

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM OIDEACHAS AGUS SCILEANNA

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Dé Máirt, 6 Márta 2018

Tuesday, 6 March 2018

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 4 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 4 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Thomas Byrne,	Maria Byrne.
Kathleen Funchion,	
Catherine Martin,	
Tony McLoughlin,	
Jan O'Sullivan.	

Teachta / Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: I call the meeting to order and remind members to turn off their mobile phones. Apologies have been received from Senators Gallagher and Ruane.

The joint committee went into private session at 4.11 p.m. and resumed in public session at 4.40 p.m.

State Examinations: Discussion

Chairman: I remind members and delegates to turn off their mobile phones or switch them to flight mode, as they interfere with the sound system and make it difficult for the parliamentary reporters to report the proceedings of the meeting. Television coverage and web streaming are also adversely affected.

The purpose in this part of the meeting is to engage with a number of stakeholders on the topic of continuous assessment for State examinations. On behalf of the joint committee, I welcome Ms Moira Leydon, assistant general secretary of the ASTI; Ms Joanne Irwin, president of the TUI; Mr Oisín Hassan, vice president for academic affairs, USI; Mr. Geoff Browne, president of the national parents' council post-primary, and Mr. Lewis Purser, director of academic affairs, Irish Universities Association.

I communicate the apologies of Deputies Thomas Byrne and Catherine Martin who had to leave the meeting to participate in the work being done in the Chamber. The Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Deputy Josepha Madigan, and Senators Robbie Gallagher and Lynn Ruane also send their apologies.

I will invite the delegates to make brief opening statements that should be no longer than three minutes and which will be followed by engagement with members. I thank the delegates for their submissions which will be published on the committee's website after the meeting.

By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the Chairman to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or an entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Any opening statement submitted to the committee will be published on its website after the meeting, together with the submissions forwarded to the committee secretariat.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I call on Ms Leydon to make her opening statement.

Ms Moira Leydon: Go raibh maith agat, a chomhghleacaí. I fully understand members are busy; after all, this is their workplace.

The ASTI appreciates the opportunity to be present. It welcomes the space the meeting affords the teaching profession to communicate its views to legislators. That is something we value and we would like to think it will be sustained into the future. It is not something every other organisation enjoys. It is very important that we communicate that message. I know that the committee has received our submission, but members may not have had an opportunity to read it in detail. The two core messages are that there must be more richness in our assessment and that there must be a greater spread of the assessment load across the school year, but we must also ensure the State examinations are assessed by the State Examinations Commission. That is the only way we can have the quality assurance and control the system has enjoyed to date. They are the two key messages in our submission.

In the time available to me I wish to make two or three points. This discussion is actually timely because 2018 marks the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the commission on the points system which, as members know, was a seminal event in looking at assessment and examinations in our system. The commission made a number of recommendations, two of which are germane to our discussion. First, it strongly argued for the retention of external assessment for the leaving certificate examinations but equally strongly recommended that more diverse modes of assessment be introduced to supplement the written examinations. Since the publication of the report in 2001, all of the reviews of the subject and programmes that have taken place have heeded that recommendation. For example, in the case of Irish and modern foreign languages, there are oral and aural examinations which form part of the overall mark in the junior and leaving certificate examinations. There is project work in the case of history and geography. In the case of home economics, students get to demonstrate that they can cook as part of the examination. In the practical subjects of music, art, technology and science there are practical and performance tasks to be performed. The practical assessment for leaving certificate science subjects will come on stream. Therefore, in the case of practical work which is spread over time, there is continuous assessment under the examination system. When the assessment is for the purposes of the State examinations, it is not conducted by the teacher but by the State Examinations Commission. That system has merit and stability, but more to the point and most important from the point of view of education, there is quality control. It is objective, fair and transparent.

State examinations are meant to tell society a number of things, core among which is that they tell the student and his or her family how he or she has progressed in his or her learning, but they also tell society how individuals and the system as a whole are progressing. The view of the ASTI has always been, since time immemorial, that because of the role played by the State examinations, the assessment must remain located in the State Examinations Commission.

By international standards, we have a high performing education system. The last PISA, programme for international student assessment, report found that of the 37 OECD countries, Ireland was third in literacy levels, which is really amazing when we are being compared with countries that have hundreds of times the population of Ireland. Ireland was 13th in the case of science and mathematics. By international evidence, we have a high performing education system with good quality control.

Chairman: I call Ms Irwin, president of the Teachers' Union of Ireland.

Ms Joanne Irwin: The TUI welcomes the opportunity to address the joint committee on the issue of continuous assessment for State examinations. Assessment in schools takes three forms: formative, which takes place in schools every day, for example, in the marking of homework, copies, etc; the summative assessment, which is used to measure the breadth and depth

of knowledge acquired, for example, in the State examinations at the end of the year; and diagnostic testing to measure the capacity of a student to carry out tasks, for example, aptitude or special needs testing. Each of these forms of assessment takes place frequently in schools. By its nature, formative assessment is continuous.

It should be noted that in the State examinations additional forms of assessment, as Ms Leydon said, take place in many subjects in the leaving certificate examinations. They are embedded in the new revised junior cycle programme. For example, oral and practical tests take place in many language and practical subjects. Of the 32 curricular subjects in the leaving certificate programme, 17 have a mixture of assessment components, between the terminal examination and the practicals, the orals, the aural and course work. All of the recently revised junior cycle subject specifications have a second assessment component which is assessed by the State Examinations Commission. They enable students to demonstrate wider abilities than could be shown in a written examination alone. We are not fully through that procedure yet and all the subjects are not on stream but as that happens, parents and students will see that a lot more.

The suggestion is sometimes made that continuous assessment reduces student stress. However, the Teachers' Union of Ireland, TUI, believes that there is a real risk that continuous assessment would simply lead to students experiencing continuous stress with no breaks between assessments. Furthermore, it should be noted that an excess of assessments can infringe on time to learn and explore topics of interest.

There are potentially significant risks arising from the use of continuous assessment in the State examinations. These include the reputational risk to the existing, widely respected system, to which Ms Leydon has referred, risk to student contact time and the risk of over-assessment.

It is also worth noting that the Department for Education in England has recently moved away from continuous assessment for the purposes of the lower secondary education, the general certificate of secondary education, GCSE. This move was largely motivated by fears about a lack of rigour in the assessments and also because continuous assessment can cause difficulties if students move school during the junior cycle and it also causes difficulty for adult learners who return to do the junior cycle or the leaving certificate on a part-time basis.

Teachers already operate a system that is superior, we believe, than continuous assessment and that is formative assessment. Formative assessment is where students are given feedback on a daily basis so they can learn from that as opposed to continuous assessment where they hand up a piece of work and they do not get feedback on that piece of work. It is also embedded in the new junior cycle, as I have said.

The structure and the content of courses designed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA, typically take full account of the variety of assessment modes that are available and of the need to equip students for a world that is ever-changing.

The TUI asks the committee to note that any ill-advised introduction of a continuous assessment could undermine public trust in both the junior cycle, which we are currently just halfway through and the leaving certificate. This would have adverse implications on the approximately 100-----

Chairman: I ask Ms Irwin to conclude. I must divide the time.

Ms Joanne Irwin: In conclusion, TUI believes that any move towards continuous assessment system could negatively affect the quality and the reputation of the Irish public education

system.

Chairman: I call Mr. Oisín Hassan, vice president for academic affairs in the Union of Students Ireland, USI.

Mr. Oisín Hassan: On behalf of the Union of Students in Ireland, USI, I thank the committee and the Chair for inviting us today. The USI welcomes the joint committee's investigation of the potential use of the continuous assessment model in State examinations. USI has worked for many years on issues of quality and enhancement of education, primarily at third level, but has often taken a view of the need for wider educational reform. USI is broadly supportive of the efforts at third level and especially at higher education in regard to continuous assessment, recognising and championing the need to develop a model of student partnership and we are eager to see efforts expand beyond the post-secondary sector.

The committee should be aware that USI has largely approached this submission from the view of third level and specifically higher education, and throughout the submission we have attempted to highlight the significant need for a more joined up approach to educational reform in Ireland. Each phase - primary, lower and upper secondary and tertiary - cannot continue to be reformed in silos. Further, consultation and input from students, staff and relevant organisations, and the public, should be facilitated in a more informative and collaborative way if we are to truly understand continuous assessment and the need for it.

The topic of continuous assessment across State examination presents an opportunity to do that. I draw the committee's attention to the three key priorities that we listed in the overview, namely, that the committee should formulate a clear view of the value of continuous assessment, rather than view it as an international pressure; that the committee should embrace the opportunity to consult on this issue in a way that is inclusive of students, parents, and practitioners; and that the committee should utilise this opportunity to focus on transition from one phase of education to another, with continuous assessment as a key enabler to a successful transition, retention and student success.

In conclusion, I want to reiterate something in the submission, namely, that the senior cycle review currently being undertaken by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and its relationship to this work needs to be carefully considered. I also want to encourage the committee to involve the Irish Second-Level Students' Union, ISSU, in this work. USI and ISSU enjoy a strong partnership and that represents a key opportunity to look at how that holistic and joined up approach to educational reform can be undertaken.

Chairman: We invited representatives from the secondary school students' union but they declined to come in. They did not respond but we asked them. I call Mr. Browne, president of the National Parents' Council post-primary.

Mr. Geoff Browne: On behalf of the National Parents' Council, we are grateful to the joint committee for the opportunity to make this submission on behalf of students attending post-primary schools in Ireland and also their parents.

I will refer to the National Parents' Council post-primary, as the NPCpp. NPCpp has previously engaged with this joint committee on related matters and while we acknowledge that the leaving certificate examinations have served our young people well to date, we advocate review and reform of the leaving certificate and the examination process currently in place for same. We welcome efforts to evaluate and adjust current practices and examination methods within

the education system to better reflect the talents and achievements of students and to better prepare them for further education and their future lives and careers.

While fully accepting that some method is required to assess the knowledge that students gain through their post-primary education, the current system is primarily based on one-off testing, namely, the junior and leaving certificate examinations. This reflects more as a memory test mostly suited to rote learning rather than genuinely assessing a student's learning, knowledge, ability or acumen for a subject.

Indeed, many studies and informed discussions suggest that ongoing assessment has very significant value towards students' learning and engagement while also being a better tool to establish the true depth of a student's knowledge.

Through nurturing a student's strengths and interests our education system can create self-motivated thinkers who learn and understand the benefits of discovery through research and evaluation. Assessment methods should enable and examine a student's true depth of knowledge, overall ability and critical thinking on an ongoing basis.

NPCpp is also concerned that the current system of evaluation maximises stress on students who often memorise to regurgitate in a moment and then forget. It does little for many towards assisting their learning or retained knowledge. Once-off examination can be a brutal instrument undertaken at a particularly stressful time in most children's lives and does not sufficiently assess a student's overall performance and learning during his or her time at school.

Indeed, from the calls received from parents and sometimes students themselves, it would appear that examination anxiety is a very common reality in teenagers and to some students and their parents can be quite devastating. This was also highlighted to us in calls to the helpline we had in place last summer.

Significant stress in teenage students definitely occurs as a result of the anxiety caused by the current method of assessment and the pressurised study regime that derives from it. Educational or work opportunities associated with the outcome of the examination, the students' self-esteem with regards to their grades and judgments from friends, family and teachers in relation to their performance are among the main causes of stress in teenagers reported to us. Comparisons to friends and siblings based on once-off examination results are also feared. Let us not forget that the stress the students are under can and does reflect on their families as well.

NPCpp acknowledges that some changes have already been made and that some subjects already utilise forms of continuous assessment and project works and believes that, where this is the case, there is widespread acceptance of the benefits towards fairness and better evaluation.

NPCpp affirms that our curriculum and method of assessment should be evaluated on an ongoing basis to ensure that our education system is fit for purpose and delivering fairly. Changes, when made in subjects, curriculum and assessment methods, etc., need to be regularly reviewed to ensure that they actually deliver the benefits as envisaged and will require constant updating to retain relevance in today's rapidly changing world and to ensure that Ireland remains to the fore in quality education.

In summary, NPCpp believes that the current examination method is not fully serving our children to their maximum potential and our education system, curriculum and methods of assessment particularly, must be reviewed and changed to incorporate increased levels of continuous assessment to ensure that it is delivering what every child in our country deserves - a quality

education that prepares him or her for his or her future life. We also acknowledge the changes cannot happen overnight and that significant investment will have to be injected by government in developing continuous assessment methods and further teacher training will ensure continuous assessments completed by students are free from plagiarism and are carried out in modern and fully equipped school environments. We owe it to our young people to ensure that best practice is employed in our assessment methods of their learning and ultimately benefits all the people of Ireland and our nation.

Chairman: I call Mr. Purser, director of academic affairs for the Irish Universities' Association.

Mr. Lewis Purser: We have been asked to represent the universities in this important discussion with the Chair and the committee. This opening statement and our contributions to the discussion are based on and heavily informed by the written submissions we understand the joint committee has already received from our colleagues in UCC, UCD, the National University of Ireland, Galway, and the University of Limerick. Our aim today is simply to highlight some of the main potential benefits and risks for the State examinations system that may be associated with continuous assessment and to list some of the most important enabling measures and conditions that we see as being needed for continuous assessment to be used in State examinations in pursuit of the overall goals of the State's education and skills strategies and policies.

Continuous assessment is, very simply, a way to ensure that all learners have opportunities to succeed. This is what teachers do every day in their classrooms and good teachers do it very well. By continually observing learners, monitoring what they know and can do, teachers can ensure all learners are making progress in a holistic way, irrespective of the type of examination system in place. With the high stakes terminal leaving certificate examinations currently in place in Ireland, it means much of this good practice is often sacrificed in order to prepare for the examination.

Regular, ongoing assessment also means that teachers can use a range of assessment tools and methods to assess learners in a variety of different ways, developing confidence in their knowledge of what the learners know and can do. Research indicates that this allows for much greater flexibility in teaching and learning and provides a more accurate and robust overview of student progress and performance than methods that provide a single "snapshot" through formal examination.

There are particular benefits that continuous assessment can bring to the well-being of students. It is likely to reduce the pressure associated with preparing for final exams, for example, and continuous assessment gives a better rounded and nuanced profile of the student over time. If correctly designed, it can play to a student's interests and strengths. Continuous assessment activities focus on student understanding rather than their ability to memorise. Assessment should require learners to think, express their thoughts and demonstrate their skills. This enables learners to display a much deeper understanding than if they were simply memorising information for a test. This greater emphasis on skills related to critical thinking, reflection, teamwork and creativity are appropriately assessed over a continuum in time and through multiple methods. A consistent critique of high stakes one-off examinations is the narrowing impact on what and how students learn.

With respect to risks, there is certainly a risk to the integrity of the examination system and a number of measures would need to be put in place to counter that potential risk. There is a serious risk around validity, reliability and consistency in examinations across the many

thousands of teachers who would need to be involved and the different assessment measures. A rigorous and comprehensive external monitoring and moderation process organised by the Department and the State Examinations Commission would be needed if we move to this sort of system. There would need to be much initial training, continuing professional development, ongoing support and resources, including the necessary time to allow teachers to engage with this successfully.

There has been much recent positive change to the junior certificate and there is an impetus for change at the senior cycle. However, the junior cycle reform is still a work in progress and there is no data, as of yet, on the effectiveness or experiences arising from these classroom-based assessments. We need some rigorous investigation and research into international best practice, including the various forms of assessment that could be best used in the leaving certificate context. This would involve consulting with a wide range of stakeholders and bringing them on board.

Chairman: You should make a final point now, if you do not mind.

Mr. Lewis Purser: We have highlighted in our submission a number of enabling measures, critically around staff development. Continuous assessment, *per se*, will not be a panacea or a one-size-fits-all solution. Much appropriate training and development will be needed but there are very good models in further and higher education about how this can be managed over time very successfully, with good external quality assurance and monitoring mechanisms. We would be delighted to engage with the committee further in these matters.

Chairman: I thank all the witnesses for their observations and opening submissions. We will have questions from members before coming back to the witnesses. If questions arise and the witnesses feel they would like to come back over the next few weeks with written submissions, they should feel free to do so.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I thank everybody, including those in the Gallery, for attending. I have a great interest in the area, and not necessarily in the context of the current debate on some of the proposed reforms of the leaving certificate. It relates to students' anxiety, stress and mental health. It even starts as young as primary school, as we see children worrying about spelling tests on Fridays. Children tend to compare themselves with other children from a very young age and feel they are not good enough or cannot do something as well as another student. That can stay with a person and it is a constant battle to try to build children's confidence.

I am not questioning the quality of teaching or the curriculum of the leaving certificate but I question the way we currently assess students. It is not a fair system and it is weighted in favour of students who might come from a more affluent background and may be able to afford grinds or extra support. If students are in any way panicked or stressed, or if they suffer from anxiety at all, it will be exacerbated during exams. Most of us would know many people who say the leaving certificate was one of the worst experiences, if not the worst experience, of their life. I include myself in that. If we have a system like that, it is clearly failing.

Continuous assessment does not necessarily need to be from fourth year onwards but we could look at the model in some colleges, where 60% of marks are awarded for exams and 40% comes from continuous assessment. A student must pass the exam in order to pass a particular subject. I do not see the difficulty with it being run by the State Examinations Commission. Some teachers take issue with being the person who must assess a student constantly and the fairness in it. It is a reasonable point. We need to move from the model of having just one

examination. Depending on subject choice and day on which the examination takes place, a student might study for two years but have everything examined in four or five days. If exams start on a Wednesday, all the exams might be completed by the following Wednesday. With other subject choices, there might be a gap of a week in which a student can study. It is completely unfair as it currently stands.

Would a level of continuous assessment be a fairer way of examining students? If not, what would the witnesses suggest as a change to the current leaving certificate? There are many stories and everybody knows the level of stress and anxiety in students. People cannot say it does not have an impact on students when it does. Mr. Browne made the point that there is an effect on families as well. It is becoming clearer every year. It does not help that when the leaving certificate examinations start, there is hype in the media about the number of students doing it and what they thought of the first English paper. We should not have any of that as we are constantly drawing attention to it. On the day of the results, there are one or two people with six or seven A grades, which is great for them, but that does not reflect the majority of people. Students who may already doubt themselves and have issues of confidence and anxiety will look at them and see somebody else who is again better than them. We know there are major mental health issues with young people. I am not saying this is the only reason for it but it is a major and increasing factor.

If the witnesses could change one element of the current leaving certificate structure, what would it be? What should be done differently from a mental health perspective? For example, I know some schools practise mindfulness, doing it for maybe five or ten minutes every day. I know we must consider resources and what can be done but there are practical ways to try to address the mental health issues of students.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: The witnesses are very welcome and I thank them for their very detailed submissions and presence today. They have been very informative so far. What evidence suggests that continuous assessment alleviates student stress? Mr. Browne referred to the stress experienced by students. Is there evidence to support the contrary view? Given their already burdensome schedule, will teachers be able to appropriately grade or correct additional assignments? Do students tend to receive better or worse grades under the continuous assessment model? How will it be possible for the State to standardise continuous assessment?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I thank the witnesses for their presentations and the useful written submissions made by the organisations represented today and several other organisations. It is important that the committee feeds into the work being done on the leaving certificate examination by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA. I share the concerns expressed by previous speakers about the stress experienced by young people. The leaving certificate places great emphasis on the final written examination. As Ms Leydon and Ms Irwin stated, there is also an element of assessment in the oral examinations and so forth but it is primarily based on the final written examination. This approach places severe pressure on young people, especially those who are not particularly strong in written examinations. The system should be modified to make it fairer to young people with different skills, for example, co-operative and critical thinking skills. How can we advance this objective?

I have history in this area as I have sat across a table from some of the witnesses. I know the teaching unions must negotiate on behalf of their members. I had a particularly interesting experience working with the higher education sector on modifying grading systems and so forth. I am interested in hearing the views of the teaching unions on the new grading systems for the leaving certificate.

The recently introduced junior cycle reforms were negotiated. I am interested in how teachers, students and parents are responding to these changes. I remember attending a meeting in Kilkenny facilitated by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment in the 2000s while serving as an Opposition spokesperson on education. Representatives of the Irish Second-Level Students' Union to which Mr. Hassan referred attended and provided feedback from second-level school students. We have not made much progress in the intervening years. How do we move forward and reduce the severe pressure on school pupils? I do not know what the witnesses' views are but I find league tables appalling. We need to move away from measuring schools' success on the basis of the percentage of students which progress to higher education because there are many other pathways available to school leavers.

In its written submission, the Irish Universities' Association refers to mitigating risks and ensuring continuous assessment has robust criteria defined in sets of standardised but flexible rubrics. It also refers to making learning and teaching outcomes visible for students, staff and parents and making teaching and learning accountable. It notes that a terminal examination system can be shrouded in secrecy and normative assessment. I presume this is the point Deputy Funchion was making when she argued that people from certain backgrounds have an advantage in written examinations.

All of us, from all backgrounds, agree that we need to modify the system in some way to reduce pressure on students and achieve formative results of assessment and focus on engaging with students in the learning process. This may not be primarily the examination function of assessment, if one likes, but we need to be able to offer feedback to students. The NCCA's written submission refers to processes and outcomes of learning. Rather than judging young people, education is supposed to be about the process of learning and facilitating young people to become lifelong learners. These may be somewhat abstract points. How can we move forward to achieve something better for all students, not only those who are good at written examinations or can afford to pay for grinds or repeat the leaving certificate?

Chairman: I thank Deputy O'Sullivan for her contribution. No one here is more experienced than she is in the area of education. All speakers made valid points. I note that 50% of students now take grinds, which surely mitigates against those who come from a disadvantaged or vulnerable background. This must be borne in mind.

It is interesting to note in the written submissions and the views expressed by those representing teachers and students a divergence of opinion on this matter. We all want students to have a positive, holistic experience of education. We want them to be educated for life and helped to learn the skills and resilience they will need to find employment and live their lives.

Ms Leydon referred to benchmarking the Irish system against the systems of other European countries and noted that we are doing well in the PISA rankings. While it is important to benchmark, would transitioning to continuous assessment facilitate effective benchmarking against other European countries? Would such a transition and enabling greater student engagement have a significant impact on early school leaving? I expect it would. It is very important that we should not focus only on students who will do well in the points system but also support those who are at the bottom of the class, so to speak, in terms of achievement and attainment. Does the current educational model impact on the use and take-up of new technology? I expect that it probably does. Does the system have the capacity to make the transition to continuous assessment? What needs to be done in this regard, both in the system and in terms of teacher training? I acknowledge that this will cause great upheaval for students and teachers.

I propose to open the discussion again to stakeholders. I will take speakers in the order in which they indicate. We will then have a second round of questions from members.

Ms Joanne Irwin: I will make a few brief points. Like Deputy Jan O’Sullivan, I know exactly what it was like to get the junior cycle to where it is now and it is not yet fully on stream. As my colleague pointed out, it will be a number of years before we see the effect of classroom based assessments. Every subject will have two classroom based assessments taken during the year. Students will have an assessment task that is marked by the State Examinations Commission. In a way, they will have experienced a form of continuous assessment. It will take a long time to embed this in the system, which will be necessary before we make changes to the senior cycle.

On the issue of anxiety and stress, from my experience of teaching in further education where all courses are taught through continuous assessment - I have taught students aged from 16 to 83 years - certain students experienced stress more frequently in the continuous assessment model because they were anxious in any case. Rather than only experiencing it at the end of the year, these students felt anxious every time they were given an assessment. This meant they felt more anxious throughout the year. I acknowledge, however, that some students did not experience anxiety. The main issue is the CAO points race because it causes most of the stress students experience. We need to change the whole focus on the leaving certificate result or when the leaving certificate starts. I have never yet seen a student featured on television who got their leaving certificate applied or PLC results or who completed an apprenticeship - all these areas that those of us in the education sector are told to promote but which are not promoted. So much pressure from the media and the third level sector is on going on to third level and that should not be the case.

I am totally against league tables. They measure one form of assessment and do not take the holistic learning of a student into consideration. The day of the leaving certificate results, we do not hear about the student who struggled every day to go into school, who got a D and who passed. I have had students like that and it meant more to me, and to them, than the students who got an A1 because these students were always going to get an A1. It was the student one encouraged to come in every single day who should be out there to show people what they can achieve.

Workload will be a major issue. We have a teacher supply crisis, pay discrimination and very low morale in the profession. However, they are engaging in the CPD for junior cycle, which is an extensive programme. To try to put this on top of changing the junior cycle will be the straw that breaks the camel’s back for teachers. They just do not have the capacity to do it.

I welcome what Deputy Funchion said, which is that it will be assessed by the State Examinations Commission. We have huge faith in the commission. I do not know if it has the capacity or whether it would be funded to have the capacity to extend the work it does. We do not have any objection to a second assessment component if it is externally assessed by the State Examinations Commission so that it is an objective analysis of the students’ work. I am not speaking on behalf of the State Examinations Commission but I would have fears about whether it would have the capacity to do it. It would certainly have the ability but the question is whether or not it has the capacity.

Regarding the Chairman’s question about whether it would impact on early school leaving, a recent study by the OECD entitled, Education at a Glance, showed that Ireland has a 91% completion of upper secondary education where the EU average is 67% so we are very success-

ful at present. I accept that if there are more second assessment components, we do not have an issue with it but it should be independently assessed by the State Examinations Commission. In fairness to the NCCA, in respect of the work it does in devising the programmes, it takes on board the views of the development groups and has more practical elements. Music for the new junior cycle is composed of 30% practical while home economics is composed of 50% practical.

Mr. Geoff Browne: I will make a few observations. Deputy McLoughlin asked whether we had any evidence that continuous assessment alleviates stress, etc., in students. We have only anecdotal evidence in terms of phone calls received by the National Parents' Council. We would often ask the students what model works best for them. An example given to us involves construction studies. My figures may not be exactly correct but a day practical covers 20% of the marks while a project covers 25% so straightaway, they have attained almost half of the marks before the actual terminal examination. Students have told us that this works for them but, as I say, there is no empirical evidence of that.

With regard to the final examination, I would like to add that it often does not suit our most academically bright children. They can also suffer from nerves on the day of the examination and underperform due to the stress it causes them. I concur with what Ms Irwin said. Deputy O'Sullivan asked about league tables. I have described them here previously as laudable at best. They make no allowance for students who go on to do apprenticeships. I think a stigma has developed around the leaving certificate applied and those who complete it. I have children myself. Some children are academically gifted while others are practically gifted and will go on and do apprenticeships so the area of apprenticeships and the leaving certificate applied should be given more focus.

Mr. Oisín Hassan: I will try to cover as much of that as I can. The CAO race is probably the bigger factor but a high-stakes examination is still one of the root causes. We are focused on rote learning. To return to Deputy Funchion's question about whether there is one thing we could look at and start to do, it is gradual reform. Certainly the experience from higher education is that the move towards continuous assessment needs to be done gradually for the benefit of an underfunded system, the staff who are involved in the CPD that is required and the students and their ability to adapt to a changing environment. We need to realise that everyone has to adapt to the move to continuous assessment because we have focused on a high-stakes examination and rote learning in the past.

To return to the point about transition, the evidence to say that a move to continuous assessment will have a positive impact on well-being is not necessarily there because we have not gone out to find that evidence. We have not done the research and we have not started to make the necessary moves towards what I would view as continuous assessment to start to see the benefit of that. I draw members' attention to the transition report from the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education which concluded that there was no link between academic performance in the CAO and the ability of the student to successfully transition and not struggle. Students struggled across the board with the transition, particularly in that first academic semester and the first year. We know that the drop out rate at that level is around one in six. The majority of students will drop out in first year so transition is a big issue.

Ms Moira Leydon: I am glad Mr. Hassan used the word "transition" because we have certain solutions to the problem we identified. I am picking on three themes that have come across very strongly. At the risk of being teacherly, I think we are talking about two different things.

We are talking about assessment and how it is spread over the year, etc., but we are also talking about the role of the leaving certificate, to be very blunt, as a selection mechanism for third level education. I prefaced my remarks by saying this is the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the commission on the points system. This was the very issue it sought to address. Continuous assessment is exactly what it is. It is spread over the two or three year cycle. Actually, it is pretty well embedded in our system. For example, in Gaeilge, 40% of the marks for the examination at junior and senior cycle are for oral communication skills. This is exactly what it should be for a language because if someone cannot communicate orally, their communication capacity is diminished. The same is true for the practicals for music and the sciences. As the junior cycle rolls out, that facility is there. Continuous assessment is not really the challenge for our system.

The perennial challenge for our system is the fact that the leaving certificate is a very high-stakes examination and will remain so as long as it continues in that selection role for third level. As legislators, members of this committee are in the business of finding solutions. I was doing some reading around this matter this morning. I think we should all revisit the transitions project of 2011 when Professor Áine Hyland prepared a very well-researched and thoughtful paper in which she set out three potential solutions to this high-stakes selection function and how we can reduce stress and what has been called the backwash effect on teaching and learning. I would certainly suggest that members revisit that report to see how far the three core recommendations in it have been implemented. At the risk of being shot down by my third level colleagues, the one area where the least progress has been made has been entry to third level. We have changed the grading structure and conducted very reputable research on predictability in the leaving certificate examination. The conclusion was that leaving certificate examinations do, by and large, test the higher cognitive skills so it is not all about rote learning, etc., so we need to revisit that.

I think we have taken our eye off the ball over the past decade. The Deputy referred to what I would describe as significant socioeconomic patterns in student achievement. That is still with us. It has not gone away. Every system struggles with this. We should look very carefully at how we can, as a system, put more resources and supports into our schools in order to break these cycles of disadvantage and lower achievement. I cannot quote the most recent but there have been evaluations of DEIS and ESRI research on the subject. One recent study showed that more than 64% of students deemed disadvantaged are outside the DEIS system. Those students are in schools where they are not getting the extra supports. They are not necessarily in schools which have a dedicated focus on dealing with disadvantage. The research on disadvantage shows that it is not so much the model of assessment that is critical to students' achievement levels. Rather it is whole school policies for school attendance and retention, high expectations of students by teachers and, more critically, a feeling of student engagement and being part of the school. That is what teachers often talk about - the school as a community. As Ms Irwin has said, our retention rate is up there at the top because schools make a huge effort in this regard. If 64% of our students who are not achieving because of background are not in DEIS schools, we need to think very seriously about supplementary models.

Coming back to the issues of well-being and stress, it is really to the credit of our legislators and our education community that student well-being has been at the heart of our debates on curriculum at the junior cycle through health promotion in schools, youth mental health guidelines and our new child protection policies. It is absolutely critical that we follow up on these good intentions and build the capacity of schools to realise them.

To be teacherly, I will say there are issues with continuous assessment in respect of how to do it better. We have a balance. We can always get a better balance, but we must address the selection function of the leaving certificate. Some 67% of our students transfer to higher education, which is defined as the institute of technology sector and third level sector. The iar-Aire was very much part of this policy development. We are really in a very good space at the moment with regard to further education and training, the amount of apprenticeships coming on board, the sense of enthusiasm out there and the promotion of these alternative post-school pathways. Ms Irwin referred to the junior cycle bedding down and that over time we might see conclusions. I believe that over time - over five years or so - we will see the impact of that further education policy and the opening up of apprenticeships. It will loosen the nexus between the leaving certificate and the selection function. I ask the committee to revisit the transitions project. That would be a good step.

Chairman: I thank Ms Leydon.

Ms Moira Leydon: I am sorry. I have gone on a little bit.

Chairman: Not at all. It was all interesting. I am sure Ms Leydon is aware that the committee held hearings on positive mental health and education and on the area of apprenticeships and that we have issued recommendations to the Minister in respect of both of those areas. We sing from the same hymn sheet without a shadow of a doubt.

Mr. Lewis Purser: I thank the Chair. I will make a few general remarks and then try to respond to some of the more precise questions which the committee has raised. When we discuss the topic of assessment we have to remind ourselves of the purpose of assessment. What are we trying to do? We are trying to establish how well students have achieved the level of knowledge, skills and competences which the programme was designed to equip them with. Obviously there are multiple ways to undertake such assessment. Any form of assessment will involve some form of stress, but there are well established ways of spreading that stress over multiple methods and over periods of time. In most cases students will learn to deal with that stress and that is quite a useful life skill to develop.

The purpose of assessment is important because if we are looking at what we want the students to have achieved as part of their programme of learning - in higher education we refer to this as the learning outcomes - and if we are explicit about what those learning outcomes should be and what outcomes are desirable, then the assessment methods need to be aligned to ensure that those learning outcomes are being achieved and to ascertain the extent of that achievement. Different methods will be useful for measuring different types of outcomes.

In Ireland we have a very robust national framework of qualifications which is very highly regarded internationally. The further education sector and higher education sector engage extensively with this and structure their programmes around it. QQI, Quality and Qualifications Ireland, conducts all its quality assurance on the basis of the national framework. I would contend that the State Examinations Commission, and the State examinations system in general, has engaged to a lesser extent with the national framework of qualifications and has been less explicit about the learning outcomes which should be achieved; about how the knowledge, skills and competences which we would like learners to have achieved at key stages in their learning careers are tested; and about the optimal way to do that. There is quite a lot of literature on that topic. There is a lot of experience in other countries and, as I have referred to, there is very good experience in the further education sector. There has also been some quite good experience in the higher education sector over the last ten years.

There was a particular query about addressing student stress and diverse types of learners. There is a considerable body of research which shows that a broader assessment base, as opposed to a very narrow assessment base at a fixed point in time, is eminently more suitable for meeting the diverse range of learning strengths and needs that we find in our high-participation system. Ireland has a very inclusive system but I am not sure that the assessment part of that system meets the needs of this very broad range of learners. The current examination model restricts the opportunities for those students, for example, who have special education needs to demonstrate their learning in the way that is best suited to their own requirements. Students who experience difficulties with aspects of literacy, memory, concentration, mobility or anxiety are immediately disadvantaged by aspects of our State examinations system. That is currently the situation.

There was also a query on how we should step towards implementation. I mentioned earlier, and I believe this is supported by a number of my colleagues on the witness bench, that some very positive change is taking place in the junior certificate but that we would be wise initially to carry through the full set of reforms involving continuous assessment at junior cycle. We need to help teachers manage the change. The junior cycle culminates in a State examination with lower stakes - the junior certificate. This will help address teachers' attitudes towards risk taking, because we are talking about moving outside comfort zones, taking a little bit more risk and being more comfortable with a broader range of assessment practices.

There is quite a limited culture of continuous assessment in our post-primary schools, at least on a formal basis. Not all subjects allow continuous assessment to count towards State certification. Some subjects use it very well, particularly some of the languages and some of the laboratory based subjects, but if compared with the way in which state examinations take place in a number of other European countries - and I do not think the United Kingdom is necessarily a good benchmark - we are certainly behind the times. If we are looking to assess the 21st century generic competences that employers increasingly call for and the need for which is recognised in society for all our learners, including those who are academically brilliant and those who are more vocationally oriented, we need to do something about the assessment method which we use.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Purser. Do any members have any further comment?

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I would like to respond briefly. I tend to agree with the point made by both Ms Irwin and Mr. Purser about the need to see how the junior cycle changes bed in. Although I asked how this process could be moved forward and expressed frustration at how long we had been talking about this, I understand that we have to take it step by step. There will be a learning process in changing the junior cycle which will feed into any changes to the senior cycle. I take that point. Ms Leydon referred to Áine Hyland's report. I suggest that we circulate that to the members of the committee. We all need to be reminded of it even if we did originally read it. It would be useful in terms of how we proceed. I am not sure that I have further questions except a very specific question about how each of the organisations is actually engaging with the process which the NCCA has undertaken. Obviously we are engaging with the process. Are there related issues of which the committee should be aware? I assume that all the witnesses are directly involved in the ongoing discussions.

We need to learn from the junior cycle outcomes, the work that is being done at the higher education level, as well as apprenticeships and all the other alternatives such as further education and so on. At the same time, we must start thinking about and certainly adapting our mindsets as to how we might proactively and positively engage with the reform process for the

leaving certificate examination in order to address the real problems we all acknowledge exist. Despite having very good educational outcomes in Ireland generally, many people still find the leaving certificate examination to be problematic.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I agree with Ms Leydon that students may not attend a DEIS school yet qualify for DEIS status. While funding is an issue, one way to solve the problem is to expand the school completion programme because it does a lot of good work. Many schools that do not have a DEIS status participate in the school completion programme. The programme makes a great difference to the lives of many students. For example, one of my constituents contacted me recently about a child being very stressed about the leaving certificate examination. Luckily, the student attends a school that participates in the school completion programme and, therefore, had the opportunity to access counselling nearly straight away. If a school is not part of the programme then a parent or guardian must source and pay for counselling privately because the waiting lists are so long in the public system. The school completion programme is good but is often overlooked. Unfortunately, the scheme is no longer operated by the Department of Education and Skills and is now provided by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, which I do not consider to be a good idea. The committee should consider the programme and call for its expansion.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: I thank the witnesses for their contributions. Would continuous assessment create a better environment for students? Would it reduce the amount of academic stress currently experienced by students by distributing the stress over a period where several assessments take place?

The committee has discussed the CAO race on several occasions. Today, the witnesses have made the interesting remark that emphasis is placed on third level education rather than apprenticeships. In the past while, the committee has met many groups that called for a greater emphasis to be placed on apprenticeships, as there is a shortage of apprentices in various sectors. At present, all of the emphasis is placed on securing enough points to enter third level institutions or universities. I ask the witnesses to comment on the matter.

Chairman: If witnesses wish to add anything else to this debate then please submit a written submission to the clerk to the committee and we will ensure that their comments are included in the final report. I call Mr. Hassan as he was the first to indicate a wish to comment.

Mr. Oisín Hassan: In terms of the National Council for Curriculum Assessment, NCCA, a colleague and I have been involved since the launch of the review. The general feeling in the room at the launch event was there were many lessons to be learned from international perspectives on how to consult with stakeholders, students, staff and teachers. However, when the review process was outlined at the end of the day, there was also a feeling that it was not as inclusive as it should have been, especially considering the speakers who spoke earlier.

As for what steps to take, the review provides an opportunity to consider issues such as the length of time it takes to get the results of final examinations. While the junior cycle review must take its course, steps can be considered immediately. Many final examinations amount to between 70% and 80% of the total marks that can be awarded. The review is welcome but it needs to be more inclusive.

On spreading academic stress over a longer period, the USI has defended the value of continuous assessment in our submission. We first must define continuous assessment. As far as I am concerned, continuous assessment in its purest form simply relates to the timing of assess-

ments and is not related to whether it is an examination or course work. We need to be mindful of that aspect. There is a risk that continuous assessment might spread academic stress. Assessment should follow the curriculum rather than the other way around. Continuous assessment requires resources in all sectors and that comes back to the transitions. It is key that continuous assessment be defined.

Ms Joanne Irwin: I also attended the launch of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment review of the senior cycle examination and wish to disclose a conflict of interest by declaring that I am a member of that council.

In respect of any review by the NCCA of the senior cycle examination, the TUI is concerned that there be teacher buy-in from the start because teachers will operate any reform. In May, a sample of either 40 or 50 schools will be selected by management to conduct research on the current senior cycle and the existing programmes. The TUI has clearly told the NCCA that teachers in those schools must be consulted about whether they want to be part of the scheme. There are schools that want to participate but management has not selected them. Also, the schools selected must include disadvantaged schools, mixed education schools, girls' schools and schools in regions as far away as north Donegal and as close as city centre Dublin. The research must include all aspects otherwise the findings will not truly reflect the current situation.

On the issue of continuous assessment, the TUI is concerned that breaking up assessment points would not reduce stress for students. When I hear the term "continuous assessment" I think, from the perspective of further education, that it is a lot of assessment. For example, I deliver a level 4 module on the Qualifications and Quality Assurance, QQI, framework that has 14 assessments. Therefore, when we hear the term, "continuous assessment", we think that will mean 14 pieces of work for one subject. If one practical element takes place at one time of the year, as mentioned by Deputy McLoughlin, then that is very different. I agree with Mr. Hassan that we need to define what is meant by continuous assessment. Again, I repeat that it must be externally assessed by the State Examinations Commission.

It also is important to consider the current assessment timetable in schools, which is extremely busy. One will not get an holistic picture of what students experience by analysing the timetable for one subject because most students study ten subjects at junior cycle. I agree that we need examinations to take place on a phased basis. One should not schedule the assessments for home economics and materials technology or woodwork at the same time, as that would increase stress. Recently, we analysed the timetable for assessments as part of the new junior cycle when the programme was fully embedded and included all of the subjects. We discovered that assessment takes place nearly every month. One must be mindful of the increased workload generated by classroom-based assessment from the point of view of school management, teachers and students. If one is teaching two or three subjects and if there is classroom-based assessment, that will increase both teacher workload and stress for students. All of those aspects must be taken into consideration.

Ms Moira Leydon: Deputy Jan O'Sullivan asked about the engagement with reform. The ASTI is on the council and we will engage with any public consultation. It would be misleading of me to not state explicitly that the ASTI is not in the business of countenancing any proposal that links teachers assessing students for the State examination. That would be the red line we would not cross. Yes, one can supplement and balance written examinations with all sorts of practical examinations, oral examination, aural examinations etc. If a proposal emerges, however, that teachers would assess and award marks that would go towards the final State examination, then we would be back where we started, unfortunately. Such a proposal is not in

anyone's interest. While we will engage, that will be the point from which we will start.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin suggested that examination stress could be reduced by continual assessments. Young people face challenges that we have no idea about and it is quite terrifying. Examination stress is not the only stress experienced by young people. We have had another fantastic debate on this matter. I must compliment the legislators for spearheading a debate on social media and its impact on young people's well-being. Achievement stress and academic stress is one dimension in one dimension of that. Perhaps continuous assessment can alleviate such stress. As Ms Irwin has said, however, a cursory analysis of the timetable for a child studying ten subjects will reveal there are tests at the end of each week, end of term tests and classroom-based assessments, CBAs, or one could be in third year or could have practical work to be undertaken. The one lesson we have all learned from the junior cycle is that assessment should not drive the curriculum. Instead, the curriculum should drive the assessment.

I get the feeling that there is a nuanced understanding of assessment and what role it should play. Spreading it out can alleviate stress, but there is much more that legislators can do for student well-being. Bringing some of the social media giants to heel and making them deliver on their corporate social responsibilities is a good way of dealing with this societal issue.

Mr. Geoff Browne: Regarding Deputy O'Sullivan's question about engaging with the NCCA, the National Parents' Council has a representative on it and we are invited to participate in all the working groups. I have had the good fortune to be a part of the computer science working group over the past 12 months. We are content with how that will be assessed, in that it is a 70:30 split. The 70% will be for the terminal examination, but there will also be a project worth 30%. It is heading in the right direction. We have representation on the NCCA's senior and junior cycle working groups.

I agree with my colleagues that, from a parental point of view on continuous assessment, we are not advocating monthly or weekly assignments. The word "continuous" should probably be dropped and replaced with something else. I will repeat the example I gave earlier. I did construction studies and that model worked well, in that there was the day practical, a project and the terminal exam. The continuous assessment has to be defined and resourced and training must be provided.

I cannot concur with Deputy McLoughlin enough on apprenticeships. Try getting a plumber or electrician. It cannot be done. Those trades people probably earn more than all of us put together.

Chairman: They are worth their weight in gold this week anyway.

(Interruptions).

Mr. Geoff Browne: Us computer science guys do not earn much.

Chairman: Does Mr. Purser wish to make a final comment?

Mr. Lewis Purser: Yes. Questions were raised about the recently launched NCCA reform process. The universities are supportive of it. Obviously, it is still in its infancy, but we understand it to be moving forward cautiously and trying to develop evidence and a coherent approach in order to bring stakeholders with it. Rushing anything in the current environment would be a mistake, but there is already a great deal of good practice in the system that we need to bring to the surface, make people more aware of, and with the concept of which we need to

make them more comfortable.

Interesting and important work will come out of the NCCA's detailed consultation with the 40 schools, which I understand should be representative of the second level system across the country. The NCCA will take those findings, put together a series of proposals and hold a second broad public consultation, which will point the way forward.

The universities contribute to all the NCCA's senior cycle subject development groups and are pleased to do so but, as Mr. Browne mentioned, new subjects are coming on stream and are presenting exciting developments, for example, computer science, new languages, and politics and society, which are moving away from some of our older understandings of what the leaving certificate looks like. There are models in the new subjects that could be adapted into some of the more traditional subjects.

A number of committee members mentioned the transitions reform process. A part of the rationale for reforming the leaving certificate grading system was to provide a little extra space at each grade band to allow scope for innovation in the system and a broader set of assessment options when the time comes. Under the previous grading system, the transparency of the leaving certificate required students to be exactly aware of what they needed or could have got, so the pressure was ratcheted up even further when they were close to a different grade. With broader grade bands, there is scope within them to innovate, for teachers to use their best professional competences and judgment and for the State Examinations Commission to build on that. We have put in place the parameters for many exciting things to happen over the next five years. I agree with Deputy O'Sullivan that it would be a pity to lose that opportunity.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Purser. This has been an interesting debate and I thank our witnesses for their valuable contribution to it. We look forward to debating the matter further, issuing a report and making recommendations to the Minister.

I remind Deputies that the select committee will meet the Minister at 9.30 a.m. on 29 March in committee room 4 to consider the Revised Estimates for public services of the Department of Education and Skills - Vote 26. As there is no other business, this meeting of the joint committee is adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 5.55 p.m. until 4 p.m. on Tuesday, 17 April 2018.