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Does our Current Educational System provide opportunities for Success for Everybody ?

Paper submitted by Professor Áine Hyland, Vice-President, University College Cork to the TUI Congress Journal 2002.

Ireland was a relative latecomer to free second level education for all. Whereas most Western European countries introduced mass second level schooling soon after the Second World War, it was 1967 before Donncha O'Malley, the then Minister for Education, introduced free second level education in Ireland. In terms of enrolment statistics, the scheme was a great success. Within a decade, enrolment in second level schools had doubled and by the late 1990s the numbers had trebled. By the end of the 20th century, 97% of the relevant cohort were completing junior cycle (up from 44% in the mid 1960s) and over 80% sat a Leaving Certificate (up from about 20%). However, concern has been expressed in recent years that the numbers taking Leaving Certificate have remained at around 83% during the past decade despite a plethora of government interventions and supports for those at risk of early school leaving.

The numbers completing senior cycle have remained constant during the past decade in spite of fairly radical reform of the senior cycle curriculum. The introduction of the Leaving Certificate Applied in the mid 1990s has been a particularly effective intervention and it has been widely recognised as providing a suitable alternative programme for pupils who had failed to achieve under the established Leaving Certificate programme. The modular approach of the LCA and its emphasis on task-based and ongoing assessment has provided an incentive for many young people to remain in school where they might previously have dropped out because of their perceived irrelevance of the Leaving Certificate programme. However, some requirements of the LCA may well be an obstacle to progress for some young people - even though those requirements were no doubt initially intended as incentives. For example, the 90% attendance requirement can be an insurmountable obstacle for some - and it may contribute to drop-out rather than retention.

For some young people, especially young males in the 15 to 18 age-group, the schooling structures which have become the norm for this age-group are arguably outmoded. To quote from a recent publication:

> Schools in their present form were designed for the industrial age. They have been remarkably stable in their structure over the last hundred years and most changes made have been relatively superficial… Schools are attempting to provide education for the changing needs of the 21st century in structures designed for the greater rigidity of the 19th century. More flexibility is required[1].

It is quite obvious that for many young people, the requirements of the current schooling models are incompatible with their lifestyles or their natural instincts. The requirement to sit passively at a desk for six or seven hours a day for 167 days of the year goes against the natural instinct of young men to be engaged in physical activity. There is often no outlet in schools for the pent-up energy of 15 to 18 year olds and it is not surprising that for some, this energy results in outbursts of violence against classmates or teachers. For those who are uninterested in intellectual pursuits, school can be intensely boring, especially if one's efforts invariably result in failure. It is likely to be more damaging in the long run to require such people to remain in school where they have no positive experiences than to turn a blind eye to their absenteeism or disappearance. It is now widely accepted that pupils' experiences in

[1] J. Ireson & S. Hallam *Ability Grouping in Education,* London: Paul Chapman Publishing 2001

their school years have a lasting impact on their lives. Negative attitudes to learning inculcated during the school years can impact on each individual's motivation to continue or return to education later in life[2].

The schooling system needs to be more flexible. While one is not necessarily advocating a return to the one-day or two-day school which was a feature of the vocational school system in Dublin, Cork and Limerick in the 1940s and 1950s, the system needs to re-visit the notion of part-time schooling. Part-time schooling would be better than no schooling for the 18% who have currently left school before the Leaving Cert. Individual schools also need to be more flexible in terms of opening hours, timetabling and attendance. Part-time working may have to be accommodated in certain situations. Modularisation could well be one option with a concomitant flexibility in the assessment and certification system.

The recently launched National Qualifications Framework provides an ideal opportunity for Ireland to take the lead in this area[3]. The idea of a unified and comprehensive awards framework, including second level state certificates and all awards at further and higher education levels, offers an unprecedented opportunity for learners to achieve a truly seamless transition from one level of learning to the next, and to gain credit for learning undertaken in a wide range of contexts and modes[4]. The key principles articulated in the document represent a strong commitment to developing a comprehensive and coherent qualifications framework for Ireland.

The document states that *equality* is one of the key principles underpinning the development of the framework. It seems that what is meant by *equality*, however, is merely confined to notions of *equality of access*. There is a lack of recognition that the debate on educational inequality and disadvantage has advanced considerably in recent years, and now focuses more explicitly on equality of *participation* and of *benefit/outcomes.* The Authority needs to take account of research and policy in this area, and to link closely with the National Educational Disadvantage Committee as its work develops.

In espousing the notion of *inclusiveness,* the Authority needs to recognise that the inclusion of some groups of learners presents a considerable challenge. Many people have felt alienated from existing awards systems for a range of different reasons. Achieving "ownership", "interaction" and "collaboration" among the excluded groups is essential for the success of the framework, as stated in the document. The issue of improving the lifelong learning experiences of people from disadvantaged communities is a matter for the Authority, as well as for providers. The major role of the Authority in this context is to provide leadership and strategic direction for improving the inclusiveness of the system.

The document states that "a system of credit accumulation and transfer could be a vital element in developing a national framework of qualifications". It is the experience of many schools that some learners, even those in "mainstream" schooling would be better served by a more flexible modular approach to credit accumulation than by existing arrangements for state certification in junior and senior cycle. A number of comments might be made in this regard:

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[2] Ibid.

[3] National Qualifiactions Authority of Ireland *Towards a National Framework of Qualifications - a Discussion Document* Dublin: 2001

[4] I am indebted to Cynthia Deane, former Chief Executive of the National Council for Vocational Awards and currently a consultant to the *Bridging the Gap* project, University College Cork, for the ideas contained in these paragraphs. A fuller response by the *Bridging the Gap* project to the Discussion Paper of the National Qualifications Authority can be found on the NQA Website.

- The concept of "early school leaving" needs close examination and re-definition. Learners who do not achieve state certification, but who progress to apprenticeship, employment or to programmes provided under Youthreach, for example, have opted in most cases for a more personally relevant learning path. They should not automatically be classified as "dropouts" or "failures" within the system. Rather, the qualifications framework should be designed so that they can gain recognition for the learning they have achieved, accumulating credits from a number of sources as they progress through different parts of the system.

- The persistent problem of non-completion of Leaving Certificate by a significant proportion of the age cohort should be seen as a failure of the system to respond to the needs of learners, rather than as a failure on the learners' part. There is an opportunity, with the development of a comprehensive qualifications framework, to redefine "completion" in terms of achievement of an appropriate level of award within the framework. This would enable a far greater proportion of the cohort to attain the criteria for completion of upper secondary or equivalent, in international comparative terms.

- With the creation of a truly inclusive framework, it is possible to visualise a situation where a learner could combine credits from learning units undertaken as part of full-time or part-time school experience at both junior and senior cycle, for example JCSP, TYP, LCVP, LCA, traditional leaving certificate. They could also gain credits in out-of-school centres and Youthreach programmes; in employment; in the home; through independent learning, and as part of youth, adult or community education programmes. Creativity, imagination and flexibility are needed if such a framework is to become a reality. The benefits for learners for disadvantaged learners will be significant.

As the experience of the National Council for Vocational Awards (now FETAC) has shown over the years, learners are encouraged by success when there are modular credit-based programmes leading to meaningful national certification. They are enabled to learn at their own pace and to present for assessment and certification as and when they are ready. This is particularly important for older learners who may have suffered the effects of disadvantage at an earlier stage in their lives.

It is important not to over-distinguish between formal and other learning. All learning is worthwhile if it is based on sound quality criteria. Equally, a focus on the outcomes of learning should not overshadow attention to process, which is especially critical in encouraging marginalised members of society to become lifelong learners.