IVEA
Representing Vocational Education Committees

IVEA SUBMISSION TO NCCA

INNOVATION & IDENTITY: IDEAS FOR A NEW JUNIOR CYCLE

Introductory comments

IVEA welcomes the publication of the NCCA's discussion paper, *Innovation and Identity: Ideas for a new junior cycle,* and the consultation process that has been initiated around that publication.

Despite a number of efforts, on the part of the NCCA, to kick start reform of the junior cycle, there has been no significant reform of junior cycle education for some 21 years. Indeed, it could be argued that the replacement of the Intermediate Certificate with the Junior Certificate significantly failed to deliver on its promise and that the change merely amounted to one set of syllabi being replaced by another.

Twenty one years ago the knowledge society and the ubiquitous developments in information technology that we take for granted today were mere figments in the imagination of the futurist. Also, of course, it was still six (6) years to the *European Year of Life Long Learning* (1996) and literally light years away from where we are today – where knowledge of virtually any kind is no more than a Google search away.

Today, it is widely acknowledged that the key to maintaining individual and national prosperity and social cohesion is the constant updating of knowledge, skills and competences. The need for our schools to turn out lifelong learners has become obvious

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to educational policy makers and practitioners alike. And 'the how' of satisfying this need, in an ever changing world, is the great new challenge facing Irish education.

In this regard, the orthodoxy is that significant work has been undertaken in the area of primary education and that the next step in the reform process involves reforming post primary education. On the other hand, there are those who argue that the root of all our educational difficulties can be traced back to the failure of the primary school to 'get the basics right'.

In response to the Tánaiste's invitation to the education partners to contribute to the junior cycle consultation process, IVEA mounted a series of six (6) symposia around the country. It also consulted widely within the Sector around how the reform agenda might be advanced. The ideas harvested through both the symposia and the consultations substantially inform this submission.

What follows is a discussion of the concerns, issues and proposals that emerged over the course of the IVEA consultations.

Implications of Leaving Certificate and the points race for reforming junior cycle

While junior cycle education is in urgent need of reform, this reform is unlikely to succeed unless the senior cycle (Leaving Certificate) is first reformed because Leaving Certificate results and entry to third level courses is what principally drives what happens in the junior cycle. For example, when the Junior Certificate was first introduced, there was concern among teachers of subjects such as Chemistry that the new Junior Certificate Science syllabus would not provide those wishing to study such subjects in the senior cycle with a sufficient preparation for the Leaving Certificate course. Indeed, this kind of concern lingers to this day – especially among older teachers.

Understandably, many teachers feel, given the media coverage and parental pressure, that teachers and schools are essentially judged on the basis of the results their students achieve in the Leaving Certificate. Accordingly, how they teach and what they teach in the junior cycle is very much influenced by this perception. One could say that the 'invisible hand' of the Leaving Certificate influences every aspect of junior cycle education

and that, until that influence changes, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to reform junior cycle education in any permanent sense.

As long as the Leaving Certificate 'prize' goes to the student who most successfully memorises large volumes of subject content and regurgitates it in the Leaving Certificate, teachers will feel compelled to teach and assess their students in a way that promotes this outcome to the maximum extent – in the clear knowledge that they (the teachers and their schools) will be judged accordingly by their students, their parents and the media.

There are very strong arguments for concluding that the first step towards reforming the junior cycle should be a radical reform of the criteria for admission to third level courses and a concomitant reform of the Leaving Certificate programme – the syllabi, how it is assessed, how it is taught, and how students learn.

While it would be ideal if the criteria for entry to third level education, the Leaving Certificate programme and the Junior Certificate programme could all be reformed contemporaneously, it is feasible to reform junior cycle education independently of the other two but not as effectively. For example, the junior cycle curriculum and assessment process could be reformed, independently of the senior cycle, in a way that would result in the junior cycle curriculum building on the primary curriculum and the whole assessment process becoming much more continuous than is currently the case. There is potential for independently reforming the junior cycle though the impact of such reform would be more lasting and more significant if such reform was to occur in the context of a holistic and integrated reform of both second level education and access to third level education.

Junior cycle education: an integral part of the school system

While, from a reform standpoint it would be distinctly advantageous if it were possible to treat junior cycle education as a discrete element in the overall education system – a self-contained element with an identity of its own – the reality is that junior cycle education is an integral part of the overall school system. In fact, junior cycle education can no more

be seen as operating independently of primary education and senior cycle education than it can be said that the duodenum operates independently of either the stomach or the colon. What goes on in primary education influences junior cycle education, and indeed all subsequent education. Likewise, both the process and the outcomes of junior cycle education have implications not only for senior cycle education but for all subsequent education and, in today's world this very much involves creating a culture of lifelong learning – where all graduates of front-ended education have the skills, inclination and disposition to go on learning, formally and informally, for the whole of their lives. Significantly, also, the imperatives of the Leaving Certificate and entry to third level hugely influence what happens in junior cycle classrooms all over the country.

Issues that reform of junior cycle education needs to address

I. Junior cycle education needs to link seamlessly with primary education

Currently, the second level curriculum and school experience ignores, to a very significant degree, what has occurred in primary school. While linking the first and second level curricula would be a significant reform, there are other matters that need serious consideration in relation to the transition from primary to post primary education. For example, students in their last year of primary school are usually taught by just one teacher over the course of a single day. Consequently, their aptitudes, personalities, backgrounds and special needs are well known to their teachers and, because there is virtually constant contact between student and teacher over the course of the school day/week, academic and other matters can be followed up on very easily. On the other hand, from his/her first day in the second level school, a first year student can have up to nine teachers in the course of a single school day. The consequences of such a sudden change are self evident and the ESRI finding that some students progress little over the course of their first year at post primary school probably reflects this discontinuity.

Might it be possible to introduce a team teaching approach to all primary classes, from fourth class up? Maybe the second teacher could take a very small proportion

of the teaching day in fourth class, then take a greater proportion of the day in fifth class and, in sixth class, two teachers could share the school teaching day with a class. Adopting this approach would also allow primary teachers to specialise in teaching particular subjects – to some degree. In the post primary school, teachers could be required to teach a group of related subjects to the same first year class, so as to ensure that no first year student is taught by more than, say, 4 teachers. Then, in second year, this could be increased to five (5) teachers and so on. While the adoption of this approach might have industrial relations and in-service-training implications, it would seem worthy of exploration.

The prevailing wisdom among policymakers and expert commentators seems to be that the primary curriculum has been successfully reformed and it is now a matter of reforming the second level curriculum so that it articulates seamlessly with the primary curriculum. On the other hand, there are some who opine that many of the problems manifested in the post primary sector have their origin in a primary school curriculum that does not provide an adequate foundation for the work of the post primary school.

When it comes to constructing a school curriculum, we need to ask what the curriculum is intended to achieve and, in a knowledge society, the response to such a question may be answered in the following vein. The school curriculum (primary and second-level combined) should provide a graduated basis for young people acquiring the knowledge, skills and competences to make the most of their lives (in education, in the family, in community and in the workplace) having regard for each individual's unique interests, aptitudes and aspirations. If we accept this depiction of the curriculum then it cannot be taken for granted that the primary curriculum is fit for purpose in every instance, simply because it has been reformed relatively recently and that it has a relatively high level of acceptance. In a world constantly evolving at an ever increasing rate, the curriculum, at all levels, must be constantly reviewed to ensure that it is fit for purpose.

It is therefore proposed that if, in the course of putting a new junior cycle curriculum in place, it is found that the primary curriculum is not capable of providing the necessary foundation, then it should be amended accordingly. For this reason, it is further recommended that the development of new junior cycle curricula should involve curriculum development experts from the primary sector and also that the primary curriculum committees should include second level teachers.

II. Need for a core curriculum

Junior cycle education needs to provide the learners with a real opportunity to acquire a core set of skills, knowledge and competences that build on what they have acquired in primary school. This core should be delivered in a way that will enable the learners to further develop these skills, knowledge and competences in subsequent phases of their education and so make the most of their lives (in the family, in the community and in the workplace) having regard to their individual aptitudes and aspirations. For this reason, a reformed junior cycle programme would need to include a core curriculum that **all** learners would experience. It would also be important that this core curriculum should be accessible to all learners - irrespective of their aptitudes, backgrounds or amenability. To this end, all teaching would need to be differentiated to the maximum possible extent and all learning would need to be individualised to the maximum possible degree.

Currently, it could be argued that there is a core curriculum for the Junior Certificate in the sense that all students are effectively required to study Irish, English, Maths, History and Geography (students in VEC schools are only required to study either History or Geography), Physical Education, Religion SPHE and CSPE. However, there is no requirement for Junior Certificate students to take Science or to be offered a creative arts course or any form of technology. Indeed, some schools deliberately offer a very academic curriculum in order to discourage students with special needs from enrolling. Of course such narrow curricula also fail to meet the educational needs of many who enrol in those schools.

III. Addressing overcrowded curriculum

Because of the way school timetables have been historically organised, at junior cycle level, there tends to be an assumption that all core subjects need to be taken over the whole of the three (3) years at junior cycle but this does not have to be the case. It should be possible, as is the case with the School Certificate programme in NSW (Australia), for students to study some core subjects for just one (1) or two (2) years or for a specified number of hours (say 90) over the course of junior cycle.

Clearly, the current junior cycle programme is overcrowded and something has to be done to pare back the content if learners are to engage in a meaningful way with both the subject matter and their teachers. This paring back is also indispensable to students acquiring the skills and dispositions to become self-directed, reflective lifelong learners. Importantly, paring back or rebalancing the curriculum does not necessarily mean that subjects should be removed from the curriculum but rather that the content should be reduced and that, in some cases, a number of subjects might be collapsed into a single, integrated, coherent subject.

While the Irish school curriculum, in the sense of subject syllabi, had its provenance in an era when it was felt that school students had to acquire all available knowledge in preparation for life and work, the current reality is that knowledge is continually changing in a rapidly evolving world. Consequently, today's school students need to acquire the skills and aptitudes to locate, interpret and apply information appropriate to resolving real-life problems rather than to learn immutable facts by rote. Of course, a certain amount of subject content is necessary in any syllabus but much less than might have been considered necessary in the pre knowledge society world. The whole emphasis is now on providing learners with a window on their world and the wherewithal to go on re-evaluating and reinterpreting 'the landscape' for the whole of their lives – as circumstances change.

The NSW (Australia) School Certificate programme[1] provides an interesting model that might well provide a basis for reforming the junior cycle in Ireland though, in saying that, it needs to be acknowledged that the NSW School Certificate is itself about to be reformed with the imminent introduction of a national curriculum across all the Australian States and territories. It is understood that this reform will also see state-wide examinations being dispensed with at the conclusion of the junior cycle.

IV. What a common core curriculum might comprehend

The common core curriculum for all students might include the following subjects.

- English-Literacy*
- Irish*
- Maths*
- Science*
- An integrated social studies subject encompassing History, Geography, the Environment, Business and active citizenship.*
- A combined Personal Development Health and Physical Education subject incorporating relationships and sexuality.*
- Applied Technology – incorporating ICT and opportunities to taste a range of technology options before pursuing any one of them in depth.
- A European language – only a taster before making a decision about whether or not to study a particular language in depth.
- A creative arts subject incorporating music, art, craft and design - to provide students with an opportunity to taste these areas before making a decision about which electives to pursue.

[1] http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/

NOTE

a) Subjects marked with an * would need to be allocated something in the vicinity of 260 hours over the course of a three (3) year junior cycle programme or some 350 hours over the course of a four (4) year programme.

b) The remaining subjects might be allocated some 100 hours in either the first year of a three (3) year programme or, maybe, some 150 hours in the event of a four (4) year programme.

c) An important function of a common core curriculum should be to provide all students with a wide range of 'taster courses' – so that they may choose the elective subjects most suited to their aptitudes and interests. Each student should have the option of taking three elective subjects for certification at the conclusion of his/her junior cycle education and taking these elective subjects to a level that facilitates them being studied in the senior cycle.

V. Elective subjects

As well as a core curriculum, national curricula should also be put in place for a variety of elective subjects.

For several of the core curriculum subjects, it would be necessary to develop curricula for elective 'add on' subjects – a range of foreign languages, a range of creative arts subjects (music, photographic and digital media, visual arts, etc), a general business subject with an enterprise orientation, maybe a combined history and geography elective, physical education and sports studies, a range of technology subjects around wood, metal, computing and technical graphics. The possibility of putting in place a more general technology subject might also be considered.

Essentially, all electives should be designed in a way that would give students an opportunity to pursue their interests and aptitudes – having had an opportunity to taste a variety of curricular areas through the core curriculum.

A further consideration in the design and delivery of elective subjects should be a maximisation of the use of modern technology. While the need to use modern

technology in the area of woodwork or metalwork may seem obvious, technology is now very much part of every area of knowledge/study - whether it be music, art, language or business. And while, in say a business subject, a lot of teaching and learning can occur without modern technology, technology is now central to the operation of every business – marketing and promotion, communications, record storage and retrieval, managing customer orders and appointments, etc. Student learning outcomes will be more relevant to the students themselves and the wider society where they (the students) are involved in 'doing things the way they are done in the real world' rather than by just hearing about how these things are done.

All curricula, core or elective, should address the key issues facing humankind and the planet at the beginning of the third millennium: the environment, the need for sustainable development, social cohesion, healthy living – in terms of both mental and physical health, constructive/active citizenship and social equality.

Provision should also be made for schools to develop their own curricula in areas of particular relevance to their students. For example, in a rural area, a school might develop a course around the rural environment or agriculture, while a school in a tourist area might develop a course around tourism, and a school in a seaside location with a strong fishing industry could develop a course on fishing or mariculture – and so on.

In order to ensure that all elective courses are appropriately quality assured, the NCCA would need to develop a clear framework within which 'school-developed' courses would be developed and assessed. Indeed, in the first instance, schools should be required to have all their 'school-developed' courses validated by the NCCA before being offered to students. Then, as schools develop their own courses and have them validated by the NCCA, these courses could be added to the NCCA's menu of approved elective courses.

Also, as individual schools acquire an expertise in course development, the NCCA could quality assure those schools to develop further courses, without requiring them

to have new courses validated by the NCCA. This way, over time, schools could take on greater responsibility for curriculum development – within the confines of an NCCA defined framework.

The current Junior Certificate programme is structured in a way that disempowers students and teachers and a reformed junior cycle programme needs to empower both by giving them more freedom over what is taught, how it is taught and how it is learned – all within a framework that ensures quality assurance at every level.

VI. Need for public confidence in junior cycle programme

Notwithstanding the well merited criticisms of both junior cycle and senior cycle education in Ireland, the reality is that many parents and employers, in particular, place great store in our school system. These and others see the school curriculum as rigorous and demanding and, more importantly, they see the examination system, much as it may be excoriated by educational experts, as fair and incorruptible. Accordingly, they feel confident that a 'B grade' in, say Mathematics, has the same value, in terms of mathematical achievement, irrespective of where it is obtained. Public confidence in an educational system is crucial and, irrespective of the validity of expert criticisms, retention of public confidence in our school system is something that has to be considered very seriously when changing a system that enjoys a high level of public confidence. In a sense, it may be said that while the junior cycle has many critics, there is no unanimity about how it might be reformed.

In an ideal world it would be possible to argue convincingly for a radical reform of the junior cycle but the reality is that we do not enjoy ideal conditions currently and any proposal for reform has to take account of that reality. For example, in times of strong economic growth, it would be possible to resource a much more sweeping reform of the junior cycle than it is going to be possible to resource over the course of the next four (4) to eight (8) years. Ultimately, there is little point in embarking on a reform programme that we are not in a position to resource – as doing so would merely be a recipe for failure.

Notwithstanding current economic circumstances, it should be possible to devise and implement an affordable reform plan for the junior cycle that would, at a minimum, address curricular and assessment issues within a reasonable time frame – say five (5) years. However, to do this will require thorough planning, clear agreement with the teachers' unions to ensure that what is proposed in the plan will be delivered, and certitude about what the State is in a position to resource.

VII. Effects of Junior Certificate examination on junior cycle

One of the most common and persistent criticisms of the junior cycle is the extent to which the Junior Certificate examination dictates so much of what happens during the junior cycle programme. But, in fact, it is the extent to which the examinations interact with the subject syllabi, rather than the examinations themselves, that is most problematic. That being said, there is clearly a case for reforming the way student achievement is assessed at the end of the junior cycle in order to bring about an increased level of engagement between the learner and the teacher and the learner and the subject matter. Assessment reform is also fundamental to moving the whole junior cycle experience away from a preoccupation with learning facts and towards the acquisition of key knowledge, skills, competences and predispositions that will prepare young people to become lifelong learners.

A further consideration here is the embedding of assessment for learning into the whole junior cycle experience. Despite the best efforts of the NCCA and others, over the course of the last decade, the whole notion of assessment for learning has not been adopted to anything like the extent that is necessary. Schools and teachers still tend to see assessment substantially in terms of providing students with grades at the conclusion of topics, terms and school years; they see assessment as a tool to facilitate reporting on achievement rather than as a tool to improve both teaching and learning on an ongoing basis.

Reforming junior cycle is going to require much more work in this area so that all teachers, as a matter of course, assess their students' work with a view to informing

both their own teaching and their students learning. In this regard, it is interesting to note in the DES published recent report on the teaching and learning of English and mathematics in primary schools[2] that, in more than one third of all classrooms visited, assessment practices were deemed to be unsatisfactory with particular reference being made to the failure of teachers to use the outcomes of assessment to inform teaching and learning. Though this research finding is in relation to primary schools, it would seem to confirm anecdotal evidence that the whole matter of assessment in post primary schools also leaves much to be desired.

In devising a new approach to assessing the educational achievements of junior cycle students due consideration must be given to maintaining public confidence in the new system - see above. For that reason, it is recommended that some form of national assessment (testing) system should be retained while also building significant continuous assessment into the whole process for arriving at an overall grade, in a particular subject - at the point a student exits junior cycle.

A national assessment system should not, however, exclusively involve facts based examinations in all or, indeed, in any subject. Rather, the national examinations (tests) should focus on skills and competences. The national examinations system might also be confined to the core curriculum, as is the case in NSW, where there are five (5) mandatory state-wide tests each November in Maths, English-Literacy, Science, Australian History, Geography and Citizenship (one test), and Computing. On the other hand, a case can also be made for putting national examinations in place for elective subjects without requiring all students to take examinations in all elective subjects each year – see below.

The use of state-wide tests would ensure comparability across schools, thus engendering public confidence in the system, while an individual student's 'junior

[2] Incidental Inspection Findings 2010 – A Report on the Teaching and Learning of English and Mathematics in Primary Schools, DES Dublin.

certificate' result in any single subject could comprehend a mix of continuous assessment and the national test result - on say a 50-50 basis.

In terms of maintaining comparability across schools, the results of the national tests could be used by the State Examinations Commission as a basis for allocating grades to schools for all nationally tested subjects. For example, the State Examinations Commission could allocate subject grades to individual schools as follows.

> **Based on the achievement of its Junior Certificate students in the 2016 national Maths/English ... assessment tests, St Senan's Community College, Tower, Inniscarra, Co Cork, is authorised to allocate the following Maths grades to its candidates for the 2016 Junior Certificate.**

- (4) A1s plus or minus a tolerance of one (1)
- (6) A2s plus or minus a tolerance of two (2),
- (8) B1s plus or minus a tolerance of three (3)
- (4) B2s plus or minus a tolerance of one (1)
- (6) C1s plus or minus a tolerance of two (2)
- (8) C2s plus or minus a tolerance of three (3) ... and so on ...

To maintain comparable standards across non-core subjects (electives), individual schools might also be required to have their students sit an examination in one elective subject each year – with the State Examinations Commission selecting the subject to be examined some eight (8) months prior to the state-wide assessments being held. Such an approach would mean that there would also be a transparent and objective mechanism for benchmarking the performance of schools in elective subjects across a specified number of years. In a number of respects, this approach to standardising school achievement in elective subjects would be similar to the approach that the Inspectorate takes to subject inspections in schools, in that the tests would not be on an annual basis but on an intermittent basis – as determined by the State Examinations Commission.

In the case of elective subjects a student's Junior Certificate results could be based exclusively on continuous assessment, other than where a particular subject was being examined through the state-wide examination system in a particular year; in which case a student's Junior Certificate result in that subject should comprehend a continuous assessment element and a state examination result element – as in the case of a core subject.

There is one further significant benefit of state-wide standardised tests at the conclusion of junior cycle education that merits mention. Given the power of modern computer-based statistical packages to manipulate and analyse data, the use of state-wide subject assessments, in conjunction with the results of the standardised testing of primary school students currently being undertaken by the DES in relation to numeracy and literacy (a practice that it is proposed to extend to post primary schools) has the capacity to facilitate the making of anonymous comparisons between schools of a particular kind – particular student intakes, etc. The outcomes of such analysis can be very helpful to schools in that they allow them to compare their learners' achievements with those of similar schools in the course of their school development planning.

VIII. Differentiation of teaching and learning

The differentiation of teaching and the individualisation of learning should be integral to all areas of the curriculum and not just to the core curriculum. While, until relatively recently, this differentiation and individualisation presented teachers with a very difficult challenge, in many respects, the appropriate use of modern information technology to support teaching and learning now makes it possible for schools and teachers to differentiate teaching and to individualise learning to a very significant degree. Consequently, if teaching and learning are going to be reformed in a way that practically acknowledges learner differences (learning styles, aptitudes, concentration levels, literacy and numeracy levels, etc.), all schools must be provided with an appropriate learning management system (LMS) and all teachers must be

upskilled to use this technology efficiently and effectively – both to the benefit of their learners and to enhance professional satisfaction.

The appropriate application of ICT to supporting teaching and learning in schools has one further significant advantage. It has the potential to enable teacher collaboration in the production of programmes and other resource materials to support teaching and learning by facilitating the establishment of communities of practice. Within these communities of practice, teachers of particular subjects, irrespective of their location, can collaborate, via the internet, in the production of reusable teaching and learning objects that can be used in teaching and shared with students as may be appropriate. This kind of development, which has been encouraged and facilitated at third level through the operation of the National Digital Learning Repository (NDLR), can bring significant synergies to both the teaching and learning.

It is widely acknowledged that students learn enthusiastically and actively in practical classes - wood work, cooking, art, and so on. On the other hand, the passivity and disengagement of students in theoretical subjects is a cause for concern. The use of appropriate ICT in the 'theory-orientated' classroom can hugely increase experiential learning, with students learning by doing and, in the process, engaging with the subject matter and the teacher.

With the computer a standard item in most middle class homes and a steady increase in the number of classrooms with computers, it would be easy to assume that ICT has become a standard tool of trade for many teachers. The reality, it seems, is rather different even in schools that have made a considerable investment in ICT. This situation prevails for a number of reasons. Firstly, a substantial proportion of teachers and school leaders lack the skills and awareness to use the technology effectively to support teaching and learning. Secondly, even where schools have invested significantly in ICT, oftentimes the school has not put in place an integrated system capable of supporting teaching and learning effectively and efficiently. Also,

of course the lack of a national LMS that teachers can learn to use relatively easily is a major impediment to teachers using ICT appropriately to support their work. Leaving schools to their own devices means that what happens in an individual school depends very much on the enthusiasm and expertise of individual members of staff, and, if and when the 'expert/enthusiast' moves on, the system falls apart. Another consequence of leaving individual schools to do their own thing is that a teacher transferring to a new school has to learn a new system. If we really want to see teachers using ICT appropriately to support their work, we must provide them with the tools of trade and the training essential to using these tools properly to improve learner outcomes and professional satisfaction; and professional satisfaction is the key to empowering the teaching profession.

Recently, the DES reported research findings[3] showing that, in only 30% of 1,300 primary school classrooms visited, was there evidence of ICT being used to support the teaching of either English or Maths. While this finding is specific to the primary school context, is there any basis for believing that the situation is significantly better in the post primary sector?

IX. Junior cycle – a foundation for further study

A reformed Junior Certificate programme would need to provide a foundation for students progressing to senior cycle studies, vocational education and training (such as apprenticeships and traineeships), further education and work. While it is tempting to think of the Junior Certificate as an independent programme of study, the reality is that students graduating from the junior cycle programme must have acquired the knowledge, skills and competences to progress to particular courses in the senior cycle. For example, those opting for a language or one of the sciences, at senior cycle, must have the knowledge skills and competences to commence such

[3] Incidental Inspection Findings 2010 – A Report on the Teaching and Learning of English and Mathematics in Primary Schools, DES Dublin.

senior cycle programmes; otherwise, their further study and career options will be limited. Again, this reality highlights the need to reform the senior cycle in conjunction with reform the junior cycle.

X. Integration of Transition Year experience into junior cycle

The Transition Year, notwithstanding legitimate criticisms of the extent to which the quality of the programme varies from school to school, has been very successful in the way that it has provided students with access to areas and aspects of learning that would be closed off to them within the exam-orientated straight jacket of both the junior cycle and senior cycle programme. It has also resulted in large numbers of teachers gaining experience in the development of curricula to meet the specific needs of particular groups of students. The weakness in the whole process is that, until relatively recently, there was no consistent approach to quality assuring the curriculum development process.

In the context of reforming the junior cycle, there may now be a good case for establishing a four (4) year junior cycle and making the whole Transition Year experience an integral part of the junior cycle. Such an approach would provide more time and space for students to engage with the curriculum and their teachers and to acquire skills relevant to becoming lifelong learners. It would also mean that students deciding to leave school at the end of their junior cycle would have had a more complete learning experience and would have acquired a qualification at level 4 on the NFQ – as compared with the level 3 qualification obtained by those who leave at the conclusion of their junior cycle currently.

On the other hand, it is acknowledged that there would also be some, but lesser, merit in integrating Transition Year into senior cycle education. Certainly, incorporating Transition Year into either cycle would result in second level education becoming more coherent and continuous, which would seem desirable.

X1. Qualifications/s at conclusion of junior cycle

The NCCA discussion document raised the possibility of junior cycle students having access to more than one qualification and suggested that, for example, special needs students might have access to FETAC qualifications at level 2 while especially talented students might be given access to qualifications at level 4 or above.

While the thinking underpinning this suggestion has merit, in that it highlights the need to ensure that the qualifications suit the needs of the learners, rather than the other way around, it should be possible to accommodate all junior cycle students' requirements for qualifications within the envelope of a single certificate - irrespective of what this certificate might be called.

The current Junior Certificate qualification is awarded at three different levels in Maths, English and Irish and, if necessary, a foundation level could be established in all subjects. To cater to particularly talented students it should be possible to put in place distance learning modules in virtually any subject and it should be possible to put in place a transparent mechanism for assessing and certifying student performance in such modules. Of course, the proper use of ICT, as mentioned above, can substantially individualise learning and this is as relevant to the special needs student as it is to the gifted student.

It is felt that making other qualifications available to junior cycle students, other than on an extracurricular basis, would simply lead to confusion for schools, teachers, students and their parents.

X11. Literacy, numeracy and personal effectiveness skills

A reformed junior cycle programme should prioritise the whole area of numeracy, literacy and personal effectiveness. To do this effectively will involve the integration of the teaching of these core competences across subject teaching within the school but to do this will entail significant teacher CPD and a commitment across the teaching profession to such integration.

Other issues

If Ireland is to produce life-long learners with the inclination and capacity to go on improving their knowledge, skills and competences, in a world where change is ubiquitous and prosperity is dependent on our capacity to compete in the global market place, then junior cycle and indeed senior cycle education must be substantially reformed as a matter of urgency, a monumental challenge given the history and character of Irish post primary education - but a challenge that we have no option but to accept. Ultimately, reforming the junior cycle is no longer an option. The options relate only to how it may be reformed.

The current economic crisis, which is likely to constrain educational funding for some years to come, should not be seen as an absolute barrier to commencing the reform of the junior cycle at this point. It is quite feasible to set out a reform programme, in a sequential series of steps that could be implemented over a period of years – in the context of an overall goal and set of objectives. Such an approach may not be ideal but it would, nevertheless, allow reform to proceed, albeit at a slower pace than might be considered desirable were the economic circumstances more propitious.

The publication of *Innovation and Identity* and the subsequent consultations around the 'big ideas' ventilated in that document have engendered considerable debate within the IVEA. While there is still debate about how the junior cycle might be reformed in detail, there is virtually unanimity about the need for reform that will enhance engagement between the learners and the teachers and between the learners and what is learned. There is also virtual unanimity around the need for the junior cycle to provide all young people with educational experiences that enable them to become lifelong, independent and reflective learners – in areas suited to their aptitudes and aspirations.

At this point it is recommended that the NCCA should, having considered the submissions it has received and the consultations that it has undertaken, set out clear practical proposals for reform of the junior cycle and that, in doing so, it should be mindful of the following considerations.

I. The proposals should be laid out in a series of sequential, self-contained steps so as to allow for a full reform of second level education (junior cycle and senior cycle) being implemented incrementally over a period of years.

II. While the proposals should set out clear long term goals for the system and an overall strategy for achieving these goals, the detailed proposals should relate to the short term – probably the first five (5) years of the project.

III. The proposals should incorporate a mechanism to ensure that there is a rolling review and reform of junior cycle education over time – so that junior cycle education is continuously reformed as the prevailing circumstances change. The system should never again be left unreformed for such a long period of time. For example, In Norway, compulsory education was radically reformed twice between 1994 and 2006.

IV. The proposals should set out very clearly what has to be done by each of the parties involved in implementing the reform - DES, NCCA, individual schools, management bodies, teacher unions, etc.

V. The proposals should specify what resources are essential to implementing each stage of the proposals – ICT and related infrastructure, teacher professional development, design and roll out of new syllabi, design and roll out of a new structure and process to assess and certify learner achievement, design and roll out of web based resources to support every facet of every syllabus, etc. On the latter point, the web provides us with the potential to provide every classroom with a permanently updated and easily accessed resource to support every element of every syllabus. We no longer have to make do with musty, outdated and uninterestingly presented black and white text books. Stimulating material of every kind abound to support the teaching of every subject – video, excerpts from newspapers and other publications, quizzes, 3 D models, working models, etc. We no longer need to tell students about how the digestive system works; they can be shown full working models – accessed via the web.

VI. While appropriate teacher upskilling is essential to reforming junior cycle education, proposals for the provision of such professional development should ensure that student contact time is not lost as a result of teachers participating in these professional development programmes. The model of taking teachers out of their schools for most professional development needs to be reviewed with a view to ensuring that, in so far as is possible, staff development takes place in school, thus maximising the extent to which knowledge, skills and competences acquired through professional development programmes are embedded in the day-to-day work of the school. The use of appropriate information technologies to deliver such professional development programmes should be maximised. For example, the proper use of video conferencing would allow a single expert to deliver a continuous professional development programme into individual schools in real time. The possibilities for delivering in-service without negatively impact on student contact time abound and it is only a matter of choosing the technology most suited to the particular circumstance.

VII. Whether the junior cycle should be a three (3) year or four (4) year programme.

VIII. How the junior cycle articulates with and relates to both primary education and senior cycle education. School education should, in so far as possible, be seamless and every effort should be made to avoid difficult transitions, at which interfaces learners are prone to encounter difficulty.

IX. In so far as is possible, the junior cycle should be reformed in all schools at the same time. Yet, it is appreciated that it might be necessary to pilot the reform in a core group of schools, in the first instance. While a reformed junior cycle programme should provide real opportunities for schools to take responsibility for teaching and learning, all schools would need to follow similar programmes of study in order to ensure that students and teachers could transfer easily from one school to another.

X. For a variety of complex reasons, many of them historical legacies, Irish second level education has seen a gradual disempowerment of teachers and school management. In a sense, it could be said that each side feels that it has little power to influence

school outcomes yet believes that the other side has considerable power to influence such outcomes. In a related context, students also feel alienated from their own education and many disengage from the process relatively early in the junior cycle. Reforming second level education must address this paradoxical conundrum and put in place agreements, structures and processes capable of empowering students, teachers and management. Without such empowerment the reform project will fail.

XI. The need for consultation with the teachers unions in the process of finalising any new junior cycle programme and the need for clear agreement with the unions about what their members will contribute to the implementation of a new junior cycle programme – continuous assessment, assessment for learning, participation in in-service training, using modern technology to support teaching and learning, etc. There is absolutely no point in introducing reforms that are not implemented as intended (as happened to a significant extent with the Junior Certificate) and negotiating with the unions after the new programme has been put in place is not a workable solution. There needs to be clear union 'sign-off' before any new programme is implemented.

Concluding remarks

Notwithstanding widespread and legitimate criticisms of second level education, many, both at home and abroad, have considerable regard for the Irish school system. While there are manifest reasons for reforming junior cycle education, it would be important to do so in a way that clearly builds on best practice internationally rather than to experiment wildly with a system that, despite its defects, has significant strengths.

Any reform of the junior cycle should be evidence based and the evidence should be widely disseminated in advance of firm reform proposals being published. Because Ireland has been slower than most OECD countries in reforming its second level education system, there is an abundance of international best practice to draw on. A clear

documentation of this international best practice might constitute an important next step in progressing the reform agenda.

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