

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills

ASTI Submission on Continuous Assessment and State Examinations

Friday 23rd February, 2018

Introduction

The ASTI welcomes the opportunity to make this submission. Education is a vital public service which affects the life-chances of individuals, communities and society. Its role in securing social and economic progress has never been as significant. It is therefore vital that our legislators are actively engaged in shaping broad education policy. This is a timely moment for the Joint Oireachtas Committee to look at the role of assessment and examinations as the advisory body, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, has now commenced a review of senior cycle education. This submission is structured as follows: a background note on assessment and examinations provides the context for the ASTI answers to the 17 questions from the Committee.

Background note on assessment and examinations

Assessment and examinations cannot be treated separately from the curriculum. The curriculum, by specifying the aims, content and desired outcomes, aims to promote quality teaching and learning. This takes place primarily in the classroom. Assessment aims to measure progress in learning and provide evidence of that progress to students and their parents.

There are different types of assessment currently in use in our schools. Teachers assess their pupils on a daily basis in that they provide feedback to students in order on their learning. This is supplemented by weekly, monthly and end-of-term tests. The state examinations are also a form of assessment in that they are a statement of students' learning at the end of a phase of education – junior and senior cycle. In the Irish context, the state examinations represent important 'milestones' in students' progress at second level. Because of this status, the ASTI has always insisted that these examinations are externally assessed in order to meet the criteria of fairness, transparency and objectivity. In other words, teachers should not assess their own students for the purposes of certification in the state examinations.

Continuous assessment takes place over a period of time. It can be internal or external. Weekly, monthly and termly tests by the subject teacher are by definition continuous but are internal to the school. There is also a form of continuous assessment in the State examinations in that project work, practical work and oral examinations are conducted in the two terms before the final written examinations in June.

However, in order to be fair, transparent and objective, this continuous assessment is conducted externally by experienced teachers as part of the quality control process of the State Examinations Commission. In the past when it has been suggested that this form of continuous assessment in the Leaving Certificate be extended back to 5th year, the general

consensus was that students would not have covered the two-year programme and it would not be appropriate or feasible to conduct such assessment.

In a sense, therefore, the important question is not whether there should be continuous assessment in the state examinations but, rather, *who* is conducting this assessment. For educational and social reasons, the ASTI has always insisted that such assessment must be externally conducted. The State Examinations Commission must continue to set, mark and award the accreditation to students.

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's 15-year olds are among the top achievers globally. The 2015 OECD PISA report placed Irish students 3rd in reading, 13th in both science and mathematics. Ireland's status is attributed to high quality teaching which ensures high standards generally in the system. The state examinations are central in maintaining these high standards.

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

There is already continuous assessment in the state examinations. What is critical is that this mode of assessment remains externally conducted to ensure fairness, transparency and objectivity.

3. *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?*

Currently, continuous assessment by way of project work, practical and oral examinations spreads out the workload on students and, as such, reduces some of the pressures as students approach the final examination.

4. *Are there risks associated with moving to a CA model?*

As noted above, there is already a form of continuous assessment in operation for the state examinations. The biggest risk to the fairness, transparency and objectivity of the state examinations would be any change to the current model of external assessment.

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

The Leaving Certificate state examination has an acknowledged strong international currency. This is underpinned by the fact that this examination is domestically and internationally perceived as meeting the criteria of fairness, transparency and objectivity.

6. ***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 external assessment of all parts of the state examinations – written, project, practical and oral – eliminates any potential for bias. As noted above, high education standards are maintained by externally assessed state examinations.

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

There is already continuous assessment in the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme. In common with the mainstream Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme, continuous assessment in the LCA is externally conducted.

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

High educational standards are strongly correlated to high levels of economic productivity. The 2006 OECD economic survey of Ireland stated that:

“..by raising employment and labour quality, the increasing educational attainment has contributed to 2.1 percentage points per annum to economic growth over the period 1994-2003.” (1)

The external assessment of the Leaving Certificate examination is central to maintaining educational standards and to sustaining confidence of both domestic and foreign investors in the quality of the school leaving qualification.

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

See under Q.8.

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

As noted under Q. 3 above, all students benefit when the workload for the state examinations is spread out. In terms of improving the achievement levels of students who are educationally disadvantaged, evaluations of DEIS indicate that factors such as high teacher expectations of students, supports for school attendance and retention, and a positive disciplinary climate in the schools are decisive.

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

See under Q. 10.

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

The current forms of continuous assessment – project work, practical work and oral examinations – are designed to assess students’ skills and knowledge which are not best demonstrated in a written examination. The former include problem solving, creativity, team work and oral communication – all vital competences for adult and working life.

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

As stated under Q.12, generic skills such as problem solving, creativity, team work and oral communication are assessed in the Leaving Certificate examination and prepare school leavers for third-level and all further learning and training. It is also worth noting that successive studies carried out since the introduction of the points system indicate that the Leaving Certificate continues to be a reliable predictor of student performance in higher education (2).

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

The NCCA has commenced a review of senior cycle education which promises an extensive engagement with all the education partners on curriculum change, including how best to assess students' learning.

15. *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 the standard practice that curriculum change is supported by a national inservice programme for teachers. The ASTI has always insisted that the latter must accompany curriculum change: investment in teachers' professional development must be part of curriculum change.

16. *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?*

Changes to curriculum and assessment are major developments in any education system. In the Irish context, the state examinations have a status that is perhaps historically unique. Teachers support externally assessed state examinations because they meet the professional requirements of any national examination, namely, that it is fair, transparent and objective. This support is mirrored in the wider society. The prolonged disagreement between the teacher unions and the Department of Education & Skills on the Framework for Junior Cycle underlines the strength of teachers' professional beliefs. Transformative curriculum change takes time: it also requires professional buy-in and confidence in the new model.

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

See under Q.16.

Notes

1. OECD (2006) *Economic Survey Ireland* (page 66)
2. NCCA/HEA (2011) *Entry to Higher Education in Ireland in the 21st Century: Discussion Paper for the NCCA / HEA Seminar 21st Sep 2011* (p.15)