

03 November, 2011 - Speaking notes for the address of Ruairi Quinn, T.D Minister for Education and Skills to the meeting of the NCCA Council

Check Against Delivery

- I am very pleased to be able to address the Council. It gives me the opportunity to thank you for your important work in the development of a revised framework for junior cycle, and for the innovative proposals you have put forward for the future direction of the system.
- The key issues the Council was asked to address in its review of junior cycle were curriculum overload, rote learning, providing for greater creativity and innovation, strengthening of key skills, providing for more relevant and flexible forms of assessment, and ensuring that the needs of those currently least served by the system are better addressed. I believe that the proposals put forward by the Council are designed to address these issues.
- On the issue of curriculum overload, I am pleased to see the plans to address this both through putting a cap on the number of subjects which can be taken for qualification purposes, and through a reduction in the content of syllabuses. One of the criticisms of our system has been the emphasis on recall rather than real understanding and competence. The reforms will make space for embedding of key skills, and for active learning. Nevertheless, I have some concerns as to the challenges which lie ahead in this area – what it will mean for timetabling and delivery in schools, how the risk of dumbing down will be avoided, how the time demands which are an essential part of strengthening literacy and numeracy will be met, and whether too large a gap will be created between the learning demands of junior cycle and those of senior cycle. I believe these issues must be carefully considered and grappled with as discussions on implementation proceed, and as the syllabus committees review each area of learning.
- I have agreed that a mandatory cap on the number of subjects to be taken for examination purposes will not apply until the examination of 2017, but I have also encouraged schools to move in this direction in the interim as soon as they can. The cap was proposed for good reason -- to address the concerns about the backwash effect of the examinations, to make time and space for embedding of key skills, active learning and broadly based assessment, and to ensure that a focus on rote content is not at the expense of the acquisition of the critical skills and competences that students need for their future learning throughout life. I know the Council has stressed the importance of putting the focus on the process of learning, rather than on the examinations. The Junior Certificate is not a final examination for the vast majority of students, and it needs to become more flexible and to reclaim its own identity as a critical stage in the learning process for adolescents.
- I do not wish to underplay the difficulties which may arise in implementing this approach. However, if we need an examination to ensure that students are motivated and disciplined, we will have failed in the reforms. One of the successes of Transition Year was that it freed up students from the stress of

examinations, and allowed the opportunity for transformative learning to take place.

- I welcome the fact that the existing range of subject options is being retained, with the added opportunity for school-based innovation through the option of short courses which may count for up to 25% of the qualification. I am aware of some of the concerns which have been highlighted about inter-school equity. However, the Transition Year Programme has demonstrated admirably that schools have the capacity to develop their own innovative programmes, and there are many examples of excellent modules which have been developed through schools working in partnership with other organisations.
- I welcome the embedding of key skills across the subjects in junior cycle -- Managing Myself, Staying Well, Communications, Being Creative, Working with Others and Managing Information and Thinking.
- In that context, I attach critical importance to strengthening literacy and numeracy and embedding ICT as a tool which is actively used in all classrooms. You will be aware that the PISA 2009 digital reading assessment shows Ireland scoring broadly at the OECD average on the composite reading scale, although having fewer lower achievers. However, while the proportion of Irish students at the highest levels - Levels 4, 5 and 6 - is at the OECD average, countries such as Australia, Korea and New Zealand having a much greater proportion of students scoring at the highest levels.
- The Junior Cycle reforms, allied with the opportunity for short courses and development of portfolios creates new opportunities to ensure that ICT is embedded in the teaching and learning of all subjects, and that no student leaves school without the skills for using digital media for work, learning, social interaction and entertainment.
- On assessment, I welcome the emphasis on the dialogue between student and teacher in the learning process, and the increased role of the class teacher both in assessment of learning and assessment for learning. Unless the examination changes, nothing else will. That is why I am determined that assessment reform must be an integral part of the reforms, if we are to make real change in teaching and learning and in the student experience. I fully accept the need for a deliberate approach to the issue of measuring learning. The new proposals strike a balance in this regard. 60% of the marks are to be awarded for written examination externally assessed by the SEC. 40% will be available for portfolio work to be assessed by the class teacher, supported by school based moderation and SEC moderation.
- In short courses, which will be limited to a maximum of 25% of the award, there will be school based assessment only.
- There has been considerable concern in recent years about rote learning, and the examination system has been widely criticised as focussing on recall rather than on other critical skills. The assessment reforms in the Junior

Certificate must be designed to address these issues, with students being asked to demonstrate their understanding and competences.

- However, assessment alone cannot address this issue, it will take a concerted effort from all involved in education and a changed mindset to ensure that the proposed reforms have the desired effects. We must think of students' futures and their capacity to be able to apply their learning in various contexts throughout their lives, rather than learning things off by heart for an examination. Short term recall without real understanding will ill serve their future needs. Great care will also need to be taken to ensure that the portfolio work is designed to promote important key skills and innovation, and that the learning objectives are not defeated by an overly formulaic or rehearsed approach.

I am aware of the concerns which have been highlighted regarding teachers being advocates for their students, and the changed relationship which would occur were they to adopt a formal assessment role for qualifications purposes. Of course teachers have an advocacy role but they also have a professional assessment role which is a normal part of the teaching and learning process. The tensions inherent in these roles are grappled with by teachers throughout the EU, and entirely externally based assessment in lower secondary education context is a rarity.

- I am also aware the History and Geography teachers have shown some disquiet about their subjects under the new dispensation, and I note the geographical and historical awareness skills have been included in the 24 statements of essential learning. That is to say that these skills will be required in order to achieve the required outcomes.
- Good and enthusiastic teachers in History and Geography have the opportunity to inspire a real interest in their subject and so ensure that pupils will want to sit the exam
- Overall, I am in favour of leaving the decisions on what is offered at the discretion of the school, and of students having as broad a range of options to choose from as possible.
- I welcome the Level 2 award proposed for those students with special needs for whom a Level 3 may not be suitable.
- I know that the State Examinations Commission is not in a position to assume the administration of this, and future Leaving Certificate reforms will require the addition of second assessment components.
- The Qualifications and Quality Authority of Ireland (the name of the amalgamated body for NQAI, HETAC and FETAC) has indicated a willingness in principle to certify at this level, but detailed discussions will have to take place on the overall processes and the staffing and resource issues. FETAC

already certifies a wide range of awards at Levels 1-6 in the framework, including for special needs.

- These are fundamental changes for teachers and schools, and indeed the State Examinations Commission, and there is a considerable level of detail which can only be worked out in dialogue between my Department officials and the partners in education.
- I want to stress that teachers and schools will be supported in making these changes by investment in professional development, particularly in relation to the new roles of assessment and moderation.
- We are at an important turning point. I know that the direction of reforms proposed has widespread acceptance, and that you all recognise the need for change and the opportunities it will present for a more stimulating learning experience for our students. It will also be about ensuring that students take more responsibility for their learning, and are more actively engaged.
- I know that teachers and schools are operating in a very difficult environment, and yet, I am asking for your co-operation in implementing this important change.
- You will be supported in this work through the professional development service for teachers, and care will be taken to move at a pace the system can sustain.
- I am asking my officials to begin the discussions on implementation with the partners in education, so that the necessary planning and development work can begin. Side by side with this, I will also put the necessary arrangements in place to begin the assessment and consideration of the resource implications of the proposals. These will, of course, fall to be considered in the normal way by Government in the context of the estimates and budgetary processes.
- I would like to take this opportunity to thank the staff and the board of the NCCA, and those involved in its various committees, for their contribution to these ground breaking proposals.
- I appreciate that you have engaged in the discussions in an open-minded way, have kept the proposals confidential throughout the process, and have put learners and their needs centre stage in your deliberations.
- I congratulate you for your work, and I look forward to beginning the dialogue and development work to implement the reforms.

Thank you all