

**Teachers’ Union of Ireland**

**Submission to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills regarding** ‘**Continuous Assessment for State Examinations’ (February 2018)**

**Introduction**

TUI represents teachers and lecturers (17,000+) employed by Education and Training Boards (ETBs), voluntary secondary schools, Community and Comprehensive (C&C) schools and the institutes of technology.

The TUI welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the Committee in relation to ‘**Continuous Assessment for State Examinations’**. For the convenience of the Joint Committee, the TUI shall briefly address each of the questions in turn and then conclude with some general points.

**Questions Posed by Joint Committee**

1. In light of the positive international standing the Irish education system currently has, is there international pressures on Ireland to move to a system of Continuous Assessment (CA) simply to be in line with other jurisdictions?

Ireland has an internationally acknowledged, high-performing education system (Teaching Council, 2010; OECD, 2013; DES, 2018; OECD, 2009; NAPD, 2016; Comhairle na nOg, 2017, Growing Up in Ireland, 2017, IPSOS MRBI Trust in the Professions Survey, 2017; Boyle, 2017) despite spending relatively little on education (OECD, 2015). The international pressure, in so far as it exists, appears to be to retain the core assessment structure of the Irish post-primary system rather than to change it.

1. Are there benefits to moving to a CA model for State Examinations?

There is sometimes confusion in what is meant by continuous assessment. Assessment in schools tends to take three forms: formative, summative and diagnostic. Formative is the type which takes place in schools every day e.g. correcting homework, copies etc. Summative assessment is the use of assessments to measure the depth of knowledge acquired e.g. end of term examinations. Diagnostic testing usually takes the form of measuring the capacity of a student to carry out tasks e.g. aptitude, psychological or special needs testing. Each of these forms of assessment takes place frequently in schools. Formative assessment, by its nature, is continuous. However, the TUI assumes that the reference to State Examinations here means that the Joint Committee is particularly interested in additional forms of assessment taking place in the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate. It should be noted that additional forms of assessment (usually referred to as second component assessment) already takes place in many subjects in the Leaving Certificate, and that it is embedded in the revised Junior Cycle. For example, oral and practical tests already take place in many language and practical subjects. All revised Junior Cycle subject specifications include second component assessment (referred to as Assessment Tasks). These tasks are evaluated by the highly respected State Examinations Commission. They are not, strictly speaking, continuous assessment as they take place to a national timetable. However, they do enable students to demonstrate wider abilities than could be shown by a written exam alone.

1. Are there particular benefits that such a system might have in relation to the well-being of students and reducing the pressure as students approach final exams?

The suggestion is frequently made that continuous assessment reduces student stress. However, the TUI believes that in some cases continuous assessment has simply led to highly motivated students experiencing continuous stress with no break between assessments. Furthermore, it should be noted that an excess of assessments can infringe on time to learn and explore topics of interest.

1. Are there any risks associated with moving to a CA model?

As set out above, there are potentially significant risks arising from the use of CA in the State Examinations. Those risks include reputational risk to the existing respected system overseen by the State Examinations Commission, risks to student contact time and risks of ‘over-assessment’. The Joint Committee may be interested to note that the Department for Education in England has recently moved away from continuous assessment for the purposes of lower secondary assessment (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 an exam cycle.

1. Will the CA system affect the perception of the level or calibre of students produced through the Irish education system?

It is hard to predict what may happen in the future but, as noted above, the Irish exam system already enjoys extraordinarily high levels of respect and changes to the system have been agreed and implemented successfully without undermining the overall structure. The introduction of an extensive model of continuous assessment could easily undermine the existing successful system and also lead, at a minimum, to a period of flux. Any criticism of the existing system, for example in relation to alleged problematic predictability, has been found to have no basis in fact (Oxford University, 2015).

1. Is there a risk that CA could be used to protect/improve school ranking? Is there a need to include safeguards against such risks? Is an external assessor of the CA model required to deal with the potential for bias?

The issue of ‘league tables’ is a significant problem in many education systems. By their very nature they encourage schools to ‘game the system’ by, for example, manipulating data or declining entry to students perceived as ‘risking the school’s place in the tables’. Sahlberg (2015) has clearly set out the many ways in which league tables can undermine equity in the education system. The key safeguards in the system are the central role played by the State Examinations Commission and the prohibition on league tables set out in Section 53 of the Education Act 1998.

1. How would the Leaving Cert Applied (LCA) fit into a CA model?

The Leaving Certificate Applied currently encompasses a range of forms of assessments so as to best meet the needs of students taking the programme. For example, extensive use is made of oral assessments and frequent student tasks. Teachers can also award credits based on student attendance and successful completion of required tasks. However, measures of student performance in terms of distinction, merit etc remain within the remit of the State Examinations Commission. This system has been found to be reliable and robust whilst also serving the needs of students for whom the traditional academic Leaving Certificate would not suit their individual educational needs.

There are two forms of change currently being discussed which would have an impact on the Leaving Certificate Applied. Firstly, some subjects within Leaving Certificate Applied are currently being updated (English and Communications, Mathematics Application, ICT). There is also a broader strategic review starting in relation to all of Senior Cycle and this is likely to examine the overall role and structure of Leaving Certificate Applied. Any changes to assessment in Leaving Certificate Applied now could prejudice and undermine the future findings of the overall subject and programme review already happening.

1. Is there any risk to FDI should the education system change from its current form to that of CA?

The existing post-primary education system, and in particular its graduates, is frequently cited as an attraction to companies engaged in FDI. It is difficult to see how changing the existing respected system would encourage further investment in Ireland and may indeed jeopardise investment already located here.

1. Will Brexit have any implications should Ireland decide to pursue a CA model?

The TUI is unable, at this time, to draw any robust conclusions as to whether there is a relationship between Brexit and continuous assessment.

1. Would transitioning to a CA system benefit students in schools with more concentrated levels of disadvantage?

The TUI represents teachers and school leaders in a very high proportion of schools that are designated as disadvantaged. The TUI does not see any benefit deriving from a CA system that is not already is utilised through existing systems of formative assessment and summative assessment using second component measures as set out above.

1. Will schools with more concentrated levels of disadvantage be able to adjust their teaching practices to a CA model?

The post-primary education system is currently undergoing an extensive change arising from updates in Junior Cycle. Those changes embed developments in formative assessment that were already being implemented in many schools. The revised Junior Cycle is being supported by extensive continuous professional development. If that revised model were to be abolished now and replaced with a new CA system then it is likely that support for a revised Junior Cycle, as demonstrated by the September 2015 ballot of TUI members, would dissipate rapidly.

1. Would a model of CA produce students with both knowledge and skills to equip them for a workforce for the 21st century?

It is important to note that CA is a form of assessment and not a form of teaching and learning. Whatever form of assessment is carried out does not change what a student learns. A significant number of subject specifications at both Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate have been updated recently. Furthermore, a number of entirely new subjects have been introduced e.g. Politics and Society, Physical Education, Computer Science. Whether CA exists or not does not change, in any way, the content or existence of a course and the ability of that course to equip student for the 21st Century.

1. What are the impacts, if any, to third level education?

The TUI represents members in the post-primary, further education and higher education sectors. Our members believe that any undermining of the examination system at second level is likely to cause reputational damage to the entire education system.

1. Has consultation with parents’ representatives and other stakeholders taken place and is there support for exploring the introduction of a CA system?

The TUI notes that parents have expressed strong faith in the work of the State Examinations Commission. This strong faith in the State Examinations Commission is well demonstrated in the fact that the Exams Commission only received one complaint regarding the 2017 Junior Cycle English exam, despite the fact that approximately sixty-one thousand students sat the exam (Irish Times June 28th 2017).

1. Will the CA model provide training opportunities for teachers to become examiners as part of this new system and are there any other considerations to take into account?

It is important to note that training opportunities for teachers would almost certainly fall dramatically if a CA system was introduced. This is for two reasons. Firstly, existing training being provided for the revised Junior Cycle would almost certainly have to end to enable a revised CA system to be introduced. Secondly, a CA system would mean that teachers would no longer attend worthwhile training provided by the State Examinations Commission through, for example, marking conferences.

1. What are the lessons learnt from previous reform introduced through other programs, for example the LCA programme and Project Maths, in relation to introduction of a system of CA?

Assessment in LCA and Project Maths is carried out by the State Examinations Commission in a similar way to other Junior and Senior Cycle programmes. The most commonly used form of CA in the Irish post-primary and higher education system is that of student portfolios. It is interesting to note that two studies on the use of student portfolios in Ireland have recently been published. One study focused on Transition Year and the other study focused on higher education. It is noteworthy that whilst both studies found that students, largely speaking, found benefits in using portfolios that, on the whole, significant challenges for the system existed in the use of portfolios (Scully et al., 2018; Brown et al., 2018).

1. Have any contingency plans been considered if the CA model is introduced and does not have the desired effect?

A flawed implementation of CA could undermine both the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate. This would have implications for the approximately one hundred and twenty thousand students who sit those exams each year. It would impact on the further and higher education systems for several years to come. It would impact on recruitment of workers into all industries. It would cause reputational damage to the Irish education system for an indeterminant period of time. The TUI is not aware of any contingency planning which could cope with all of those negative impacts on an education system which is currently highly respected in Ireland and abroad.

**Conclusion**

The TUI believes that a CA system could undermine the currently highly valued Irish education system. Significant agreed changes are currently being implemented in both Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle. The introduction of a new CA system would prejudice all reforms which are currently in process. Hence, the biggest changes in Irish post-primary education since 1989 could be destroyed.

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