



Opening Statement to the

Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills

6 March 2018

In relation to **'Continuous Assessment for State Examinations'**.

1. Thank you for the invitation to meet with the Joint Committee to discuss the topic of **'Continuous Assessment for State Examinations'**. As Director General and Director Academic Affairs of the Irish Universities Association we have been asked to represent the universities in this important discussion with you.
2. This opening statement and our contributions to the discussion are based on and heavily informed by the written submissions we understand the Joint Committee has already received on this topic, from our colleagues in UCC, UCD, NUIG and UL. Our contributions today will also reflect additional comments and suggestions gathered from the other universities also, from the broader work of the Irish Universities Association in recent years in the Transitions Reform process, and ongoing developments in undergraduate education across the Irish university system.
3. The Transitions Reform process seeks to facilitate better outcomes for students transitioning between second and third level, through fostering critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaborative working as key skills, all through active student engagement in the learning process. This approach has been welcomed and supported by the Irish universities, and employers and professional bodies also emphasise the importance of such skills as fundamental to their own requirements. These broad skills, when combined with discipline knowledge and expertise, will enhance both the professional and personal ambitions and competences of Ireland's third-level graduates. We expect that greater use of a range of continuous

assessment methods as part of the State Examinations process would also contribute significantly to these ongoing developments in the Irish education system.

4. The university submissions already received by the Joint Committee provide considerable background discussion on the concept of Continuous Assessment and the various contexts and ways in which this can take place. Our brief opening statement today does not seek to repeat these, but aims simply to highlight some of the main potential benefits and risks for State Examinations which may be associated with Continuous Assessment, and then to list some of the most important enabling measures and conditions which will be needed for Continuous Assessment to be used in State Examinations in pursuit of the overall goals of the State's education and skills strategies and policies.

5. Benefits:

5.1 Continuous assessment is a way to ensure that all learners have opportunities to succeed in school. By continually observing learners, monitoring what they know and can do, teachers can make sure that all learners are making progress in a holistic way over a period of time. This assessment information can then feed back into the learning process to ensure continued progress. This is what good teachers do every day in their classrooms, irrespective of the type of examinations system in place. The high-stakes terminal Leaving Certificate Examinations currently in place in Ireland mean however that this good practice is often sacrificed in order to prepare for the exam.

5.2 Regular ongoing assessment (i.e. continuous assessment) also means that teachers can use a range of assessment tools and methods to assess learners in a variety of different ways. Research indicates that continuous assessment, using different tools and methods at various points on the learning pathway, allows for greater flexibility in teaching and learning and provides a more accurate and robust overview of student progress and performance than methods that provide a single 'snap shot' through formal examination. In addition, this allows the teacher to assess various components of learning in different ways, providing a better overall picture of the learner's knowledge and skills.

5.3 School can be a major stress in young people's lives, especially when the stakes of educational performance are high, as in Ireland. This can apply to continuous assessment as well as to formal state examinations. There are however particular benefits that continuous assessment can bring in relation to increasing the well-being of students, and it is likely to reduce the pressure associated with preparing for final exams. Continuous assessment gives a better-rounded and nuanced profile of the student over time, and a range of assessment methods and tools will respond better to a student's interests and strengths. It can also maximise student motivation, since the student has more choice and can feel that the assessment is doing him/her justice. It allows both the learner and their teacher to understand where they need to improve at an earlier stage. Any particular 'problem areas' can be addressed during the learning process thus improving learning and reducing pressure.

5.4 Continuous assessment activities focus on student understanding rather than their ability to memorise. Assessment should require learners to think, express their thoughts, and demonstrate their skills. Such assessment enables learners to get a deeper understanding than if they were simply memorising information for a test. Moreover, learners benefit from receiving ongoing feedback about their learning from their teachers. Continuous assessment activities help learners to measure if they are making progress or not. This knowledge can also help learners know where to focus, thus improving their learning efforts. A well-designed continuous assessment approach can also involve students more directly in the learning process, leading to improved engagement in school.

5.5 The greater emphasis on skills related to critical thinking, reflection, teamwork and creativity in school curricula are also more appropriately assessed over a continuum in time and through multiple methods. A consistent critique of high stakes 'one off' examinations is the narrowing impact on what and how students learn.

5.6 A broader assessment base would be more suitable in terms of responding to the diverse range of learning strengths and needs now evident throughout our post-primary

schools. The current examination model restricts the opportunities for students with special educational needs to demonstrate their learning. Students who experience difficulty with aspects of literacy, memory, concentration, mobility and anxiety are immediately disadvantaged.

6. Risks:

6.1 Integrity: Considering the high-stakes nature of State Examinations, there would be constant and significant challenges in relation to maintaining the integrity of the assessment process. Familial and local links would be one aspect, but there would be a whole range of interpersonal relationships and pressures to be negotiated. There are elements of continuous assessment already in place at present at Senior Cycle (oral examinations, field work, practical examinations etc). Despite the fact that these are corrected externally, the integrity of these assessments is a constant challenge and source of tension. It is vital to maintain public trust and confidence in the State Examinations system, and in particular to design safeguards to the process which visibly reduce the potential for manipulation (real and perceived).

6.2 Validity/Reliability/Consistency: With thousands of teachers involved in the assessment process, each with different competencies, attitudes, experience and experiences, maintaining consistency across such a large group would be a significant challenge. We need however to trust and empower our teachers as professionals. It is indeed possible to mitigate this risk by ensuring that continuous assessment has robust criteria defined in sets of standardised but flexible, instructional rubrics, for example, that make teaching and learning objectives and outcomes visible for students, for staff and for parents. Continuous assessment is still an accountable process, much more so than a terminal exam system that can be shrouded in secrecy and in normative assessment. Rigorous and comprehensive external monitoring and moderation processes, organised by DES and SEC, will be needed, as well as initial training, CPD, ongoing support and resources (including the necessary time). The assessment of students' work is a key issue that deserves the necessary investment of time and other resources.

6.3 In light of the recent positive changes at Junior Cycle there is an impetus for change at Senior Cycle. However, the new Junior Cycle is still a work in progress and as such there is no data, as of yet, in relation to the effectiveness/experiences of the classroom-based assessments. Before any move in this direction rigorous investigation and research into international best practice is required, including how the various forms of assessment could be best used in the Leaving Certificate context, with stakeholders consulted and brought on board.

6.4 There are risks in moving to a continuous assessment model if it is the ONLY model adopted. It will also depend on what combination of continuous assessment and terminal exam is used. Many students and teachers prefer the existing terminal exam system and may resist change. In the short term, there is a risk of resistance and of negativity. In the current situation, carrying through the full set of reforms involving continuous assessment at Junior Cycle might be a prudent first step. This can help teachers to manage the change at a lower-stakes level, thus helping to address teachers' attitude towards 'risk-taking' and change in practice. It should be recognised that there is currently a quite limited culture of continuous assessment in our post-primary schools i.e. not all subjects use this to count towards State certification.

7. Enabling measures and conditions:

7.1 Internationally, there is an increased emphasis on developing education skills that match 21st century needs, with the OECD having a significant impact on policies in this area. The greater recognition of skills related to confidence, creativity, critical thinking, teamwork, ethics, resilience and learning to learn are not so open to assessment in a one-off terminal examination. Continuous assessment in itself will not equip students with 21st century skills. This requires curriculum reform and appropriate training and development for teachers, which is currently happening in the reforms being introduced at Junior Cycle level.

7.2 Continuous assessment is not a new phenomenon in the Irish education system and is widely employed in Further and Higher Education. Continuous assessment in these contexts is guided by processes of quality assurance which include both internal (within the

educational institution) and independent external oversight to ensure integrity, transparency and accountability of process, and comparability of standards at a national (and indeed international) level. As already mentioned, these processes will be needed if continuous assessment is to be used widely in the State Examinations system.

7.3 Professional development will of course be vitally important. The success of continuous assessment relies on the ability of teachers to use appropriate teaching methodologies to assist learners in developing the skills and supports that this more applied and independent approach to learning and assessment requires. If teachers are to play a greater role in the assessment of learning, assessment should therefore become a key part of instructional practice and in initial teacher education programmes.

7.4 Many reforms are identified as having a potential positive impact on student learning and outcomes. The biggest lesson to be learned is the 'management' of the teachers' responses and engagement with the 'new' teaching, learning and assessment approaches. We will need to move away from the traditional, didactic and information/fact-led approach to learning and develop an approach that is truly facilitative and less content restricted at Leaving Certificate. This mindset change will not be unlike the principled-based approach now being implemented in the Junior Certificate.

7.5 Teachers' assessment literacy skills will need to be developed. A range of assessment tools and methods to capture different types of learning will need to be designed, and assessment principles of validity, reliability and fairness will need to be adhered to. A greater assessment workload will be placed on teachers and this will involve time for marking, issuing formative feedback and record keeping.

7.6 It should be noted that continuous assessment is not a panacea, but a way of profiling students fairly over time and giving them a chance to play to their strengths and their interests. However, an extended programme of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for staff and an extended campaign to educate parents about the long-term benefits of continuous assessment in the context of life-long learning is absolutely necessary to the introduction of continuous assessment. Currently, we do not have the necessary infrastructure in place to make continuous assessment mandatory in the short-term.

8. Conclusions:

In this statement we have summarised some of the expert submissions which you have already received from the individual universities. There is considerable international evidence that the planned and considered use of continuous assessment in State Examinations can bring many benefits for students and their learning processes, behaviours and outcomes. There are also a number of important risks which would need to be addressed if such approaches were to be introduced systematically in Ireland for the Leaving Certificate. We have also outlined a number of the enabling measures we believe would help in making this possible.

The universities would be pleased to work closely with the relevant authorities in addressing this important topic with significant potential for the future of Irish post-primary education.