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Applying an Evaluation and Assessment Framework: An Irish Perspective

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Introduction

A Chairde

As Dr Paulo Santiago referred to in his paper this morning, Ireland has been a participant in the OECD Review Project on Evaluation and Assessment Frameworks for Improving School Outcomes. We are delighted to see this project come to a successful conclusion and I want to pay tribute to Paulo for the leadership and scholarship that he and his team have brought to the project.

Purpose of the paper

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the OECD work is the proposal that countries ought to view arrangements for evaluation and assessment as a structured and planned system. Many of our countries have attempted to use different mechanisms and approaches to improve the quality of schooling. This OECD project is suggesting that, in the realm of evaluation and assessment, we need to examine how best all the elements we use can be planned and deployed in a coherent way. I will return to the significance of that recommendation later.

To begin with, however, I want to examine how the framework that Paulo suggests to us could be applied in the Irish context. I realise that this may seem a very localised approach – one centred on Irish questions and issues, but I want to use this example as a way of exploring the usefulness or otherwise of the OECD model. I hope that in doing so, my perspectives on our situation in Ireland may stimulate your thinking on the situation in your own country and I look forward to hearing your views and reactions towards the end of this session and in our discussions before lunch.

The Irish situation

Let me begin, therefore, with the Irish situation. I stress that what I am about to say will largely be in the realm of raising questions and matters that we need to consider in Ireland. I don’t propose to give definitive answers or pre-empt decisions about how we in Ireland will address the issues raised by the OECD work that seem to be relevant for our educational system. Nor am I suggesting that in a short paper I could address all the relevant issues in a comprehensive way. I realise that if one was to

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apply the OECD framework to the Irish context, a broader conversation would be required. We would need to have a national dialogue about the relevance of the suggestions and policy recommendations in the OECD report. These are matters that need to be considered by both the political and educational systems as well as the wider Irish society.

What I hope this paper will do, however, is to illustrate the challenges that are posed for one EU country by the OECD’s work on Evaluation and Assessment Frameworks. I want to use the overarching themes suggested by the project as a way in which to consider questions regarding evaluation and assessment. The themes are:

- Governance
- Design and procedures – the how of assessment and evaluation, including the menu of tools and approaches that one might consider using
- Capacity – the ability of the system and the institutions and individuals to operate evaluation and assessment arrangements, and
- Use of results

For the sake of time, I am going to concentrate my remarks on the first two of these themes and refer to the others as relevant within those headings.

**Governance**

Let’s turn to the issue of governance.

The OECD framework suggests that having **clear structures** and **defined responsibilities** for evaluation and assessment are prerequisites for an effective system. Measured against this criterion, Ireland would appear to have at least the main elements of governance in place, though some challenges remain.

As late as the early 1990s, Ireland lacked a legislative basis for much of its educational system. It operated largely on the basis of long-standing understandings and precedents. However, this legislative lacuna was addressed in a series of acts passed by the Irish parliament (Oireachtas) in the 1990s and early years of this century, including the Education Act of 1998 and the Teaching Council Act of 2001. These laws ascribe to the Minister for Education and Skills responsibility for setting national educational policy and specifically refer to his responsibility:
• for evaluation

*To monitor and assess the quality, economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the education system provided in the State ……and publish, in such manner as the Minister considers appropriate, information relating to such monitoring and assessment* (Education Act, section 7(2)(b))

• for curricular policy

*The Minister may ……prescribe the curriculum for recognised schools* (Education Act, 1998, section 30(1))

*The Minister may make regulations…..relating to….the curriculum of schools* (Education Act, section 33(l))

• for making regulations concerning the appointment and qualifications of teachers (Education Act, 1998, section 33(c))

• for determining the policy framework in which the Teaching Council operates

*The Council in the performance of its functions shall…..implement the policies relating to teacher education and training, probation, qualifications, professional conduct and standards of teaching as established, from time to time, by the Minister* (Teaching Council Act, 2001, section 7(3)(a))

• for making regulations concerning the inspection of schools (Education Act, 1998, section 33(d))

Irish legislation also provides statutory remits and underpinning for a number of organisations that are involved in carrying out various duties relating to standard setting, evaluation and assessment:

• the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is charged with advising the Minister on the content of the curriculum and related assessment arrangements (Education Act, 1998, sections 38-48)

• the State Examinations Commission (SEC) has responsibility for the running of State examinations which are a feature of second-level education. (Education Act, 1998, section 49-53 and related amending legislation). Currently, students take these externally set and marked examinations at the
end of lower secondary education (Junior Certificate examination) and at the end of upper secondary education, where the Leaving Certificate examination is used for entry to third-level courses, for entry to training courses and for entry to the world of work

• the Inspectorate is a Division within the ministry (or Department) of Education and part of the Civil Service. It has responsibilities to evaluate the work of schools and other aspects of the educational system (section 13 of the Education Act, 1998) and, as Chief Inspector, I publish inspection reports on schools and more general evaluation reports arising from evaluations that the Inspectorate has powers to initiate. The Inspectorate works closely with….

• ….the Educational Research Centre (ERC) in Drumcondra, Dublin. This body is the only one that does not have a statutory underpinning but it was established on the initiative of the Department and in conjunction with the authorities of Ireland’s largest college of education in the 1960s. It was a pioneer in the development of standardised tests – work in which it is still involved. It is funded directly and indirectly by the Department, but like the Inspectorate, it has a strong tradition of independence of operation. It conducts detailed reviews and evaluations of initiatives and aspects of the educational system, at times in conjunction with the Inspectorate. At the request of the Department, it is also responsible for Ireland’s participation in international surveys such as PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS

• the Teaching Council (under the Teaching Council Act of 2001) is the body responsible for regulation of the teaching profession and the setting of standards for teacher education programmes in universities and colleges of education.

A cursory glance at the wide-ranging powers of the Minister for Education and Skills that I have listed above might suggest a strong concentration of responsibility and powers within the political process. However, what I think is interesting about the Irish context is that the structures that I have mentioned, and the legislation underpinning them, have been deliberately designed to set up a system of checks and balances which tempers the powers of Ministers and the political system to a certain degree.

Ultimately, decisions about issues such as curriculum, national assessment arrangements, evaluations and general policy concerning teacher education are vested in the Minister. However, an underlying principle enshrined in the Education Act of 1998 is that the Minister can only exercise his powers following consultation with the key stakeholders in the education system, including school managers, teacher unions,
national associations of students, universities and third-level institutions, national
associations of parents, and sometimes, bodies representing wider community,
business or social interests.

In addition, many of the bodies to which I refer also seek to capture the tensions
between competing interests and to engender a national consensus about policy
direction. The Council of the NCCA, for example, is deliberately constructed to
ensure that the views of these diverse interests are represented in the formulation of
curricular and assessment policy advice. The Teaching Council, while having a
majority of teachers as Council members, also includes members who come from
other stakeholders. And the Inspectorate cannot choose to alter how it inspects
schools without a mandatory consultative process with stakeholders.

One of the advantages of such a process is that one gains a degree of stakeholder
buy-in into new proposals and policy. Considerable curricular reform was
implemented without controversy among teachers or wider Irish society at primary
level in the 2000-2009 period, for example, unlike the situation that pertained in parts
of the United Kingdom at the same time. National organisations of parents, which are
formally involved in the policy-making process, have been supportive of changes in
curricula, in inspection, in student assessment and other issues. And it is worth noting
that, although some criticisms are made of standards in Irish schools, there is broad
public support for, and almost universal participation in, State-funded schools.

The system also ensures that teacher professionalism – an important dimension that
is referred to a number of times in the OECD report – has a strong impact upon
decision making about the setting of standards in the curriculum, and in proposing
how assessment should complement curricula. Irish teacher unions, particularly at
primary level, have a strong historic tradition of being involved in discussion and in
commissioning research on professional matters (as well as industrial relations
issues). A welcome development over the last twenty years or so has been the
emergence of active national professional network bodies for primary and second-
level school principals. These, too, have brought a further valuable professional
perspective to national debates on educational policy matters.

However, in Ireland, we have also learned that there are downsides to a process of
policy making and governance that seeks to achieve consensus.

One issue concerns the responsiveness of the system. Building agreement on policy
– and especially in areas such as the setting of curriculum standards, or evaluation
arrangements, or student testing – is slow. Irish business interests, for example, often
argue that Irish curricula do not evolve sufficiently quickly to ensure that Irish
students are equipped with the skills and knowledge in sciences and mathematics that
they require for the knowledge society and workplace. Instances have also occurred where the pace of reform of inspection arrangements for schools was slower than might have been expected because of the need to address issues raised in the consultation process.

This brings me to a further risk associated with policy-making processes that involve consensus building. Sometimes, fundamental change is necessary but, of course, radical change is much less likely to emerge from a consensus-led approach.

When making decisions about educational policy, governments, ministers and education departments have to take into account a much wider range of issues than those that are likely to shape the advice they receive from bodies that are influenced by sectoral interests. Issues may arise when, for the wider societal good, ministers have to take more radical decisions and actions. A government department, which is committed to a programme of comprehensive reform across a number of sectors, may have to advance change in one area of policy at a faster rate than some actors within that sector might wish.

Our current efforts to make very significant changes to the curriculum and assessment arrangements for lower secondary education are a good example. Some excellent proposals to move Ireland towards a competency-based 21st century style curriculum emerged from our National Council for Curriculum and Assessment in 2011, including proposals for greater teacher-based assessment and less emphasis on summative external assessment via a State Examination. However, the Minister and the Department considered that the assessment proposals had not gone far enough to end the harmful dominance of externally set State examinations. Given time, more radical proposals may have emerged from the consultative process, but having judged that urgent change was needed, the Minister chose to make a more fundamental change to a school-based process of student assessment at lower secondary level in 2012 and then committed to seeking partnership on how the decision would be implemented.

Reflecting on the OECD framework, then, we can probably say that the structures exist whereby national policy on evaluation and assessment can be set, and the responsibilities of the key players in this process are also clear. The question remains, however, as to whether we have articulated an overall policy about evaluation and assessment and its role in the education system. Here, I think, we have more work to do.

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The Government’s *National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* is perhaps the closest we have to a recent statement regarding how significant aspects of curriculum, assessment and evaluation knit together. The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy is perhaps the only statement of public policy on how evaluation and assessment arrangements are intended to work together in the Irish school system. In this regard, the Strategy is ground breaking for the Irish system. The inclusion of very specific targets for improvements in students’ learning is also novel. The compilation of the Strategy itself illustrates that existing structures *can* interact effectively to shape the policy when led strongly by the political process. The Strategy was formed following extensive consultation within the education system and between the key agencies – the Department, the NCCA, the SEC, the ERC and the Inspectorate – and includes linkages between the agencies, but it owes a great deal to the supportive political imperative given to the project by Ministers and Department officials.

However, the Strategy is naturally focussed on literacy and numeracy and does not seek to address wider questions regarding assessment and evaluation of other aspects of learning in schools. And while the Strategy announced several important decisions regarding teacher education – such as extending the period of initial teacher education and changing the focus and content of these courses, issues that are raised in the OECD report and that might have been considered in raising literacy and numeracy standards – such as teacher appraisal – were not discussed. In addition, the linkages that need to be made between the organisations involved are often implicit rather than explicitly stated, and they rely to a considerable degree on initiative from the ministry and from each of the organisations.

In summary, then, one reflection on the OECD’s report would be that we in Ireland could find it beneficial to examine deliberately how we want the essential components of an evaluation and assessment framework to develop in a coherent way that will support the sort of student learning to which we aspire in the school system of the 21st century.

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Design and procedures

Much of the most detailed work undertaken in the OECD project and especially in the country reviews focuses on the choice of components that are available to countries as they establish assessment and evaluation systems. As Paulo has outlined, the menu of components suggested in the OECD Framework include:

- **Student assessment**
- **School evaluation**, including inspection and self-evaluation
- **Teacher appraisal** and **Appraisal of school leaders** (which I shall treat together), and finally,
- **Education system evaluation**

Like many countries, our arrangements for evaluation and assessment have developed over many years as new tools became available or as new concerns emerged. In recent years, for example, we have initiated a number of major reforms in the education system – several of which are still in the early years of implementation. A number of these initiatives have adopted some of the components of the evaluation and assessment framework suggested by the OECD. There are still further possible components that Ireland has not yet adopted or has to date firmly rejected.

**Student assessment**

Ireland has had a somewhat unusual history with regard to the use of student assessment.

Ireland was an early adopter of the use of standardised tests across a national sample of students in reading and mathematics. The four- and five-year cycles of these national assessments, conducted in primary schools by the Educational Research Centre, began in the 1970s. They continue to provide important national monitoring data about standards of literacy and numeracy in primary schools and we will soon extend this monitoring to second-level.

However, until relatively recently, standardised tests were used to a limited extent by teachers in primary schools, where teacher-assessment of student progress has dominated. In contrast, at second level, assessment was, and continues to be, dominated by externally set State examinations used for certification purposes at the end of lower secondary level and at the end of upper secondary education.
The policy situation was made even more complex in the late 1980s and 1990s when standardised assessments and the publication of school league tables based on examination and test results became common in parts of the United Kingdom (especially in England) and in the United States. This provoked a strong reaction, among Irish educational professionals and in the Irish political sphere, against the potentially damaging impact of the mis-use of externally reported standardised testing – so much so that Ireland’s Education Act of 1998 gave Ministers for Education the specific power to withhold from publication (and from Freedom of Information provisions) any examination and assessment statistics that could lead to the compilation of school league tables. This provision remains in place but media interests have sought to get around this provision. Using Freedom of Information legislation, they have compiled data concerning the school of origin of students accepted into universities and third-level institutions. The resulting league tables are quite inaccurate (even within the narrow parameters of this measure) and they appear to value only the proportion of students who aspire to third level education but they are popular and commercially lucrative for newspapers.

The reaction against standardised testing meant that standardised tests in general were not used to their maximum potential in primary schools, even when their use at two points in the primary cycle became mandatory in 2007. The lack of adequate professional development concerning assessment also hampered the use of such assessments. I should also say that, in common with a number of systems cited in the OECD report, Ireland’s educational system has paid relatively less attention to the development of teachers’ expertise in assessment generally and relatively more attention to the development of their teaching skills.

At second-level, externally set and marked examinations have dominated student assessment and there have been criticisms that these examinations have had a negative “back-wash” effect on teaching and learning. Over 90% of students complete second-level education (we have been very successful at increasing this participation level) and they undertake the Leaving Certificate at the end of second-level education. This examination, set and marked by the State Examinations Commission, serves as a gateway to higher and further education and to the world of work. While the need to broaden the range of assessment components within the examination is

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7 The participation rate (the proportion of students who completed second-level education) rose by 9% for the cohorts entering school in 2001 and 2006 to reach 90.2% in 2012. The rate for boys is 88.7% and 91.8% for girls. The rates in DEIS schools (schools serving areas of severe disadvantage) increased from 68.2% to 80.1% for the student cohorts who entered school in 2001 and 2006. Source, Department of Education and Skills (2012), *Retention Rates of Pupils in Second-Level Schools 2005 and 2006 Entry Cohorts* (Dublin, DES).
acknowledged, the examination is seen as rigorous and fair and an appropriate “high stakes” test of many, though not all, aspects of students’ learning.

However, we also have a similar externally set State examination at the end of lower secondary education. This examination is an historical artefact from a time in the early 1970s when lower secondary education marked the end of formal schooling for most young people. Its formality is particularly inappropriate at this stage of students’ learning. The overall dominance of externally marked State examinations has meant that efforts to promote Assessment for Learning have been difficult to implement in second-level schools, and teachers – and indeed students and parents – have tended to view external, summative assessment as the only relevant form of assessment.

The publication of Ireland’s National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy in 2011 and a new framework for lower secondary education in 2012\(^8\) signalled a considerable change in this policy. The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, prompted partly by evidence from inspections that standards of literacy and numeracy teaching were not as good as they should be at primary level and, more importantly, by a significant fall in Ireland’s ranking in PISA 2009,\(^9\) announced that a reform of the lower secondary curriculum and the reform of the primary curriculum for English, Irish and mathematics would be completed. The new curricula will, in some ways be less prescriptive but will be expressed in clear learning outcomes. These learning outcomes will be supplemented by examples of students work to illustrate for teachers, parents and students what students should be expected to know and do if the learning outcomes were achieved. This is deliberately intended to support Assessment for Learning approaches in schools. Currently, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment is working on the first drafts of the curricula and, more interestingly, is working with pilot schools to collect and record in video and other formats examples of work to exemplify the learning outcomes of the curricula.

Reporting to parents across all aspects of the students’ development is also being strengthened. The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy instituted the use of standardised literacy and numeracy testing and the reporting of achievement to parents in primary schools. It also signalled that similar testing would become mandatory in second-level schools in 2014. The outcomes will also be reported to the Department (the first round of data from primary schools is being processed at present) and the Department will be able to provide data on achievement levels in different types of schools – such as schools serving areas of disadvantage, boys’ schools, etc. However, the arrangement

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\(^8\) The framework for lower secondary education is found in Department of Education and Skills (2012), \textit{A Framework for Junior Cycle}.

\(^9\) A detailed examination of the issues regarding PISA 2009 results for Irish students may be found in the study: Rachel Perkins et al, (2012), \textit{PISA 2009: Results for Ireland and Changes since 2000} (Dublin, Educational Research Centre). The study draws on work by the Education Research Centre and an independent international analysis of Ireland’s PISA data.
not to publish the data on a school-by-school basis was re-affirmed by the Minister for Education and Skills.

The new framework for Junior Cycle (lower secondary education) is bringing the most radical changes to assessment. It announced the ending of traditional State examinations at the end of the lower secondary phase, and their replacement by a system of supported school-based assessment from 2017 onwards. New curricula will be complemented by a broader range of new assessment approaches which will involve some classroom components and a final assessment that will be centrally provided but marked by teachers. The Department, the NCCA and the State Examinations Commission are working in a closely coordinated way to lead this change and the Minister has established a National Consultative Forum to incorporate school management, parents and teachers in the reform process.

How then is the OECD framework useful in this ambitious change project? It seems to me that we are attempting to address a number of policy directions which are highlighted as important in the OECD work:

- Paulo’s work highlights the importance of convincing parents about the efficacy of assessment and evaluation, and about the standards that are expected of students in schools. In the changes that we have made at primary level and those we are planning at second level, we are trying to ensure that parents are engaged in the change process. We are also ensuring better and more transparent reporting to parents about their child’s progress, and I am glad to say that there has been a very positive reaction to the new reporting arrangements at primary level.

- We are trying to support assessment for learning approaches and build assessment expertise and capacity in the Irish educational system. We see this as supporting teacher professionalism because we know none of this change can be delivered without the provision of considerable continuing professional development serving for teachers and significant changes to initial teacher education to develop teachers’ understanding of and capacity to use assessment. The Government is committed to providing this professional development despite the considerable constraints on public expenditure and has already increased the duration of initial teacher education programmes.

- We are attempting to establish a balance between formative and summative assessment, and promote the use of a broader range of assessment methodologies. It is a welcome feature of the OECD report that it warns against the narrow uses of statistical assessment data from standardised testing and the dangers of strategic behaviour that has been shown to accompany such
programmes. In Ireland, we are seeking to use standardised tests, but with safeguards against an over-reliance on their outcomes. This is an area that will need constant monitoring and review, especially as experience of using a broader range of assessment approaches becomes embedded in Irish schools. We also know that we have yet to exploit ICT system effectively to administer, collect and analyse data and to provide it back to schools in efficient and meaningful ways. The work at EU level about which Dr Christine Redecker spoke yesterday on the use of ICT in the assessment of competences is very interesting in this regard.10

- Our own history also illustrates the genuine concerns of educationalists and others about an unbalanced use of student assessment. In Ireland, we have a very strong cultural commitment to schooling as an experience that nurtures all aspects of the child – the academic, the social, the physical, the aesthetic, the spiritual. Many valuable aspects of this nurturing go on in schools every day and they cannot be readily turned into a metric for measurement. Many people – and not only teachers – fear that injudicious use of student assessment, and especially of testing, examinations and league tables can, in themselves, change the nature of teaching and narrow unduly the educational experience of young people to that which can be readily measured.

No one wants to lose what is most valuable in teaching and learning. But, this does not mean that we ought to turn our faces completely away from using a range of good assessment practices, including tests, examinations and ICT-bases assessments in our schools. A significant challenge arises: how to ensure that these forms of student assessment do not become the sole measure of the value and quality of the school system. And a second challenge is to ensure that parents are well-informed about the progress of their own children and assured that the quality and standards of schools are maintained. We have reached a particular set of balances in Ireland at this stage of our development. However, the particular blend of arrangements that we have currently should not remain fixed. As parents, teachers and the school system become more familiar with the blend of arrangements that we have chosen to use – including tests and a range of other assessment and accountability mechanisms – and as we come to see the potential of new tools, I am sure that we will have to reconsider the balance of approaches, limitations and legislative arrangements that we currently deploy. That is where the questions raised in this OECD project and the work of others can be useful in informing public debate in Ireland, both now and into the future.

10 Christine Redecker (forthcoming), The Use of ICT for the Assessment of Key Competences (Luxembourg, Report of Joint Research Centre of the European Commission).
School evaluation: Inspection and School self-evaluation

The second component suggested in the OECD framework is school evaluation, including inspection and school self-evaluation. School evaluation is an area in which Ireland has some well developed structures and other elements that are much less well developed.

The Education Act 1998 placed inspection on a statutory basis and, since then, inspection has undergone considerable development and reform. School inspections, which were already a feature of primary schools, were re-introduced at secondary level and inspection is a well-regarded and well-accepted part of the landscape of quality assurance and school improvement. Our experience has been that by collaborating closely with stakeholders, including teachers, school leaders and parents, we have managed to evolve robust yet well-accepted evaluation models.

Inspections look closely at how well schools are managed and led, but also focus very particularly on teaching and learning. Direct observation of lessons and engagement with students form core features of our inspections, and add an indispensable dimension to evaluation and assessment. Inspectors make judgements about the actual processes of teaching and learning and can make valuable suggestions for improvement in professional conversations with teachers and school leaders. We seek to combine this improvement agenda in the inspection process with accountability to parents and the wider public through regular publishing of inspection reports on schools.

In our most recent reform and development of inspection, I think we have learned some valuable lessons:

- We have found that notified inspections are necessary in some types of whole-school inspections, if we are to have meaningful engagement with school management boards and parents’ councils in the inspection process

- In contrast, short, unannounced inspections that we introduced two years ago allow us to have much greater coverage of the school system. In the period 2010-2012, for example, inspections of some sort occurred in over half of all primary schools and in 2011-2012 in 93% of second-level schools. Unannounced inspections also allow us to see the authentic learning experience for students, and to scan the school system and identify where risks may exist for students’ learning. We find, too, that principals, deputy principals and teachers appreciate the immediate feedback and professional conversations with inspectors in the context of a normal school day.
• A gap in our evaluation work until recently was the lack of systematic follow-up inspections. Our recent experience of these types of inspection seems to confirm that the existence of this follow-up activity does aid the improvement of schools.

• And one of our most successful mechanisms has been the inclusion of confidential questionnaire data from parents and students in the school, as this adds important additional evidence for evaluation. It also serves as an important way of engaging parents in the change and improvement process and provides a significant re-assurance for the system.

In contrast, school self-evaluation has been considerably less well developed, and has been a focus of attention in the last two years. A national framework for self-evaluation has been developed to assist schools in evaluating their teaching and learning, and its use has been made mandatory. A range of tools has been provided in national guidance and schools are being asked to begin the process of evaluation and reporting to parents in the current and forthcoming school years.\(^{11}\)

Much of what Paulo (and the earlier paper by Graham Donaldson on Tuesday) refers to under the heading of school evaluation resonates with the Irish scene.

• Paulo talked about the importance of **being clear about the role and purpose** of school evaluation. The most crucial question facing us has been whether the primary purpose of inspection and self-evaluation should be **accountability or school improvement**. For example, while school self-evaluation serves both of these purposes, we have decided that school improvement is the primary objective in school self-evaluation. Our national guidance on school self-evaluation deliberately emphasises the improvement journey that the school should seek to undertake. This decision was prompted by the experience of systems described by Michael Fullan and others, where an over-emphasis on accountability has not led to the desired improvement.\(^{12}\) In Ireland, inspection has also clearly articulated a school improvement purpose. Inspectors’ engagements with the school community and the recommendations of reports are focussed strongly on how the school can provide a better learning experience for students. Inspectors’ reports do not include statistical data on examination results even though the judgements about learning in the school are partly informed by the school’s examination and test data. However,

\(^{11}\) Inspectorate, Department of Education and Skills (2012), School Self-Evaluation: Guidelines for Primary Schools and School Self-Evaluation: Guidelines for Post-primary Schools (Dublin, DES).

\(^{12}\) Michael Fullan (2011), Choosing the Wrong Drivers for Whole-System Reform (Melbourne, Centre for Strategic Education)
external inspection inevitably has an accountability focus too – especially where there are serious risks to students’ learning. The publication of a report on a school where very serious weaknesses are identified and the follow-up measures that commence emphasise this accountability function.

- The OECD experience also points to the importance of public confidence in schools and in the quality of the service that they provide. Irish schools have a considerable degree of autonomy. In the future, their willingness to be open with their communities about the quality of their work may well be an important determinant in whether the public feels it has adequate information about students’ progress. This is bound to affect the demands made about public availability of data.

- The development of a framework of standards published in 2003 (in *Looking at Our School*) was an important foundation document for inspection and it has been made much more explicit in the *Evaluation Criteria* and *Quality statements* included in the *Guidelines for School Self-evaluation*. However, the degree to which teachers, schools and parents understand these criteria and statements as standards is still untested and, in our opinion, only likely to develop over a number of years of usage and reporting.

- Our biggest challenges lie in the area of capacity. We recognise that the capacity of school leaders and teachers to engage in self-evaluation is yet to be properly developed – indeed it is this concern that has led us to carefully phase in the elements of school self-evaluation so as to give us time to provide the necessary professional development and experience to schools to build up familiarity and expertise within the process.

- Issues of capacity also touch upon the Achilles Heel of the Irish educational system – our relative lack of investment in data capture and usage. It would seem that the OECD report and the experiences of many countries such as New Zealand, Australia, Norway, Northern Ireland and the Netherlands among others demonstrate that investment in the collection and analysis of data about students and schools in properly controlled environments can facilitate better analysis by external inspectors and by school leaders and staff. And it seems to show, too, that this can have beneficial effects on practice in schools. However, it remains a political challenge to secure sufficient investment to enable adequate data capture and analysis systems to be built, developed and maintained. This is especially so, when we have a growing student population, a strong political desire to maintain or improve pupil/teacher ratios, and a downward pressure on all public expenditure.
**Teacher appraisal & Appraisal of school leaders**

Of all the evaluation and assessment approaches recommended for consideration in the OECD menu, perhaps formal teacher appraisal is the least developed in Ireland. It is also one feature of the project where I think terminology could get in the way of serious consideration of the issues.

Appraisal of teachers, as described in the OECD report, is not entirely missing from the Irish system. The work of graduating teachers is, of course, assessed during and at the end of their university teacher education programmes, and the standards in these programmes are set and evaluated by the Teaching Council. The Teaching Council sets standards for registration and recognition of qualifications, and has developed and published Codes of Professional Conduct for Teachers. In the near future, it will acquire the full legal powers to conduct inquiries into the fitness to teach of any registered teacher and the power to remove teachers from the register and hence from eligibility for employment as a teacher in Ireland.

Formal arrangements, overseen by the Teaching Council, exist at present by which newly-qualified teachers demonstrate their competence during a probationary phase and the Teaching Council has just published proposals to improve this important “gateway” to the teaching profession. Its current proposals will involve a largely school-based process, supported by school-based mentors as well as the Inspectorate, and an induction course for both primary and second-level teachers.

A formal process also exists for dealing with underperforming teachers. This process is initiated by the school principal or the school board in the case of an under-performing principal. A staged process of advice and support is followed by an appraisal of competence, an independent element of which is carried out by the Inspectorate.

Outside of the probationary period and cases where teachers experience professional difficulties, however, there is no procedure whereby the competence and/or the standards of an individual teacher’s work are regularly and systematically evaluated within the school. This may seem odd, given that the Education Act gives legal responsibility to the school principal “for the instruction provided to students in the school”, for “the guidance and direction of staff” (see section 22 and 23). Unlike many countries, there is no arrangement for annual reviews or performance evaluations of teachers. Nor is there any formal annual process for reviewing the work of the principal. The effectiveness of the school leader is an important aspect of

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external inspections, and there have been instances where the leadership of schools changed following inspections, but there are no regular formal performance appraisals or performance contracts for principals. Indeed, the term teacher appraisal is quite foreign in the Irish context.

Given the experience of other school systems documented by the OECD, it is not unreasonable to ask why some form of formal teacher appraisal, led by the school principal, is not among the components of Ireland’s evaluation and assessment arrangements. And the comparisons and contrasts can be made within Ireland too: the lack of teacher appraisal contrasts strongly with the Irish civil and public service where annual Performance Management and Development Reviews are commonplace.

Here again, I think that in discussing the Irish context, the themes that the OECD report suggests become relevant.

Some of the explanation regarding the lack of formalised teacher appraisal in Ireland points to the importance of teacher professionalism, but it also points to what I think is a weakness in the OECD construct and terminology. The term teacher appraisal and its implicit emphasis on a process that is purely external to the teacher would seem to be unfortunate when viewed from an Irish perspective, mainly because it seems to ignore the balancing role of reflective professional practice. I would venture to suggest that using a term such as teacher appraisal – although it is has the virtue of being easily understood outside the education sphere – tends to suggest a hard-edged accountability measure rather than a process that will foster genuine improvement for the individual and school. (To be fair, I should mention that an oral OECD presentation by Dr Andreas Schleicher at last week’s Teachers’ Summit in Amsterdam seemed to adopt a much broader understanding of teacher appraisal, at least in the oral questioning.14)

- Of course, just because we don’t like the OECD terminology we shouldn’t be blind to the potential benefits of having a more formalised professional appraisal culture in schools, especially as we become more familiar with good reflective practice. The benefits that arise for teachers and learners when teachers routinely observe and discuss each other’s practice are well documented. Effective principals know the value that observing and providing constructive comment to teachers about their practice can bring to teaching and learning. And, it is very hard indeed for principals to tackle instances of

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teacher underperformance if observation and professional conversations are not part of the school’s routine.

- We just need to be clear about the purposes that we want any system to perform. If we are to have really effective teachers and schools, then we have to cultivate truly reflective practitioners. Such teachers will recognise the need to reflect on the quality of their own practice; they will accept a responsibility to contribute to professional, collegial conversations about improvement in the school; they will be open to having their practice viewed and commented upon by colleagues; and they will accept routine observation and indeed appraisal of their work by principals.

This is the sort of highly professional form of reflective practice and accountability that we are trying to promote through school self-evaluation in Ireland. It would be consistent with the generally high regard in which teaching as a profession is held in Ireland, where entrants to teacher education courses have traditionally been recruited from the top quartile of Leaving Certificate students, and where teaching, at least until recently, has been relatively highly paid.

- I accept that capacity issues arise here again. Our lack of teacher appraisal or teacher reflective practice and appraisal at present must also be viewed in the context of the capacity of our education system at this point in time. For example, professional development for principals is much underdeveloped in Ireland and considerable investment will be necessary to enable principals to cultivate collaborative, reflective cultures in schools and engage in the challenging conversations that will be necessary.

- In Ireland, we may or may not continue to choose that formalised teacher appraisal systems are unnecessary in Ireland other than for entry to the profession and for dealing with clearly unsatisfactory teachers. At the very least, however, we have to engender a culture of professional dialogue about teaching, learning and standards in schools. And if we accept that cultivating that sort of professional dialogue is to be our objective, then there are grounds for considering how the twin purposes of collegial professional reflection and appraisal are clear and formally supported in our evaluation and assessment arrangements.

**System evaluation**

Finally and briefly, I should mention some of the arrangements in place for system evaluation. These include our participation in international surveys such as PISA and
TIMSS and PIRLS at primary level, and national surveys of literacy and numeracy conducted by the Educational Research Centre, sometimes in conjunction with the Inspectorate. Specialised evaluations, often associated with specific interventions and with a desire to ensure equity in the educational system for disadvantaged groups and those with special educational needs are also carried out from time to time. Many of these have had a direct impact on policy, especially in initiatives seeking to tackle disadvantage, such as the successful national policy to support students through targeted actions in socio-economically disadvantaged schools.15

THE IMPLICATIONS

So what then can we learn by seeking to apply the framework offered to us by the OECD Project on Evaluation and Assessment?

Can I first voice a number of concerns that I know some educationalists will express. It can probably be summed up in a simple phrase or proverb: “Weighing the pig will not make him any heavier”. What this encapsulates is a suspicion that simply measuring educational outcomes more frequently or more thoroughly will not, of itself, improve learning. This self-evident truth convinces many in the educational sphere that over-use of assessment and worse, the use of assessment for purposes for which it is was not intended, are likely to be damaging to teaching, learning and the long-term good of the school system. Some will be ready to criticise this OECD project as a further attempt to advance the case for more and more student testing, and many could – unfairly – dismiss the project at this first hurdle.

Secondly, we should recognise that the criticism of student testing is also made of other measures of performance and accountability. As responsible policy makers we have to be alert to and consider the criticisms made of the “use of performance information of various kinds as a resource for comparison, addressed to improvements in quality and efficiency by making nations, schools and student ‘legible’”.16 Persuasive arguments can be made that by attempting to define high standards and by trying to evaluate or assess the degree to which these standards are achieved – be it by a teacher, or a school principal or a student – the actual process of teaching and learning is altered – and for the worse – by the activity of defining and measuring. It


can be argued, for example, that each of the tools suggested by the OECD project can have a negative back-wash effect on schools: just as the over-use of testing can lead to teaching to the test, inappropriate use of teacher appraisal or inspection can also lead to unintended adjustments in teaching and learning. Offering a palette of such tools in the way suggested by the OECD project could be seen as an even more systematic threat to a highly professional teaching workforce and the achievement of broad and balanced curricula in schools.

At least some of these concerns have their origins in the powerful dynamic that has gathered around international school performance surveys and especially around PISA. Arguments have been voiced in some quarters about the effect of such international surveys; accusations are made that they have a malign, “neo-liberal” and economically-focussed effect on schooling; and criticisms are made that international surveys have prompted indiscriminate and ill-informed policy borrowing between educational systems. Indeed, the OECD report on evaluation and assessment frameworks could be caricatured by some as the ultimate policy-borrower’s charter, setting out all the possible evaluation arrangements that could be borrowed and re-assembled Lego-like, in a mosaic of policy convergence.

I voice all of these concerns but I disagree with them, because I believe that this project is an honest, valuable and most significant attempt to avoid short-term, narrowly-focussed, ill-informed policy making.

Children have but one opportunity to enjoy the benefits of excellent schooling and the consequences for a child who does not enjoy such a public good are incalculable. As policy makers, we have a duty to take every advisable and effective step to ensure that as far as possible every child experiences a rich and effective educational experience in schools.

I know that effective and creative teaching from highly-educated and skilled teachers, delivered in well-resourced settings is a requirement for good educational experiences for children. And it is also true that a balanced approach to the use of assessment and evaluation can help in the consistent delivery of effective learning. What most policy makers seem to struggle with is getting the right mix of tools and approaches – the balance of formative and summative assessment; the balance between improvement and accountability, the balance between professional autonomy and teacher accountability – I could go on! It seems to me that the most valuable contribution that the OECD project has made is that it seeks to move us away from a narrow focus on student assessment and school accountability mechanisms, and offers us the possibility of looking in a coherent way at how a wide palette of different approaches can be considered, used and balanced to create a framework that is focussed on improvement.
The project is valuable in that it warns us not only of the advantages and dangers associated with each particular approach, but also because it raises questions and challenges that can only be answered in the context of each country’s culture, current state of development, the capacity of its educational system, the status of its teaching profession, and many other environmental factors. It is striking that while there are commonalities in some of the recommendations made by the project in each of the country reports, the solutions suggested are diverse and necessarily rooted in each country’s needs. It has certainly raised a number of challenges and questions for Ireland and I hope Paulo’s presentation and this initial Irish reflection will stimulate equally searching questions for you and your school system.