

Thursday 3 November 2011

Minister Quinn backs National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) proposals for junior cycle reform

The Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairí Quinn T.D., today officially launched proposals which will see radical changes in the way Junior Cycle students are taught and assessed in second level schools.

The NCCA proposals will address the problems of rote learning and curriculum overload while providing for greater creativity and innovation.

They are designed to strengthen key skills and provide for more relevant and flexible forms of assessment.

The Minister has asked his officials to begin discussions with the partners in education on implementing the proposals.

“I will also put the necessary arrangements in place to begin the assessment and consideration of the resource implications of the proposals,” he told an NCCA board meeting.

Minister Quinn welcomed the recommended limit on the number of subjects to be taken for qualification purposes, and the reduction in the content of syllabuses to make space for active learning and the embedding of key skills.

However, he indicated that these issues would have to be explored further in discussions on implementation, particularly in terms of what the changes would mean for timetabling and delivery in schools.

Last month he had agreed that the cap, limiting qualifications to a maximum of 8 subjects or equivalent, would not come into effect on a mandatory basis until the entrants beginning second level in 2014 were sitting their first examination in 2017.

However, he encouraged schools and students to move in this direction as soon as possible. The Minister stressed the importance of ensuring that ICT is strengthened across all subjects and short courses, and indicated reform in assessment was essential to provide real change in teaching and learning, and in the student experience.

He welcomed the proposal for a Level 2 award for those students with special needs for whom the junior certificate was unsuitable. He sought the co-operation of teachers and schools in implementing the proposed changes, which will begin on a phased basis in 2014 for first examination in 2017.

Speaking after the meeting, the chairperson of the Council, Prof. Tom Collins said that the launch of the proposals with the support of the Minister represented a historic achievement for the NCCA.

I was surprised to learn, that this was a third attempt at reforming this phase of education in the relatively recent era. It is evident that this time around, the alignment of the research findings, Ireland's PISA performance, concerns being expressed at school level about the quality of student engagement, developments in technology, the commitment of the Minister, and the insights and views of students themselves pointed us firmly towards change.

He also noted that the current social and economic crisis played a part in shaping the proposals and in giving an impetus to finding new solutions to old problems. He noted the shift in emphasis from describing what subjects are taught, to a focus on what students should learn and welcomed the 24 Statements of Learning for *all* students as a means to ensure equality between schools and readiness for senior cycle. He was particularly pleased, he said, to see the new qualification for students with special needs. He also paid tribute to the Council members for their engagement with the research findings and for the time they gave to developing and finalising the proposals.

Noting that the hard work of implementation was now underway, Dr. Anne Looney, Chief Executive of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, emphasised the scale of the challenge involved.

2014 may sound like a long time away, but it means that schools need to begin planning early in 2012. It means that children now in fourth class in primary school, who will leave post-primary school in 2020, will be the first to access the new qualification. Being ready is a big ask for a system more used to a slower pace of change, and to change of a modest scale. Supporting schools and supporting teachers who will lead the change will be critical to getting these proposals from the paper and from the screen into the learning and lives of students.

Copies of the proposals are on their way to post-primary schools, but the material is all available on www.ncca.ie/juniorcycle. *Anyone with an interest in the 2020 generation and their education and aspirations should take a look,* suggested Dr. Looney.

Notes for editors

The proposals for reform in junior cycle were submitted to the Minister for education and Skills in October 2011 and can be accessed at www.ncca.ie

The key elements of the proposals are:

- a revised junior certificate programme at Level 3 of the National Qualifications Framework (as at present), but with a cap on the number of subjects which can be taken for assessment for qualification purposes. The objective is to make time and space for active learning and the development of key skills, to place the focus on the process of learning rather than on the qualification/examination, and to address the issues of overload highlighted in ESRI transition studies. The Minister has recently signalled that the cap will not apply on a mandatory basis until new entrants to second level begin their junior cycle in 2014 (for first examination in 2017), but he has encouraged schools to move in this direction in the interim.
- All students will be required to cover 24 statements of essential learning which are focused on such areas as communications, language, mathematical concepts, critical thinking, citizenship and sustainable values, environmental, economic and social knowledge, consumer skills, ICT, creating and appreciating art, valuing local and national heritage and recognising the relevance of the past to the current national and international issues, well being, and ethical and responsible decision-making.
- Irish, English and Maths are core for all, except for those with an exemption from Irish. The syllabuses for all subjects will be specified at a **common level** by NCCA, except for Irish, English and Maths which will be specified at Ordinary and Higher Level. The State Examinations Commission is anxious to ensure that assessment mechanisms are designed to reward achievement of weaker students while stretching higher achievers. Appropriate differentiation in assessment will occur, and it is likely that some subjects, if not most, will have two levels of written examination. The initial indications are that Foundation Level assessment will be continued as at present for English, Maths and Irish.
- Schools will have discretion to provide for bottom up curriculum components as well as essential areas of learning in the form of short courses of 100 hours. NCCA will develop guidelines and a range of exemplars to support this.
- Subjects will be reduced to 200 hours, except for Maths, Irish and English which will be 240 hours.
- Students will have a limit on what can be taken for qualification purposes – a max of 8 subjects, or 7 subjects + 2 short courses, or 6 subjects + 4 short courses.
- 6 key skills will be embedded in subjects – Managing Myself, Staying Well, Communications, Being Creative, Working with Others and Managing Information and Thinking.
- **Subjects** will be assessed by means of a written examination set and marked by SEC, and a portfolio marked by the class teacher in the school, moderated by the school and subject to external moderation on a sample basis by SEC. The detailed arrangements for school and external moderation are still being

discussed with the SEC. The portfolio will generally attract 40% of the marks, and the written examination 60%, although there may be some variations by subject.

- **Short courses** will be assessed by means of a portfolio, and subject to internal moderation by the school. The term “portfolio” may include practical tests, (or events or school musicals in a short course context) as well as project or portfolio work, depending on the area of learning.
- The subject reforms will begin on a phased basis in 2014 for first examination in 2017. English will be implemented first in keeping with the priorities in the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.
- **Report card templates** will be developed by NCCA for reporting to parents on student’s progress. These would be available in 2012/13, for use by schools in 2013/14.
- The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy provides for **standardised testing** in English and Maths to be introduced in the 2nd year of junior cycle. (2014, for 2012 entrants).
- A review of the new forms of assessment would be completed by 2019 in order to inform the ongoing rollout.

Level 2 award for special needs students

There will be an additional award at level 2 of the National Framework of Qualifications for students with special needs.

The award will be based on 5 priority learning units – communicating and literacy, numeracy, looking after myself, living in a community, and preparing for work. Specifications will be developed by the NCCA. Assessment will be means of a portfolio, with internal moderation by the school, and sample external moderation by the awards body.