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Transitions Within the School System

Article by Áine Hyland for *Education Matters* 2018.

(Draft 3rd September 2018).

The Irish school system is not seamless. From the time children enter pre-school at the age of three until they complete their formal education, they experience a number of transitions – some more visible and challenging than others. The official designation of the various "levels and sectors" of education – pre-primary, primary, junior cycle second-level, senior cycle second-level, further education and higher education - is not unique to Ireland. A formal classification of different levels and sectors (ISCED 0, 1, 2 etc) has been used by the OECD and the European Commission in recent decades in their publications of international data and statistics.

Ireland was one of the first countries in the western world to have a state-funded system of basic education for all - the national school system founded by Lord Stanley in 1831. Higher education in a university setting has existed for many hundreds of years, but until recently, such education was only for the privileged few – mostly men. A small number of "Intermediate Schools" (intermediate between primary and university) to prepare the elite for university, existed from late medieval times but state aid was not available for intermediate schools to any significant extent until the latter half of the nineteenth century. And it was not until the mid-twentieth century that "free" second level education became available for all. From a historic perspective, schooling could not be described as "joined-up" until very recently.

Today, in Ireland, almost all young people begin their schooling at the age of three in one of the newly funded ECCE centres. Having spent two years there, they graduate to a separate national (primary) school where they spend eight years. They then move to a second-level school where they spend five or six years, the first three in junior cycle and the second two or three years in senior cycle. At the age of 18, most young people continue with their education, either in a further or higher education institution, for a further one to six years, sometimes having a further transition or transitions during this period. Therefore, the average young person is likely to attend at least four different school settings during their formal education. For some the transition from one level to another is painless – even exciting. But for others it can be challenging and stressful – resulting in a small number of early school leavers.

Given the way in which the structure of schooling developed, it is not surprising that there was little if any continuity in the past between pupils' learning experiences at the various levels. The primary school curriculum was initially devised to provide a minimum level of numeracy and literacy for a population whose schooling would end at 12 or 13 years of age. The secondary school curriculum was drawn up to prepare the elite for university education – with little or no reference to the national school curriculum. Universities have always jealously guarded their autonomy and academic freedom, and their curriculum traditionally reflected the academic interests of their individual professors. In recent decades efforts have

been and continue to be made in most countries to align the curriculum of pre-primary, primary, second-level and higher education, with compromises being made by all sectors, and Ireland is no exception to this trend. In its recent documentation, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment has indicated its commitment to ensuring that there will be continuity in the learning experience of young people through all levels of their school life.

In another article in this publication, the issue of the transition into and out of the primary school is addressed. In this article, the focus will be on the transition between junior and senior cycle and between second level and higher education.

Recent reforms of junior cycle curriculum reflect the approach which has underpinned the primary curriculum since the early 1970s – an approach which emphasises guided discovery and active learning. The Junior Cycle framework which was published by the NCCA in 2011 (Innovation and Identity) focused attention on the "school as the site of innovation, and on teachers and school leaders as the agents of any change process". What students would learn was described in 24 statements of learning and eight key skills including literacy and numeracy. A revised assessment structure was introduced which would include classroom-based assessment. After a series of delays, the revised junior cycle curriculum is finally being implemented, and the year 2018 saw the first cohort of Junior Cycle students sitting the new Junior Cert examination which included a limited amount of school-based assessments.

The Senior Cycle curriculum is at the early stages of revision and reform and until reform is agreed and implemented there will be some discontinuity between junior and senior cycle curriculum. The Leaving Certificate is a high-stakes examination, given that it is the only 'student performance indicator' used for entry to most third level courses. Consequently, at senior cycle assessment is the tail that wags the curriculum dog. Regardless of what skills the Leaving Certificate syllabi emphasise, such skills are unlikely to be prioritised by teachers or students, unless they are assessed for certification purposes. Therefore the Leaving Certificate examination will effectively determine what teachers teach and students learn at senior cycle level for the foreseeable future.

Employers and third level academics have for many years now, been critical of the over-emphasis in the Leaving Certificate on lower order skills such as knowledge and regurgitation of facts, to the detriment of higher order skills such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation. An analysis of current Leaving Cert. syllabi carried out some years ago by this author, indicated that in many subjects, higher order thinking and the skills of application, analysis, critical engagement, synthesis and evaluation, are indeed emphasised in the syllabi of most Leaving Cert subjects. However, some of these skills are not being assessed, because the assessment tools are for the most part, limited to end of cycle written examination. A study in 2014 carried out on behalf of the State Examinations Commission by Baird et al[1] on "Predictability in the Irish Leaving Certificate" recommended that more emphasis be placed on higher order thinking skills in the examinations, in keeping with international trends in assessment. This point was also made in a recent study (2018) by Denise Burns et al which

[1] J. Baird; T.N. Hopfenbeck; J. Elwood, D. Caro; and A. Ahmed. 2014, "Predictability in the Irish Leaving Certificate" OUCEA report 14/1.

quoted students as confirming that memorisation and rote learning dominated their preparation for the Leaving Cert. One student referred to preparing an "essay pool" of 30 essays on different topics for the English paper, and a Geography student said that they did "100 essays in January and learned them off"[2]. Similar findings emerged from an analysis by Cullinane and Liston of Leaving Cert Biology papers over a ten-year period from 1999 to 2008[3]. Their study concluded that "the examination predominantly includes questions that do not promote higher levels of thinking" and that "the majority of the marks were allocated to the lower objectives of (Bloom's) taxonomy, suggesting that students can rely on rote learning to succeed when undertaking the biology examination".

In the view of this author, some actions could be taken to ensure greater congruence between the desired outcomes of the Leaving Cert. syllabi and their assessment. The existing examination system could be supplemented with a greater variety of modes and techniques of assessment to ensure closer alignment between the syllabi and the examinations, and to move towards a situation that the skills which have been identified as necessary for lifelong learning, such as analytic reasoning, critical thinking, the ability to generate fresh ideas, the practical application of theory etc., will be recognised and rewarded by the assessment system. Supplemental modes of assessment could include projects, portfolios and other assignments completed in supervised but non-examination conditions. Essays and open book questions answered in supervised classroom conditions and externally marked, could also be considered. Instead of requiring students to sit one written examination at the end of the final year, two or more sittings at different points throughout the two-year senior cycle could be an option. New and different forms of assessment might also reduce the current reliance on pen and paper tests and provide for greater use of new technologies, which might include online submission of essays (written under supervision) and computer-marked multiple-choice questions.

It has been noted that even though the total number of students taking the Leaving Certificate increased somewhat this year, the numbers applying for third level places fell. While the reasons for this are not yet clear, it may well be that students are beginning to embrace different pathways to employment other than spending three or four years in the third level sector.

It has been argued that too many students are attending third level education in Ireland. Currently, more than 60% of the relevant age cohort make the transition from second level to third level. This is one of the highest rates in the EU. By contrast, Ireland has one of the lowest rates of participation in apprenticeships – fewer than 2 to 3% of school leavers in recent years, probably the lowest in the EU. Only 1% of apprentices are female – since until last year almost all apprenticeships were in male-dominated craft apprenticeships such as construction, electrical, plumbing and carpentry. Earlier this year, the Minister for Education

[2]Katherine Donnelly, "Leaving Cert 'memory test' doesn't challenge students' in the *Irish Independent* , 13th August 2018

[3] Alison Cullinane and Maeve Liston "Review of the Leaving Certificate Biology examination papers (1999-2008) using Bloom's taxonomy – an investigation of the cognitive demands of the examination" in *Irish Educational Studies,* Vol. 35, Number 3, Sep. 2016.

and Skills, Richard Bruton, announced that the government is committed to increasing the numbers of young people entering apprenticeships, and he pledged to more than double enrolments in what he referred to as "earn and learn" opportunities by 2020. He announced 26 new apprenticeship programmes, varying in duration from two to four years and culminating in awards from Level 5 to Level 10, in areas such as accounting, financial services, cybersecurity, animation, systems engineering etc. A sum of €122 million has been allocated in the current year for apprenticeship programmes.

Given that the number of apprenticeships has been so low in Ireland, an increase in the number makes sense. However, the cynic might well ask whether this is a covert way by government of getting employers to contribute financially to the education of the future workforce. The cutbacks in government funding for higher education have been a source of considerable concern in recent years, with HEIs pointing out that their enrolments have almost doubled in the past decade while government funding fell by almost one-third. The era of "doing more with less" has come to an end as there is no longer any slack in the higher education system, if there ever was!

And so as we move into the third decade of the 21st century, the transition from second to third level and into the labour force is becoming more varied. Transfer is no longer linear. There are many more pathways to employment from second level education than there were a few decades ago. With the expansion of further education and the growth in apprenticeships it is likely that the proportion of school leavers entering higher education directly from school will fall and the numbers entering via further education or apprenticeships will grow. In parallel with this development, there is likely to be an increase in lifelong learning opportunities and in the number of mature students re-entering education with a view to re-skilling or expanding the skills and knowledge they acquired earlier in life – a new and additional transition?