



Institute of Guidance Counsellors;

Response to NCCA/HEA Entry to Higher Education in the 21st, Century Transition or Transaction Conference 21st Sept. 2011.

Firstly I would like to thank the NCCA and HEA for the invitation to attend the conference and now add to the many responses the contribution of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors to the current debate as to how we might forward.

We have digested the papers presented for the conference for discussion. As guidance counsellors working with young people as they progress through the educational system especially those in second level we provide guidance as they make educational and career choices. Therefore we feel we have a unique insight into how students view the exam system and make decisions about subjects and courses. As counsellors providing personal counselling also we are aware of all the factors in a young person's life which may affect a young person's move from second level education to higher education.

I would like to address some ideas and issues presented in the documents presented at conference.

Transition or Transaction?

There is much to be said for Prof. Aine Hyland's comment in the introduction to her paper that many students view their leaving cert results in terms of the number of points scored. They regard the leaving cert as a means of scoring points which can then be cashed in through the CAO for admission into Higher Education, i.e. a transaction. Industry, education and other interest groups all agree on the negative back wash effect this has on teaching, learning and the student experience. There is also agreement that entry into higher education should be a 'transition' where students come forward with the skills and competencies necessary to survive and succeed at third level, skills and competencies which the current exam system does not support. There would appear to be agreement from all that the exam system needs to be reformed in keeping with curricular reform, NCCA should talk to the State Exam Commission in this regard. The reports of the IUA and IOTI also concur that exam reform should 'evolve' together between second and third level sectors. Any reform of the exam system must take into consideration the cognitive and intellectual development of the 15/16 year old student is at when embarking on a Senior Cycle where continuous assessment will be applied over the next two years. It should also be noted the myriad systems available to the higher education sector to deal with instances of plagiarism or indeed regulations applying to deadlines for project work where the vast majority of students are adults not minors.

Professor Hyland, the IUA and IOTI all offer suggestions for alternative mechanisms to the current Points system with varying level of connectivity to the leaving cert.

I should like to draw attention to a number of suggestions which would merely reinforce the impression for the leaving cert as 'transaction' rather than transition.

Bonus Points.

The suggestion of awarding bonus points for subjects related to the student's course choice, while having a certain logic merely reinforces the notion of choosing subjects to maximise points score. The backwash effect would now filter down to students in third year or transition year choosing subjects for senior cycle, demanding the student get it right first time in order to compete for places at third level later on. The backwash effect would reach even further back to first year as most students continue to study in senior cycle subjects taken from first year. Proposed curriculum change to reduce the number of subjects at junior and subsequently senior cycle will increase this pressure downwards.

This begs the question as to whether the Leaving cert should remain a broad certificate of education or become a more reduced specialised one like A levels in the UK. It should be noted that approximately 50% of student intake into UK universities comes from students presenting A levels, the other 50% is made up of applicants with further education qualifications such as GNVQs and BTECH qualifications. Currently Irish students can pick from a broad range of subjects or indeed decide to choose specialisms should their interests and aptitudes tend that way e.g a student may choose one, two or three science subjects or business subjects. The suggestion of the IOTI that all students pick from across a range to include language, science, humanities etc does have merit but would have negative effects on retention rates at senior cycle, particularly among boys who often opt to specialise in the applied science subjects such as technical graphics, construction studies and engineering.

The initiative to award bonus points for Honours Maths for CAO purposes from 2012 has now introduced an element of inequality into the leaving certificate and also contributed to the growing perception of the leaving cert as transaction. The decision of the HEIs was not based on any hard evidence that either more students would continue to study higher maths post junior cert or indeed take up STEM courses post leaving cert. While this initiative will be revisited in 2016 and reviewed in 2014, how will its effects on the uptake of higher maths at leaving cert. be measured distinct from the effects of Project Maths on uptake?

Subject Choice and Points.

The Minister for Education and Skills, Mr. Ruairi Quinn made reference to research on subject choice identifying students choosing particular subjects e.g increase in the uptake of Agricultural Science to gain points rather than taking subjects more relevant to their chosen courses of study. Yet Prof. Hyland states that research indicates this only happens in a minority of cases and probably high points course only or more accurately high demand courses. The competitive pressure for such courses should not be allowed to skew entry requirement for all higher education courses. The introduction of HPAT in conjunction with leaving cert for entry into medicine and veterinary courses has resulted in two adequate mechanisms of selection in operation instead of one and no subsequent meaningful reduction in points or stress levels!

Further Education;

The development of a 'vibrant' further education sector referred to in the IOTI submission is a recommendation which the Institute would firmly support. It was disappointing that this sector was not represented in the submissions to the conference. There are many advantages to be gained, including producing a skilled workforce, training and skills for the cohort of students who do not enter higher education, raising awareness of applied science and technology sectors and the creation of an open and obvious pathway into higher education. Entry systems should be mainstreamed with CAO and no longer considered as 'Supplementary'. The development of this sector in Irish education is vital to the promotion of the principle of life-long learning.

Similarly we would support the move towards more generic courses in higher education where students can specialise or opt for professional training late in their chosen areas. This takes the pressure off students to get everything right at once and allows them time to get to grips with new subjects. A longer year in first year proposed by IOTI would not alone support this move but would also help students to make the transition to life at third level.

Perceptions.

Both Aine Hyland and IUA have identified issues of concern about the current points system. Some are evidenced based and some are not. Before any changes major or minor are introduced, issues which have a real basis and not just perceived to be real must be identified and prioritised.

Any reformed admission system is as the IUA points out 'is likely to involve some trade offs' of the key principles of an effective admissions systems. Therefore any changes must be rooted in evidence, monitored and reviewed regularly.

To date all contributors give a health warning about any of their suggested changes to admission to higher education. All call for further investigation and discussion before any decisions are taken. Suggestions are offered 'tentatively' as to how we move forward.

The Institute of guidance Counsellors as the professional body for guidance counsellors working with learners of all ages would welcome the opportunity to participate in these discussions.

We provide educational, career and personal guidance to students in second-level and further education and to adults seeking to return to education, upskill or reskill and to those finding themselves out of work. Any changes to be made coming out of the current debate should be informed by how young people and adults made decisions and choices. The guidance and counselling service is central to good decision making and should be included in the context of this debate.

Finally it is interesting to note that the recommendation of the Points Commission that the introduction of an weighted lottery entry system was abandoned as it would not be approved by society and that feeling still persists today. It begs the question should society determine educational progress or should education lead reform and progress for a better society? Access and equality issues must be tackled if all citizens are to benefit from our educational system. These

are issues which are all the more stark in our current economic difficulties . We, in the Institute are anxious to make a positive contribution to the way forward.

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