mater Dei Academy occupies a self-contained area on the second floor corridor that includes four classrooms, an office space, a staff work area and storage space, a kitchen and canteen. The Mater Dei Academy's designated area of the Farranferris Education and Training Campus offers a physical environment that is suitable for the educational needs of the students.

Pupils have access to a secure outdoor recreational area. The onsite chapel is a significant shared space for the school. The chapel is used for Mass, a service is held each week on Fridays, family members can attend this service if they wish.

Each classroom has adequate space for teaching and learning and for resources. School corridors feature some displays of students' work and relevant educational charts and aids.

The class numbers are small and two of the classrooms benefit from an adjoining door, which allows for flexibility to deliver classes. According to the school's website, the small class sizes are ideal for students of all abilities as they benefit from personalised attention and care afforded by classes of fewer than fifteen students.

Section 6 The Educational Activities

6.1. General information

Mater Dei Academy currently offers a four-year programme that begins with a four-year Junior Cycle in classical education. Starting next September, the school will also provide a two-year Leaving Certificate senior cycle for 5th-year students. Academic subjects in the junior cycle are assessed through the International GCSE, Teastas Eorpach na Gaeilge, and DELF examinations. These

assessments, aligned with international standards, are designed to provide a strong foundation for the subsequent Senior Cycle and Leaving Certificate examinations.

The principal informed the assessors how the Mater Dei Academy emphasises a liberal and classical education that fosters the joy of learning for the sake of understanding what True, Beautiful, and Good is. This education is seen as formation for life rather than merely training for work. The curriculum benchmarks against international standardised examinations, including IGCSE, DELF, and TEG exams, without sacrificing time for activities such as focused learning, reading, praying, and thinking.

The Academy's four-year classical Junior Cycle aims to prepare students for the two-year senior programme, culminating in the Irish Leaving Certificate examination. The educational philosophy draws inspiration from Saint John Henry Newman, who advocated for a 'liberal education that refines the mind and character'.

Philosophy and theology form the twin pillars of the curriculum, framing all subjects within a holistic context that *integrates God's presence in every aspect of human life, including language, science, culture, and the arts.*

Mathematics and science are approached as extensions of this educational model, encouraging students to observe and appreciate the order and beauty of creation within the context of God's goodness. History provides the backdrop for understanding contemporary society and culture, while the study of Fine Arts is understood within this model to express humanity's highest forms of thanksgiving and creativity.

6.2. Language and literacy skills

The languages taught at the Academy are English, Irish, Latin and French. The study of language at Mater Dei Academy is considered a natural form of expression. The Academy believes that it allows students to examine their thinking processes and articulate their thoughts meaningfully in both written and spoken word. At the time of the assessment the assessors visited a classroom where students were engaged in a debating class. Debating is considered key aspect of oral language development, critical thinking and expression.

The English Programme Overview is as follows:

Year 1: The Ancient World

Emphasis on grammatical accuracy, punctuation, and narrative/descriptive writing. Literature includes medieval retellings of classical stories and tales of Celtic heroes. Study of a novel, a play, short stories, and poetry.

Year 2: The Christian World

Focus on developing grammatical and verbal abilities. Creative writing skills are extended. Study includes writings of Augustine, Ambrose, and St. Patrick, as well as Shakespeare's King Henry IV and selected poetry.

Year 3: The Renaissance World

Emphasis on logical thought, speech, public discourse, and debate.

Themes include love, fortitude, and youth, with works by Dickens, Chesterton, Burns, and Tennyson.

Year 4: The Modern World

Focus on modern classic works, debating, and public speaking skills.

Exploration of new styles of written expression and enduring themes of conflict and loss.

The Core Texts in use are :

Cambridge IGCSE First Language English Coursebook

Voyages in English Writing and Grammar 7 and 8 (2011 Editions)

Supplementary Reading:

Extensive list capturing many of the great books from Western Civilization and beyond.

Selected English poetry to encourage wider reading and exploration.

The Latin Programme overview is as follows:

Latin I: Introduction to the structure of language through the language of Western civilization and the Church. Focus on understanding and appreciating Latin texts in their native form.

Latin II: Development of reading longer and more complex sentences using a greater variety of tenses and verbal forms.

Latin III: Building a working knowledge of Latin sufficient to read simple classical Latin texts in their original form.

Latin IV: Deep dive into primary texts, enhancing understanding of the culture and thought of the authors by studying works in their original language.

6.3. Numeracy

The numeracy provision at Mater Dei Academy currently consists of the following structure and resources.

Mathematics I: Algebra

The mathematics programme aims to instil in students an appreciation for the order and perfection inherent in mathematical concepts.

Mathematics II: Geometry

Geometry serves as a fundamental tool for understanding beauty, symmetry, and form across various disciplines. An adept understanding of geometric principles enables students to appreciate the harmony and structure in the natural world, as well as in human endeavour's such as art, architecture, and engineering.

Mathematics III: Trigonometry

Trigonometry is delivered in order to demonstrate the logical consistency of mathematical systems and their real-world applications. Its principles find extensive use in scientific, business, engineering, and medical fields, providing essential tools for problem-solving and analysis.

Mathematics IV: Pre-calculus

In the final year of the mathematics programme, students deepen their understanding of mathematical reasoning through Euclidean algebra and geometry. This prepares them for the concepts of calculus and statistics required for the Leaving Certificate programme, including sequences, series, limits, and mathematical induction.

6.4. Irish

The Irish language programme at Mater Dei Academy is structured over the four Junior Cycle years, with the principal objective being to ensure that students can speak and write the language accurately and fluently. The first year of the programme emphasises the development of students' spoken language skills.

Texts used throughout the programme include Buntús Cainte (Parts 1, 2, and 3), Buntús Gramadaí: Eagrán Nua, Jimín Mháire Thaidhg (An Seabhac), Graiméar Meánscoile: Cúrsa Gramadaí do Mheánscoileanna (D. Ó Tuama), Briathra na Gaeilge (D. & A. Ó Murchú), Capall Cogaidh by Michael Morpurgo (CCEA), and An Gasúr a Chaith Pitseámaí Stríocacha (CCEA).

Through engaging with these texts and others, students explore the Irish language through stories, poems, songs, debates, and discussions, encompassing both traditional and modern writers. Grammatical accuracy, both spoken and written, is taught explicitly as a foundational aspect of language learning.

Children attending an Independent School should be afforded opportunity for the study of Irish, however the study of Irish is not a requirement for registration under Section 14 of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000. Where Irish is included in the provision, an Independent School may identify students attending that they consider would qualify for an exemption from the study of Irish. Independent Schools can make decisions in consultation with parents regarding arrangements for these children. Any arrangements made in relation to the study of Irish does not entitle students to an exemption from the study of Irish in the event of a subsequent enrolment at a Department of Education recognised school.

Parents of children attending an Independent School should be informed of and acquaint themselves with implications of not taking Irish and/or having a second language. Parents seeking information should consult with the Department of Education www.education.ie and/or the State Examinations Commission www.examinations.ie with regard to the requirement for Irish and/or an additional language.

6.5. Other areas of learning

History

The four-year history programme at Mater Dei Academy mirrors the structure of the English programme, covering historical eras sequentially: The Ancient World, The Christian World, The Renaissance World, and The Modern World. In the first year, students delve into Mesopotamia, Ancient Greece and Rome, and pre-Christian Celtic Ireland. This foundation leads to the study of early Christian Ireland and significant events such as the fall of the Roman Empire, the rise of Islam, and the Viking and Norman invasions in Ireland. The third-year curriculum focuses on the Reformation, Counter-Reformation, Renaissance, and revolutions in Europe and America. Irish history is explored through topics like the end of Gaelic kingdoms, the Battle of Kinsale, and the Penal Laws. In the final year, students examine Catholic Emancipation, the Great Famine, the rise of nationalism, and the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The programme also covers the two World Wars and explores prevailing philosophies and ideologies of the 20th century. The curriculum is supported by an extensive selection of texts covering eras, events, personalities, and topics across the four-year programme.

Science / Geography

Geographical studies are integrated into the Science curriculum. Physical geography is the central focus in the first year, followed by biology, chemistry, and physics in subsequent years. The programme aims to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of each discipline and its relevance in the world. Core texts are specified for studying the course content, providing students with resources for learning.

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)

While SPHE is not timetabled as a subject, Mater Dei Academy emphasises the importance of social, personal, and health education. The school's Code of Behaviour guides students' social relationships, and pastoral support is provided on an individual basis as needed. The responsibility for relationships and sexuality education primarily lies with parents, but elements of sexuality education are included in theology studies, aligning with the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Art

The four-year art programme aims to introduce students to the history, ideas, and practical aspects of art production and understanding. Students develop skills such as sketching, drawing, and oil painting while studying art across different periods and styles, including cave art, Roman and Grecian masterpieces, Renaissance art, and modern artists like the Impressionists. A number of art works created by the students were on display in the school and shown to the assessors at the onsite visit

Music

The music programme spans four years, beginning with an introduction to music, including performance, listening, theory, and composition. Subsequent years focus on developing sight-singing ability, knowledge of music notation, and composition skills. Students study a range of musical genres, including folk, classical, Irish, and sacred music, culminating in the exploration of contemporary music and composers.

Physical Education

The PE programme at Mater Dei Academy prioritises fun and enjoyment over sporting achievement. The schools emphasise is on moral characteristics and virtues akin to athletic growth. While outdoor facilities are limited, indoor and outdoor activities promote health education and teamwork. Activities

include ball games and activities such as water sports and hillwalking are made available to students. The students are separated for this subject according to gender.

6.6. Special educational needs

The school does not currently have any students with identified Special Educational Needs (SEN). The school is committed to offering professional development opportunities for teaching staff to address any additional learning needs of students identified in the current or future cohorts. Presently, the small class size, with fewer than fifteen students, are conducive to catering to a range of academic abilities. This setting allows for teachers to personalise the learning pace to meet current individual student needs effectively. The school does not currently have any formalised additional supports in place for children that may enrol with Special Educational Needs (SEN).

Section 7 Assessment and Record Keeping

Regular class tests are conducted across various subjects in the school by teachers, with detailed records maintained to track student progress. Samples of student work and teacher-designed tests are stored.

End-of-year assessments incorporate a range of external tests, primarily provided by Cambridge Assessment International Education. These assessments are internationally recognised. Mater Dei Academy is a registered Cambridge school, delivering its courses and utilising its assessments and certifications.

Subjects registered for the Cambridge system include English, mathematics, science, history, and Latin. For Gaelge, the Teastas Eorpach Gaelge (through Maynooth University) is used, while the diplôme d'études en langue française (DELFI) is employed for French assessment. Subject examinations are staggered over the four years, with some subjects examined at the end of second and fourth year.

Upon completion of the Junior Cycle, students will undertake the Irish Leaving Certificate in selected subjects within the school. Parents receive regular updates on their children's progress and are actively involved in planning their learning programme. Teaching methodologies are flexible, adjusting to accommodate the individual learning needs of each child.

Section 8 Other Relevant Information

Continuous consultation and collaboration are inherent in all school-based activities, facilitated through staff meetings aimed at planning future initiatives within the school.

Additionally, as required in the R2 information form, the school has the necessary policies and procedures in place. The requested policies and documentation have been made available, including the Child Safeguarding Statement, Fire Safety Policy, Health and Safety statement, and Certification of

The Child Safeguarding Statement is compliant and displayed as required. The procedures identified on the Child Safeguarding Statement were reviewed and discussed and identified as in place. Staff are trained in the implementation of the Child Safeguarding Statement.

Staff members have undergone Garda vetting and received training in implementing Children First legislation. All staff have completed child safeguarding training, and the school has designated a Designated Liaison Person (DLP) and Deputy Designated Liaison Person (DDL), with required notices displayed.

Section 9 Evaluation of the Education Provision and Recommendations

It is the assessor's opinion that the Mater Dei Academy provides an education that can be characterised as offering "a certain minimum education, moral, intellectual, and social."

Successful aspects of this provision include:

The reasons I have formed this opinion of the educational provision in this school are as follows:

- The principal's leadership skills and her participation in classroom work
- The curriculum in the school aiming to provide a well-rounded education to its pupils.
- The commitment of staff to the delivery of the curriculum and a pursuit of high standards of pupil attainment
- Visits to the classrooms, conversations with teaching staff and pupils, and observation of pupils' work – all indicating the strong teaching and learning ethos of the school.
- The enthusiasm of staff to engage with the ethos of the school's overall development as well as curriculum development.
- The implementation of organisational and health and safety policies, relevant to the successful administration of the school
- The availability and appropriate use of a range of resources to support lesson delivery.
- The strategic plan to grow the school with a clear curriculum vision and future plans for recognised state examinations.

Recommendation for the provision

- It is recommended that additional attention is given to the classroom environment including a review of resources for use in the classroom and additional focus on organising students work and resources and displaying student work.

- It is recommended that the space in the corridors is maximised for teaching and learning opportunities through the display of educational resources and students' work.

The findings of the assessment were discussed with the participants on the date of the assessment. The participants were advised that the decision regarding registration would be made by Tusla – the Child and Family Agency: Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Service (AEARS).

Following the assessment, a draft report is provided to the principal, along with a Factual Accuracy and Feedback Form, which may be submitted within a specified timeframe, in response to the content of the draft report. The report, along with any information provided on the feedback form for consideration, is brought to the AEARS Registration Panel. The Registration Panel make decisions regarding registration of children in receipt of the education at the Independent School.

Section 10 Discussion of Finding of Report with Principal

The principal of Mater Dei Academy actively engaged in the review process, offering valuable insights into the school's teaching, and learning environment. The assessors expressed their satisfaction with the educational provision and the organisation of the school as outlined in the findings of this report

It was indicated that the recommendation would be to maintain the registration of students receiving an education at the Mater Dei Academy, Cork. The final decision regarding registration will be made by the Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Panel - Tusla, Child and Family Agency.

Section 11 Outcome

Outcome of Tusla Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Service Panel Regarding Requirements for Section 14 Registration of Children Attending the School

Following the Assessment, the Registration Panel decided that children attending Mater Dei Academy will be registered and retained on the register of children receiving an education in a place other than a recognised school as required by Section 14 of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000.

Registration is subject to a periodic review by the Child and Family Agency