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### *Senior Cycle Review: Analysis of discussions in schools on the purpose of senior cycle education in Ireland*

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**Abstract:** *This report is intended to inform the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) review of senior cycle and draws on the first cycle of the consultation process with 41 schools with different profiles and characteristics. The first cycle of the process has looked at teacher, parent and student perspectives on the purpose of senior cycle. The report outlines their perceptions of the benefits and challenges of the current senior cycle and their views on how senior cycle could be changed to address these challenges and to foster greater inclusion.*

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## CHAPTER 1

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### Introduction

This report is intended to inform the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) review of senior cycle and draws on the first cycle of the consultation process with schools conducted in September and October 2018. The first cycle of the process has looked at teacher, parent and student perspectives on the purpose of senior cycle and thinking about the future while the second cycle will explore pathways and structures within senior cycle.

With the support of school management bodies, the NCCA invited schools to become involved in a consultation process. From among those who indicated a willingness to participate, 41 schools were selected to capture diversity in terms of DEIS status, gender mix, school type, size, language medium and geographical spread. These schools were provided with support materials to consult with teachers and parents about the purpose of senior cycle and potential directions for the future. The themes for discussion were outlined by the NCCA with input from the research team on the wording of the questions. The approach to consultation with teachers and parents was left to the schools but they generally used focus group or brainstorming sessions. In order to explore the perspective of young people themselves, NCCA staff conducted focus group interviews with junior and senior cycle students in 20 case-study schools. Generally, three focus group interviews (one junior cycle and two senior cycle) were carried out in each of the schools. These interviews were recorded and the NCCA staff members also wrote up a summary of the responses from each group.

Teachers were asked to reflect on the following questions:

- What are the best things about senior cycle in your school?
- What are the main challenges relating to senior cycle in your school?
- Looking toward the future, from your school's perspective what do learners need to gain from senior cycle to succeed and participate actively in an ever-changing world?
- What changes to senior cycle would be needed to enable this to happen?
- How should senior cycle build on the student experience of the new junior cycle? Are there any challenges in building on the new junior cycle experience from your school's perspective?
- Does the teaching and learning at senior cycle enable all students to achieve their full potential?

- Currently, to what extent do you feel that senior cycle is inclusive of all backgrounds, talents and abilities?
- How can we ensure that in the future senior cycle education helps all students achieve their full potential?
- How do you currently define success in senior cycle (including TY, LCA, LCVP, LCE)
- How should we define success in senior cycle?
- What have we missed?

The material from teachers was fed back in the form of written templates<sup>1</sup> and analysed to identify the main themes identified across different kinds of schools.

Parents were asked to reflect on the following questions:

- What are the best things about the senior cycle experience available to your child?
- What are the main challenges relating to senior cycle for your child in your school?
- Looking toward the future, what does your child need to gain from senior cycle to succeed and participate actively in an ever-changing world?
- What changes to senior cycle would be needed to enable this to happen?
- How should the senior cycle build on the experience of the new junior cycle?
- Are there any challenges in building on the new junior cycle experience from your child's perspective?
- Currently, to what extent do you feel that senior cycle is inclusive of all backgrounds, talents and abilities?
- How can we ensure that in the future senior cycle education helps all students achieve their full potential?
- How do you currently define success in senior cycle (including Transition Year, Leaving Certificate Applied, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and Leaving Certificate Established)?
- How should we define success in senior cycle?
- What have we missed?

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that these templates represent a summary of the discussion provided by the school. Extracts from the written templates are used in the chapters that follow but cannot be regarded as direct quotes from teachers and parents in the same way as the student interviews.

The material from parents was fed back in the form of written templates and analysed to identify the main themes identified across different kinds of schools.

Reflecting the different experiences of the two groups of students, junior and senior cycle students were asked a different set of questions. Junior cycle students were asked the following:

- What helps you learn in class just now?
- How do you think these things that help you learn will be useful in the future?
- What are the best things that you have heard about senior cycle from other students, your teachers or family members?
- What do you see as the differences between junior and senior cycle?
- What are the most important things you think you will gain from your time in senior cycle?
- Do you think the current senior cycle is suited to all students?
- What are the things that you would like to change about senior cycle?
- Think about your experience in the new junior cycle, how should a new senior cycle build on this experience?
- Is there anything you would like to bring forward from junior cycle into senior cycle – e.g. different reporting such as the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA) or Classroom Based Assessments (CBAs)?

Senior cycle students were asked the following questions:

- What did you most enjoy about junior cycle?
- What are the best things about senior cycle in your school?
- How do you think this experience and learning will help you in the future?
- What are the most important things you gain from your time in senior cycle?
- Do you think the current senior cycle is suited to all students?
- What are the things that you would like to change about senior cycle?
- What plans do you have for when you leave school?
- At the end of your time in school you receive a certificate of results, do you think this will fairly represent all your achievements throughout senior cycle?

Notes were prepared on each focus group interview and a selection of interviews was transcribed for analysis. The transcripts and notes were analysed to identify

the main themes raised by junior and senior cycle students.

Chapter 2 examines the perspectives of teachers on senior cycle, Chapter 3 explores the student perspective while Chapter 4 looks at the view of parents. Chapter 5 offers some concluding remarks.



## CHAPTER 2

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### Teacher perspectives on the senior cycle

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter draws on the consultation with schools to outline teacher perspectives on the senior cycle. Section two examines perceptions of the positive aspects of senior cycle currently while section three explores teacher views on the challenges they encounter in relation to senior cycle. The fourth section considers whether senior cycle is seen as inclusive of all students. Section five looks at the skills teachers feel young people will need for the future. The sixth section examines the changes to senior cycle desired by schools in order to address the challenges they encounter and to foster greater inclusion. Section seven explores the relationship between junior and senior cycle while section eight looks at current and potential metrics for determining success at senior cycle level.

#### 2.2 THE POSITIVE ASPECTS OF SENIOR CYCLE

In the consultation, teachers were asked to highlight positive aspects of the senior cycle in their school. They highlighted both general features of senior cycle and specific aspects of how the programme operates in their school. In terms of senior cycle more broadly, the vast majority of the schools mentioned the range of subjects available in senior cycle, which was seen as providing flexibility for students to select subjects to meet their abilities and interests.

*The senior cycle programme offers a broad range of subject choices and caters for students of all abilities. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*Students choose subjects they are interested in - in these subjects classroom management is no longer an issue as at Junior Cycle, as everyone has decided they are interested in the subject. (Boys, DEIS)*

Over half of the schools emphasized the range of programmes on offer, arguing that having the LCE, LCA and LCVP caters to students of different abilities and orientations. DEIS schools were somewhat more likely to highlight the value of having a variety of senior cycle programmes, emphasising the need to have diverse pathways to cater for their student population.

*There are a great many programmes and subjects available in the school which are selected by students and which respond appropriately to their very diverse needs, abilities and interests. (Girls, DEIS)*

Among the group emphasising the variety of programmes, a considerable number highlighted the successful operation of the Transition Year programme in their school. These teachers stressed the range of subjects and activities on offer and the chance it offered students to develop a range of skills and to mature.

*The TY programme provided students with an opportunity to develop a range of interests, learn to manage time, fosters self-discipline, experience the work place, gain insights into self and make informed subject choices for Leaving Certificate. It is evident that those who complete the TY option are better equipped to cope and succeed in the Leaving Certificate than those who move directly into 5<sup>th</sup> Year. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

Smaller schools were less likely to highlight Transition Year in this way, perhaps because they are generally less likely to be in a position to provide the programme for logistical reasons (Clerkin, 2013).

A large minority of schools saw the approach to assessment as a positive feature of senior cycle but differed in the aspects they highlighted. One group felt that the current senior cycle allowed for the use of a variety of assessment methods which counted towards the final result. This was seen as reducing the stress for students as their performance did not rest on a terminal exam alone.

*Continuous assessment alleviates pressure in most subjects for June. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

Another group of schools emphasised the positive features of the exam system itself, highlighting in particular the way in which external assessment provided a 'level playing field' for students.

*It was expressed that external assessment of students work ensured objectivity, validity and reliability. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

*The anonymous nature of a set exam for all students does ensure that all students are on the same playing field and college access is open to all based on achievements that are comparable from school to school. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*The anonymity of the terminal exam makes it fair and serves as an end goal which rewards hard work and facilitates appropriate progression. (Girls, DEIS)*

Boys' schools were somewhat more likely than other school types to focus on assessment as a positive dimension of senior cycle.

At the school level, the provision of supports for students, including career guidance, learning support, mentoring systems, pastoral care and links with the

local community and business, was mentioned as a positive feature of senior cycle in over half of the schools.

*Teachers engage with students outside class time and care about their needs. Senior students are supported by the Mentor System and there is good academic and holistic support. There are many links between this DEIS school and third level colleges which facilitate transition to those institutions. (Girls, DEIS)*

Smaller schools were somewhat less likely than medium or large schools to emphasise supports for students as a positive feature of senior cycle.

Around half of the schools also mentioned the quality of the teaching staff, their dedication to their work and their involvement in on-going professional development.

*Students are taught by teachers who value learning, both their own and their students', and who are aware of new developments in their subjects and in learning and teaching in general. Students' learning experiences are rich and varied. The students are given opportunities to engage in independent learning, collaborative learning, fieldwork etc. They experience learning with a highly motivated and competent staff. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*A number of teachers in the school have CPD training in the areas of behaviour management and teaching methodologies. ... Trained teachers give feedback to staff during staff meetings and during a monthly Teaching and Learning forum. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

Related to the quality of supports and staff engagement, a significant minority of schools pointed to the positive school climate in their school, characterised by good relations between staff and students and among students themselves. Girls' schools were somewhat more likely than other school types to explicitly mention a positive school climate.

*There is a good relationship between students and teachers, and [a] positive and enthusiastic environment. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*There is a very good relationship between students and teachers. It is possible to give personal assistance and guide students to do their best and to get the best learning. [Tá caidreamh an-mhaith idir scoláirí agus múinteoirí. Táthar in ann cúnamh pearsanta a thabhairt agus treoir a chur ar na scoláirí chun a ndícheall a dhéanamh agus an fhoghlaim is fearr a fháil.] (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Other positive features of senior cycle mentioned by schools included the availability of a range of extra-curricular activities, the provision of different subject levels, an explicit focus on inclusion in the school and the preparation of students for the world of work and adult life.

### 2.3 THE CHALLENGES RELATED TO SENIOR CYCLE

The two dominant themes emerging from teacher accounts of the challenges relating to senior cycle were the time pressure on teachers and students and the implications of this pressure in the form of rote learning, teaching to the test and a negative impact on student motivation and stress levels. The courses were seen as very content-heavy, making it difficult to ‘cover’ the course in the available time and constraining the use of more active teaching methods and a focus on independent learning.

*The courses are very wide and take lots of time to cover and they often prioritise learning based on memory so that the learning is often narrow. Higher order skills are poorly developed by students and there are not enough opportunities for students to become independent learners. (Girls, DEIS)*

*Teachers focussing on getting through content rather than developing skills. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*It was felt that some courses were too long and there was pressure to get material covered. There was a sense that the learning was therefore not as deep. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

This time pressure coupled with the high stakes nature of the Leaving Certificate examination was seen as fuelling teaching to the test as teachers endeavoured to ensure that their students were ‘prepared’ for the exam.

*The Leaving Certificate is taught to the final exam and in most cases to the exam paper. Rote learning is very common unlike at Junior Cycle level where the eight key skills of the Junior Cycle supports students to become independent learners, creative and digital literate. When students enter 3rd level the Leaving Certificate curriculum or experience does not support them with the skills to access 3rd level. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*Due to the fact that this single exam can have a significant bearing on students' entry to third level, this leads to teaching and learning to the test, which does not allow a number of students to shine, nor does it place emphasis on important skills needed for life after school. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

From the student perspective, this context was seen as encouraging, if not rewarding rote learning, with students focusing on assimilating rather than understanding volumes of information.

*The Leaving Certificate examination rewards rote learning and memory work to the detriment of understanding and the higher order skills on Blooms taxonomy. The demand for notes and simplified versions of texts increases pressure on staff. The “good teacher” can be seen as the one who “fills the mind” rather than the one who encourages reflection and self-directed learning. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

The current system was seen as negative effects in terms of student motivation among those who were not as academically oriented and as leading to higher stress levels among the high achievers.

*Student stress - striving to achieve success and often do not get any pleasure or benefit from the subject. [Strus an scoláire – ag cur brú orthu féin chun rath a bhaint amach agus go minic níl siad ag fáil aon phléisiúr nó tairbhe as an ábhar.](Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*Course content is too much which affects students’ ability to balance extra-curricular therefore negatively affecting students’ wellbeing. Therefore, no time for personal development. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Staff in girls’ schools were somewhat more likely to emphasise the effects of the current system on rote learning and related stress than those in other school types, most likely reflecting the greater prevalence of exam-related stress found among girls (see Banks, Smyth, 2015).

*The Leaving Certificate, while “brutally fair”, is a high stakes examination. Much depends on one day. The large number of students who undertake grinds in multiple subjects is giving rise to “burn out” and mental health problems. The need for such grinds stems from fear of underachieving on the day and a pressure from friends to do more and more. What a student does in school is never seen as enough. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

Two other themes featured in around half of the schools involved in the consultation. Firstly, the points system was viewed as increasing the risk of young people taking inappropriate choices at senior cycle level. This related to choice of programme and subject level and, to some extent, choice of subjects.

*Lack of student knowledge when making selections for Senior Cycle programmes and subject choices. This manifests itself in terms of students making poor choices. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Many young people were seen as reluctant to take the LCA programme, even where staff felt it would better suit their needs, because it would not provide them with direct entry into higher education.

*Some students in senior cycle would do better in LCA. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*They will not opt for LCA as they feel the programme is inferior to the Leaving Certificate. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

Students were also seen as selecting higher level in subjects to order to maximise the points for higher education entry, even where they were struggling with the higher level material.

*Students who are academically challenged suffer under the points system as they feel compelled to enter higher level courses that they cannot access, all in a race to accumulate points. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*At L.C. a lot of students who are less able still want to do Higher Level because they get points for a H7. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*Many teachers felt the bonus points in maths were causing students who would traditionally have done ordinary level to take the higher level, placing extraordinary pressure on their other subjects. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*Too many students taking HL maths paper when they are not able for it as they are trying to get the extra 25 points, regardless if they actually need HL maths or plan to use it in 3rd level. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

The lower points awarded for ordinary level was also seen as leading to lower morale for this group of students (see McCoy et al., forthcoming, on the effects of the grading system).

Although programme and level choice were mentioned more frequently, some teachers referred to student choice being driven by the desire to have 'easier' subjects. Lack of adequate knowledge about the content of some subjects was seen as resulting in some students taking subjects that did not suit their interests or abilities. The issue of inappropriate choices featured to a slightly greater extent among those in larger and/or boys' schools.

A significant minority of schools highlighted challenges related to senior cycle students being motivated and taking ownership over their own learning. This group felt that students expected that teachers would 'spoon feed' them and that young

people were reluctant to take responsibility for their own educational development.

*Difficulty handing over the responsibility of learning to the students, teachers taking on too much of the responsibility. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*They expect to be spoon fed in this school due to pressure from parents. How do we foster independent learning? (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*Not preparing students adequately for college, teachers giving all the information (spoon-feeding) the students, and students are unprepared to work towards deadlines and independent learning in college. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*Many teachers felt that students wanted to be 'spoon-fed' and wanted the 'grinds' approach of notes and rote learning. Some teachers lamented the fact that students are too 'mollycoddled' by their parents and are unable to think for themselves. They are seen as being reluctant to take initiative and work independently. This, it was felt, feeds into the grinds-school mentality that they seem to rely on. They therefore do not take enough responsibility for their own learning and a teacher is deemed ineffective if they do not follow the grinds-school model of 'education'. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

This was a somewhat more common theme in DEIS schools, where some teachers reported challenges in relation to student attendance and motivation.

*In relation to some of our students: Motivation. Attendance. Attendance requirements for LCA. Not taking deadlines seriously - lack of responsibility. Lack of self-belief and Low expectations. Lack of ambition & work ethic - Unwillingness to take responsibility for independent study. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

Other challenges, mentioned by a smaller group of schools, were the neglect of other (non-academic) skills in the senior cycle, the discontinuity between junior and senior cycle (an issue explored in greater detail below) and the provision of a narrow range of programmes and subjects.

*The volume of information that must be covered across 7 subjects prevents students from developing other aspects of themselves. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

## **2.4 INCLUSION AND SENIOR CYCLE**

As well as being asked about perceptions of the senior cycle overall, teachers were

asked more explicitly about the extent to which the current senior cycle is inclusive of all young people. Many schools had very mixed views, with staff reporting that teachers within the school did not necessarily reach a consensus. In providing more detail, however, the teachers tended to highlight aspects of senior cycle that did not promote inclusion.

On the more positive side, a significant minority of schools highlighted the way in which the provision of a variety of programmes offered pathways to suit different groups of students.

*Overall it is [inclusive], as the differing needs of students are catered for. There are various options available to students (i.e. LC, LCA, LCVP, ASDAN, Higher / Ordinary levels. This school takes every opportunity to include everyone. Increased weight on Oral exams is a favourable change. This school is excellent at making adjustments for weaker students. Diverse backgrounds and talents are catered for in this school because there is so much on offer. The Access Programme helps. We are very inclusive of all backgrounds. (Girls, DEIS)*

A smaller group of schools also highlighted the fact that the variety of assessment approaches fostered inclusion by catering to a broader range of student abilities and interests.

On the more negative side, the majority of schools indicated that the current model did not cater for the range of different ways of learning and needs among the student population. The system was seen as favouring those who were better at exams and more oriented towards academic rather than practical subjects.

*It suits rote learners but does not prepare students with the skills they need for college / university / positive destinations. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*It does not allow ALL students to achieve their potential and is heavily weighted in advantage of academically minded students and those with a strong work ethic and support system at home. The terminal exam still rewards those who learn the formula of writing essays rather than showing evidence for their learning. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

The system was seen as posing particular challenges for including young people with lower achievement levels and those with special educational needs.

*Currently the senior cycle is not accessible by the large majority of students with a moderate to severe and profound ID. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*



*Leaving Cert is not inclusive of Travellers, EAL students or those with significant learning difficulties. (Girls, DEIS)*

*Students with special additional needs are not well catered for in senior cycle and there is little done to recognise their talents, abilities or backgrounds. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

The reliance of assessment on a relatively long, written exam was seen as a particular issue in constraining the inclusion of certain groups of students.

*There is a significant number of students with SEN and language needs in our school and the volume of learning for the LC is incredibly difficult for these students. In Home Economics there is a written journal and a written exam with no practical element which would be a lot more beneficial to our students many of whom would experience success in practical areas rather than learning off information and recalling it in the exam. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*The assessment process and in particular the traditional Leaving Cert represents significant challenges for a cohort of students such as English and Learning support students. Specific mention was given to the lengthy terminal exams in respect of this. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Interestingly, non-DEIS schools were somewhat more likely to highlight difficulties in catering for SEN students, perhaps reflecting the expertise built up by DEIS schools in relation to learning difficulties. Staff in the special schools included in the consultation highlighted the absence of a senior cycle programme which catered to the needs of their students.

Some teachers explicitly stated that the current system favoured more socio-economically advantaged groups of students, especially given the emergence of a 'grinds' culture as a way of preparing for the exam.

*It remains a post code based lottery based on the number of grinds you can afford and the socio-economic background that you emerge from (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*The 'points race' definitely favours the advantage whose parents have access to funds to pay for extra tuition, Gaeltacht and French college places. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*The current Senior Cycle is not inclusive of all backgrounds, talents, abilities. Those who are economically advantaged can avail of grinds, etc. and such classes can yield results. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

Other themes emerging related to the difficulties for young people for whom English is an additional language, challenges in differentiating course material to

cater for a diverse student body, the lack of relevance of the material for young people's day-to-day lives and the challenges posed by lack of resources and large class sizes.

*Class sizes are too big making it very difficult to give students individual attention and particularly difficult to cater for all the needs of the students in the class. The large class sizes also makes it very difficult to cater for the higher and ordinary level students in one class. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Teachers in DEIS schools were somewhat more likely to report challenges relating to lack of relevance and differentiation than those in non-DEIS schools.

*Not all students are engaged by the work and the subject choice available does not reflect the society in which students will live. There is a lack of focus on skills. Exam skill can supersede subject knowledge. Assessment is too time-dependent. Course content needs to be more relevant to their lives. (Girls, DEIS)*

Boys' schools were also somewhat more likely to regard lack of differentiation as a challenge to inclusion.

## **2.5 SKILLS FOR THE FUTURE**

Teachers were asked about the kinds of skills they felt young people would need to adapt to a changing world. There was a remarkable consensus across schools in the groups of skills highlighted. All of the schools referred to learning skills which encompassed higher order thinking, problem solving, information processing and independent learning.

*It was felt that students need to know how to learn and work independently and to organise their learning. There was a strong emphasis on the importance of taking responsibility for one's learning and being able to manage other commitments. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*Students need to master transferable skills such as social/interpersonal skills, organizational and communication skills. They must be given opportunities to apply knowledge acquired thus reinforcing and enhancing their development. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

*Students need to be more academically challenged at senior cycle as college requires higher order questioning, thinking and problem solving, (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Digital skills were also seen as an important component of learning skills, with students needing the competences to adapt to and engage with changing technology.

*There is not enough emphasis placed on becoming information literate. There can be a high requirement for rote learning and less need for students to be able to know how to access, assess and present relevant information. Similarly students should be given the opportunity to utilise a variety of IT resources in addition to online programmes and networks. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*They should be self-directed learners, able to take responsibility for tasks and deadlines, and IT literate to take on the challenges of the future. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

Almost all of the schools placed a strong emphasis on intrapersonal skills, in particular on the development of resilience but also on broader self-management and coping skills.

*Above all they need to learn to stick with things, to turn up even when they don't feel like it. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*There should be a greater focus on managing oneself, like the aspirations of junior cycle, and taking more responsibility for one's learning. Learning to cope with the process of learning, and understanding that improvement can be gradual, is important. This might alleviate the pressure and stress that arise when students feel they are not succeeding as they should, or as quickly as they should be. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*Resilience and adaptability – compassion, copying, empathy, being able to cope with change. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*Work needs to be done on developing a more resilient student, one who sees failure as a learning moment and one who sees a lifetime of opportunity ahead of them. ... Students need to be able to deal with rather than fear failure. Throughout school life, a student should be learning the skills of resilience. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

The majority of schools also mentioned work-related skills. By many, these were framed broadly in terms of the kinds of group and team work skills, presentation and organisational skills needed for further and higher education as well as employment.

*Learners need to develop the skills which will equip them for future careers, such as ability to work independently and collaborate in groups. Critical thinking skills, an ability to innovate and adapt, learner autonomy, writing and research skills, IT and new technologies, good*

*literacy and numeracy skills as well as a couple of highly cultivated passions. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*Students need to develop skills for working with people. They need to learn to compromise and to affirm others who have a different perspective from them. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

Other schools placed a more explicit emphasis on preparation for the world of work, feeling that work experience placements would provide young people with the skills to transition into employment. Single-sex schools were somewhat less likely to mention work-related skills than other school types, perhaps because, reflecting their socio-economic profile, a higher proportion would go on to higher education rather than directly entering the labour market.

Just over half of the schools emphasised the need for life skills, that is, for young people to be able to manage their finances, live independently and handle sexual relationships. A relatively small number of schools mentioned the importance of literacy and numeracy skills as distinct from more general learning skills. A similar number of schools highlighted the need to foster creativity among young people.

## **2.6 CHANGES TO SENIOR CYCLE**

Teachers were asked about the changes they would like to see to senior cycle to foster the skills they had identified and in relation to promoting inclusion.

The vast majority of schools highlighted the need for a greater variety of assessment methods in order to foster the kinds of learning, project work and team work skills needed for the future.

*Continuous formative assessment that shows where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how to get there. This will enable students to become lifelong, self-directed learners. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*The assessment methods need to be meaningful and allow students to demonstrate their skills. More continuous assessment needs to be introduced, possibly in 5<sup>th</sup> year to help keep the students focussed on the year ahead. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*More project-based learning through a learning outcomes based curriculum where the teacher has more autonomy to choose interesting content that is relevant to the students and will engage students to encourage self-directed learning. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*Rather than concentrating on an "all or nothing" examination at the end of two years- a situation not replicated in my opinion elsewhere either in third level or in work life - the content should be broken down into modules of 4, 8, 10 or 12 weeks and those contents assessed either by terminal examination or by project based assessment. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

It was felt that assessment approaches would also need to reflect soft skills.

*A greater focus on soft skills, including speaking, teamwork, building relationships, taking initiative. The assessment of subjects needs to be greatly changed to reflect the importance of developing these skills. Additionally, more CBA is required to reflect the fact that the vast majority of jobs will require smaller tasks to be completed frequently rather than a single task at the end of two years. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

Many schools grounded their desire for a broader range of assessment methods in the need to extend the classroom-based assessment approach used in junior cycle into senior cycle.

*Classroom Based Assessments in all subjects in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Year. The senior cycle should not focus solely on final exams. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*LC should have a model of ongoing assessment similar to Classroom Based Assessment and Assessment Task at Junior Cycle level to provide a reflection of students learning over two years instead of one exam. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*More project-oriented assessment like the JC. Therefore students take ownership of learning/ self-directed learning. Opportunity for students to explore their own abilities. An opportunity to develop autonomous learning that was present in the junior cycle. New JC informs students of their skills & abilities. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Some teachers felt that these different assessment components could complement, rather than replace, the terminal examination.

*All subjects should have some element of the final exam done before leaving cert examination in June to alleviate some of the pressure on students. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

There was, however, less of a consensus on how assessment could be broadened. Having a variety of assessment approaches was seen as posing challenges in terms of the timing of different assessment components and the impact on teacher and

student workload. Given the issues around students not taking responsibility for their learning highlighted above, the potential for more varied assessment to fall disproportionately on teachers was also mentioned. There was a lack of consensus too on who should do the assessment. Some teachers called for the use of class-based assessments in senior cycle as a natural follow-on from junior cycle, an issue discussed in greater detail below. Others highlighted the need for other assessment components, including projects and portfolios, to be marked externally in order to maintain comparability across schools.

*If CBA's come in for Senior Cycle, the responsibilities on teachers is unacceptable as teachers will then be responsible for the grade that decides their future career - negative rapport. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*Be wary of assessing our own students. The system has its faults but objectivity of the terminal exam is positive. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Additional resources, especially continuous professional development, were seen as crucial components of any changes to senior cycle.

*Increased workload on teachers. Fears about teachers correcting students work at senior level and the implications for points system functioning. Teacher's reluctance to grade students. More CPD at JC is needed for teachers to have sufficient confidence with extending the model to SC. Staff training is essential. ... JC adjustment is already taxing for teachers and a second wave of adjustment may be a step too far. Teaching will suffer with change related work. Collaboration time for teachers. (Girls, DEIS)*

Related to these themes of more varied assessment approaches, around half of the schools emphasised the need for senior cycle to foster a broader range of skills than is currently the case. In keeping with the responses to skills for the future, schools highlighted learning, work-related, intrapersonal and life skills.

Just over half of the group of schools pointed to the need for more flexibility in course offer through the provision of short courses and/or through providing a broader range of subjects which fostered practical or creative skills.

*Changing the structure of the Leaving Cert so that students can still participate in a wide range of subjects, without having to depend on ALL of them for points. We discussed a possible "major and minor subjects" approach to the Leaving Cert in our meeting that I thought was a great idea. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Teachers in DEIS schools were somewhat more likely to emphasise the need for more flexible course provision.

*Develop short courses for Senior Cycle thereby facilitating students for whom the current LC is inaccessible. (Girls, DEIS)*

In order to reduce the workload and time pressure discussed above, a significant minority of schools called for students being required to take fewer senior cycle subjects or for the content of the courses to be reduced in volume. DEIS schools were somewhat more likely to highlight the latter option.

*7 subjects is too demanding. We feel 5 subjects is enough. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

*7 subjects at senior cycle is too many - content too heavy. This then becomes a disadvantage to their understanding and their choices for specialisation in Third Level. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*Independent thinking and learning fostered in Junior cycle should be encouraged by reducing the curriculum at senior cycle so that they more critically analyse the material and have time to engage fully and develops skills needed in life. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*There is a need to reduce the subject specification requirements at Leaving Certificate level. This would give time to teachers to examine less material in depth, employ more active learning methodologies and develop important life skills such as critical thinking. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

Other discussions related to the need for a greater emphasis on wellbeing in senior cycle and several schools highlighted the need for funding and resources (including teacher CPD) to help meet the challenges faced.

Some schools expressed caution about the extent to which senior cycle reform could be accomplished in the absence of a change in the method of selection for higher education, feeling that the points system would continue to drive teaching and learning at senior cycle.

*The structure of a new or augmented Leaving Certificate will be largely dictated by the demands of the 3<sup>rd</sup> level institutions who rely on the points system for entry. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*Review the university entry system as a matter of urgency because unless this driving force is addressed, then assessment at Leaving Certificate will continue to be as it is today. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

When asked about the changes needed to foster inclusion, teachers highlighted many of the same themes. Over half pointed to the need for a broader range of subjects (including short courses), a pattern more common in DEIS schools and less so in boys' schools. A similar proportion called for more continuous assessment in the form of project work, portfolios and/or exams earlier in senior cycle. Interestingly, this response was more common in smaller than in larger schools. As above, teachers emphasised the need for senior cycle to provide young people with a broader range of skills in order to foster the inclusion of a diverse group.

While the topic of pathways did not emerge in discussion of the changes required to foster 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, the issue was a common feature of discussions relating to inclusion. Almost half of the schools highlighted the need to reinforce the value of existing programmes, especially LCA, or to develop alternative pathways within and beyond senior cycle to meet student needs. The emphasis on pathways was more common among teachers in DEIS schools than those in other school types.

As above, around a quarter of the schools highlighted the need for students to take fewer subjects overall while a similar proportion felt that there should be no compulsory subjects as some students struggled with the 'core' subjects.

*I am not sure I agree with core subjects for LC at all. If nobody wants to study Irish, why do they have to? If a person hates Maths or English, why do they have to continue with it? I think this is worth debating now, as it is unlikely that LC will be changed again at any point soon. The school experience is much better in subjects that the students actually have an interest in. (Boys, DEIS)*

*Forcing students to continue with subjects they have no interest in or talent for is not constructive. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

Resources and funding were seen as constraints in adapting senior cycle to promote inclusion, with many highlighting large class sizes as an impediment to adequately catering to the needs of students with learning difficulties.

## **2.7 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JUNIOR AND SENIOR CYCLE**

Teachers were asked about how senior cycle could build on the experience of the revised junior cycle and what challenges might arise in doing so. A minority, around a fifth, felt that it was too early to think through the implications as the revised junior cycle was not yet fully worked out.

The majority of schools highlighted the need to have a variety of teaching methods and assessment approaches to mirror those used in junior cycle. Teachers highlighted the use of group and team work as well as projects and portfolios.



*At Junior Cycle level we teach to Learning Outcomes. This gives each teacher the opportunity to design and plan their subjects to meet the needs of their students. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

An emphasis on oral presentation skills was also mentioned, especially in girls' schools.

*There is a lack of emphasis on presentation skills at Leaving Certificate, with the exception of during the Transition Year course. Students should become well practised at researching and presenting information in order to be able to succeed in third level and work. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

The majority of schools also pointed to the need for senior cycle to reinforce the key skills developed during junior cycle. Teachers in DEIS schools were more likely to emphasise the continued emphasis on key skills.

*Build on the key skills that the students were introduced to in junior cycle, in particular communication. An oral communication component of junior cycle needs to be introduced into senior cycle. However, it needs to be more focussed on an element of their course, e.g. poetry, fiction or drama. By following the collection of texts format, more drafting and meaningful feedback can be facilitated. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

A significant minority of schools highlighted the need to ensure continuity between junior and senior cycle but without indicating the specific aspects. A significant minority also indicated the need for senior cycle to mirror the increased emphasis on wellbeing at junior cycle level, a response that was more prevalent in DEIS schools.

*A more integrated Wellbeing programme is required at senior level where every teacher sees themselves as a teacher of Wellbeing and the key skills are woven throughout every programme. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

At the same time, a number of schools highlighted challenges in integrating wellbeing into what was seen as an already dense curriculum.

*Pressure on curriculum and timetabling as option subjects and core subjects are suffering as a result of wellbeing implementation, although [our school] would be renowned to looking after students' wellbeing outside of class times. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

In relation to challenges, the majority of schools pointed to the issue of discontinuity between (the revised) junior and senior cycle, a theme that also emerged spontaneously in response to other questions. Teachers expressed concern about the gap in course material between junior and senior cycle, with subjects having more complex material and requiring longer essay-style answers. Those in single-sex and larger schools were more likely to express such concerns.

*Students going from common papers in junior cycle to ordinary or higher level in senior cycle is going to be a big challenge. At present long answers are not required in the junior cycle exams e.g. English, students will have lost the associated skills in and will have difficulty giving detailed answers in senior cycle. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*Teachers felt that students who are starting senior cycle coming from the new junior cycle has a much more shallow knowledge of subjects than students used to have. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*not sure how students are going to go from a common level JC Science and jump to the level of knowledge required for LC Higher Level Chemistry/Biology/Physics (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*There is disconnect between the requirements at Jr Cert and at higher Leaving Cert. For a student to successfully engage in study at third level in a very academic subject, like History, English Lit, Physics etc., they need to engage in school at a very deep level in that subject. It is a disservice to them to make these subjects too simple or "accessible" at higher level senior cycle level. This needs to be addressed as currently the new junior cycle (with common papers in many subjects) does not in my view adequately prepare them for SC. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

The lack of continuity of provision was seen as a particular issue for young people with SEN:

*What will be implemented for JC Level 2 candidates at senior cycle? (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*The school have designed their own leaver's programme in the absence of a state recognised [one]. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

The majority of schools pointed to the need for resources, particularly time for and provision of professional development for teachers, to support senior cycle changes.

The majority also highlighted the implications for teachers and students in having a variety of assessment components. This was seen as providing a burden for both

teachers and students, particularly if assessment was not spaced out over the year(s).

*Many felt that the CBA model of constant and ongoing projects in all subjects is adding huge stress to JC students already and our leaving certs couldn't cope with this in addition to the stress they are already under. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*The CBA timetable is going to become frantically busy. For students who are conscientious, for the child who gives 110% to every examination task, there will be no let-up in stress at all. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*Corrections of student work is an enormous workload for students and teachers. Projects/ continuous assessment put huge amount of work and pressure for teachers and students. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

Around a third of the schools indicated the need to learn from the lessons of junior cycle reform. For some, this meant waiting until junior cycle had been fully rolled out before exploring the potential for senior cycle reform.

*There was a strong feeling among staff that it would be unwise to make dramatic changes to the Leaving Certificate programme until the successes and failures of the new Junior Certificate have been established. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

For many, this meant ensuring that teachers were provided with information, course materials and training at a very early stage in the process.

*I feel the department need to have fully thought out all aspects of the SC course before delivering it to teachers & students. Leaving teachers in the dark about changes and what's expected has caused a lot of frustrations for teachers & students. This I feel has made students angry and feeling let down that their teachers can't answer Qs or help. Having a rough/ possible making scheme of any new subject is invaluable to a student. They need to know what is been looked for and what expectations they need to work towards. (Boys, DEIS)*

*If Senior is to change, clear guidelines, structures and relevant training, resources and specimen papers must be available well in advance. It is very a very important exam for students and their futures so it shouldn't be rolled out for the sake of change, it needs to be meaningful and fit for purpose and all teachers must be well prepared in advance. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

## 2.8 WHAT IS SUCCESS IN SENIOR CYCLE?

Schools were asked about what they considered as success for students in their school and what kinds of success they thought should be considered and, indeed, valued. In their responses, teachers often referred to both what was seen as 'success' by society in general and what they themselves considered as a positive outcome for young people.

The vast majority of schools felt that achievement or points was a crucial metric currently.

*Much as we wish it were otherwise success is largely defined by the number of points. Schools come up against this problem in their community all the time. We should be more focused on things that will help young people navigate their world but we are not. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*With the huge importance of points for entry into 3<sup>rd</sup> level colleges success in senior cycle is mainly reflected in grades and results. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

The majority also emphasised progression, usually to higher or further education but in some cases, to employment.

At the same time, the majority of schools also recognised and valued the personal and social development of their students, their acquisition of social skills, self-confidence and maturing into an adult. Boys' schools were somewhat less likely than other school types to place a strong emphasis on personal/social development as a metric of success.

*In our school, we value the holistic education offered here. We would hope that a student graduating from here sees "her best as good enough". We would want her to be happy, friendly and self-confident, with a sense of humour and an awareness of the need to fulfil her potential for good. We would also want students to be able to think for themselves, be ready to further develop their diverse competencies, find their own voices and claim their own identities. It must be admitted, however, that society views success purely in terms of points and a school is viewed as good if it is placed higher than a neighbouring school in a league table. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*Students attend school regularly and demonstrate good behaviour, respect and a hard working attitude. They show that they can learn from their mistakes and are motivated to improve. Students participate in a range of extra-curricular activities and contribute to the overall school community. They are valuable members of the local*

*community outside of school and participate in community initiatives and charity events. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

Many schools, recognising diversity, wanted each student to reach his or her own potential.

*The student must define what success looks like for him. It is the school's business to ensure that every student reaches his full potential. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Completing second-level education and developing a love of learning were also highlighted by a smaller group of schools.

In thinking about how success could or should be measured, teachers placed a much stronger emphasis on personal/social development and young people reaching their potential. These were seen as much more important than achievement in itself.

*Here, the emphasis was on acknowledging that success should be seen in a broader light. At the moment, success means academic achievement and high points in order to access university. The teachers felt that success in senior cycle should reflect the student's non-academic achievements also. It was also stressed that success should not simply be a set of exam grades, but a broader model of assessment which includes formative assessment like classroom-based assessments. Emphasis was also placed on the importance of further training and vocational education. Ultimately, success in senior cycle, it was felt, means creating a resilient citizen who has the skills necessary to thrive in the world beyond second level, be it at third level or the world of work. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*The holistic development of the students so when they complete the Senior Cycle that they enter the workforce of further education that they are rounded, mature critical thinkers with the ability to work in groups. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*There should be more of an emphasis on building well rounded human beings who have the skills to learn and enjoy living and who are able to cope when life does not turn out the way they expected. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*Success in Senior Cycle should be defined in terms of the individual. He/she reaches/surpasses her academic potential, has choices for the future, is confident in his/her "own skins", has strong interpersonal skills and is able to cope with the ups and downs of life, has*

*demonstrated independent thinking, has shown an interest in charitable projects, etc. – all are indicators of success. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

While having a clear view of how they felt success should be framed, teachers were often more cautious about how these broader developmental outcomes could be recognised and valued. Some teachers pointed to difficulties in assessing these broader skills. Others expressed some caution that it might become a ‘tick box’ exercise whereby students were expected to provide evidence of community and extra-curricular involvement, thus adding further to their workload.

*It would be great to see individual research, community work and work experience to be considered but we need to be mindful of creating even more stresses for the students where they believe they have yet more boxes to tick and achievements to require in order to compete for third level places. i.e. a situation where they must have completed a good research science fair project, Volunteered in a hospital for x amount of hours and received top marks in academic assessment to get into medical school. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

## **2.9 CONCLUSIONS**

This chapter has analysed teacher perspectives on the current senior cycle and the potential for change. Teachers point to a number of very positive aspects of senior cycle, including the range of programmes and subjects and its effective implementation in their school through high quality staff, good support structures and an engaging Transition Year programme. However, teachers also point to a number of challenges with the current senior cycle, in particular, the way in which the volume of course material and the high stakes nature of the exam lead to teaching to the test and rote learning, with a consequent neglect of higher order thinking and broader skill development. The current system is seen by many as favouring particular ways of learning, thus providing limited pathways to success. Particular concern was expressed in relation to those with a more practical orientation and those with special education needs. Furthermore, teachers highlight a lack of continuity between (the reformed) junior and senior cycle, with students seen as experiencing difficulties in encountering more detailed course material and different modes of assessment after the transition. In addressing the challenges of the current senior cycle, teachers would like to see a broader variety of teaching methods and modes of assessment used but there is less consensus on the logistics of moving towards a stronger emphasis on continuous assessment or on the appropriate role of external assessment in this process.

## CHAPTER 3

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### Student perspectives on senior cycle

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter draws on the focus group interviews carried out with students in a selection of schools participating in the senior cycle consultation. Students from both junior and senior cycle were interviewed as part of the research and the results reflect their views on a range of topics including teaching and learning and student perceptions of, and experiences in, senior cycle. In section 2.5, the findings examine students' views on the main areas that they feel need to be changed in any senior cycle reform.

#### 3.2 WHAT HELPS STUDENTS LEARN?

During the focus groups, students were asked to discuss what they felt helps them to learn best in school. Students spoke predominantly about the use of group and project work and Classroom Based Assessments (CBAs) as their preferred learning approach. They also spoke about the use of technology in the classroom and 'learning by doing'. Students also raised the importance of having motivational teachers in helping them to learn in addition the use of regular testing instead of one final exam.

##### Groupwork and CBAs

Group work and CBAs were viewed by students as a move away from 'just sitting there all day and taking notes' (Coeducational, non-DEIS) which did not help them learn. For many, the main attraction of group work was the opportunity to learn from their peers, clarify issues and ask questions:

*When you're with the groups and your friends, like, you're comfortable with them, whatever, and you can just be like, "Oh, what are we doing? Can you explain it again to me?" So, we're all on the same level then. And it's easier, like, to work with your group. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*In the projects, if you're doing it with your friends, ... you'll probably learn more from your friends, what they're saying, than with the teachers explaining to you. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Students liked being able to talk to one another instead of simply writing material down:

*Getting into discussions in class is better than just having a teacher write it down and then you write it down into your notes because then*

*you're actually, like, learning it rather than just memorising it. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Activities such as giving speeches or writing poems in class were also raised by students, many of whom spoke about the importance of having 'fun' while learning:

*I like when we do speeches and, like, debates in English and get to, like, us talk more than listen. I like when you actually do things than...not just write and listen, and, like, look at what they have on the board. I like when you actually write, like, poems or, like, do speeches, it's like more fun. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*And if you get a laugh out of it, like, something funny happens, you'll remember that and you'll get taken back to what you were doing. And then, you'll remember it easier. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Students recognised the difference in their learning between simply taking notes about a subject and talking it out with their teachers and peers:

*It would be better if we were talking and discussing things more in class rather than just writing notes. There are some double classes where we're doing nothing but taking notes for the 80 minutes and we don't even discuss the notes, and we're not going to learn anything from that. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*[Bheadh sé níos fearr má bhí muid ag caint agus ag plé níos mó sa rang seachas díreach nótaí a scríobh. Bíonn roinnt ranganna dúbailte a mbíonn muid go léir díreach ag scríobh i gcomhair an 80 agus ní bhímid ag plé nó aon rud faoi na nótaí agus níl muid chun aon rud a fhoghlaim as sin.]*

Students spoke about the importance of CBAs in helping them learn in class compared to just learning from a book. In one large girls' school, junior cycle students spoke about how they liked the way CBAs helped them learn through other people:

*The way the CBA is done is really good as well, because you go out and you look for experiences through other people and, like, that also helps you to find what you think is, like, the best way to interpret, like, say texts and all that stuff. Like, you're not just getting all the information from one book, like, you're getting them from different people. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

Others spoke about the importance of CBAs in improving their confidence and students could identify the elements of their learning that would be useful in the future:



*Well, CBAs can instil confidence in somebody so that they can do better while trying to do say, a job interview. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

### **Regular testing and revision**

Depending on the subject, some students spoke about the importance of regular testing throughout the school year which helped them to learn rather than having one final exam. This takes the pressure off the final exam and is 'a more accurate representation of your skills':

*It's better to have, like, multiple tests all throughout the year than one big exam at, like, the end of the year. Because then, you think about it, you could have been sick the day of the exam and you could have totally boded it and it's not actually showing how good you are. Whereas, if you have multiple chances at different periods throughout the year, that's a lot less likely that you're gonna be sick for every single one and bodge every single one. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Students favoured teachers that helped them prepare for tests by giving them bullet points about the most important elements of the class:

*My geography teacher just, like, [covers what you] need to know and ... it expresses the points; it doesn't give, like, the test away but, like, it's just, like, certain points that you really should know and learn off rather than, like, learning the whole chapter, like, stuff you don't need to know. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

### **The use of technology in the classroom**

Some students referred to the use of digital media and technology in the classroom to help them learn and to go over course material:

*Videos help because you, like, learn more because you see it and ... everyone is learning the same thing, it's not, like, from a teacher. And you can look back on it. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Students felt there was a need for more visual material in class which would help them learn:

*Maybe, like, more visual learning because ... it's easier to understand and interpret it. And it keeps you interested more in class than just reading or writing...maybe for CSPE, maybe, like, videos and -- educational videos and the documentaries. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Students felt that during junior cycle they learned from more active methods of

learning where teaching went beyond the textbook:

*I really prefer when the teachers don't just stick to the books and, like, read it from the book. I prefer it when it's more of an interactive way of learning...so, like, using the internet for, like, videos and stuff to make it easier to understand -- like, visually understand it as well as just learning it on a book. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

### **Motivational teachers**

Students spoke about the importance of teachers in helping them to learn by using different learning methodologies and getting involved in class:

*Motivational teachers is great ... There's a few now in our school, they kind of sit there and they're like, "Open up page 59, underline the next three pages" and then, like, that's your homework. But there will be, like, some teachers who would, like, actually get involved in the class and ask you questions, and you'd, like, contradict and it, kind of, comes around full circle. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

They felt that teachers who are able to relate the subject they are teaching to the lives of students are far more effective in helping them to understand:

*The best teachers are the ones that relate it to real life and they gave, like, real life examples, like, rather than just learning for the sake of learning, learning for the sake of having something to examine you on. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

Students also spoke about some teachers who differentiated their teaching to suit learners of different abilities:

*I like it when -- because everyone is at different points in say maths, so our teacher gives separate questions to those who, like, aren't as capable and then lets the other ones do more higher level questions and she works on the ones that don't know things as well as others, so that they can know as well. And then the ones who do know can work ahead. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

### **3.3 PERCEPTIONS OF THE CURRENT SENIOR CYCLE: JUNIOR CYCLE STUDENTS**

Students in the junior cycle focus groups were asked to discuss what they knew about senior cycle and in particular what they expected from it. Based on the accounts of siblings or peers, much of these discussions were negative apart from

their views of Transition Year (TY).

### **A means to an end?**

Many of those interviewed were critical of the current Leaving Certificate exam viewing it as a 'memory test' which did not feel it truly reflected their abilities or skills:

*The entire exam is pretty much based on memory for, like, for example you could be really talented in other areas but where -- when it comes to memory you could not - like, you might not be the best at remembering things. And then when it comes to the exam, even though you're quite talented at what you want to do, you can't get into it because you didn't get enough points from your Leaving Cert. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Some felt that it was simply a mechanism to 'get into college' and after that it was meaningless:

*I was talking to a lot of lads after doing the Leaving Cert and they said, "As long as you get the points you want, or even if you're going to college, like, the Leaving Cert just means nothing after, like." You just need it to get in. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

### **Academic stress**

Many of those interviewed were apprehensive or even fearful of senior cycle with one student describing how all that he had heard so far was 'all bad stuff' (Coeducational, non-DEIS). One student said that based on what she has heard so far about senior cycle, she does not want to do it:

*The Leaving Cert's just so stressful, it sounds like. And I, kind of, don't want to do it because ... really everyone says it's so hard and it's so stressful and you just kind of, like, are mad. Like, it kind of makes me, kind of, not want to do it. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Some had siblings and had witnessed the hours required and the stress involved in doing all that was expected of you by the school:

*Well, I, kind of, know this off my sister, she done her Leaving Cert last year, she was up all hours of the night, like, studying and then she had homework on top of that study. Like, she could come home and she could, she could still be studying at 1 o'clock, 2 o'clock in the morning. And, I'm like, "Do you have to go to bed?" And she's like, "No, because I have to get this done, I have to get that done for tomorrow. Like, I*

*need it done, I'm doing my Leaving Cert." They expect so much in so little time with your Leaving Cert, I just don't think it's fair, like. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

For many junior cycle students interviewed, the increased workload and associated stress was a key part of their perceptions of senior cycle overall:

*You're more under pressure to get, like, a good grade because it's for your future and ... you're gonna be so stressed and it's not really gonna help at all. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

One student described how he found the idea of senior cycle 'intimidating' given the influence of the Leaving Certificate exam in deciding his 'whole career'. Family expectations around the Leaving Certificate were part of this source of pressure:

*Your whole career depends on this one exam and, like -- like, my brother's in Sixth Year and I'd say he hasn't left his room yet because he's studying. But, like, like, that's really hard to live up to; to, like, go and study as well especially when, like, members of your family have done well, the Leaving Cert, like, you're kind of expected to do well. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Other students had heard about the squeeze of the free-time of students during senior cycle where you 'have to remove yourself from your social life' in order to 'focus on study':

*You don't really have time to go about with friends at all or do anything except study your homework. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Some spoke of the impact of this on young people's mental health:

*A lot of people drop out of sports and their mental health is affected because all the studying and the stress that's building up to the Leaving Cert. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Others spoke about how students gave up their after-school sports to cope with the demands of homework and studying:

*I know from hearing from other people that, like, sometimes people do, like, sports after school and stuff like that. And then they end up having to stop playing the sports, because they have so much homework and so much things to study. And then it's just everyone's like, "Why aren't you playing for this team anymore?" "It's because I've got so much homework." (Girls, non-DEIS)*

Some students questioned the idea that school should be enjoyable but they felt too much pressure and therefore wanted to leave as soon as possible:

*I hear that these are the best days of my life and I should, like, save them as much as I can with the long summer and, like, I don't have to pay taxes or anything like that. And I should just stay in school as long, but then there's so much pressure from studying that you don't want to. You want to, like, leave school as quickly as you can. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

### **New experiences in Transition Year**

In marked contrast to many of the junior cycle students' negative perceptions, many of those interviewed spoke about Transition Year as the most 'exciting' aspect of senior cycle:

*TY in this school's incredible. You do so much. You do, like, work experience and then you do all the different modules and you actually -- like, there's so many clubs and things you get the option to participate in and it's so amazing. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

Some did express caution however about the 'jump' between TY and fifth year as students moved from a more relaxed environment into a more pressurised environment:

*Like, sometimes TY could be bad for some people and good for some people. Because some people will walk into Transition Year and they'll be like, "Oh, this is easy, I can just take a break." And then they're, sort of, not ready for Fifth Year, because it's, like, such a big jump. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Some students felt that there was a danger in TY being too relaxed and students entering fifth year may not be able to cope:

*I think the thing is a bit like the Fourth Year. Because everything's so relaxed, when you go back into Fifth Year, it's, like, even more stress because you haven't really been working. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

### **3.4 EXPERIENCES OF CURRENT SENIOR CYCLE: SENIOR CYCLE STUDENTS**

Senior cycle students were also asked about their experiences of the current senior cycle and in particular how it differs from their time in junior cycle. Students discussed the development of more positive, mature relationships with some teachers, the positive experiences they had in TY but also highlighted increased stress and a lack of free-time in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> year.

#### **New (more positive) relations with teachers**

In one DEIS school, students spoke about how they were enjoying a new

relationship with their teachers who they felt they could talk to now:

*Now I don't feel pressurised by my teachers. ... They're kind of, like, different people, literally, because they can joke around with us and all now... We can talk to them a lot easier. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

These views were also evident in non-DEIS schools. Students in one school felt they had a more mature relationship with teachers, something which helped with teaching and learning:

*I think, in particular, when you are in sixth year, that the teachers are kind of talking to you as though you weren't a child anymore. The teachers have more respect for you and they can have a conversation with you... I think it helps with the teaching if you have a good relationship with the teacher and you're on good terms with them. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*[Ceapaim go háirithe, nuair atá tú i mbliain a sé, go bhfuil na múinteoirí saghas ag labhairt leat mar níl tú páiste níos mó. Tá níos mó meas ag na múinteoir ort agus tá siad in ann comhrá a bheith acu leat. ... Cabhraíonn sé ceapaim leis an múineadh má tá gaol maith agat leis an múinteoir agus bíonn tú ar good terms leo.]*

The shift in the relationship between staff and students was noted by a number of students in this group as being the best things about moving into senior cycle:

*I just think we're more respected than we were for Junior Cert. Like, teachers have a completely different way of talking to us and treating to us like we're older and more mature and stuff. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*I'd probably just say, like, the relationships you build up with the teachers. Like, throughout the Junior Cycle, you really just get to know the teacher but then in, like, in the Senior Cycle, you actually form a relationship with them -- like you can actually talk to them, like they will help you out more often. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

### **The positive impact of TY**

In addition to changing relations with school staff, many of those interviewed in senior cycle spoke positively about TY and the impact it had on them:

*I think it was probably the most valuable year in the school. Like, when I finish school and look back, ... pretty much the only memories I'll have are from Transition Year. Transition Year helps you actually grow as a*

*person whereas pretty much all of the other years do nothing in that aspect. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Students also spoke about the value of TY in learning specific skills that they would use in the future:

*The work experience was good. It, kind of, shows you what it's like to actually work in the real world, it's good...But also in TY there's so many different modules as well. As in we learn lifesaving modules such as CPR and all that, which is, obviously, helpful in case of emergency. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

For those in senior cycle, the work experience component of TY allowed them to not only decide what they would like to do but also what they would not like:

*I like it as well on how we did, like, work experience in Transition Year. I thought that was really good for us because it gives us, like, an eye opener of, "Do we actually want to work with that?" Like, when I did childcare -- I wanted to, like, work with kids and stuff and then I worked in a playschool for a week in Transition Year and then I second-guessed it completely. I was like, "I don't actually think I want to do this any more" and yeah, I just think it's really good to, like, actually show you if you want to do something or not and it really helps you, like, and especially with work life and, like, how to, like, do job interviews or apply or, like, where you'd like to work and all. I think it's very good. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

### **Free time: what free time?**

Despite these positive elements in senior cycle, the students interviewed expressed frustration and concern about the squeeze on their time during senior cycle when they are trying to complete their homework, study, undertake part-time work and/or extracurricular activities such as sport:

*I go home from school and have to do homework and then, I'd have to go to my training for my sport and then I'd have no time to study or anything. Not even during the weekend because I do sport, like, most days. And when I'm not, I have to -- I, like, go working with my father and everything like that. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Other students felt there was little time for activities after school such as sport given the workload in senior cycle:

*There's six subjects and the teachers recommend to do, like, an hour study or an hour's homework each night but that's like -- you come*

*home at, like, let's say 4.00 pm, then six hours, that's 10 o'clock already, like. You have no free time if you, like, sports or something or anything like that. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Students spoke about the increased pressure on them when they began 5<sup>th</sup> year and in particular the squeeze on their free time which was affecting their ability to play sport in some cases:

*I think there's way too much pressure on you to figure out your life, like, now. Like, everyone's saying you have to decide when you're in Fifth Year because you don't have time in Sixth Year but I, like, feel like I don't have time at the moment...we don't have any time for sports this year even though they say, "Make sure you keep on your extra curriculars". There's no time. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

Students felt that they have no free-time in senior cycle which adds to their stress and disrupts their sleep:

*I go home and I have to, like, study when I get home for, like, four hours ... and then I have homework as well. And then my sleep pattern is, like, terrible because I'll get to sleep at, like, maybe 10 o'clock or later if, like, I have more homework and I do more study. And I have to get up at, like, 6 o'clock in the morning to, like, get up for school. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Many reflected on this situation as not being sustainable for many young people's mental health and wellbeing:

*I think having healthy children in the world is more important than having smart children. If you're not getting enough sleep, and you're not, like, having social interactions, then you're not gonna, like, be as healthy as, like, people who are getting, like, a healthier amount of sleep (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

### **The Leaving Certificate: a memory test?**

Students raised the issue of rote learning for the Leaving Certificate exam and there was much agreement that the exam is 'better for the people who can learn and regurgitate things on a page' (Boys, non-DEIS). Students felt that the Leaving Certificate is suited to 'academic' students and does not suit people interested in sports or vocational subjects:

*It doesn't [suit], like, the really sporty students. ... Or it doesn't suit people that just want to do, like, a trade or something. It's just about, like, just books, like, it's all just working. (Boys, non-DEIS)*



Students felt that current senior cycle is not suited to all students as it simply measure students' ability to memorise:

*It feels like you're just learning off books and then just writing down in an exam, it doesn't really show intelligence. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Some viewed the exam as a memory test:

*It's more of a memory test than a knowledge test, I think, the Leaving Cert, the more you can remember, the more you can write down on the page, the more marks you'll get. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Others discussed how the potential relevance of the Leaving Certificate exam for them in the future. Many viewed the current Leaving Certificate as 'stupid' and not relevant for their lives after school:

*The exams are kind of stupid in the way that you have to memorise all this stuff because in the real world in work you have a computer beside you. Say I want to be a poet and I forget some poetry, I don't need to have it in my mind, I can just look it up. It's sort of unnecessary to have to learn all this just from memory for one day. Like, there's way too much piled in to remember. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Students expressed some frustration at some of their subjects which they did not feel they can use in the future both in getting jobs and adult life more generally:

*There's no point in just teaching us, like, they should teach us things we're gonna need outside of school. Like, how to get along with people and, like, some point -- like, if the whole point in just teaching us all they known about, like, pointless things in subjects -- like, not -- than say in English, if you wanna teach one of these they do in poetry or anything like that, like, or film, they's ... not gonna teach you that. It's, like, they could be teaching you how to get along with people in them subjects and how to go after things to get jobs and stuff. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

One student described how school had 'kind of, crushed a bit of [their] creativity'. In primary school and during junior cycle, they had enjoyed more creative aspects of their work such as writing stories but felt that the emphasis now was on memorising for the exam:

*In Sixth Class I remember ... I used to love writing English stories and, ... loved books and then, now, like, most -- like, I've just kind of, like, memorise stuff off par. Even in English, like, you memorise the quotes, you memorise, like, what the plot and, like, there's no kind of thinking for yourself. Like, you give your own opinion but, if it's not the right opinion, it's still not correct. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

Some students described how the methods of teaching and learning had changed as they moved into senior cycle. These students preferred to ask their peers for help, particularly if they felt intimidated by their teachers. One student noted that they would like more group work but their teacher was resistant to this approach:

*Sometimes the teacher will be like really negative about, like, us helping each other because they just think we're talking and even if you tell them, "Oh, I'm just trying to give them help", the teachers'll be like, "Oh, well I'm here to give them help" but if there's, like, 30 people in a class and 15 people at a time need help, she's not gonna be able to get around each person and give a good amount of time whereas if the person you're sitting beside wants to give you help and knows how to do the question or whatever then they might as well just be helping you if they have their work done or whatever.*  
(Coeducational, non-DEIS)

Students in the LCA programme discussed the different assessment options used in the programme compared to the established Leaving Certificate. In one DEIS school, LCA students described how they were happy with the use of continuous assessment over the two-year period but acknowledged that it did not facilitate access to higher education:

*I like the whole, like, idea of the fact that it's a constant based assessment, like, and you don't have to sit down and just a big massive exam. Like, that's really good. Like, I think more people would offer it if you knew you could go into a university or college afterwards but I think it's the fact that you can't go into college or university, you're more prone to go straight into the workforce or do a PLC.*  
(Coeducational, DEIS)

### 3.5 WHAT STUDENTS WOULD LIKE TO CHANGE?

The interviews highlighted students' clear views about what they feel is important in any reform of senior cycle. The main areas raised during the focus groups centred on:

- reducing the level of stress in senior cycle;
- introducing different assessment options (in line with junior cycle reform);
- addressing the disparity between higher and ordinary level subjects;
- introducing a greater variety of subjects, more relevant subjects and addressing the use of compulsory subjects;

- introducing life skills as a subject in senior cycle.

### Reducing stress

One of the most common areas discussed in relation to senior cycle reform was the need to reduce the level of stress on students as they approached the Leaving Certificate exam. Students firstly highlighted the high stakes associated with the Leaving Certificate exam as the cause of much of this stress:

*A lot less stress on it. Because people do it and if they, like, fail or they don't get high marks, they're like, "My life is ruined," like this, because it's like this is the most important thing you'll do, like, ever. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Both teachers and parents were seen as contributing to stress among students. In one DEIS school, students spoke about how their teachers may not realise how much pressure they are putting them under. This was often compounded by their parents at home:

*I think kind of teachers do it as well without noticing that they're doing it. They're like, "You've serious potential. You can and do this, you can and do that" but it's nowhere near what you're interested in. And parents do it too but that's just because they're freaking out as much as you are. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

Students acknowledged the school's attempts to alleviate stress through physical exercise but described how this was a further source of frustration as they did not have the time. In one school, teachers encouraged students to look after their mental health:

*They're just talking about, like, better lifestyles, more healthy lifestyles but how can you do that when you're nine to four in school and have the rest of your day in homework or study? (Boys, non-DEIS)*

In another school, students felt that they had no time to do physical activity after school and that this should be incorporated into the school day. One student described how this would be preferable as it would give them more time to study in the evenings:

*They should probably, like, maybe have a certain day where they do, like, sports, like, during the day, where you, like, section off -- have, like, more classes in, like, the middle of the day and then have sports in the evening, but you're still during school times. So, when you get home you can actually do study and homework, instead of having to worry about being home late and then being like, "Oh, I have to study for my test tomorrow now." (Girls, non-DEIS)*

### Different assessment options

Many of those interviewed felt that the issue of student stress could also be addressed by increasing the level of continuous assessment in senior cycle. Having gone through junior cycle, they had experienced the impact of this assessment approach on their learning and levels of academic stress:

*Bringing some of these continuous things, like, if you had a project, like, 40 or 50% that you done in Fifth Year, it'll take a lot of pressure off the Sixth Year, if you have all the projects on the Fifth Year. But, like, have every subject which is some sort of project or something. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

*I think the continuous assessment, it would be really beneficial I'd say for the Senior Cycle. Rather than one, to have a two week period where you have every stressful exam you have prepared for for two years. (Coed, non-DEIS)*

Students felt continuous assessment would mean that students would gain a real understanding of their subjects instead of rote learning for the exam:

*You'll have a vast majority of students who don't like just learning off these phrases and vomiting them up onto the Leaving Cert paper and just handing it in, and hoping they remembered everything correctly. They want to -- and then you have the others who enjoy that sort of thing, and then you have the others who want to know how to -- yeah, just give more ways to approach the Leaving Cert (Boys, non-DEIS)*

By introducing CBAs at senior cycle, the pressure to perform in a single exam would be alleviated and the process would therefore be more representative of the student's ability:

*I just think that they should have more classroom-based assessments because, everything is down to one day and I don't think that's fair... The amount of work that you do over the two years, like, shouldn't just come down to one day and one piece of paper and that piece of paper's there for life and that's not right. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*I'd say the Leaving Cert should probably start to include CBAs because it, kind of, helps shorten the papers a small bit and relieve just a bit more stress on the exam day. And it just helps spread out the work and some people will excel at say public speaking with their CBAs. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Students like the idea of getting points 'throughout the year' which contributes to their 'total score at the end of the year' (Coeducational, non-DEIS).

## Subject variety and relevance

Another key area discussed during the focus groups was the variety of subjects offered for the Leaving Certificate exam and the lack of subject choice for students. Students felt that there were too many subjects at Leaving Certificate and this meant they had to learn about subjects in which they had little or no interest:

*I think [there should be] less subjects...Seven subjects is a lot to have to learn, like, in a short period of time, like. That's why you could end...up having to do subjects that you're not that interested in and you still have to do it just, like, for the points.*

Another student felt that the Leaving Certificate should be more like A levels in England where students can specialise in certain subjects:

*I don't know whether you could change this, but do you know, like, some people aren't good at, say, like, maths and, say, science. And then other people are great at, like, English and -- I don't know, more essay writing, like. So, instead of -- like, over in England, my cousins live in England and ... for their A-Levels, they just pick say, like, three or four subjects they're really good at and really interested in to continue on in, and then they do really well because they're interested in it. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

Some students from boys' secondary schools described how the current senior cycle was overly academic with little emphasis on vocational subjects. Some students felt that Ireland should look to other national education systems such as Germany where students can choose to attend academic or vocational schools:

*Even the state could make -- like the way they do in Germany, they have exam schools but they also have, like, trade schools. You could have, kind of, like, more texts that aren't, like, positive -- better just, kind of, skills that are for people who want to do just trade...they have, like, different exams for different people who want to do trades. So, not a lesser version of the Leaving Cert but it's a different kind of Leaving Cert, where it's more based on just, like, trades. And it's kind of woodwork and metalwork and, like, whatever they want to do. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

In one boys' school, students called for an alternative to the Leaving Certificate which would better prepare them for more vocational occupations:

*There should be an alternative around the Leaving Cert as well ... learning ten poems in English is not going to help you, if you're building a house, like. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

They felt that they should have the option to take some classes which would

prepare them for going on and doing an apprenticeship when they finish school:

*Sure, maybe have some of, like, class to do it, I don't know, whatever sort of apprenticeship you're doing, maybe, sort of, direct it towards that or, kind of, towards that. Do you know? I don't know, something like that. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

These views were also raised by students in a coeducational DEIS school who felt that students who were not academic were 'brushed to the side' by the school and as a result the gap between their grades and the grades of more academic students grew (Coeducational, DEIS).

Others felt that it was important to have a greater variety of subjects that place emphasis on more creative domains:

*I'd like to see maybe new subjects coming in, like, in drama was to come in as a subject, it's done in Australia, it's done in England, if that was brought in as a subject then I think more people would -- like, people would express themselves through theatre in a way. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Students could then choose their preferred subjects according to their own abilities:

*Let's say, like, music or art, there are not really taken as seriously as I think they should be. Because compared to someone that wants to be, like, a politician or something and then, like, someone that wants to be an artist, it's, like, the academic subjects are more focused on. And then, they're not taken as seriously, more of the creative subjects, So, someone that wants to be, like, a musician or something, isn't gonna wanna concentrate in geography and isn't gonna do as well. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

In another school, students also felt that the current subjects did not reflect students who had more creative or artistic talents. They argued that their subject choice should reflect this:

*They might be so talented in art, dancing, singing but there would be more of a harder competition out there to become a really good artist, or dancer, or singer. And, like, I feel that everything is always down to, like, practical stuff when it comes to exams, so. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

Students welcomed the introduction of PE as a Leaving Certificate subject but felt this could be broadened to include other subjects such as drama:

*I think there needs to be more, like, subjects, like, they brought PE in this year but we don't have it here and think that's a really good idea*

*because, for the people who aren't as academically inclined, they're better at sports and, like, if there's people wanting to go into performing or, like, West End or something, if there is, like, a drama and, like, arts and something, like, more subjects that aren't focused at the people who are just academic, you know? (Girls, non-DEIS)*

Some students discussed the importance of acknowledging participation in elite sport in their senior cycle assessment. The currently feel that playing sport is 'frowned upon' by the school:

*Outlook on sport and school. Like, some people might be taking sports really seriously. Like, I know I take sports serious and if I'm not for three or four classes over a month because I play in school, sport with the school. Like, I talked with my Year Head, like, last year my parents got angry because I was out playing football four or five a month with the school, which I understand, I'm missing class. But I caught up on all the work that I missed out on, so, I just think the school -- like, somebody mightn't be, like, really good at academics but could be really sporty and could make a career out of playing sport, and put most of their time into sport but the school don't see that. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Students extended this discussion where the Leaving Certificate exam could also capture a more holistic view of students. This could be done by providing a record of the person as a whole rather than simply measuring their academic ability:

*They could even a section of your Leaving Cert points where they, kind of, give a summary of your personality and, like, the way you performed and behaved in the school. Like, let's say you were a student who was, like, extremely smart but, like, you were constantly giving cheek to the teachers or, like, antisocial behaviour, like, messing, they could put that on. And, like, maybe if you were, like -- you know, you got average points but you integrated well with, like, people and you were respectful and, like, kind. I think that would be a good reflection on your Leaving Cert because it would show your future employers that you actually are a good person. And they might choose you then over someone who may have a few more points or a slightly better degree but they're -- kind of, that person who wouldn't integrate well in the business. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

These views take future employers needs into account and acknowledge that although academic ability is important, the student's personality should also be taken into account. By having a 'personal statement' or interview, future employers could get a more holistic account of the student:

*So a personal statement ...they should go hand-in-hand, like, with your qualifications at the end of the day. Like, you're not gonna be good at a job unless you really have a passion for it. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

One student felt this was not just important at her school, but in the country as a whole, where students should be recognised for talents beyond simple academic subjects:

*I think, like, not just school wise, like, I think state wide, you need to start acknowledging people as people as a whole, not just their exam number or their points number. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

### **Compulsory subjects**

Students expressed frustration at the nature of compulsory subjects in senior cycle which they felt were the least useful when they leave school:

*It's strange how they're mandatory even though they're the least useful subjects that you're gonna do in school, because you're never gonna end English, Irish, or maths unless you're, like, becoming, like, a mathematician or an Irish historian, but you are gonna need the other ones, even though they're not mandatory. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

*They're teaching you stuff that you won't need, like, you might not need, and it's useless and you know, like, what you want to be -- and then you won't, like, be doing anything about it...Like, some of the stuff they teach you in school, you're not gonna use, like, when you grow up. And they don't really teach you anything that you will use when you leave school.*

Irish was the subject most often mentioned during the discussion of whether any subjects should be compulsory or not. Some students argued that there should be a distinction between conversational Irish, something which they could enjoy, and learning poetry through Irish which they found much more difficult:

*It [poetry], kind of, makes you hate the language, like. Like, it would actually be nice to be able to speak your own language, like, rather than learning poetry about it, and if there was more on that, I think it would be better and easier. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Students expressed frustration at having to memorise Irish poems when they would prefer to have greater knowledge of speaking the language itself:

*I don't see the point of learning off poems and stories. It's about keeping the language alive. I know it's our native language. It should be more speaking the language -- getting to know verbs, tenses, all*



*that -- but I don't see the point of learning poems. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Students spoke about the importance of allowing them to learn and enjoy the Irish language rather than simply view it as another source of pressure for the exam:

*I wouldn't be able to go out and speak -- like, have a conversation with someone in Irish and I think that needs to be emphasised more because, it's -- like, it's so important in the country, to keep it alive and I think it's put -- there's so much pressure put on it in, like, you're learning poetry and essays and stuff like that whereas, it should be -- enjoy it, like, you should be enjoying the subject because it's, like, part of who we are. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

Other students spoke strongly about compulsory Irish and felt that they should be allowed to pick subjects that they feel will be useful to them in the future:

*If someone doesn't want to do Irish, I don't think they should be forced to, like -- I personally -- I don't know Irish, but just, like, from people in my class that I know, that I talk to, they don't like Irish. And they said they're, like, sitting there and they're not listening because they don't want to do it and they could be doing some other subject that was beneficial to them. Like, do you know? I just think it should be optional. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

Others raised the issue of compulsory Irish at senior cycle suggesting that students should have a choice as to whether they do Irish as an exam subject:

*They should be it non-compulsory for -- because there's other students who are not good at Irish, so, it's easier for them to get on well in the Leaving Cert. Because apparently more people speak Polish than Irish in Ireland, so, they need to be changed here. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

### **The difference between higher and ordinary level subjects**

When asked about what they would like to change about the current senior cycle, some students mentioned the difference between ordinary level and higher level was unfair given the amount of work they put in:

*I don't think it's fair, the level of difference in the Higher and Ordinary, because even though Ordinary is a lower subject, it's still just as much content or just as hard as the Higher Level and they're rewarded for pass maths as they should be. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Other students highlighted the issue of the bonus points for Maths in particular, feeling that it placed too much pressure on students to opt for higher level:

*You shouldn't have to, like -- a lot of people as well, are doing Higher Level maths for the extra 25 marks and are pushing themselves so hard and then, the rest of their subjects are going down, anyway, so the 25 marks aren't worth it. But, if you were -- like, I don't see why maths is so important in comparison to, like, Higher Level Irish, like, you put so much effort into Higher Level Irish but, there's no extra 25 marks there. Which doesn't make sense. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

### **Life skills in senior cycle**

Students felt that any changes to senior cycle should include more life skills where they can learn basic skills about managing finance, mortgages and paying bills or travelling:

*There should be a subject for life skills, like, teaching you how to pay your bills, how to write cheques and stuff like that. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Some students spoke about the need for senior cycle to support students in developing more practical life skills that they will need if they continue their education or get a job:

*I feel like there should be a class that doesn't teach you about, like, every single subject but it teaches about what you need for, like, the real world, like, how to provide for your family and get a job, like, not -- so you know how to do things you need to know how to do in life. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

One student felt that subjects such as business could also include components such as buying houses or paying tax that would be helpful to them in their adult life:

*If I was buying a house and I wanted to get, like, all your taxes and your mortgage and I know that's business but in business sometimes they tend to focus you, like, more if you wanted to be an accountant or something. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Students also felt that they would like more classes on current affairs and politics through an expansion of the CSPE subject:

*I feel that if we had more CSPE classes, we'd have more kind of work on the charities and foundations and stuff for that because, like, I don't think we taught enough about, like, you know, the homeless crisis in Ireland and stuff like that so, I don't think we get, like, educated enough to go and, like, actually do something about it so ... (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

In one DEIS school, students spoke about the possibility of introducing a Leaving

Certificate subject which fostered well-being. Students in this coeducational school felt that these traits in a young person were as important as their ability in other academic subjects:

*I think that wellbeing should be taken more seriously...Because I think your self-acceptance and confidence and all is, like, a big part for your Leaving Cert and your career after school. So, I think it should be taken more as a serious subject, like, English and maths is. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

### **3.6 CONCLUSION**

Based on in-depth focus group interviews with students in junior and senior cycle, this chapter has analysed four key areas. Section 2.2 examines the views of students about how best they learn in school. Across a range of school contexts (girls, boys, coeducational, DEIS and non-DEIS), students highlighted the positive elements of more active learning approaches such as group and project work, CBAs and the benefits of technology in the classroom. The chapter also examines current perceptions of senior cycle among junior cycle students. These students highlight concerns that they have about their time in senior cycle around academic stress and having less free-time to do sport or other after-school activities. These interviews highlight, however, their positive expectations about TY. During the focus group interviews, students in senior cycle were asked about their current experiences. They also highlighted the positive aspects of TY such as personal development and work experience in addition to their more 'mature' relations with their teachers. They argue, however, that they have little or no free time and are suffering from stress associated with the Leaving Certificate exam. These students also expressed frustration at the relevance of the Leaving Certificate to their future lives and felt that the exam is a 'memory test' and not suited to all students. The final section of this chapter is based on in-depth discussions with students about what changes they would like to make to senior cycle in the future. The students highlighted a range of areas that they felt need to be changed including: reducing the level of stress in senior cycle; introducing different assessment options (in line with junior cycle reform); addressing the disparity between higher and ordinary level subjects; introducing a greater variety of subjects, more relevant subjects and addressing the use of compulsory subjects; and introducing life skills as a subject in senior cycle.

## CHAPTER 4

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### Parent perspectives on the senior cycle

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter draws on the consultation with schools to outline parent perspectives on the senior cycle. The chapter begins with an exploration of parent perceptions of the positive aspects of senior cycle, followed in section three by their views on the challenges in relation to senior cycle as it currently operates. The fourth section considers whether senior cycle is seen as inclusive of all backgrounds, talents and abilities. Section five examines the skills parents feel young people will benefit from for the future. The key changes to senior cycle that parents would like to see in order to address the challenges they identify are discussed in section six. Section seven considers how the new junior cycle can be built on in senior cycle while section eight looks at how success should be defined in senior cycle.

#### 4.2 THE POSITIVE ASPECTS OF SENIOR CYCLE

During the consultation, parents were asked to identify what they saw as the positive aspects of the senior cycle as it currently operates for their son/daughter. Many focus groups highlighted the objective nature of the system – it is seen as standardised for all, fair, universally recognised and largely broad-based, with students being exposed to a wide diversity of subject areas.

*We have to remember that the LC is a totally fair exam, it may be brutally fair, but it is fair to all students no matter what their background. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

In a number of the schools, parents highlighted more recent developments in senior cycle, particularly the introduction of project work for many subjects. This was seen as a positive development, and reduced the level of pressure placed on students in the final Leaving Certificate exams. While Transition Year was not available in all schools, parents who had experience of the programme were largely complimentary about it. They felt their son/daughter had benefitted greatly from participating in the programme, and noted the impact that the programme had on their personal development and maturity, in creating more positive relationships with their teachers and providing them with a valuable opportunity to try a diverse range of subject areas, enabling more informed subject choice in fifth year.

More generally, senior cycle education is seen as allowing students to study a more diverse range of subjects, with some parents contrasting the Irish system with the UK and other systems with more specialised subject choice. By and large, they felt Irish students were better equipped for life beyond school under the Irish system. This was also seen to reflect positive student support systems in the case-study

schools, particularly supports provided under guidance counselling and pastoral supports. Finally, parents in a number of schools noted the opportunities for work experience in senior cycle, particularly as part of the Transition Year Programme and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme. They were conscious of the importance of such opportunities in allowing students to make appropriate and well-informed education and labour market choices for them.

### 4.3 THE CHALLENGES RELATED TO SENIOR CYCLE

In many ways, parents highlighted a number of issues that were also raised by teachers in terms of the senior cycle as it currently operates. The first relates to the overall demands placed on students, with the workload and content seen as excessive. Parents also highlighted the academic focus of the system, and the particular emphasis on the exam. They were vocal in highlighting the impact that this was having on young people's wellbeing. The Leaving Certificate timetabling was seen as problematic in some focus groups:

*The idea that a student's entire school career is determined by their ability to perform well in two three hour exams back to back was considered grossly unfair ... This is an entirely unacceptable way to assess an individual's entire school career. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

They were also critical of what is seen as excessive media focus on the Leaving Certificate process, and felt that this needs to be addressed. With the strong emphasis on the 'points race', parents felt that students didn't always make the best subject (or level) choices, in some cases opting for what is seen as an 'easier' subject, but in which they had perhaps little interest or aptitude. Some parents also suggested that the points system should be examined, and the difference in points between higher and ordinary level subjects reviewed (as highlighted in recent research – McCoy et al., forthcoming). Parents also highlighted the implications of the exam focus and demands of the Leaving Certificate programme for the wellbeing of their son/daughter and their opportunities to balance their school and non-school life. They noted that it was difficult to maintain personal interests, leisure activities and particularly sports participation, under the current system, which for many entails a very long school day. One focus group commented 'their lives shouldn't stop because they are in 6<sup>th</sup> year' (Coeducational, DEIS).

Parents also noted that the current system expects a lot of young people in terms of expecting them to make decisions that will impact on the rest of their lives. This has emerged elsewhere and highlights how decision-making on post-school choices places a considerable amount of pressure on young people, and questions have been raised about whether young people are adequately equipped for making such choices (see McCoy et al., 2014).

In a number of schools, parents expressed views on the operation of mixed ability classes, in particular suggesting that the 'better' students are not always sufficiently challenged in such class contexts. In special education settings, parents suggested that there was 'no senior cycle in the school', the focus instead being on key life and social skills. They highlighted the need for 'a curriculum that provides post junior cycle education that is age appropriate and tailored to the particular abilities of each group of children' (Coeducational, non-DEIS).

Parents also highlighted what they saw as rigidities in the Leaving Certificate system, in particular noting that there were no allowances made or alternatives offered where young people experience a critical personal/health issue during the exams. Finally, parents noted the changes that are ongoing in junior cycle education, and highlighted that their experiences were largely limited to the reforms in English, as that was the first subject revised under the new junior cycle. A number commented that there is now a mismatch between the junior and senior cycles. In particular, they felt that students may find it difficult to adapt from experiential to content-based learning in senior cycle.

#### **4.4 INCLUSION AND SENIOR CYCLE**

There appeared to be some variation across schools in whether parents consider that senior cycle is inclusive of all backgrounds, talents and abilities. In some schools nearly all parents felt this was the case, but in others parents felt the system is geared towards the more academically able student. While schools were seen as embracing diversity, some parents felt students with more complex special educational needs require specific approaches. It appears parents in DEIS schools were less positive, suggesting that senior cycle needs to embrace different ways of learning and diverse needs more effectively. The dominant role of grinds and the perception that grinds were necessary to achieve exam success was seen as unfair on families unable to afford grinds. While it was felt that the DEIS programme helps to support students who experience educational and social disadvantage, parents felt that more needs to be done to support these students. It was also noted in a number of schools, that while the Leaving Certificate Applied is an important and valuable programme, it does not have the same status as the Leaving Certificate Established and students are reluctant to enrol owing to the stigma attached to the programme. The Transition Year programme was seen as hugely positive across many schools, but the financial costs attached to participating in the activities is a significant barrier for some families.

#### **4.5 SKILLS FOR THE FUTURE**

Parents were asked about the types of skills they felt young people would need for life beyond school, in particular in the ever-changing workplace. There was an emphasis on the need to move away from rote learning, with a view to fostering a greater 'interest in learning' rather than 'learning off'. Parents would like to see

young people developing learning skills including independent learning and critical thinking. Research, analytical, communication and presentation skills were highlighted in a number of the focus groups with parents. Some focus groups highlighted the need for more hands-on experience, including workplace-based experience, in fostering broader skills-development. Parents spoke about the importance of adaptability for an ever changing society and workplace:

*Many traditional jobs are disappearing through advances in technology. Workers need to be innovative, creative, people focused, good communicators, inventive and entrepreneurial. Languages need to be taught in vernacular and real conversation formats so they can be applied quickly and easily in vivo. Project based, collaborative working critical thinking and flexibility are all real world requirements, yet are often actively discouraged by the education system. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

Parents noted a diversity of life skills which they felt should be promoted, including first aid, banking, budgeting/money management, renting a property, mortgage applications, cooking, housekeeping, DIY and driving. The developments in digital technologies were also highlighted and parents were keen to see that young people are adequately equipped with digital skills. Across many of the schools, parents highlighted the need for greater development of social and personal skills, including the promotion of resilience and positive mental health. Participants in a number of focus groups identified anxiety as being a particular concern for some young people today. More broadly, respect for self and responsibility for self were also seen as important domains to be promoted in senior cycle education.

#### **4.6 CHANGES TO SENIOR CYCLE**

Parents were asked about the changes they would like to see to senior cycle, with a view to fostering the skills they had identified and promoting greater inclusion. A number of focus groups highlighted the need to ensure the Leaving Certificate remains objective, fair and highly regarded:

*Whatever is put in place, it cannot weaken our LC – they have to be able to compete on a world stage and be of the same standard as their peers. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

A number of focus groups focused on the potential for Transition Year to provide more opportunities for young people to develop broader skills and be exposed to more diverse subject areas and domains, such as the performing arts and music. Some also suggested that a broader range of activities and subjects could be offered in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> year, perhaps moving towards a more modularised system.

Parents also felt that the assessment system needs to become more manageable for students. This could be achieved through continuing emphasis on developing project work components, and developing an assessment system which is 'more spaced out', perhaps structured over 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> year.

*Some form of continuous assessment, similar to what happens in LCA, would help students to manage their learning more efficiently and result in less stress in 6<sup>th</sup> year. (Coeducational, DEIS).*

A number of focus groups suggested that all subjects should be optional, while some also felt that there should be a greater focus on oral skills in teaching languages.

In line with concerns about young people's mental health, a number of focus groups suggested that there should be a greater emphasis on promoting wellbeing in senior cycle, as well greater opportunities for guidance. A greater emphasis on the development of inter- and intra-personal skills was recommended in a number of focus groups. It was also noted that guidance should include the full range of post-school pathways, with excessive emphasis currently on 'going to college'. Parents were also conscious of the importance of supporting teachers during the reform process, with adequate supports, resources and CPD important to ensure successful implementation.

#### **4.7 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JUNIOR AND SENIOR CYCLE**

Parents were asked to reflect on developments in junior cycle education and how these changes should be reflected in the senior cycle going forward. A number of focus groups felt that current students are now caught between two very different systems, and 'it is very difficult for the student to revert back to the old system of learning and assessment having come through the new junior cycle' (Coeducational, non-DEIS). Some parents also felt that there is a need to better inform parents when significant changes are taking place, suggesting that many parents 'do not understand the new junior cycle'.

Some parents felt that developments in junior cycle should be now built on in senior cycle. Parents noted the need for 'marrying up' the junior and senior cycles. The introduction of portfolio work for (more) senior cycle subject areas and more project-based work were seen as important. They would like to see greater independence in senior cycle, with students taking greater responsibility themselves. One school highlighted the need to continue the priority units from level 1 and level 2 junior cycle programmes.

Other focus groups felt that the new junior cycle is not a good preparation for senior cycle and that some junior cycle subjects are 'not fit for purpose'. One focus group in a DEIS school singled out junior cycle science, suggesting that science



won't adequately prepare students for the Leaving Certificate, 'as core pieces of learning are not included'. There were diverse opinions on the merits of internal and external assessment, but it appeared more focus groups veered towards the value of external assessment. Parents in many schools were in favour of more continuous assessment over the course of 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> year. Finally, a number of focus groups with parents raised concerns over the infrastructure in schools: they noted that typical classroom designs are not conducive to a teamwork style of learning and noted that ICT infrastructure would need further investment going forward.

#### **4.8 WHAT IS SUCCESS IN SENIOR CYCLE?**

Parents were asked to reflect on what they view as success for young people and what kinds of success they thought should be valued and promoted. In many ways, parents reflected on what enabled them to succeed and be happy in life, often expanding beyond the school system per se. Many parents focused on the importance of personal happiness and their son/daughter developing into a confident, well-rounded and positive person. There also seemed to be an emphasis on valuing individual 'success', which can take many forms – for example, in terms of individual 'gifts' and 'talents'. It was also felt that sporting talents are not adequately promoted under the current system, although it was recognised that the introduction of physical education as a Leaving Certificate subject will go some way towards addressing this. Responses also reflected what some parents had also reflected as an excessively academic system, which doesn't place sufficient value on non-academic achievements.

Parents in a number of schools would like to see students being rewarded for effort and commitment, reflecting that not all students have the same academic ability. Such effort and commitment should not just include activities inside the classroom, but also include broader school participation, such as through the student council. Activities outside of school were also mentioned, such as community and voluntary work, and achievements like the GAISCE awards: 'Active citizenship and thinking and helping others [should] be rewarded and encouraged' (Coeducational, non-DEIS). Finally, parents in some schools also expressed a desire to see a greater focus on student creativity and innovation, and providing young people with flexibility and adaptability for later life.

#### **4.9 CONCLUSIONS**

This chapter has examined parent perspectives on the current senior cycle and the changes regarded as important under a reformed senior cycle. In reflecting on the current system, parents largely regarded the system as standardised for all, fair, universally recognised and largely broad-based, with students being exposed to a wide diversity of subject areas. They were particularly positive about the value of the Transition Year programme, although that was not available in all of the case-

study schools. In assessing the key challenges for students, parents highlighted the exam focus, the academic pressure and the points race as being central. They noted the implications this has for student wellbeing, mental health difficulties and the ability of students to maintain a healthy life balance, particularly in 6<sup>th</sup> year. While parents largely felt the system is broadly inclusive, parents in DEIS schools were more likely to suggest that this was not always the case. In particular, the pressure to pay for grinds, the costs associated with the Transition Year programme, the adequacy of supports for DEIS schools and the stigma associated with participation in the Leaving Certificate Applied programme were all seen as negatively impacting on some groups of students. There were mixed views on whether junior cycle provides adequate preparation for senior cycle, and parents were concerned that students are now stuck between two very different systems. They felt that senior cycle could build on many of the new developments in junior cycle, but that implementation of the new programme would need to learn from earlier experiences. Finally, parents are keen to see much wider skills and competencies rewarded and valued in senior cycle, to include community and voluntary work and student participation in diverse school activities.

## CHAPTER 5

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### Conclusions

This report has examined the main patterns emerging from the first cycle of the consultation process on senior cycle with teachers, parents and students in 41 case-study schools. The findings point to some commonality across the groups in perceptions of the current senior cycle but also some differences in views about how senior cycle could be adapted in the future.

Both teachers and parents point to a number of positive aspects of senior cycle currently. In particular, they indicate the range of programmes and subjects available to students, highlighting in particular the role of the Transition Year programme in offering young people a variety of learning experiences and in fostering a range of skills. A significant minority of teachers point to the role of assessment as a positive feature of senior cycle, with some highlighting the variety of assessment approaches and others emphasising the value of an objective, external examination. Many parents place perhaps an even greater weighting on the objective and fair nature of the current assessment system. Teachers and parents both emphasise the way senior cycle is implemented in their specific school setting as a positive feature, pointing to the supports available for students, the positive school climate and the quality of teaching. Compared to teachers and parents, students at both junior and senior cycle level are more critical of the current senior cycle, though they highlight relationships with teachers and the Transition Year programme as positive aspects of their experience.

There is a good deal of consensus among teachers, students and parents in relation to the challenges of senior cycle. All of the groups highlight the workload involved, with teachers and students under pressure to 'cover the course', resulting in a focus on rote learning in order to prepare for the examination and the neglect of higher order thinking and broader skill development. This situation is seen as having a negative impact on student wellbeing, with extra-curricular and social activities being crowded out to the detriment of young people's broader development. Not surprisingly, students are particularly vocal about the impact on their stress levels, with even junior cycle students expressing apprehension at the pressure involved at senior cycle level. Furthermore, the current system is seen by many as favouring particular ways of learning, thus providing limited pathways to success, especially for those with a more practical orientation and those with special education needs.

A further challenge mentioned by teachers, parents and students relates to the discontinuity between junior and senior cycle. Previous research has shown that many students experience difficulties in adapting to the more detailed course content and more complex writing tasks they experience on transition to senior cycle (Smyth and Calvert, 2011). Changes to the nature of junior cycle are seen,

especially by teachers and, to some extent, by parents, as leading to a greater gap between the two levels, with many teachers expressing concern that students will not have the foundational knowledge to engage with some subject areas at senior cycle level.

In discussing what skills young people would need to equip them for the future, both teachers and parents pointed to a combination of learning, work-related, intrapersonal and life skills. They emphasised the importance of learning how to source and critically evaluate information, higher order thinking and acquiring a curiosity and love of learning. A number of interpersonal skills, including teamwork, communication and organisational skills, were seen as crucial in preparing young people for the transition to further/higher education and employment. Many teachers and parents highlighted the importance of intrapersonal skills, especially resilience in the face of uncertainty and failure. They pointed to the need for students to develop life skills such as financial management, an issue that also emerged strongly in the focus group interviews with young people.

When asked about how senior cycle could be changed to address the challenges identified and to foster greater inclusion, some commonality was evident in the views of teachers, students and parents. In particular, all three groups wished to see a greater variety of assessment methods in order to foster the kinds of learning, project work and team work skills needed for the future. Young people were the most vocal about the potential for continuous assessment to alleviate exam-related pressure and stress and provide a more complete picture of their knowledge and skills. While wanting to see a variety of assessment methods, the views of teachers and parents on how this could best be accomplished were more mixed, with some highlighting the workload involved in multiple assessment tasks and many pointing to the need to retain external assessment across the range of assessment components, including projects and portfolios. Additional resourcing, especially continuous professional development, was seen as a crucial component of any changes to senior cycle, especially among teachers. Many teachers and parents also felt that any change to senior cycle should be informed by the experiences of junior cycle reform.

Many teachers, students and parents emphasised the need for more flexibility in course offering at senior cycle through the provision of short courses and/or through providing a broader range of subjects which foster practical or creative skills. Allied to this, many parents and students argued against having compulsory subjects at senior cycle level, feeling that young people should be free to select subjects which best suit their interests and abilities. A significant minority of each group argued that students should be required to take fewer senior cycle subjects or that the content of courses should be reduced in volume in order to relieve time pressure and provide greater opportunities for more engaging approaches to

learning. Many of the issues around the appropriate structure of the senior cycle curriculum will be explored in greater detail in the second cycle of the consultation process.



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