



Institiúid na gComhairleoirí Treorach

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INSTITUTE OF GUIDANCE COUNSELLORS

## **IGC Submission to NCCA on the Senior Cycle Review**

**25<sup>th</sup> of October 2019**

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25/10/2019

Dear Louise and Ben,

Thank you for offering the IGC a Bilateral Meeting to discuss our submission on the Senior Cycle Review. It was a thought provoking meeting and gave us ample opportunity to broaden our thinking and further process the content of our submission from the NCCA perspective. You have a challenging task ahead of you.

Please find attached:

- The IGC submission
- a sample of a flyer from one of our 16 IGC LMI CPD events to give you some context

If you need anything further feel free to come back to us. Wishing you all a rest next week.

Yours sincerely,

Beatrice Dooley

President of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors

## Submission from the IGC on the Senior Cycle Review

### Introduction

Who are we? The Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) is a professional body with 16 branches and over 1300 members. We represent guidance counsellors who work in a wide range of contexts, including second level schools, Further Education and Training (FET), Higher Education, Public Employment Services, Prison and Probation Services, Youth/Adult services and in private practice.

#### ESTABLISHMENT OF THE INSTITUTE OF GUIDANCE COUNSELLORS

The IGC was established in 1968. The Institute commits itself to the promotion of the highest standards in guidance counselling practice, training facilities and the provision and delivery of guidance counselling services. All members are graduates and hold a one or two year post graduate qualification in guidance counselling.

The National Executive conducts its work through a number of sub-committees which include: Continuous Professional Development (CPD), Qualifications and Membership, Policy, Guidance and the Labour Market, Adult and Continuing Education, Public Relations, Constitution, Finance.

UL, DCU and Maynooth University currently offer the post graduate qualification in guidance counselling. Members undertake CPD on an annual basis both at their annual conference and on a number of designated afternoons, we also attend counselling supervision five times annually.

### Previous recommendations communicated through our submissions

In our most recent Pre Budget Submissions we have requested enhanced allocations for guidance counselling in the form of a:

- Return to the pre 2012 circular for guidance allocation.
- In addition, an enhanced guidance allocation should be allocated to guidance counsellors ring fenced to facilitate our involvement in new initiatives such as: promoting apprenticeships, traineeships, to fully address the needs of students/clients identified as benefitting from additional guidance (e.g. students with SEN and/or socio-economic disadvantage), the increased number of anxious students presenting at our doors and the Junior Cycle Wellbeing programme.

We have also called for an Interdepartmental Approach:

- A coherent national long-term guidance counselling policy, developed by an interdepartmental group and key stakeholders.
- A guaranteed voice for guidance counsellors working with learners across the lifespan on all boards and committees with labour market and/ or mental health interests relevant to our work.
- A more structured Policy driven approach is needed to ensure that students are accessing good quality, appropriate and safe work experience during the senior cycle of second level schools.

## THE VALUE OF GUIDANCE COUNSELLING our role communicating apprenticeships

The potential value of guidance counselling is well established and it is multifaceted with benefits to both the individual and to the wider economy (Indecon 2019; Hooley and Dodd 2015; OECD 2018). Indecon (2019)<sup>1</sup> has recognised this in their report as they state:

“Enhanced career guidance also has the potential to reduce exchequer costs by contributing to tackling unemployment levels in certain cohorts of the labour force.” (p.72)<sup>2</sup>

The holistic approach to guidance counselling encompasses career, personal/social and educational guidance, all of which are intertwined and not separable.

- Career guidance counselling can ultimately increase the person’s employment prospects by increasing the students’/clients’ knowledge about the world of work, skills needs and different routes to employment; facilitate and encourage employer engagement; and help students/clients to develop career management skills which are needed in an uncertain future.
- Personal/social guidance counselling is an essential aspect of guidance counselling as a person’s wellbeing and mental health influence their ability to engage in education and the labour market. Students/clients who suffer from mental health issues are often reluctant to seek help from public health services, and some studies have found that guidance counsellors are often the only professionals they turn to (Dowling and Doyle 2017; Ystgaard et al. 2009).<sup>3</sup>
- Educational guidance counselling relates to student retention and attainment and to subject choices to match specific career paths for example.

The OECD (2018)<sup>4</sup> states that effective transitions to education and employment depend on intense guidance provision. They further describe guidance counselling as a “key tool to help students self-identify their aspirations and abilities”. Rapidly changing labour market and skills demands, in addition to complex transitions, intensify the need for guidance counselling.

Guidance counsellors work as a bridge between their clients across the lifespan and the world of industry. We are uniquely positioned to connect work opportunities with the potential labour force. We are a key resource in the labour market with access to the entire potential labour market and their parents and are pivotally positioned to communicate labour market openings to potential employees.

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<sup>1</sup> Indecon (2019) *Indecon Review of Career Guidance*, available: <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/indecon-review-of-career-guidance.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Indecon (2019) *Indecon Review of Career Guidance*, available: <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/indecon-review-of-career-guidance.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Dowling, S. and Doyle, L. (2017) ‘Responding to self-harm in the school setting: the experience of guidance counsellors and teachers in Ireland’, *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 45:5, 583-592, DOI: 10.1080/03069885.2016.1164297

Ystgaard, M., Arensman, E., Hawton, K., Madge, N., van Heeringen, K., Hewitt, A.,...Fekete, S. (2009) ‘Deliberate self-harm in adolescents: Comparison between those who receive help following self-harm and those who do not’, *Journal of Adolescence*, 32, 875–891.

<sup>4</sup> OECD (2018) *Working it out: Career guidance and employer engagement*, available: [http://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=EDU/WKP\(2018\)11&docLanguage=En](http://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=EDU/WKP(2018)11&docLanguage=En)

We have asked all of our labour market stakeholders for improved communications about these opportunities which we can then impart to our students/clients. Many have answered our call, see attached flyer on the IGC national baseline LMI (Labour Market Information) CPD.

### **Recommendations to maintain what is working and improve the current Senior Cycle structure**

#### ***First steps***

The DES need to evaluate the broader vision underpinning the Junior Cycle before initiating change to the Senior Cycle. An area of particular concern is anecdotal accounts from teaching colleagues about the stress caused to students by CBAs. It would make sense to have an awareness of what is working well and what needs to be reworked from this radical overhaul of the Junior Cycle before continuing in the same vein with a re-imagined Senior Cycle. We advise evidence be gathered to explore the impact of learning. This is aligned to the basic tenet of Cosán that we need time to process, reflect, evaluate and adapt our learning. Focus groups of students/teachers/parents engaging in a simple model of reflection such as: “What, So what? Now what?” would support a community of practice and do much to ensure buy in from stakeholders. This should not be too time intensive. Sometimes, in Ireland, we can be reactive to critique and swing from one extreme to another, so we would recommend caution and an evidence based approach to potential change. NCCA will be criticised whatever they decide, but with evidence to back decisions made they are on firm footing.

#### ***Aspects of current Leaving Certificate system worth protecting:***

The existing integrity of an examination that is anonymous, objective and the same for everyone should be preserved. A significant part of the final grade should be attributed to such an exam. Why? Because preparing for an exam is an important life skill that replicates and prepares students for high stakes tasks they will be required to perform under pressure in their careers and which if they fail they will be replaced by peers who can. e.g. Sales representative, pilot, surgeon. Most jobs require us to perform to a set standard and to respond to events that we may not expect or be fully prepared for. e.g. A critical incident in a school like the suicide of a student. That life is a competition, that we can learn from failure and that it does not cripple us is an essential life skill that all students need to learn. With recent changes to grading, we are protecting students from failure. This is neither healthy nor wise as, when they leave school they will be unable to cope with failure in the world of work if they have never picked themselves up from a disappointment or re-invented themselves after a failure in their formative years. People of our generation will tell you that we learned more about ourselves and truly developed self-awareness about the full extent of our innate abilities when we failed or faced significant threats. This is when real learning occurs.

#### **Suggestions to improve the Senior Cycle structure**

The work of 5<sup>th</sup> year and TY should be considered in calculating the overall Senior Cycle grade. In our role as guidance counsellors, practically every student we meet at the start of 6<sup>th</sup> year laments: “I wish I had worked harder in 5<sup>th</sup> year, but I just could not motivate myself after TY”. Incorporating elements of 5<sup>th</sup> and TY years’ work into the overall Senior Cycle grade would focus our students to work consistently through TY and 5<sup>th</sup> year and be better prepared for the workload and stress of 6<sup>th</sup> year. Because teenagers operate predominantly in the present tense and do not have the same relationship with future events as adults do, projects or tasks that are graded as part of continuous assessment, need to take place within a number of weeks, 8 max. Oral and aural components of languages could be assessed in 5<sup>th</sup> year, likewise presentation, written or practical projects in other subjects. We could employ elements of credit-based systems such as those used in Queensland and Ontario where students accumulate credits over the course of the upper secondary cycle upon completion of

modules or coursework. Ideally this would be combined with a terminal examination in the final year or a system like in France where written, oral and practical examinations are externally set and marked.

### **Role of guidance counsellor in re-imagined Senior Cycle**

We cannot over emphasise the importance to adolescents of the one to one appointment. The individual appointment with their guidance counsellor affords each individual we meet psychological space to process information, to start imagining themselves in different situations and begin the journey of making key educational and vocational decisions in a non-judgemental safe space. Typically we meet our students on a one to one basis on Senior Cycle, this is already too late as in First year they have started shedding subjects which have life altering ramifications for them on moving to the next educational cycle of their educational journey. Consider the constraints offered by minimum requirements and specific requirements for entry to many courses.

### **IGC specific recommendations –**

#### ***Provide students with significantly more access to their school guidance counsellor on a one to one basis***

Guiding students into the optimum educational or vocational pathway given their unique set of aptitudes, abilities, academic history, personality, work values, preferred ways of working and individual cocktail of learning styles, requires an individual appointment with a qualified guidance counsellor as an absolute prerequisite to making an informed choice about their next step. The guidance counsellor is the only person in the school with access to all of this information and with the necessary training to guide the learner in a journey of self-awareness with reference to all of the above.

The IGC are calling for enhanced guidance allocations to enable us to meet with students individually in Junior Cycle and more frequently in Senior Cycle. For many years now we have called for increased allocations to allow us time to access all students on an individual basis starting in Junior Cycle, the earlier the better.

Guidance counsellors are all too cognisant of the lifeline offered by vocational educational to a significant cohort of our students. Working in schools, Youth and Adult Services we are strategically positioned to demonstrate to students of all abilities how choosing FET, apprenticeships, traineeships, internships are valid options. We can explain to ambitious students of all abilities, the progression pathways proposed in the apprenticeship review, how they work and to what level they can progress over their lifetime culminating with a level 9 or 10 qualification or at Master Craftsman level if they so wish. The same is true of the FET route to Higher Education or employment and the level 6 and 7 options offered in Institutes of Technology nationwide. We meet all of our students on a one to one basis in Senior Cycle and in class. We also make presentations to the parents of most year groups on an annual basis.

Students equipped to supply medium and low skills in the labour market need a higher level of support and direction from the guidance counsellor than their peers if they are to achieve their full potential. These students typically present with low levels of self-confidence and self-awareness, they need regular input from their guidance counsellor to work out what their unique skill set is and to nurture the fragile process of bolstering a new found self-esteem. For students who are predominantly kinaesthetic learners, the traditional learning experience which still dominates second level education can be a soul destroying experience, this category of student typically excel in hands on, practical

learning situations. Regardless of school type a more democratic exposure to practical subjects is needed to appeal to these students, especially in all single sex schools. We agree with our students that schools need to provide more access to the kinds of learning which support students who wish to access apprenticeships, traineeships and direct employment.

In the City and Guilds report “Young People and Vocational Choices in Ireland” (June 2013)<sup>5</sup> it emerged that respondents required more information available in schools to help them judge whether vocational education can support their career choices; according to this report students currently perceive vocational training to be less challenging and less prestigious than academic education. The transferable skills which can be learned in vocational education need to be emphasised and the concept of Lifelong Learning must be inculcated in our system.

If these students become switched off at school and have no-one to join the dots for them they are in danger of not signing up for apprenticeships. In many schools, the guidance counsellor’s first opportunity to interact with their students on an individual basis is in 5<sup>th</sup> year. By then it is too late to retain or influence students disenchanted in Junior Cycle. We need timely access to our students to identify potential apprenticeships at the very latest by 3<sup>rd</sup> year. Ideally in First year.

“Educational aspirations are formed as early as junior cycle, remaining relatively stable thereafter, and are highly predictive of the actual routes taken two or three years later.” (McCoy & Byrne, 2014, p61).<sup>6</sup> It is not sufficient to merely identify these individuals; they also need regular encouragement and guidance which is vocational, educational, social and personal in nature to counteract their low self-esteem and lack of supports.

### ***Entry requirements for the next educational / vocational cycle and lack of movement between pathways***

We have concerns about the ramifications of any changes to existing subject and grading practices on students who need to meet minimum and specific subject requirements for colleges. Any change at the assessment stage needs to be meticulously aligned with all entry points to vocational and academic options at the next stage of their educational journey. This will require comprehensive collaboration from all of the educational partners and labour market stakeholders. An expansion of the current FET system, or some similar stepping stone to serve as the foundation year of third level for all may offer a solution to this challenge.

We need to remember in all of this that the welfare of the student is paramount and a more flexible system than currently exists would be welcome. e.g. If a student starts one apprenticeship and a few weeks in wishes to change to another that should be feasible. If a student wishes to transfer from one college course to another there should be some flexibility here other than repeat the year and lose several thousand euros worth of fees not to mention one years’ worth of potential earnings in the work force. Recognition of Prior Learning at all levels of education would be welcome as our system is quite rigid. In our current system, it is difficult for students to combine different types of learning (generally labelled academic, technological, artistic/creative, vocational and professional). It would engender creativity and out of the box solutions to policy, economic, cultural and ecological challenges

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<sup>5</sup> “Young People and Vocational Choices in Ireland” (City & Guilds, June 2013)

<sup>6</sup> McCoy, et al. (2014) *Leaving School in Ireland: A Longitudinal Study Post Leaving Certificate Transitions*. Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI)

facing us if we could allow flexibility here allowing students to dip into and draw on different disciplines. In Finland, the Netherlands, France, Ontario, Queensland and England students can pick a variety of course components or vacillate between them, this allows them to change a course more suited to emerging interests and careers goals. Is this something we can explore?

### ***Range of subjects***

We have concerns about how you will determine what basic subjects should be taken. There is too much focus on languages in the current system. More dialogue with SOLAS and the Future Skills groups would enhance these options greatly as they are currently out of date and out of synch with skill shortages in the Irish labour market. Most Irish middle class students end up choosing 3 languages to allow themselves a greater scope of course options in 3<sup>rd</sup> level. This is because most students do not know what course they wish to pursue until well into 6<sup>th</sup> year and they need to keep their options open. By this time they have made their subject choice and are limited by it. How many of these students would have picked languages a year earlier if they knew what they now know? Ironically few of these students will pursue languages in their studies in college. Again more flexibility around subject choice would be welcome. Perhaps students could change/shed some of their subjects in 6<sup>th</sup> year?

Can we explore the option of allowing students more choice in what they study and how. Can we either offer students:

- The option of choosing an area of interest to them relevant to their subject and completing an original piece of work on it, for assessment in a method of their choosing or
- Replace an entire subject option by one large piece of work as above that focusses on a skill instead of a particular subject. This may lead to cross curricular work not unlike the TCD Capstone project.

### ***Skills education urgently needed and work experience opportunities for all students***

The IGC would also welcome some input for students on skills education in Senior Cycle. This is a role we could carry if properly resourced, given that most of us deliver guidance classes to one or two of the three Senior Cycle year groups. This should take place as early as possible, ideally in the year immediately after Junior Cycle.

We would also love to see an introduction of two distinct and unrelated opportunities for work experience for all students regardless of which Leaving Certificate route they pick (this is currently limited to TY, LCA, LCVP). This requires a serious buy in from Industry to step up and supply meaningful work experiences for students of all abilities and to forge relationships with their local schools. There will be Garda vetting and Child Protection issues in this. This will also create a need for school personnel to coordinate this work experience from the school. The guidance counsellor is ideally situated to do this given that providing vocational guidance is part of our brief and we are the only staff member in the school with a holistic view on each student. We are already doing this work in a piecemeal way and lack resources, mainly time, to lay down the scaffolding that is required to support this as it could be rolled out.

### ***IGC collaboration with LM stakeholders since December 2019***

Both the Action Plan for Education and the Indecon report, emphasise the importance of 'employer engagement' and the development of apprenticeships and traineeships. IGC is one step ahead with our current CPD on Labour Market Skills Shortages and New Initiatives in the areas of Apprenticeships and Traineeships. This up to date CPD was developed by us in collaboration with SOLAS, Future Skills, Institutes of Technology, ETBs, local employers and apprenticeship providers, such as ESB, CIF, ATI and

CareersPortal. One of the effects of this CPD has been that guidance counsellors from all 16 of the IGC branches will ultimately be equipped with cutting edge information about labour market skill shortages and new initiatives around apprenticeships and traineeships, information they can communicate to their students through one to one appointments, in class and to their parents during annual presentations.

Furthermore, guidance counsellors are afforded the opportunity to network with LM stakeholders and to invite them to their schools to present at Careers Events, to work with them to organise appropriate work placements for their students. Already, participating apprenticeship providers have reported they are visiting schools more frequently at the invitation of the guidance counsellors who attended this CPD.

It is our further recommendation that time would be allotted at these LMI CPD events to present to parents and to communicate the facts around apprenticeships to them:

- 🗣️ The wide range of apprenticeships on offer with almost 60 apprenticeships currently on offer ranging from Traditional Craft Apprenticeships to IT, Finance, Auctioneering...
- 🗣️ How apprentices “earn as they learn” and how much!
- 🗣️ That apprenticeships suit smart people

This parental input needs to happen if the government are to meet their targets with reference to take up of apprenticeships and badly needed trainees.

We are also concerned that our entrepreneurial students are not adequately supported in our current Senior Cycle. These creative students need mentors in their area of interest to take them on and teach them everything they know, champion them as fledgling entrepreneurs. A Dragons Den style assessment process would be a very appropriate assessment means for this group of students, local employers could sit on this panel using an assessment template provided by NCCA. Guidance counsellors are positioned to identify who these students are and Industry could supply appropriate mentors. Many companies value these community relations and are actively encouraging their employees to give to their local community in different ways. For example, by collaborating with the school guidance counsellor, Ernst and Young participate in Mock Interview events in a school local to them and train up a number of employees in Interview Techniques for this purpose. This resource could be offered in every school in Ireland if different organisations got involved and those organisations satisfy their community service obligation. This could be a win win situation.

### ***(Special Educational Needs) SEN***

Exceptionally able students are not catered for in this country outside of private schools. This calibre of student typically goes overseas to study in 3rd level as they are disenchanted with 2<sup>nd</sup> level having been left to stagnate and thread water for 6 years at second level. This is a huge loss to the economy as few of these students return, if any yet most of them will benefit from a SUSI grant (funded by Irish taxpayers) which travels with them. Imagine the contribution just one of these people could make to solve some of our current economic, political, cultural, ecological challenges to name but a few. This calibre of student needs comprehensive options about what they can study and to what level. Look at the United States treatment of these students where they can take modules in college even whilst attending High School. These students need to be stimulated, challenged, and given the freedom to choose what they pursue, instead we force them to literally thread water and under achieve right through second level school. Our current system is failing these students and they vote with their feet the moment they complete the all-important Leaving Certificate, usually the flight they book is a one way ticket.

Guidance counsellors spend significant time meeting with SEN students to support them at times of emotional distress, application form filling, DARE and HEAR applications. We would posit that these students would benefit from additional time with us for all of the above. We would welcome a less complex HEAR and in particular DARE process and can be overwhelmed from a workload perspective when supporting upset students writing personal accounts of how they struggle to learn and survive in the current educational system. As their needs, obstacles and situations vary tremendously there is not one size fits all and the best remedy is individual time to work through what is upsetting them.

We would concur with your findings that more phased assessments and different forms of assessment (practicals, projects) would suit SEN students better than the current examination system.

## **Conclusion**

We recognise the tension between maintaining the momentum of the Review and moving forward with progress, crafting a re-imagined Senior Cycle that is aligned to what is best about the Junior Cycle whilst having the courage to shed what is not working.

We are intrigued by international best practice

-  What is happening in Japan to nurture budding entrepreneurs
-  A movement towards greater flexibility of programmes and pathways is evident in Finland, the Netherlands, France, Ontario, Queensland and England. Students can combine different elements or move between programmes, so they are not confined in a track or with a pathway which does not suit their learning style or vocational goals. Students can complete part of their study in the workplace or in the local community. Students and parents, supported by teachers and guidance counsellors determine the pathway students pursue through upper secondary. Enhanced resourcing of career guidance as well as more flexible pathways would be required if this broader perspective were to be achieved.

We are also cognisant that we do not have the same resources at our disposal as our international counterparts and therefore need to plan within our means. Can we afford these options? Can we sustain them? Are they the correct fit for our culture? How much are the DES actually willing to invest in the next generation? Will this be a high quality Senior Cycle or a yellow pack option? Forgive us if we are cynical given the recent pudding bowl haircut to our allocations and the continued vagueness about their restoration.

We get that the purpose of the Senior Cycle is to prepare our students and future workforce for the next cycle of their education/employment. We understand that the priority here is to support all of our learners on that journey. That is the big picture. To make the curriculum more inclusive, students are requesting more access to the kinds of learning which support students who wish to access apprenticeships, traineeships and employment directly from school. NCCA needs to be disruptive, to challenge the educational partners and stakeholders whilst managing courageous conversations about how we can collectively narrow the gap between our individual values and professional practice. It is only by placing the learner centre stage in this process that you will achieve this goal because ultimately that is the shared value of all participants in this dialogue. We are all in agreement that greater flexibility to allow students to navigate different pathways through senior cycle is desirable for the purpose of preparing progression onto higher education, further education, apprenticeships, traineeships and the working world. We also support a process that would allow second-chance opportunities for those wishing to return to senior cycle following an interruption to full-time education, this is a challenge for a cohort of our students every year for health, bereavement or financial reasons.