

UTU RESPONSE ON THE NEW ADMISSIONS ARRANGEMENTS FOR POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

CONTEXT

The Ulster Teachers' Union (UTU) is the only professional teachers' organisation that is based solely in Northern Ireland. It has a membership of almost 7000 and represents teachers and principals in nursery, primary, secondary (including grammar) and special schools.

The UTU operates only in Northern Ireland, while maintaining close links with the other major teacher organisations in the British Isles. This allows UTU to concentrate on policy issues that specifically affect the teachers in Northern Ireland.

UTU is part of the worldwide teacher union network through its membership of Education International. This ensures that in formulating policy UTU takes into account the global perspective, and where appropriate draws on the research evidence produced by a range of institutions including the OECD. OECD research is commissioned by government ministers to assist them in defining government policy.

The UTU has consistently campaigned for an end to selection at age 11. UTU wholeheartedly welcomed the recommendations contained in the Costello Report and at its 2005 Conference called on the Department of Education to implement the Report in full.

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment has put in place a new school curriculum that will encourage schools to examine what is on offer to pupils. The UTU believes that this provides an ideal opportunity to not only look at the content but the existing structures for delivery of the new curriculum.

The UTU acknowledges the need for careful forward planning in order to accommodate the continuing decline in pupil numbers. The UTU recommends that the Department of Education seize this opportunity to enhance the education service by improving the pupil/teacher ratios in schools.

The UTU also acknowledges that the changes in provision will require radical changes in physical provision of facilities. The kind of facilities on offer to pupils must reflect the rapid advances in technology that have and will continue to take place. The Department of Education must ensure that schools are fit for the requirements of the 21st Century and are able to provide the range and balance of learning opportunities that will allow each young person to achieve their full potential. This will not be possible unless there is sufficient allocation of resources to ensure that the changes can be fully implemented throughout Northern Ireland, in both urban and rural areas.

The UTU fully supports the use of the Pupil Profile provided it is used as it is intended to inform parental/pupil choice. The UTU believes that the Pupil Profile should not be used in a negative way to prevent a pupil from choosing a pathway and endorses the view that the crucial choice of pathway is not at age 11, since all pupils will follow a common curriculum up until age 14. The UTU will vehemently oppose any attempt to link the information contained within a Pupil Profile to the admissions criteria for a school.

The UTU welcomes the flexibility and increased choice that the new curriculum will provide, including the broadening of the range of vocational courses.

The UTU also welcomes the increased range of options that will be guaranteed to all children under the new post primary arrangements as this will ensure equity of range of opportunity for all children, regardless of where they live.

The opportunity for cooperation and collaboration is perhaps the most exciting and challenging aspect of the proposed changes. The UTU would encourage all those involved in the process to maximise the opportunities for cooperation and collaboration and to embrace a new concept of education that puts the needs of each young person before the needs of any existing institution.

In the primary sector a system of parental choice has operated successfully and the UTU sees no reason why this should not be the case at post primary level also. The out-dated selective system must be replaced and the systems already used in the primary sector provide a very valuable model for replication. Examination of the current statistics on over-subscription and the recognition that the demographic downturn will further reduce the extent of over-subscription leads the UTU to conclude that the need for widespread use of admissions criteria may not be substantial.

2. PRINCIPLES AND OBJECTIVES

The UTU wholeheartedly endorses the principle of putting the child at the centre of the process. As previously stated, it should be the child who is considered first and not the existing institutions.

It is vital that the processes used in the new transfer arrangements are transparent and consistent so that all involved in the process can have faith in the system. Parents must be advised on how the admissions arrangements may impact on their child choice of school.

The concept of informed choice is a crucial element in the proposed changes. The new arrangements must reflect real choice, unfettered by any admissions criteria that would introduce social bias into the process.

The UTU believes that discrimination of any kind must not be allowed to contaminate the new admissions process otherwise the new arrangements will be discredited. Any such bias would be inconsistent with current anti-discrimination and equality legislation and would be open to challenge.

While UTU agrees that in very many cases schools already serve their local communities and this has many strengths, it believes that there are also negatives in that it may create schools that do not have a true social mix. UTU would however wish to uphold the right of a child not to be excluded from their local school if that is where they choose to go, and this should be taken into consideration in the admissions criteria.

UTU believes that it is vital that pupils and parents, not schools, have the lead role in the decision-making process. The role of the pupil in making pathway choices should be given increasing importance with age.

An objective of the new arrangements should be to maximise the opportunity for young people to achieve their full potential and to maximise the flexibility of the system to allow them to change pathways easily at key points if the decisions previously taken prove not to be fulfilling their needs. The UTU believes this needs to be incorporated into the objective on maximising parental choice.

It is essential that the admissions criteria are complementary within an area. It would be unacceptable for a child to have to travel some distance away from his/her local area. (See 2.5 above).

The area of special educational needs must be addressed within the admissions criteria. The UTU believes that all pupils, including those with special needs at both ends of the learning spectrum, should be provided with equality of opportunity to succeed to their own potential.

The degree of flexibility given to schools should not be so great that it is open to abuse. The greater degree of commonality, then the greater chance that true equality of opportunity will prevail. The UTU would acknowledge that some element of flexibility may be necessary, but that this should be carefully controlled and monitored externally to ensure maximum uniformity of the system.

3. CHOOSING A POST-PRIMARY SCHOOL

The UTU has supported the development of the Pupil Profile which is simply an extension of the good practice that goes on already in the vast majority of schools. The UTU has consistently stated that a common document is not essential in the process, but nevertheless has welcomed the Pupil Profile as long as it is not used in any way to limit parental choice.

The fact that only two years of the Pupil Profile will be available in the agreed format for the first cohort of pupils transferring under the new system should not be seen as a negative. As previously stated, teachers currently monitor and record their pupils' progress in a variety of formats.

The UTU believes that used properly the Pupil Profile will be an excellent tool for assisting informed choice. It would reiterate its absolute conviction that it should not be used in any way to prevent a child from entering a particular school. If this were to be the case, teachers would not continue to support its use.

The UTU would suggest that the views of teachers be carefully considered in relation to the Pupil Profile. The system will only work if teachers have faith in it. If they believe that the information contained in the Pupil Profile will be used by anyone other than the pupil and his/her parent then this may distort or restrict the information supplied.

The UTU believes that the advice from the primary school should include a reminder to pupils that the real choices for their child should be made at 14, not at 11, when the child is still developing and maturing. The great number of older teenagers and adults who return to

courses of study later in life is testimony to the fact that it is not possible to accurately assess what a person is capable of so early on.

It is important that the dialogue between the school and the family starts early. It is also vital that the advice given by the teacher remains general and that it is emphasised that the parent and pupil are completely in control of the choice.

The UTU agrees that open days/evenings are an excellent tool in assisting parents to make their choices. It also agrees that such visits should take place in the first term of the P7 year. With the pressure of the transfer test removed from that particular time period children should be free to consider their options at this time.

School prospectuses are another excellent way for schools to provide information on what is available to pupils. The UTU would suggest that all post-primary schools be given a common ring-fenced sum to be used for the production of the prospectus or alternatively, the information should be centrally collated and distributed, in order to create “a level playing field” for all post-primary schools.

Web-based information is important but it should not be assumed that all parents/pupils have access to it. The reliance on such a means of disseminating information could be potentially discriminatory.

The UTU would refer back to one of its opening statements in relation to resourcing. If post-primary schools are to provide the level of information suggested on a one-to-one basis then there are serious funding implications that must be addressed. The demographic downturn should be used as an opportunity to allow time to be made available to teachers, both at primary and post-primary level, to provide the kind of advisory services that are suggested.

If the new system is to work effectively then there are two essential elements that must be accepted:

the current funding arrangements for schools must be revised to remove the element of competition for pupils

post-primary schools must not be asked to supply any “league table” information for publishing, including any so-called “added value” information.

These two areas must be examined to ensure that the proper conditions prevail for cooperation, not competition, and to ensure that there is no external pressure that might influence the advice offered to a pupil or parent.

The UTU believes that there may be a role for an external advisory agency in assisting parents to choose the correct pathway. Again the UTU would reiterate that this type of advice might well be more appropriate at age 14 when the pupil has a clearer idea of what he/she wishes to do measured against his/her developing strengths and interests.

The UTU also believes that the ELBs have a definite role to play in supplying information. Indeed UTU would suggest that the ELBs or other central body might be best placed to administer the transfer process much in the way that it currently manages the admissions process into primary schools.

The UTU envisages ongoing communication on a regular basis between the school and the pupil. As previously stated, this will require sufficient staff time to be available for interviews with parents/pupils as well as adequate time to maintain the Pupil Profile and prepare for the interviews.

There must be real opportunities for transfers between different schools/campuses should a pupil decide that their chosen pathway is not suitable. There must also be some element of control to prevent abuse of the ability to easily transfer.

The UTU broadly agrees with the timetable for the new admissions process. There may be those who might argue that because the choice of school is made early in the P7 year less than two years of the pupil profile would be available. The UTU believes that since processes comparable to the Pupil Profile are already carried out by schools then this criticism is unjustified.

4. PUPILS WITH COMPELLING INDIVIDUAL CIRCUMSTANCES OR A STATEMENT OF SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEED

The UTU believes that there should be provision for separate consideration of cases where there are deemed to be compelling individual circumstances. There should, however, be central monitoring of such cases by ELBs to ensure that all schools are applying similar standards. This will ensure equality of opportunity for all is maintained.

The UTU would agree that since numbers of pupils with compelling individual circumstances should be very small they should be treated as supernumerary.

A Central Panel to consider such cases would be the UTU's preferred option. Such a panel should be drawn from a panel of nominees to include teacher representatives as partners in the process.

The UTU has concerns about the ability of schools to cope with numbers if all pupils with statements of special educational need are treated as supernumerary. The increase in the number of statemented children, especially those on the autistic spectrum, means that this could amount to a significant increased intake for a school. At very least if this approach were to be adopted then there would have to be an agreed formula to increase staffing in line with the increased numbers.

5. ADMISSIONS CRITERIA FOR OVERSUBSCRIBED SCHOOLS

The UTU agrees that the four broad categories listed at paragraph 5.6 are appropriate and sufficient to ensure that decisions can be made in cases where a school is oversubscribed.

The UTU concurs with the statement at 5.4 that the admissions criteria should be consistent with the principles and objectives and conform to statutory duties under Equality legislation.

The family-focused criteria would both be acceptable to UTU and should have high priority in any listing of criteria.

The community-based criteria are less acceptable in that there is potential for them to perpetuate existing social bias. There is also a danger that the number of named schools makes the criterion meaningless as a determinant in cases of oversubscription.

The geographical criteria support the notion of a school serving its local community and the UTU believes that some element of geographical determinant should be included to ensure that the majority of children who choose to do so may attend their local school.

The UTU is aware of the concerns of those living in rural areas and believes that they must feel confident that they will receive parity of treatment. For this reason the UTU would wish to have a child-centred criterion included immediately after the family-focused criteria. This should be compulsory for all schools to ensure that every child has a fair chance of getting into their closest suitable school.

The UTU has mixed views on the tiebreaker criteria. While the use of random selection is attractive to ensure a wider social mix, the desire to ensure that no child must travel too far from home to school at age 11 has persuaded the UTU to opt for the proximity from home to school as the tiebreaker.

As suggested previously, the UTU believes that schools should not be allowed unfettered choice of admissions criteria. UTU would prefer that all schools followed a compulsory order but might choose to omit a particular category or categories if they so desired. The only compulsory category would be the tiebreaker and if the tiebreaker chosen was random selection, then the school would be required to include either a community-based or a geographical criterion to ensure that children had a fair chance of getting admitted to a local school if that was their choice.

The UTU would suggest that the appropriate compulsory order of the categories should be as follows:

Family-focused criteria
Geographical criteria
Community-based criteria
Tiebreakers

6. ADMISSIONS APPEALS

The UTU would want to ensure that the principles of transparency and consistency are upheld throughout the Admissions Procedure and would suggest that in line with this the entire process should be changed to a centrally administered one. This would include the Appeals stage which would not have to change significantly.

The UTU agrees with the current rules on the composition of the Appeals Panel and the format of the Appeal Tribunal.

The new timetable is to be welcomed as it would allow schools to receive the outcome of appeals prior to the end of the summer term when preparations are being made for the September intake.

7. CONCLUSION

The UTU welcomes this opportunity to influence the future shape of post-primary education and would be glad to elaborate on any of the views expressed within the document on request.

While consultation is a necessary and time-consuming process, the UTU would urge the Department of Education to proceed with haste following the end of the consultation period and end the uncertainty about future arrangements. The end of the current selective system is very much welcomed but teachers now require a clear picture of the way ahead so that they may put in place the building blocks for a new system that is fit for the needs of today's children.

The UTU would refer to the PISA research commissioned through the OECD which compared attainments in a large number of countries worldwide. It is clear from that research that while the current education system in Northern Ireland provides excellent results at the upper end of the scale, the system fails to cater for the needs of those at the lower end.

The UTU believes that Northern Ireland teachers are among the best in the world. The current education structures must be changed in order to allow them to maximise the learning opportunities for the full range of pupils, not just for those who are deemed to be academic.