

Reform of the Junior Cycle in Secondary School



Irish Business and
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'IBEC believes that radical reform of junior cycle teaching methods and curriculum content could have a profound impact on education outcomes including the development of critical thinking and moving away from the dominance of rote learning. ... Therefore it should be regarded as a priority area for policy attention and investment.

IBEC 2011 Budget Submission

Introduction

Ireland's education system played a key role in our economic transformation over the last three decades. As we move into an extremely challenging time, the system is being called upon again to innovate and change in several fundamental ways, if we are to meet new demands coming from the workforce, employers and society. While relatively few young people now enter the workforce with a junior certificate qualification, business is keenly aware of the cumulative nature of educational success. The origins of - for example - an effective national skills strategy or a plentiful supply of fourth level researchers are traceable as far back as the quality of the school system and the inculcation of an appetite for learning from an early age. Therefore business regards this as the priority area for reform.

Junior Cycle: purpose, nature and identity

Key skills have become a focus of developments at all levels of education systems around the world. Moving from a content based to a more skills based learning model at an early stage is more likely to equip students with 21st century skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, design, innovation, communications and creativity.

For the last 21 years, the junior certificate has been little more than a dress-rehearsal for the leaving certificate and a guide for making decisions around subject choice. Yet its over-crowded, rigid and subject-based curriculum dominates secondary school organisation and teaching practice. This concerns business and employers. It represents a major missed opportunity to develop the types of higher order thinking skills that figure so large in policy discourse.

Clearly, the secondary education system fulfils a vital role in society that extends well beyond the that of satisfying enterprise's needs for skills or research. However we should not view the requirement for workplace skills and the cultivation of the intellect and values as some zero sum game. Business and educators have a shared objective of developing adaptable, well-rounded, creative, cultured and ethically minded citizens who have an appetite for learning. Translating these shared aspirations into something more tangible is the major challenge.

Recommendations:

1. **A junior cycle education should help the students to develop the type of minds they will need to thrive in the 21st century.** Gardner (2008) has explored the intellectual approaches managers and employees will need to function successfully in the 21st century¹. They will need to be experts in a least one area (*The Disciplined Mind*). As synthesisers, they will need to be able to gather together information from disparate sources and put it together in ways that work for themselves and can be communicated to other persons (*The Synthesising Mind*). Because almost anything that can be formulated as rules will be done well by computers, rewards will go to

¹ Five Minds for the Future, Howard Gardner, Harvard Business Press (2008)

creators – those who have constructed a box but can think outside it (*The Creating Mind*). The world is becoming increasingly inter-connected and diverse. Accordingly, we must respect those who differ from us as well as those with whom we have similarities (*The Respectful Mind*). Finally, as workers and as citizens, we need to be able to act ethically – to think beyond our own self-interest and to do what is right under the circumstances (*The Ethical Mind*).

2. **A junior cycle education should help the learner develop a strong relationship with, and understanding of, learning.** If this purpose is met at a critical time in a young person's life, other benefits such as the provision of a solid foundation for senior cycle study, personal development and preparation for a life time of learning will follow. From a business perspective, the capacity to adapt quickly and to continue learning are important factors influencing success in the workplace.

Pathways towards change

3. **Teacher quality and professional development should be acknowledged as the most important factors influencing junior cycle reform.** The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers and international evidence suggests that the empowerment of the teaching profession produces good results. Teachers should not be seen as technicians whose work is to implement strictly dictated syllabi, but rather as professionals who have the space for innovation to improve learning for all. Therefore the success of the reform process will depend on the flexibility of teachers and the allocation of adequate resources to their continuing professional development. The Teaching Council has a major role to play in fostering and improving the quality of teaching. Therefore, the forthcoming policy on the teacher education continuum should take into account the implications of a new approach to teaching the junior cycle. The elements of the Teaching Council Acts 2001 and 2006 relating to continuing professional development of teachers should also be commenced without delay.
4. **The autonomy of school leaders should be strengthened to adapt junior cycle curriculum delivery to local contexts.** Business welcomes the emphasis in a recent National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) consultation document on schools having more scope to customise the curriculum to respond to their local needs. However this will also require (i) increased investment in the leadership skills of school principals (ii) Greater accountability and transparency, including external evaluation of individual schools through inspections.
5. **The number of subjects should be reduced and interdisciplinary teaching emphasised.** The concept of a distinct frontier between science and the arts, humanities and social sciences (AHSS) is anachronistic in a modern society and global economy. Successful economies depend increasingly on the creation, communication, understanding and use of ideas and images. The capacity to communicate across this division, or to invent new relationships between the sciences and the AHSS, can be both encouraged – and unfortunately discouraged – in every phase of the educational system. The junior cycle offers an early opportunity to make these connections.
6. **The curriculum should be rebalanced by increasing the emphasis on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).** This has been constant, and often misunderstood, demand from business. We are not suggesting that the AHSS subjects should be devalued. Indeed, the insights and skills imparted by the AHSS are central to the creation of new knowledge and understanding that will allow businesses to address increasingly complex societal challenges. However the focus on STEM is critical, because these are the disciplines in which employers find that the talent pool is inadequate. Rebalancing curricula in favour of STEM is not

just about ensuring sufficient amount of study time on STEM issues but also involves strengthening student motivation and creating engaging learning environments and teaching methods.

7. **The use of ICT should be encouraged in the classroom.** ICT tools can improve, extend and support learning and help evaluate learning outcomes. Used as a tool to support teaching, technology can be an important element in the mix of assets that a teacher uses in her/his classroom to engage students. Online tools for teaching core curriculum subjects can also foster high-order thinking and more 21st Century skills. These tools will also allow for the assessment of learning outcomes and thereby enable a more flexible and effective education system. It is critical that the significant resources that have been allocated to the ICT in the classroom initiative (Smart Schools = Smart Economy) are effectively leveraged to drive the junior cycle reform programme.
8. **A foreign language policy that provides for the inclusion of languages other than Irish is required in the junior cycle.** Ireland does not have an integrated language curriculum, but a series of language curricula that are largely independent of one another. This leads to an impoverished educational experience and piecemeal curriculum planning. the European Council's Language Policy Division² warned: 'The main challenge for Ireland is to move away from "an official but lame bilingualism" to become a truly multilingual society, where the ability to learn and use two and more languages is taken for granted and fostered at every stage of the education system and through lifelong education.
9. **A wider variety of sources is required to provide evidence of learning.** The certification process should include a wider range of learning. For example examination results should be combined with continuous assessment by teachers, portfolios of achievement, learning journals to produce a qualification.
10. **The junior cycle should be structured in a way that facilitates a smoother transition from primary school and links in a structured way with senior cycle.** A stronger bridging, in terms of a curriculum framework and information flows is required between primary and secondary school. However more consideration is also required on how a reformed junior cycle will link with transition year and the senior cycle. The transition year experience is positive for many students in helping them mature and develop in a broad range of personal capacities. However, its quality and availability is uneven - and often depends on the school's socio-economic context. The experience is also devalued because it is not assessed.
The dominance of the leaving certification and the point system also poses a challenge in terms of providing an integrated education experience. There is growing recognition that the points system limits students' education experience by concentrating on rote learning so as to maximise points. This has the effect of having many students leaving second level without developing their ability to self-manage their learning and to become autonomous learners.

Conclusion

Ireland's economic recovery is contingent on a world class education system. This does not imply that education can be exempted from the consequences of the need for ongoing fiscal adjustment. But it does mean that we should focus on solutions that yield the best returns on investment, improve the effectiveness of our system and ensure excellent outcomes. A radical reform of junior cycle teaching methods and curriculum content offers such a solution.

² Language Education Policy Profile – Ireland, Language Policy Division, Strasbourg, 2005 - 2007

The NCCA has proposed that the essential direction of the change should come from its key agents – the schools, teachers and students. This makes sense but the change process will require a sense of urgency, political support, a clear policy framework and flexibility from teachers themselves. It also needs appropriate investment in training and development for teachers.