

Junior Cycle Developments (TUI Comments, November 2012)

Minister unwisely and prematurely departs from earlier proposals on assessment

On 4th October 2012 the Minister for Education and Skills launched A Framework for Junior Cycle. This set out radical changes to the Junior Cycle to be implemented on a phased basis from 2014, commencing with English and the introduction of short courses. While he embraced many of the principles and proposals set out by the NCCA Council (2011) he departed significantly with regard to others. Full details are available from the NCCA website (www.ncca.ie).

On a positive note the Minister has set aside the 8 subject cap on the number of subjects a student can present for certification and qualification purposes - a measure that will provide reassurance to teachers that some subjects will 'not just disappear' off the curriculum. Significantly, the other primary differences also rest in the area of assessment and certification and reflect a unilateral decision to replace external assessment with school based assessment and replace state certification with school certification.

This shift is of considerable concern. TUI had fought for the retention of all current subjects, externally set and externally marked terminal exams, a commitment to external moderation for school based assessment and the retention of state certification. It lodged strong opposition to the idea of changing the junior cycle at a time of scarce and contracting resources. During 2012 the union pressed for a meeting of the Implementation Group that the Minister had promised to establish but this was not forthcoming. Taking advantage of ministerial imperative the Minister decided on critical issues in advance of the Group setting about its work. This gives a clear message - the Minister is determined to bring about the changes announced in October, which are of considerable magnitude.

Many TUI members have indicated their belief that the educational case for the change has not been conclusively established and contest implementation and administrative capacity at school level. Of particular significance to TUI, therefore, is the re-emergence of the initial ideas for an assessment approach which both teacher unions for the post-primary sector had vehemently opposed, supported (to a more or less degree) by several other stakeholders. Initial TUI concerns in respect of the wide ranging implications of implementing change at this time return to the fore – inadequate resources, a lack of administrative capacity, a potential to undermine educational standards and a high risk of exasperating current inequities.

The Minister's decision has very significant and far-reaching educational and industrial relations ramifications. From an industrial relations perspective, the proposed change could potentially result in a dramatic increase in workload for affected teachers and poses a significant risk to teachers' conditions of work. Furthermore, in a context of very restricted

resources, increased workload at Junior Cycle will inevitably lead to reduced teacher availability and time for other important aspects of school life such as extra-curricular activities, pastoral care support or curriculum development at Senior Cycle. Therefore, advancing significant changes at this time could in fact have an overall detrimental impact on the educational experience of young people. These issues will feature strongly as TUI engages further in discussions at national level.

In its response the TUI will focus heavily on the absence of provision for external moderation of the assessment process or results. This gives strong grounds for concern about the maintenance of standards, grade inflation and the emergence of inconsistencies within and between schools and, therefore, within the system in general. Its absence poses an enormous risk to the integrity of the overall assessment process and, therefore, to public confidence and perception. The removal of state certification brings further risks. TUI holds the view that this could exasperate inequities in the system, further marginalise smaller schools and engender unhealthy inter-school competitiveness.

The TUI argument will also focus heavily on a lack of resources or capacity at school level to handle the administrative and operational issues that will arise from a move to all school based assessment and a curriculum model that seeks to introduce too many different dimensions (short courses, priority learning units). Areas of particular concern are timetabling, organisational capacity, access to physical space and resources, teacher development and expertise, access to ICT and, most especially, access to teacher time and senior posts to co-ordinate and manage related activity.

TUI is gravely concerned about the lack of consultation with the teacher unions or other education partners in advance of the decision to depart so sharply from the NCCA proposals. Given a long standing commitment to have such consultation and an explicit recognition by the Minister, in various public statements, that successful implementation of change would require the engagement of teachers. TUI members are justifiably angry about the process and decision making approach. The opportunity for further public consultation of any depth or breadth may have been withdrawn but it is not acceptable that such change would proceed without full and timely discussion of the issues. The Minister has indicated that the proposals for change should move into 'the negotiating space' over the coming months and has re-iterated his view that the teachers' voice should influence the emergence of implementation arrangements. TUI will pursue this vehemently. It met with the Chairperson and Chief Executive of the NCCA recently and has sought a meeting with the Chief Inspector to express its concerns about the process and consider critical union concerns. It will seek full and comprehensive discussion on important issues by the Department Implementation Group.

Where to now?

- TUI has many concerns (educational and resource related) about the change being pursued – these must be framed in strong, clear and compelling evidence and argument.
- Issues related to teacher workload and conditions must be centre stage but the union must also speak to the public in general with whom issues of standards, inequity, and integrity will resonate more forcibly.
- TUI needs to explore and agree a strategy that will underpin its approach to engaging in further discussion. Time and space needs to be created at local and national level to carefully consider the wide ranging issues, pose questions, find solutions and plan. To support this:
 - Schools and other centres are advised to hold workplace meetings to draw as many as possible into the discussion at local level.
 - Branches are advised to ensure the changes proposed for junior cycle are discussed extensively at branch meetings over the coming months.
 - **A TUI National Consultative Conference is being organised for the 1st December.**