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## PROFILES OF EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS WORLDWIDE

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### About the Republic of Ireland

The island of Ireland is the most westerly point of the European Union, and is divided into the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland and the 6 counties of Northern Ireland, the latter under the governance of the United Kingdom. This profile confines itself to an account of assessment in the Republic of Ireland; while there is ongoing cross-border cooperation between education systems north and south, significant differences remain, particularly in the areas of assessment and testing. Education in Northern Ireland is influenced by developments in England, although since the establishment of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly following the Belfast Agreement in 1998 to a somewhat lesser degree than previously.

The Republic of Ireland is a relatively new state. The year 2016 will mark the centenary of the uprising against British rule and the start of a war of independence followed by a civil war that resulted in the eventual establishment of the Irish state in 1922. Membership of the European Union—the European Economic Community as it was at the time—in 1972 marked something of a coming of age of the nation state, but it also marked the beginning of two decades of economic decline, emigration and economic stagnation. From the early 1990s, a series of economic and social policies including a low tax regime to support inward foreign investment, a programme for national recovery and a decision to deploy EU funding in human rather than infrastructural resources together along with some cultural coincidences—a young educated English-speaking workforce for example, resulted in the explosive period of economic growth generally referred to as the ‘Celtic tiger’. By 2004, a leader in *The Economist* referred to Ireland as the economic model causing the most excitement among emerging European states given its full employment and low public debt, noting that fifteen years ago Ireland was deemed an economic failure, a country that after years of mismanagement was suffering from an awful cocktail of

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high unemployment, slow growth, high inflation, heavy taxation and towering public debts (*The Economist*, 2004).

Recent accelerated economic growth has resulted in a change in the established pattern of emigration to immigration, not confined to returnees, but in recent years including hundreds of thousands of workers from Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. The slow decline of the influence of the Catholic Church in Ireland over the past 20 years has also accelerated in recent times, and this, together with new patterns of immigration, and greater wealth and ensuing consumerism, has seen unprecedented cultural and social shifts in the population of just over 4 million.

### **Schooling in the Republic of Ireland**

The school system in the Republic of Ireland is small by European standards—just 770 or so post-primary schools and 3,400 primary schools. Many of the latter are small, with half having four teachers or less.

While primary education has its roots in the school system established in the nineteenth century, universal post-primary education is relatively new, available to all only since the end of the 1960s. Administration for both primary and post-primary education is centralized, with vocational schools and community colleges having some regional governance through local Vocational Education Committees.

Schooling is compulsory for all children and young people between the ages of 6 and 16, although almost all five-year-olds and half of all 4-year-olds are in primary school. By the age of 17, just under 80% of the school cohort is still in full-time post-primary education. Primary school has eight class levels, two infant classes followed by first to sixth class. After sixth class, children transfer to larger post-primary schools which, although they may differ in governance or management structures, generally offer similar curricula.

The Education Act of 1998 is the first comprehensive piece of legislation regarding schools since the foundation of the State in 1922. It sets out the functions and responsibilities of all key partners in the schooling system and gives expression to the principles of education at the centre of the Irish system. It delineates the role of the board of management and the requirement for schools to have school plans. The promotion of parents' associations is encouraged, as is the establishing of student councils. Accountability procedures are set out in the legislation and the school inspection process is put on a statutory footing. The Act also includes statutory provision for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The latter advises the Minister for Education and Science on curriculum and assessment for early childhood education, and for primary and post-primary schools. The Department of Education and Science is responsible for education policy for schools as well as for the tertiary sector.

While the legislation supporting the school system is relatively recent, and the post-primary system only thirty years in existence, it is important to recognize that the tradition of education and of schooling in Ireland is an ancient one. From earliest times, the learned person, and their learning, has been highly valued in Irish society.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in times of extreme economic hardship, schooling was seen as a valuable asset and the key to escaping poverty and, usually, Ireland. In more recent times, strong associations exist, both in lay and in expert analysis, between the quality of the school system and the ‘Celtic tiger’ economy. The idea that the education system ‘has served the country well’ is well-supported, most recently in the new enterprise strategy for Ireland in the knowledge society, *Ahead of the Curve* (Enterprise Strategy Group, 2004). The strategy suggests, however, that if economic success is to be sustained, the education system faces increasing challenges.

The widespread cultural and economic support for schooling, together with strong performances in the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), particularly in reading achievement, means that compared to other school systems, Ireland’s is somewhat inert, and system-wide reform is rare. Issues such as low levels of literacy in schools serving poorer communities and families (Eivers *et al.*, 2005), and indiscipline in some post-primary schools (Task Force on Student Behaviour, 2006) have generated some concerns, but these generally translate into a clamour for additional resourcing of the current system, rather than demands for a radical shake-up of schooling. In this context then, it is to be expected that the waves of assessment-led reform that have swept across much of the developed world in recent decades are only now beginning to lap at the shores of the Irish republic.

### Assessment in schools

The analyses of Hall (2000) and subsequently of Hall and Kavanagh (2002) suggest that neither assessment policy nor assessment practice feature as strengths in the Irish education system. In their advice to the Minister for Education and Science on standardized testing in schools, the NCCA (2005) notes:

Teacher practice in assessment has developed largely due to the work of teachers themselves, and their concerns for improvement. Despite the absence of policy-makers’ attention, assessment has been the focus of an upsurge of public interest in and debate about the quality and outcomes of schooling. While schools and classrooms have been the focus of considerable teacher work on assessment, that work has not been supported, nor informed, by comprehensive and considered national policy on assessment in schools. (p. 14)

Hall suggests that in Ireland assessment policy is characterized by conceptual uncertainties, and practice by underdevelopment and lack of support. Few would contest this analysis, although recent developments, documented later in this profile have forced greater policy clarity and led to calls from teachers for greater support and professional development for classroom assessment practice.

The relative policy silence on assessment and testing to date is down to a number of factors. A report by the influential primary teachers’ union, the Irish National Teachers Organization (INTO) in 1997 offers an overview of these. It states that to date, ‘there has not been any groundswell of serious dissatisfaction over educational standards amongst teachers, parents, politicians, educationalists or other commentators’ (INTO, 1997, p. 4). The report suggests that debates in Ireland have concentrated on equity and resourcing rather than on standards. It further proposes that the

lack of any mandated testing in primary schools in particular, or of legislation to support it, is evidence of the lack of any political or public appetite for what is generally called assessment-led reform. While not referred to in the INTO report (INTO, 1997), it is likely that the negative backwash of developments in testing in England reached as far as Ireland and was a factor in the general silence on assessment.

The 1999 Primary School Curriculum makes strong claims for assessment from the outset proposing as one of the principles of the curriculum that ‘assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning’ (Government of Ireland, 1999a, p. 9). This ‘integral’ role is articulated further:

Assessment is central to the process of teaching and learning. It is used to monitor learning processes and to ascertain achievement in each area of the curriculum. Through assessment the teacher constructs a comprehensive picture of the short-term and long-term needs of the child and plans future work accordingly. (Government of Ireland, 1999a, p. 17)

The role of assessment in the diagnosis of special educational needs and in communicating with parents is also articulated in the introduction to the curriculum, and the curriculum, it is noted, ‘contains a wide variety of assessment tools’ (p. 18). These tools are not simply to assist teachers in assessing the products of learning, but also the ‘strategies, procedures and stages in the processes of learning ... Assessment includes the child’s growth in self-esteem, interpersonal and intrapersonal behaviour, and in the acquisition of a wide range of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values’ (Government of Ireland, 1999a, p. 18).

Given the rhetoric in the introduction to the curriculum, it might be expected that assessment would feature large across the curriculum; however this is not the case with generic statements about using a broad range of assessment tools, and some descriptions of the kinds of assessment tools that might be used including teacher observation, teacher-designed tasks and tests and ‘work samples, portfolios and projects’ (Government of Ireland, 1999b, p. 118).

Given the lack of clarity on how pupil progress is to be assessed, initial evaluations of the implementation of the 1999 curriculum in schools and classrooms reveal patterns of assessment practice that are not surprising, with teachers reporting observation as their most commonly used assessment tool in English, the visual arts and mathematics, but unable to provide descriptions of what was being observed, or how data collected in this way was used to provide feedback or inform planning (NCCA, 2005).

At present there is no system of national testing or assessment in primary schools, although most teachers use standardized tests in reading and mathematics to provide them with information on student achievement in these areas. In most cases the results are reported to parents. Monitoring of achievement in reading and mathematics of a national sample of the primary school cohort is conducted every four years on behalf of the Department of Education and Science by the Educational Research Centre and reported on publicly.

There is no test associated with transfer between primary and post-primary school, with the latter required to publish detailed admissions policies. However, tests organized by post-primary schools on entry or just before entry to post-primary

schools are used by the vast majority of schools (only 6% do not use them). Recent research showed that 26 different tests (some school designed) are currently in use. Principals of post-primary schools reported using the results of these tests to identify students who may require learning support, to provide base-line data for ongoing monitoring of students' achievement and to assist in allocating students to class groups in banded or streamed settings (Smyth *et al.*, 2004).

The transfer of information from primary to post-primary schools is not organized on a national basis, as there is no national system of recording and reporting, although moves in that direction are proposed (see below). Transfer of information on students' achievement between schools is locally organized and generally ad hoc, with post-primary schools more likely to receive verbal communications than written reports from feeder schools, and a majority of schools reporting no formal arrangements regarding the information received on incoming students.

In post-primary schools students take two state examinations, the Junior Certificate examination at the end of three years in post-primary education and the Leaving Certificate examination at the end of the senior cycle, or upper secondary education. The examinations are prepared, administered and marked by the recently established State Examinations Commission. Previously, examining was conducted by the Department of Education and Science. These examinations are similar in style, ceremony and content, being largely written tests, conducted over several days in June at the end of the school year. The Leaving Certificate examination was described by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment in recent reform proposals as 'the towering presence' on the educational landscape (NCCA, 2002, p. 45). Unlike its Junior Certificate counterpart, the Leaving Certificate is a gateway examination, associated with considerable high stakes. Examination results are converted into 'points' by the Central Applications Office and used to allocate places at university and other third-level institutions.

Of note is that examination results are not published on a school-by-school basis. The publication of results in this form or in any form that would allow for between-school comparison is barred by the 1998 legislation. This bar is generally seen as a response to criticism in England and elsewhere of the impact of so called school league tables, particularly in schools serving poorer communities. However, the issue remains contested, and annual publications by national media of rank ordering of 'top schools' based on the numbers of entries to particular universities (based on data gathered from the third level institutions) are the focus of considerable public interest and comment.

National data is published by the State Examinations Commission for both the Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations. This data generates much public debate and comment on an annual basis on issues such as achievement patterns within particular subjects and gender differences in performances in both examinations.

### **Towards development and reform**

Since the 1990s, in Europe and in the US assessment-led reform has become a significant component of the education policy ensemble. Such reform is credited with

promoting higher standards of teaching and learning and increasing the accountability of teachers and the education system generally (Gipps, 1994; Murphy & Broadfoot, 1995). More recently, the potential of classroom assessment as a tool for reform has been promoted in a range of developments under the headings of assessment for learning or feedback for learning (Tunstall & Gipps, 1996; Black, 1998).

In the Republic of Ireland, assessment in post-primary schools in the form of two formal and one high stakes certificate examinations, is almost universally presented as having a negative impact on curriculum, and on the educational experiences of students generally. The role of assessment as *a tool for reform* is rarely discussed with debate generally confined to assessment as the *object of reform*.

At the National Education Convention, for example, held in preparation for the drafting of the education legislation, it was noted that the examinations reinforce the subject-centred nature of teaching and learning to the detriment of cross-curricular work and efforts to develop thinking or problem-solving skills (Coolahan, 1994). Attempts by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (in its pre-statutory status) to negotiate consensus on reform of the Junior Certificate examination in the late 1990s met with little success, although they did lead to a developmental initiative with teachers and schools in assessment for learning in classrooms and schools as a means of providing much-needed support for teachers in this aspect of their professional practice. The relatively low stakes of the Junior Certificate examination—no ‘points’ awarded—meant that the press for reform was not strongly felt, and its role as a dry run for the Leaving Certificate was seen as significant by stakeholders.

Public submissions sought in 1998, during a review of the university entrance system, the ‘points’ system mentioned above, highlighted the negative impact of the Leaving Certificate examination. The report summarizing the submissions refers to the emphasis generated by the Leaving Certificate examination on a narrow range of academic skills, to the detriment of ‘many other qualities which young people need for life and work’ (Commission on the Points System, 1998, p. 114).

A 1998 report by the Conference of Religious of Ireland (CORI), representing many of those involved in the management of post-primary schools, concluded that the examination system as it stood was a significant contributor to educational inequality ‘because that system is a factor influencing many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to leave school early’ (CORI, 1998 p. 35), largely, they suggest, because they realize early on in their school careers that their chances of experiencing success in an examinations-driven environment, are limited.

In 2002, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) initiated a consultation on the future of the senior cycle of post-primary education, including the Leaving Certificate examination. On the latter, the consultation paper noted that while ‘a premium is placed on tried and trusted assessment modes and methods characterized by rigour, yielding results with a high level of reliability’ the validity of the assessment process, and the relationship between the assessment process and the aims and objectives of the curriculum were seen as ‘secondary concerns’ (NCCA, 2002, p. 43). The report prepared arising from the consultation process concluded ‘that there is universal agreement that the examination has to change. Such change

has the potential to transform the school experiences of students as well as the manner in which they are examined' (NCCA, 2003, p. 24).

The reform proposals which emerged from the consultation and review process for the future of the examination have focused on greater congruence between the aims and objectives of the curriculum and the examination process, greater variety in the examinations—more project, ICT-based and portfolio work—and less reliance on the terminal written papers, a greater spread of assessment, with less focus on the traditional June examination time. The development of short courses and transition units as new curriculum components are seen as offering new assessment possibilities. The finer details of the proposals are still in development; yet to be decided is whether the Leaving Certificate label will be replaced by a new school-leaving qualification in which examination results would play a significant part, but would not represent the qualification in its entirety. Contestation continues.

There has been no movement to introduce any form of assessment-led reform as has happened in the UK with the development of tests and league tables, and in the US with the No Child Left Behind policy of the federal administration. However, in July 2004, the Minister for Education and Science announced a controversial and unexpected proposal to introduce standardized testing in literacy and numeracy for all in compulsory education. A number of purposes for such an initiative were identified ranging from the identification of progress to the allocation of resources, to the provision of information for decision-making. He asked the NCCA to advise on the implementation of this proposal.

In developing its advice on the proposal, the NCCA drew heavily on its work in progress in supporting teacher assessment practice in primary classrooms and schools, and in filling some of the gaps in the 1999 curriculum on the nuts and bolts of assessment and reporting (Government of Ireland, 1999a). The NCCA operates on a consensus basis—before sending the advice to the Minister, the agreement of school managers, teacher unions and parent organizations is required.

The advice notes that standardized tests are already widely used in Irish primary schools 'on a regular basis to test a child's reading and mathematical skills and to measure children's progress in these areas (NCCA, 2005, p. 2). The advice warns of the danger, in making standardized testing a requirement, of the creation of what it terms an 'assessment hierarchy' with testing at the top and other forms of assessment assigned lesser status. Similar warnings are made about 'stakes' attaching to the tests or to the scores.

In moving to make proposals on testing, the advice draws on the Broadfoot and Black (2004) survey of ten years of assessment activity, notably their assertion that in recent times belief in the power of these forms of assessment to provide a 'rational, efficient and publicly accepted mechanism of judgement and control has reached its high point' (p. 19). The advice also points to Broadfoot and Black's signalling of a different set of assessment principles born out of educational priorities which view assessment as a 'powerful force in supporting learning, and a mechanism for individual empowerment' (p. 22). The advice recommends five areas of action; supporting and promoting good practice in assessment and reporting through the development



of report card templates for school use; standardized tests in literacy and numeracy for all children in primary schools at two points on their school career as part of good practice; supporting teacher judgement through making available ‘annotated examples of student work’ (NCCA, 2005, p. 22); pilot projects to consolidate good practice in transfer between primary and post-primary schools; and continuing ongoing work with teachers participating in an assessment for learning initiative in the junior cycle of post-primary schools. In addition, the NCCA advice suggests that further investment is needed in providing system-wide data

to assist schools in planning, to provide policy-makers with data on system effectiveness and improvement, to guide those who allocate resources, to inform the work of the NCCA and to report on the education system to the public at large. (p. 24)

Notably, the advice separates out the range of purposes for testing as originally announced by the Minister. System evaluation purposes are ascribed to the rolling sampling, while teaching and learning, and reporting to parents are purposes ascribed to the testing conducted by teachers and schools. The advice has been formally accepted and the roll-out of the strands of work is underway.

## Conclusion

The contrast between developments at primary and post-primary is significant. In the case of primary, in the space of a few years, the system has moved from relative silence on assessment to an emerging dialogue, in which teachers are very much included, on purposes, philosophies and practice. Attempts to address the assessment gaps in the 1999 curriculum are well underway, and while contentious issues such as the transfer of information from primary to post-primary schools remain, there is general agreement on the need for and directions of reform.

In post-primary schools, the silence is filled with the deafening noise of two formal public examinations, which, despite the efforts of the NCCA in its Assessment for Learning Initiative, drowns out the whispers of other assessment discourse. Whether the reform proposals for senior cycle education, and those for the reform of the Leaving Certificate examination can be heard above the din, remains to be seen.

## Notes on contributor

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