



Interim report of review of senior cycle education

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List of Acronyms

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| ASDAN | Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network. ASDAN is a British education charity and awarding organisation who develop curriculum programmes and qualifications to help young people develop knowledge and skills for learning, work and life. |
| CAO | Central Applications Office |
| CBA | Classroom Based Assessments. All subjects in the new junior cycle have CBAs. |
| CPD | Continuing Professional Development |
| DEIS | Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, a scheme developed by the Department of Education and Skills in 2005 aimed at addressing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities. |
| ESRI | Economic and Social Research Institute |
| GAISCE | Meaning 'great achievement', it is a self-development programme for young people between the ages of 15-25 and has been in existence since 1985 |
| ICT | Information and Communication Technology |
| JCPA | Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement, this replaces the junior certificate and reports on the results of CBAs and other areas of learning in addition to state examination results. |
| L1LP | Level one learning programme is a programme for a specific group of students with general learning disabilities in the range of lower functioning moderate to severe and profound categories. |
| L2LP | Level two learning programme is a programme for a specific group of students who have general learning disabilities in the higher functioning moderate and low functioning mild categories. |
| LCA | Leaving Certificate Applied is a two-year Leaving Certificate available to students who wish to follow a programme with a strong practical and vocational emphasis. |
| LCE | Leaving Certificate Established is the leaving certificate course followed by the majority of students in senior cycle. |
| LCVP | Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme is designed to give a strong vocational dimension to the Leaving Certificate (established) and is followed by some LCE students if they fulfil certain criteria. |
| NCCA | National Council for Curriculum and Assessment |
| NPCpp | National Parents Council Post Primary |

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| OECD | The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development is an intergovernmental organisation with 36 member countries, founded in 1961 to stimulate economic progress and world trade. |
| QQI | Quality and Qualifications Ireland is an independent State agency responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training services in Ireland established in 2012. |
| SEC | State Examinations Commission |
| SEN | Special Educational Needs |
| T1 | Teanga 1 refers to the language specification for Gaeilge for Irish medium schools |
| T2 | Teanga 2 refers to the language specification for Gaeilge for English medium schools. |
| TY | Transition Year refers to an optional year that can be taken by students after junior cycle before starting senior cycle |
| UCAS | The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service is a UK-based organisation whose main role is to operate the application process for British universities |

Executive summary

The purpose of this interim report is to present the main themes, ideas and perspectives emerging from the NCCA's ongoing review of senior cycle education which commenced in 2016. Thus far, senior cycle review consists of three phases: scoping; school review and national seminars; and public consultation.

The following are the main themes emerging from the review thus far.

Review participants affirmed the core purpose of senior cycle education, to help every student towards fulfilling their potential. Every student is empowered to deepen their knowledge, skills and qualities throughout senior cycle as they mature and develop intellectually, personally and socially. The educational experience at senior cycle equips students for diverse and sustainable futures so that they can embrace full, active citizenship and participation in society and the economy as they learn and as they make the transition to life beyond school. The vision for education emerging from this review reflects many of the intended purposes of senior cycle education, as outlined in *Senior Cycle: Towards Learning, Listening to Schools* (NCCA, 2009) and acknowledges societal changes which have impacted on education in recent decades. Participants in this review identified barriers to achieving the broad purposes of senior cycle education and repeatedly affirmed that the purpose of senior cycle is broader than – and must be broader than – a selection function for entry to third level education.

Review participants considered the skills and qualities students should have opportunities to develop further as they engage with and apply knowledge within and across a range of disciplines. The skills and qualities they evoked can be grouped as follows:

- higher-order thinking; critical thinking and analysis; problem solving and information processing; independent and collaborative learning; creativity and innovation; and skills in the areas of research, writing, communication, presentation and digital technologies
- intrapersonal and interpersonal qualities, including resilience, self-respect, self-acceptance and confidence, compassion, empathy, responsibility, self-management and organisation, teamwork, curiosity and a love of learning

- life skills such as financial management, the ability to navigate and actively participate in the real world and the digital world; and knowledge and understanding of social, personal and health education (including relationships and sexuality¹) and the world of work.

A strong desire emerged for improved continuity and coherence as students transition from senior cycle to a diverse range of future destinations. Career guidance, work experience and subject choice are seen as important supports in achieving this. Varied teaching and learning methods, including class discussions, peer learning, and pair and group work were affirmed, as were varied assessment approaches, including project-work, portfolio-based work and opportunities for oral communication of learning. Mixed views were expressed about continuity between the new junior cycle and the existing senior cycle, and the extent to which potential changes to senior cycle should align fully with developments at junior cycle.

There were different views as to how long students should spend in senior cycle, with two or three years viewed as an appropriate length for this phase of education. Students could benefit from the flexibility to complete senior cycle to differing timeframes, to condense it into two years, expand it to three years or, if suited to their needs, to leave after one year with the option to return to senior cycle or further education at a later date.

Flexibility was sought for students to combine full subjects with learning of a shorter duration in a range of areas. Students might benefit from the option to study subjects for one or two years. The current structure of senior cycle is seen as too rigid with student choice in selection of subjects for the Leaving Certificate Established seen as quite restricted and overly influenced by requirements for entry to third level.

There were differing views on which curriculum components, if any, should be compulsory for all students, with English/literacy, mathematics/numeracy and life skills most frequently suggested. Digital literacy; financial literacy; work experience; social, personal and health education (including relationships and sexuality education); citizenship and political education; sustainability and climate change education; culture and multiculturalism; and opportunities for interdisciplinary learning were among the curriculum components proposed. There were mixed views as to whether these areas should be optional or compulsory. Mixed views were expressed on retaining Gaeilge as a compulsory subject.

¹ A concurrent review of provision of Relationships and Sexuality Education across all phases of education is taking place. Feedback from RSE review will also feed into senior cycle review.

The many strengths of current programmes were identified, including rich opportunities to mature and develop personally and the wide range of subjects, modules and work experience opportunities available to students. Challenges identified include lack of access to technical, vocational, creative and professional learning; over-emphasis on a single pathway (the Leaving Certificate Established); lack of flexibility to combine aspects of different programmes; the absence of a follow-on pathway for students who access learning through Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes in junior cycle; and insufficient supports for student progression to a range of future pathways, with an over-emphasis on progression to third level. Greater flexibility to allow students to navigate different pathways through senior cycle was seen as desirable.

In relation to wellbeing, participants emphasised positive factors which can enhance wellbeing, including an open, supportive school climate; positive student-teacher relationships; work experience and career guidance; high quality teaching; high quality CPD and teacher collaboration. Factors evoked which can negatively impact on wellbeing include curriculum overload across seven subjects; excessive focus on terminal examinations leading to narrowing of teaching and learning approaches, high stress and /or disengagement for many students; heavy workload and concerns about the future.

There were differing views on the extent to which the current senior cycle is inclusive of all students. Transition year is seen as most inclusive of a wide range of talents and abilities; it was suggested that this is less evident as students progress through senior cycle, with a narrower range of abilities being valued and less recognition for the learning students achieve in LCA and LCVP. Strong support was evident for enhancing provision for students who wish to transition from senior cycle education to apprenticeships, traineeships and further training and employment. Increased attention is needed to inclusion of all students. Review participants particularly mentioned students with SEN, students for whom English is an additional language and students from the Traveller community. There was strong support for paying increased attention to wellbeing and inclusion in senior cycle.

Strengths in current assessment arrangements in senior cycle include high levels of public trust in external assessment; the variety of assessment approaches currently used; and assessment being spread out over time, as experienced in a number of senior cycle programmes. Challenges include high stress levels for many students; assessment condensed in a narrow timeframe in the Leaving Certificate Established; limited second chance opportunities for students; and the impact of high stakes assessment on teaching and learning, with a perception that terminal assessment can contribute to over-reliance on memorisation, rote learning of sample answers, and a grinds culture.

Assessment in senior cycle, at its most valid, values a wide range of knowledge and skills and a variety of ways of displaying learning. Greater flexibility in spreading out assessment over time is needed.

Assessment should support the broad purposes of senior cycle and align with teaching and learning in ongoing classroom interactions between teachers and students.

Strengths in current senior cycle reporting include broad reporting of achievement in Transition Year and in the Leaving Certificate Applied programme, with some challenges in interpreting LCA reporting. Reporting of achievement in the Leaving Certificate Established programme through SEC certification and transition to higher education via the CAO system is broadly viewed as fair, impartial and transparent. It is also viewed as quite narrow, providing students, parents, future employers and educators with a limited picture of the knowledge, skills, abilities and aptitudes of students when they transition to the worlds of work, training and higher and further education. Reporting in senior cycle should be broader and more varied. Broader reporting could be of benefit to the large cohort of students who transition from school to apprenticeships, traineeships, further education or training and employment or a combination of these future destinations, as well as students who transition to third level.

There was concern that the transition into fifth year (direct from junior cycle or from Transition Year) and from school to post-school destinations can be challenging due to a range of factors. There are insufficient supports for students transitioning to apprenticeships, traineeships and work. Student learning during senior cycle should help students to develop the knowledge, skills and qualities they need for adult life, irrespective of their choice of post-school destination.

Next steps

Areas for further exploration and development emerging from this review are outlined in an accompanying document, *Senior Cycle Review Public Consultation (NCCA, 2019)* and will form the basis of public consultation. This public consultation will gather feedback in four ways; through an online survey, written submissions, focus group meetings and a national consultation conference. Meetings with stakeholders will also take place as needed.

Informed by feedback from this review, from the public consultation and from research, the NCCA will formulate priority areas for development, as well as longer-term goals for the evolving development of senior cycle education in Ireland. Areas of focus and a proposed timeline for developments in senior cycle education will then be presented to the NCCA's Board for Senior Cycle and subsequently to NCCA Council. Once agreed, advice in the form of an advisory report will issue to the Minister for Education and Skills for consideration. If you would like to take part in the consultation, please complete our online survey and/or send expressions of interest to get involved in focus group meetings to seniorcycle@ncca.ie and we will endeavour to facilitate your request.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Purpose of this report

The purpose of this interim report is to present the main themes, ideas and perspectives emerging from the NCCA's ongoing review of senior cycle education which commenced in 2016. The review thus far has encompassed three phases: scoping; school review and national seminars; and public consultation. Each phase was overseen by the NCCA's representative structures, the Board for Senior Cycle and Council. The ideas emerging from this interim report are presented for further discussion and feedback and will form the basis of public consultation.

Report structure

This report offers a rationale for embarking on the review and outlines the collaborative process used. It outlines how senior cycle currently operates to provide context and presents a variety of perspectives on senior cycle education emerging from the school review, national seminars and email submissions. In order to capture this breadth of rich feedback, this report is descriptive in nature. Further context is provided through brief insights into upper secondary education in a number of jurisdictions internationally. This report explores senior cycle education in relation to its purpose, structure, pathways and programmes, inclusion and wellbeing, assessment, reporting and transitions. Some initial conclusions are drawn in light of the significant strengths of senior cycle education in Ireland and the areas where there is scope for further development. Next steps for senior cycle review are then summarised, with concluding comments.

Rationale for review of senior cycle education

In the last decade of the twentieth century, senior cycle education in Ireland changed significantly. Three new programmes: Transition Year, Leaving Certificate Applied and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme were introduced in 1994/95 to diversify the range of experiences open to our young people. However, the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE), first introduced in 1924, has structurally remained largely the same since 1969, with changes since then happening at the level of individual subject specifications. Now two decades into the twenty-first century, much has changed since the 1990s, and indeed since 1969. Whilst we cannot predict the future, we can identify changes in our society which already influence how we approach senior cycle education in Ireland.

Some societal changes worth considering include:

- increased focus on the broad range of capacities that contribute to full engagement and active participation in the modern world and discussions which relate to identifying and achieving balance and integration across knowledge, skills and qualities
- an aspiration for enhanced physical and mental health and wellbeing
- concerns about equity and social inclusion and significant differences in outcomes for particular groups of young people
- increased sophistication in digital technologies and their impact on connectivity, ways of working and socialising, and the dissemination of knowledge and information/misinformation
- evolving conceptions of gender and sexuality and growth in diverse and blended families
- increased migration and enhanced multiculturalism
- increased focus on citizenship, particularly in the context of climate change and sustainability concerns
- increased focus on student agency, the impact of teaching on learning, powerful knowledge and powerful pedagogies
- growth in regional networks and a tendency towards decentralisation to meet local needs existing alongside concerns about accountability and standardisation.

Our societies face myriad opportunities and challenges arising from these developments. Education cannot solve or resolve these complexities by itself but nonetheless plays a vital role in helping individuals, communities and societies to meet the personal, familial, local, national and global opportunities and challenges they present. These developments impact on schools on a daily basis and need to be taken into account in formulating responsible and responsive education policy, including revising and updating curriculum, assessment and reporting.

This review of senior cycle provides opportunities to look across time at the evolution and endurance of senior cycle education in Ireland and to take stock; to think deeply about students' learning, agency and wellbeing and to consider the kinds of senior cycle experiences which contribute to students' holistic development. It is timely in exploring what experiences, opportunities and qualifications our young people are currently getting and need so they can continue to learn, work, grow and develop as human beings; learners; citizens; employers and employees; and future leaders in our communities. In this review, teachers, parents, students, stakeholders and policymakers are evaluating the

structural changes to senior cycle which occurred two decades ago in the form of TY, LCA and LCVP and providing rich feedback about how these programmes are currently experienced by senior cycle students in Ireland. With the Leaving Certificate Established remaining largely unchanged in structure since its establishment in 1969, this review also asks teachers, students, parents and stakeholders how they view the Leaving Certificate Established programme and what, if any, changes they might suggest.

The approach taken to reviewing senior cycle recognises the importance of listening to practitioners in shaping policy advice; embraces the idea of students' meaningful participation and contribution to their own learning, as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; and acknowledges the pivotal role played by parents/guardians and the state in supporting young people's education. It allows us space to consider how best to meet the needs of groups at risk of exclusion; to ask questions about how the line of continuity between a reformed junior cycle and senior cycle might best be realised; to consider transitions within senior cycle as well as from senior cycle to future pathways; and provides us with a rich opportunity to explore the impact of systemic decisions on schools capacity to achieve the purpose of this stage of education within their local context. Combining this approach with insights from education policy and research nationally and internationally gives us an opportunity to examine national and global developments in education policy and consider what best fits our national context.

Developments in education from early childhood to senior cycle

Senior cycle education exists within a wider context and belongs to a continuum of educational experiences in the home, early childhood education, primary school and junior cycle. It acts as a foundation for young people to embrace full active citizenship and participation in society and as a transition point as they move from school to apprenticeships, traineeships, employment, and further and higher education.

Each phase of education responds to the evolving needs of children and young people as they grow, learn and develop. A number of uniting and defining features in curriculum and assessment are evident across phases. Recent developments have placed particular focus on:

- continuity, coherence and progression across all phases of education
- the inclusion of all learners
- capacities, dispositions, values and skills
- the wellbeing of children and young people and the wider school community
- times of transition

- the impact of teaching on learning
- greater autonomy and support for teachers.

Aistear (2009) provides guidance for early childhood care and education; a draft Primary Curriculum framework, revising and updating the 1999 Primary Curriculum, is currently in development; and the Framework for Junior Cycle (2015) underpins the first three years of post-primary education. In developing these frameworks:

- schools are at the heart of curriculum review as teachers, students, parents and school leaders work directly with the NCCA to shape the evolution of Irish education
- relevant research, both national and international, is consulted and/or commissioned, shared with participating schools and used to inform developments and advice
- seminars, focus groups and a range of communication tools are used to widen the conversation and promote awareness and engagement
- consultation with stakeholders and the wider public takes place on an ongoing basis.

Relationship between review and reform

The rationale for this review is outlined above. However, it is important to note that this is not a rationale for a reform of senior cycle, nor should it be assumed that this review will automatically give rise to a large-scale curriculum reform. In fact, a major reform of junior cycle is still being introduced and embedding in schools as this review takes place.

This review has highlighted many strengths in our current senior cycle and in our post-primary schools more broadly and affirmed the invaluable role teachers and school leaders play in the education of our young people. It has also generated much debate about the extent to which there is a need to reform senior cycle, and while there are differing views on the nature, pace and scale of any future changes in senior cycle, there is widespread agreement on the need for change. Decisions about what to prioritise and why, as well as how much time and the kind of resources that will be needed for any suggested changes to senior cycle education will need to emerge from this review and will be informed by concurrent developments within early childhood, primary and post-primary education.

We move into the next phase of the review with the intention of working with all stakeholders to achieve a shared vision of the purpose of senior cycle education and identify priorities for further developing senior cycle in order to realise this purpose together.

Process used to review senior cycle

Senior cycle review is composed of three phases thus far. Phase 1: scoping (2016-2017), identified key themes for exploration and established the process for conducting the review. Phase 2: school-based review and national seminars (2018-2019), provided the opportunity to work with 41 schools nationwide to gather, analyse and discuss teacher, student and parent perspectives on senior cycle education. Feedback was sought to ensure the process remained flexible and responsive to participant feedback throughout. Phase 3: public consultation and formulation of advice on the development of senior cycle (2019 and ongoing) involves consultation and further discussion of the ideas contained in this report and in *Senior Cycle Review Public Consultation* (NCCA, 2019)

Phase 1 scoping (2016/2017)

NCCA was aware of the need to examine senior cycle within the wider context of national and international curricular changes. Various approaches to conducting a curriculum review were considered, in light of Ireland's experiences of curriculum reform to date and in consultation with stakeholders, curriculum developers and education policy advisors in Ireland, Wales, the Netherlands and the OECD. The importance of looking in, of taking a deep dive into our national context to explore the concrete needs of our students and our system, was clear. The importance of looking up and out, of examining how upper secondary education is experienced by students in other countries, was also clear. Eight jurisdictions internationally were identified and a desktop study comparing upper secondary education across these jurisdictions was commissioned under a number of headings identified by the Board as priority areas, including purpose, structure, pathways and programmes, inclusion and wellbeing, assessment, reporting, and transitions.

In response to further feedback from the Board for Senior Cycle and NCCA Council, an overview of upper secondary education in Ireland was added to this study. This provided the opportunity to hold Ireland's approach to senior cycle education up to the light and to view it through the prism of other systems internationally. In turn, this generated a deeper appreciation of and further debate about our cultural, structural and institutional values around senior cycle education. A comprehensive school-based review, involving teachers, students and parents in 41 schools nationwide, using these same headings, formed a major part of this review of senior cycle education. In addition, research into specific aspects of our current senior cycle programmes was gathered and/or commissioned, to ensure that a clear picture of key strengths and areas for development in senior cycle education would emerge from this review.

Phase 2 school review (2018/2019)

Prior to embarking on the school review, it was necessary to establish a group of participating schools. To assist this process, management bodies sought expressions of interest from all post-primary schools in their sector. Eighty schools responded, from which 41 schools nationwide were selected, using DES statistics to ensure a representative sample across school type, location, gender, size and language of instruction.

The school review took place over two cycles. Key themes for exploration in the school review were the same as for the international research, namely purpose, structure, pathways and programmes, inclusion, assessment, reporting and transitions. Teachers, students and parents across 41 schools discussed students' current experiences, affirmed the many strengths in our current senior cycle and began to suggest areas for development. Cycle 1 focused on the purpose of senior cycle education. Cycle 2 focused on pathways, programmes and flexibility. Participating schools were invited to attend an induction day where the objectives of the review were outlined, and teachers and parents were invited to co-construct the questions to be used in the school review. In this way, dialogue with and between schools enabled clarifications to take place before the process began. Each school was provided with a small grant, access to relevant research and other support materials and assigned an NCCA mentor to provide support and respond to queries. The research questions for each cycle were peer reviewed by the ESRI and participating schools and edited in response to this feedback before being used by schools. The research questions teachers and parents used were very similar, with some slight adjustments to ensure accessibility for a wide cross-section of parents. Parents were invited to attend the induction day along with the link teachers from their school and participated in a workshop aimed at facilitating parent focus groups for the review. The NPC-PP were involved in developing the workshop and offered support to all parent councils involved in the review. Student questions were similarly developed to ensure accessibility for a wide cross section of students. The mentor for each school answered all queries relating to the review and worked closely with the school link teachers to facilitate the gathering and reporting of school feedback. All other supports, including research questions, research reports and response templates for engaging in the review, were made available online for optional wider involvement of schools and nine additional schools availed of this opportunity.

In response to feedback from participating schools that they would like support in gathering student voice, and in consultation with the Ombudsman for Children and the ESRI, each school's NCCA mentor took on the role of gathering and audio recording student feedback for the review. To do this each NCCA mentor and a colleague visited the school and initially met with a large group of 50-70 students to workshop some of the questions. They then facilitated three focus group sessions with groups of

ten students which were audio recorded and notes were taken by the NCCA colleague. In response to feedback from schools, in cycle two the third focus group session was sometimes replaced by a workshop with school staff to examine the review questions before the staff held their focus group session.

Teacher and parent feedback were gathered by each participating school's link teacher and parent respectively, for the most part through focus group discussion(s) to gather a diverse range of perspectives. Each school then collated their teacher and parent feedback in the form of two written reports and returned these to the NCCA, who then transferred both reports to the ESRI for analysis, alongside a written report and audio recordings of student feedback. The ESRI published a working paper analysing the feedback from schools following each cycle of the review. The NCCA also created a summary bulletin in English and as Gaeilge, which was posted to all post-primary schools nationwide. The cycle 1 bulletin summarised the ESRI findings and sought further engagement and feedback through expressions of interest to attend the national seminar series and/or via email. All requests to attend national seminars, including those received in response to an open invite from the NCCA on twitter and facebook, were facilitated. The cycle 2 bulletin summarised ESRI findings from cycle 2 and invited teachers, parents and school leaders to take part in the public consultation on the ideas emerging from this report.

A series of national seminars followed each cycle of the review, with the aim of opening up the conversation to include more schools and stakeholders. Following cycle 1 seminars in Cork, Galway and Dublin, participant feedback indicated a desire for fewer presentations and more time for table discussions. This fed into the design of Cycle 2 national seminars, which were built around table discussion and the gathering of further feedback, which in turn has been incorporated into this report.

There are thus many dimensions to this review. Three groups (teachers, students and parents), explored four senior cycle programmes (TY, LCA, LCVP, LCE), across six inter-connected areas (purpose; structure; pathways and flexibility; wellbeing and inclusion; assessment; reporting and transitions), areas which were also explored in relation to eight jurisdictions internationally. Emerging ideas were explored at seven national seminars. In light of these multiple dimensions, and in order to capture this range of perspectives, some repetition is evident in this report.

Phase 3 public consultation (2019)

The ideas contained in this report and *Senior Cycle Review Public Consultation (NCCA, 2019)* are presented for further discussion and feedback and will form the basis of public consultation. This public consultation will gather feedback through an online survey, written submissions, focus group meetings and meetings with stakeholders, as needed. The approach taken to the review of senior

cycle continues to place a strong emphasis on reflecting on the review process itself and responding to feedback from review participants. NCCA will continue to adapt the approach to review in response to feedback as the next phase of the review, public consultation, takes place. A graphic summary of senior cycle review to date is included on the following pages.

Figure 1: Collaboration and Participation in Senior Cycle Review

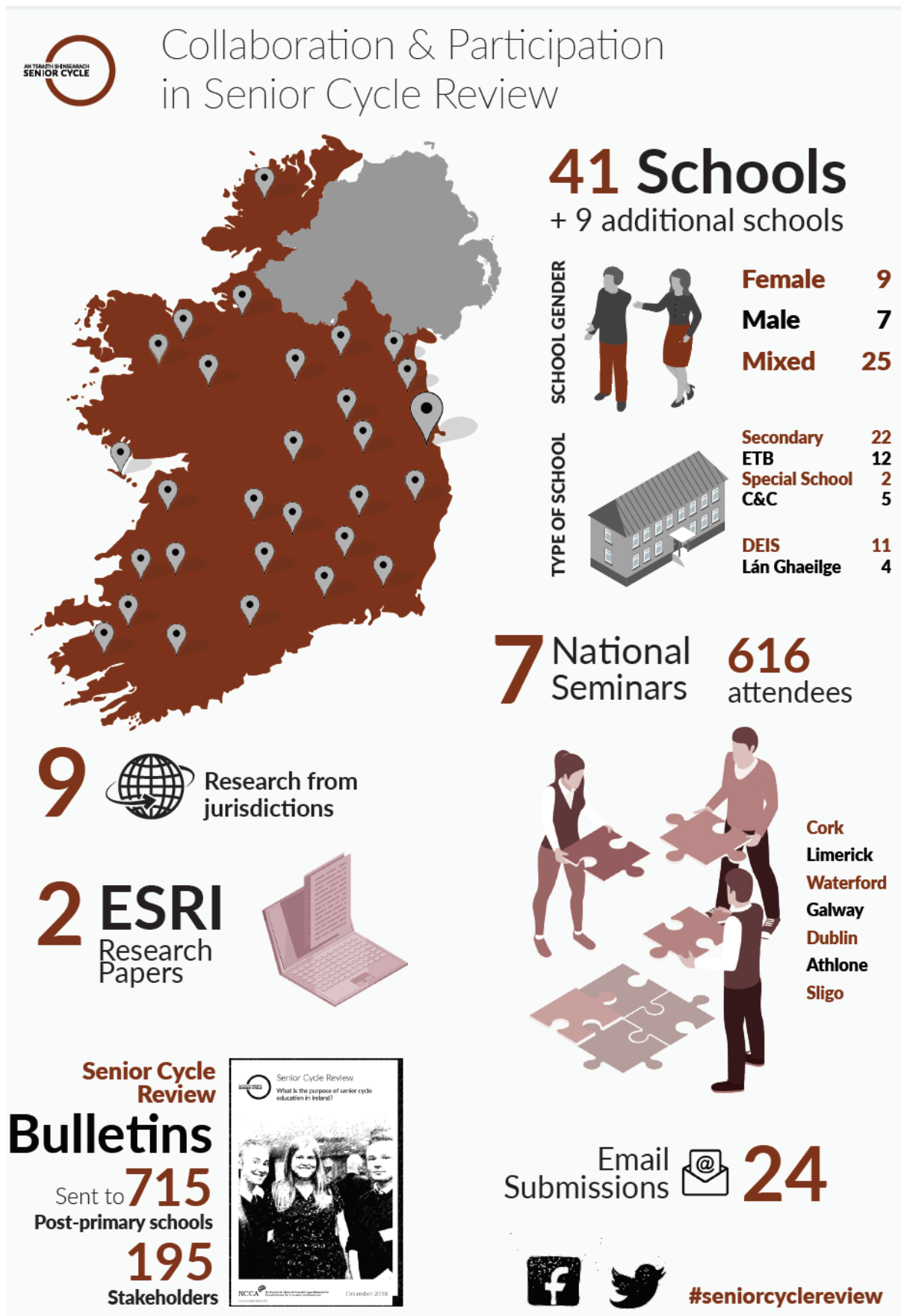
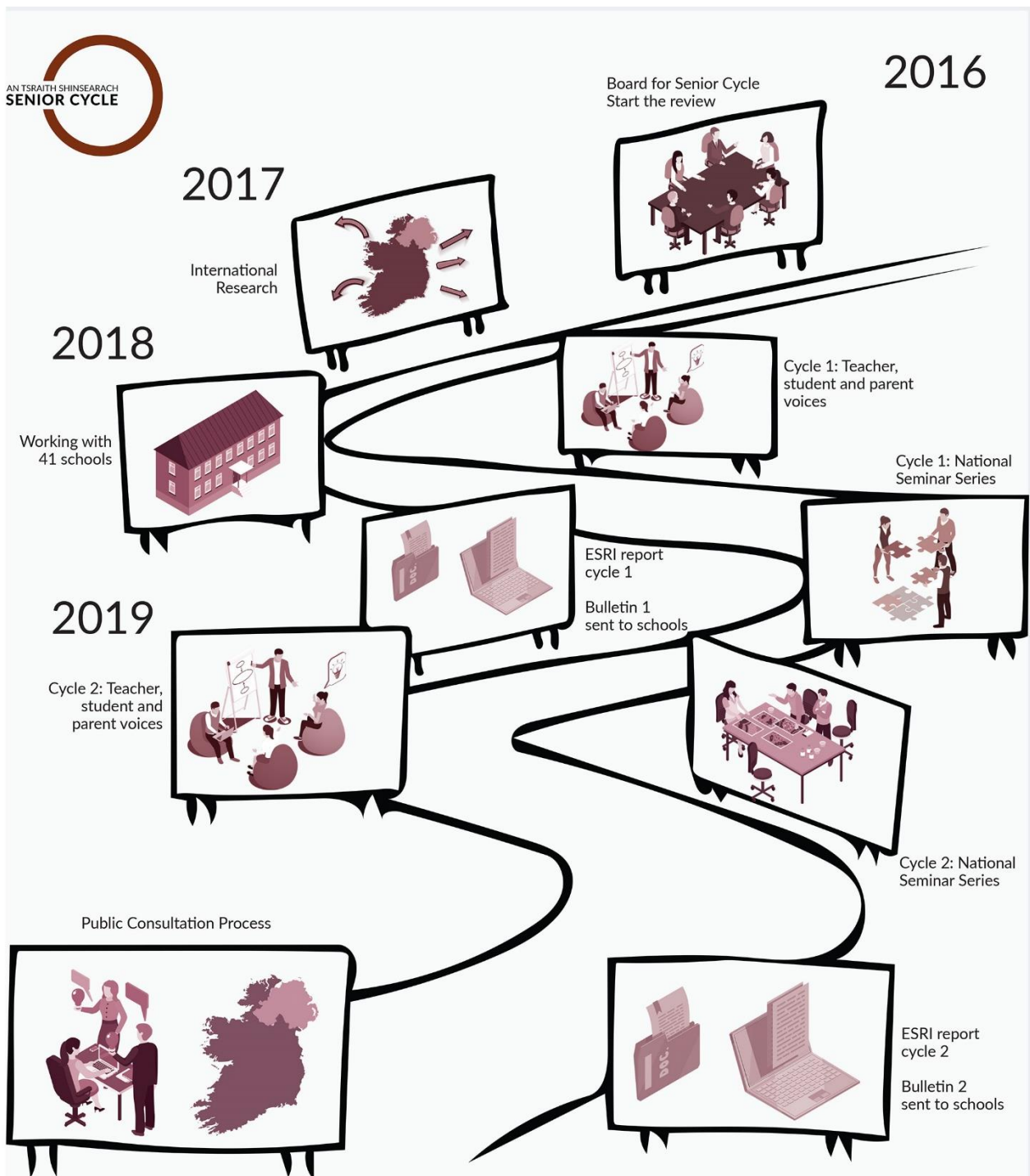


Figure 2: Senior Cycle Review Timeline: Process to Date



SENIOR CYCLE REVIEW TIMELINE: PROCESS TO DATE

Outline of senior cycle education in Ireland currently

This section presents an outline of current provision and includes some commentary from recent research on the senior cycle programmes currently offered. The perspectives of teachers, students, parents and stakeholders on senior cycle education arising from the review to date are explored in detail in subsequent chapters.

At present, students completing junior cycle at level 3 and/or through Level 2 or Level 1 Learning Programmes may enter an optional Transition Year (depending on the school) or go directly into a two-year Leaving Certificate Programme. Schools and/or students may choose from the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE), the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) or the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). While Transition Year and Leaving Certificate Applied are ring-fenced programmes, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme is a more flexible programme where students studying a selection of subjects for the Leaving Certificate established may avail of additional modules in vocational preparation and work experience. Students receive the same certification as for the LCE at the completion of their LCVP programme.

International research shows that the Irish education system enjoys a high public confidence rating of 90% (World Gallup Poll, 2013). The number of students continuing their education to the end of upper secondary and beyond is quite high at 87% (OECD, 2017) when compared with international figures. In addition, international research has increasingly looked at measuring indicators other than educational attainment in order to measure educational success and in the areas of wellbeing and life satisfaction Ireland has been significantly above the OECD average, (OECD, 2015). In addition to these clear strengths in our education system, Ireland is currently focused on enhancing education in a number of areas including through the *Digital Strategy for Schools, 2015 – 2020*; the Creative Schools initiative; *Languages Connect, the Foreign Languages Strategy 2017 – 2026*; the *DES Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018 – 2023* and the *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)* scheme.

a. Transition Year

Transition Year (TY) is offered in 89% of schools and is taken up by approximately 65% of the eligible cohort of students. Smaller schools and those with a higher proportion of socio-economic disadvantaged students are less likely to offer TY (Clerkin, 2013; Jeffers, 2002). The year is intended to provide varied learning experiences for the students, without the pressure of a state examination. Research by the ERC (Clerkin, 2019) would indicate that the experience of TY is beneficial to students particularly in terms of their personal and social development through exposure to other subjects,

discipline areas and varied experiences. Of these, work experience has been highlighted by students as one of the key benefits of TY. Other factors to consider in relation to TY include the future implications of the later school starting age as a result of additional pre-school years and the research which suggests more negative experiences of TY where it is compulsory for students (Clerkin, 2018).

b. Leaving Certificate Applied

Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) was first introduced in 1995 for students who would prefer a more practical, skills-based programme. It is described as a pre-vocational programme with a focus on general rather than specific vocational skills.

Approximately 40% of schools offer LCA and the programme is taken up by 5% of the total student cohort. One of the distinguishing characteristics of LCA is its modular structure, with students achieving credits on completion of modules over the two-year duration of the course. Assessment is varied and includes assignments, tasks, interviews and oral examinations in addition to written final examinations in some subjects. The final result is a single award of a pass, merit or distinction based on the accumulation of credits over the two years. Students who leave the programme before completion can return to the programme with their previous credits 'banked' and continue their studies. Research on LCA has noted the positive student experience associated with the experiential teaching and learning focus of the course, the lack of pressure associated with terminal examinations, the skills developed through the varied methods of assessment (Banks, Byrne, McCoy & Smith, 2010).

According to research, the main negative aspect of the LCA programme is the stigma attached to the qualification itself as it does not share parity of esteem with the Leaving Certificate established (Gleeson & O'Flaherty, 2013). The LCA programme does not qualify for CAO points, which limits progression routes for students wishing to attend higher education. There are also no system-level supports, such as a centrally co-ordinated traineeship/apprenticeship CAO-type system and uneven local supports to connect students completing LCA to potential future pathways. Another factor influencing the perception of LCA is the changing cohort of students enrolled in LCA. Research shows that LCA is often recommended to students as being the most suitable option if they have special educational needs or behavioural difficulties even though this was not the intention in its design (Banks et al., 2010). These factors, along with the lack of awareness or appreciation of the LCA programme among employers and colleges, means that students completing LCA find accessing higher education extremely difficult, and find accessing further education, training, apprenticeship and employment opportunities beyond school challenging, despite their varied and valuable learning experiences. Research by Banks, Byrne, McCoy and Smyth (2010) points to the relatively low levels of progression to post-school education and training by students who complete LCA and where such

transitions are made, they are highly gendered and restricted to courses in further education. This study also strongly questioned the 'ring-fenced' nature of the LCA programme which the report suggested may facilitate the reproduction of social inequalities.

c. Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme

The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) was first introduced in 1994 in order to provide for students who wanted to undertake a Leaving Certificate with a vocational, work-oriented and practical focus. Students are eligible to take the LCVP programme if they have chosen LCE subjects that fulfil the selection criteria. The programme itself consists of two additional courses followed by the students in work preparation and enterprise known as Link Modules. These modules are assessed via the production of a portfolio, an interview and a written examination that takes place each year in May. Approximately 28% of students complete the LCVP programme each year. Research identifies work experience as one of the key benefits to the LCVP. As with TY and LCA the varied experiences and insights offered by this module are valued highly by students and schools. There are strict criteria relating to subject combinations which students must meet to be eligible for participation in the programme. The grading of the programme is given on a pass, merit or distinction basis, similar to the LCA, but in this case there is a CAO points allocation. The maximum points for a distinction are in line with a H4, which makes it less appealing for students wishing to maximise their points. The LCVP is not recognised by all Higher Education Institutions for matriculation purposes.²

d. The Leaving Certificate Established

According to DES figures, approximately 67% of students complete the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) programme. This, in addition to the 28% of the student cohort who complete the LCVP, means that 95% of students (approximately 55,000) complete the Leaving Certificate examinations. The LCE consists of 37 subject options that are available to students. The only compulsory subject is Gaeilge, but mathematics and English, and in some cases a foreign language, are also required subjects for matriculation in most HEIs and therefore perceived as required subjects by students. Over the past fifteen years the Leaving Certificate has seen the introduction of additional, diverse assessment components such as research reports, practicals and orals that are now incorporated into 24 of the 37 subjects. Additional subjects such as Politics and Society, Physical Education and Computer Science have been developed and introduced to Senior Cycle in recent years. Over the course of two years,

² While the LCVP may be used for points requirements it is not accepted as one of the six subjects for matriculation purposes in NUI (<http://www.nui.ie/college/entry-requirements-faqs.asp>)

students may complete courses at higher or ordinary level in a number of subjects. Achievement in a maximum of six subjects counts towards a combined CAO points total.

Research on LCE has explored the issue of predictability in terminal examinations and in project/practical components where applicable, across six subjects (Baird, Hopfenbeck, Elwood et al, 2014). This research found that student and teacher perceptions of the kinds of learning these examinations promote / intend to promote varied depending on the method of assessment and how content-driven they perceived the subject to be. Research has also shown that Irish students experience high levels of stress and anxiety associated with the high-stakes nature of the terminal examinations (Hannan et al., 1996; McCoy et al., 2014; Banks & Smyth, 2015). Research by Cullinane and Liston (2016) and Burns et al. (2018) commented on the limited learning assessed in written examinations, the aspects of the programme and terminal examinations which may encourage some students to place excessive focus on memorisation over the development of understanding and the resulting lack of development and testing of higher order skills. Research by Hyland (2011) commented on the backwash effect a focus on a high stakes examination has on teaching and learning at this level, with the examination becoming the determinant for what subjects are studied and how, and the negative impact this has on extra-curricular activities. Research on transitions (Banks, Smyth and Calvert, 2011; Denny, 2015; O’Leary & Scully, 2018) has explored a range of factors which improve the transition to life beyond school and those which make it more difficult. This echoes some of the earlier findings of research on senior cycle (NCCA, 2002, 2009).

There is an extensive range of research available on all aspects of senior cycle in Ireland of which this is just a selection. A further list of reference material can be found in Appendix 1.

Additional options

Some special schools, to meet the needs of their students, have diversified to offer Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI³) and Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN⁴) qualifications and/or school developed completion programmes to follow on from the learning achieved in junior cycle at Level 1 and Level 2. Early school leavers (unemployed young people who have no qualifications or vocational training) may follow a two-year Youthreach programme of integrated education, training and work experience. Employer-led occupational skills development programmes combining formal (off the job) and workplace (on the job) coaching may also be available.

³ QQI is the national agency responsible for qualifications and quality assurance in further education and training and higher education in Ireland

⁴ ASDAN is a British education charity and awarding organisation who develop curriculum programmes and qualifications to help young people develop knowledge and skills for learning, work and life.

Summary remarks

Twenty years ago, senior cycle education in Ireland changed. The Leaving Certificate Applied and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme were introduced, and Transition Year, which began as a pilot programme in the 1970s, became more firmly and widely established. In the interim, much has changed in society and in the economy. The knowledge, skills and qualities needed for full, active citizenship and for life in the modern world have evolved. This review is exploring how well senior cycle education is meeting the needs of our young people and helping them to build these capacities. It is also asking what changes, if any, might be needed to senior cycle education. Review of senior cycle commenced in late 2016. Phase one, scoping and phase two, school review are complete. Review of senior cycle education thus far has included:

- a desktop study of upper secondary education in nine jurisdictions (including Ireland)
- launch of international research and school review at a seminar in Croke Park with over 100 attendees
- consultation with stakeholders and education policy experts in Ireland, as well as education policy advisors in Wales, the Netherlands and the OECD to explore various ways of conducting curriculum review
- participation of teachers, students and parents in 41 schools nationwide
- email submissions from 9 additional schools and 15 individuals/stakeholders
- analysis of school review feedback by the ESRI, published in two research papers
- seven national seminars at locations across Ireland with 616 attendees
- communication via update bulletins posted to post-primary schools and 195 stakeholder groups and via social media
- discussions at NCCA Board for Senior Cycle meetings and Council meetings since 2016.

Public consultation (phase three) will include opportunities to discuss areas for development through an online survey, written submissions, focus group meetings and a national consultation conference. Meetings with stakeholders will also take place as needed. The clear need for change, whilst retaining core strengths of our current senior cycle, is emerging from this review. Decisions about the nature, pace and scope of change have not yet been made. These will emerge from this review and be explored during phase three: public consultation.

Chapter 2: The purpose and aims of senior cycle education

The overarching purpose of senior cycle education is considered below from a wide range of perspectives, including

- the current purpose of senior cycle education
- review with teachers, students and parents across 41 participating schools nationwide
- table discussions at national seminars⁵
- comparative research across nine jurisdictions, including Ireland.

Current purpose of senior cycle

Philosophers have long debated the purpose of education and the role it fulfils in society and for the individual. The values at the heart of senior cycle are outlined in *Senior Cycle: Towards Learning, Listening to Schools* (NCCA, 2009), namely equality and inclusion; justice and fairness; respect for human dignity and identity and freedom and democracy. Eight principles underpin these values: quality, inclusive education, continuity, choice and flexibility, participation, relevance and enjoyment, wellbeing, creativity and innovation and lifelong learning.

Recent articulations of the purpose of senior cycle education, informed by *Towards Learning: An Overview of Senior Cycle Education* (NCCA, 2009) and outlined in specifications such as Leaving Certificate Politics and Society (2016) and Physical Education (2017), reflect these principles. There is a clear focus on supporting students towards realising their potential and equipping students for life after school and for lifelong learning. The qualities and capacities education has the potential to develop in all students (*resourceful, confident, active and engaged learners*) and the experiences and supports which contribute to realising this vision are outlined. This vision of the learner encompasses wellbeing, relevance, enjoyment, creativity and innovation. It is envisaged that at this stage of maturity, for the most part, students manage their own learning and take responsibility for shaping

⁵ The first round of seminars invited participants to email their ideas to the NCCA following table discussions. In response to feedback from attendees, the second round of seminars provided more time for table discussions and ideas were noted and collated during the seminars to inform and enrich the review.

their future directions in life. It is equally acknowledged that students need support to shape their own futures, particularly in the context of the changing nature of societies and economies worldwide.

The core learning at the heart of senior cycle as currently articulated is the development of knowledge, understanding and skills and deepening awareness of processes of and strategies for learning. Five key skills are currently embedded in senior cycle specifications: information processing; communicating; being personally effective; working with others; and critical and creative thinking. These skills are explicitly linked to core knowledge within the subject domain in each specification. Senior cycle aims to build upon a continuum of educational experiences with a continued emphasis on breadth whilst acknowledging the need to provide some opportunities for specialisation. It recognises that all learners have abilities, aptitudes and talents and that for many human beings, these abilities co-exist alongside learning needs and challenges. The learner is at the centre of the experience with opportunities for *educational achievement of the highest standard for all learners, commensurate with their individual abilities*. Less evident in recent articulations of the purpose of senior cycle education is a focus on flexibility.

It is also important to note that individual senior cycle subject syllabuses and specifications have been developed at different times over a number of decades and are thus uneven in terms of connecting to a broader overarching narrative of the purpose of senior cycle education. Most specifications published post 2006 include a summary of the broader aims of senior cycle education, but those published pre-2006 generally do not.

The *Action Plan for Education 2016 – 2019* (DES, 2016) places equal emphasis on the needs of learners, society and the economy and emphasises choice, motivation and engagement. It focuses on improving transitions; creating a greater diversity of learning opportunities (including apprenticeships and traineeships); enhancing supports for students in making career choices; and creating a focus on entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation to develop the national skills base and meet the challenges of growth in the modern world.

Purpose discussions in school review

The school review considered a range of questions relating to purpose including:

- currently what are the best things about senior cycle in your school?
- what do learners need to gain from senior cycle to succeed and actively participate in an ever-changing world?

- how should we define success in senior cycle?
- does teaching and learning at senior cycle enable all students to achieve their full potential?
- how should senior cycle build on the student experience of junior cycle?

Teachers, students and parents discussed these questions and affirmed the core purpose of senior cycle education, to help every young person towards fulfilling their potential. Every student should be empowered to deepen their knowledge, skills and qualities throughout senior cycle as they mature and develop intellectually, personally and socially. The educational experience at senior cycle should equip students for diverse and sustainable futures so that they can embrace full, active citizenship and participation in society and the economy as they learn and as they make the transition to life beyond school.

A range of school factors which help in achieving this aim were highlighted, including high quality teaching, mature relationships between students and teachers, mentoring and pastoral care, community links, extra-curricular activities, career guidance and work experience.

The central importance of disciplinary knowledge was fully affirmed and the need for students to be challenged cognitively and creatively as they learn and deepen their knowledge, skills and qualities was repeatedly reiterated during the review. Review participants considered the skills and qualities students should have opportunities to develop further as they engage with and apply knowledge within and across a range of disciplines. The skills and qualities they evoked can be grouped as follows:

- higher-order questioning; critical thinking and analysis; problem solving and information processing; independent and collaborative learning; creativity and innovation; and skills in the areas of research, writing, communication, presentation and digital technologies
- intrapersonal and interpersonal qualities, including resilience, self-respect, self-acceptance and confidence, compassion, empathy, responsibility, self-management and organisation, teamwork, curiosity and a love of learning
- life skills such as financial management, the ability to navigate and actively participate in the real world and the digital world; and knowledge and understanding of social, personal and health education (including relationships and sexuality) and the world of work.

Student experiences in senior cycle should provide a firm foundation for adulthood and independence, supporting young people to transition to higher and further education, apprenticeships, traineeships and employment or a combination of a number of these pathways. Senior cycle should empower all young people to play a full and active role in their school, society and economy, as active citizens and

as beneficiaries and contributors to social, political and economic life nationally and internationally. The experience of senior cycle was also viewed as impacting on young people's orientation toward (or away from) further and lifelong learning.

Continuity in teaching and learning and coherent transitions

A strong desire emerged for improved continuity and coherence as students transition from senior cycle to a diverse range of future directions. Career guidance, work experience and subject choice were deemed important supports in achieving this. Varied teaching and learning methods, including class discussions, peer learning, and pair and group work were affirmed, as were varied assessment approaches, including project-work, portfolio-based work and opportunities for oral communication of learning. Mixed views were expressed about continuity between the new junior cycle and the existing senior cycle, and the extent to which potential changes to senior cycle should align fully with developments at junior cycle.

In discussing the purpose of senior cycle education, a number of talking points emerged from the school review. For example:

- can a revised senior cycle recognise and value personal capabilities, community involvement and the life skills and capacities needed both within and beyond school? Can emphasis on and recognition of these capabilities extend beyond transition year into 5th and 6th year? And if so, how?
- how will the perceived lack of continuity between the revised junior cycle and the existing senior cycle impact on students? Should senior cycle build on changes to junior cycle or is it too soon to say? Teachers and students affirmed the use of a variety of teaching methods and assessment approaches as an area where they would like to see better continuity between the two phases and particularly in the movement from Transition Year to the Leaving Certificate Established.
- can we achieve parity of esteem and wider acceptance of varied student choices in terms of different programmes/pathways, subject and module choices and higher and ordinary levels, as students build towards diverse futures?

Purpose discussions in national seminars

Teachers, students and parents from the 41 participating schools, as well as teachers and school leaders from other schools and a wide range of stakeholders debated, discussed and further teased out this emerging purpose at cycle 2 national seminars. The observations they made vary in scope and focus. Some observations concentrate on the opportunities the learner should have to grow and

develop; some focus on what achieving particular purposes would mean for schools and the education system; others still relate to broader societal matters (such as equality) and even global concerns (sustainability).

Many of the observations made during the school review were reflected during the national seminars, and in the email submissions. For example:

- the role of education in contributing to the holistic development of the whole person
- the importance of building towards a range of diverse futures and providing students with some of the life skills they need beyond school
- challenges in achieving the broad purposes of education such as curriculum overload in the Leaving Certificate Established; stress and pressure; the stigma associated with pathways which do not lead to third level; some frustrations with the ring-fenced nature of the different programmes; and the impact of the CAO system in narrowing the purpose of senior cycle to a gateway mechanism for higher education
- the challenges for particular schools (small, rural, single-sex, DEIS etc.) of achieving the broad purposes of senior cycle education by providing breadth and specialisation, a range of programmes, meaningful work experience opportunities and gender-neutral subject options and combinations.

A number of the points made expanded on ideas arising from the school review and offered further reflections on the purpose of senior cycle. For example:

- it is important to consider what the learners at the core of this experience need, experiences which contribute to the cognitive, emotional and physical wellbeing, growth and maturity of every student. A holistic canvas, a vision of active, empowered learners not a fragmented list of inputs and outputs is needed
- continuity and coherence of purpose from early childhood, through primary schooling, across junior cycle and into senior cycle is desirable yet must simultaneously allow that each phase may have some distinct elements to its identity, as appropriate to the age and stage of learning and the full range of abilities, talents and interests of learners
- it is vital to strive for progression and the achievement of high standards, as appropriate to the individual learner, across a range of different domains, interests, talents and abilities

- the structure of senior cycle currently is quite rigid and inflexible, making it difficult for students to embrace, develop and display a range of talents, abilities and interests across the two/three years of senior cycle
- there is scope to focus more on the role education plays in the development of expressive, imaginative and artistic abilities; in deepening awareness of Irish cultural heritage and multiculturalism; and raising awareness of sustainability issues
- given a tendency towards greater specialisation in senior cycle education, aspirations for students to further develop certain knowledge and abilities should not translate into a list of compulsory subjects all students must study
- increased emphasis on the skills needed for life in the modern world is important but this should not result in eclipsing or downplaying the importance of knowledge. The inter-relationship between cognitive development and physical and emotional wellbeing; and the complex relationship between knowledge and skills need to be carefully considered to achieve a balanced approach to students' senior cycle experiences. This was echoed in the email submissions
- Ireland as a small nation should have a strong focus on adapting to an uncertain future, in light of an acceleration in the pace of change in technology and the workplace. However, it's also important to acknowledge that the future has always been unknown; that adaptability is a trait of successful learners irrespective of the era in which they live; and that adaptability serves human needs, not just the needs of the (future) economy
- the relative responsibilities of schools and parents/guardians in the education of young people need to be considered, alongside the role of education as a vehicle for social justice, as education can provide students with opportunities for learning they otherwise might not have access to
- some life skills (such as financial or health literacy) are integrated across a range of subject domains. However, this can make the development of certain life skills in school highly dependent on the programmes and subject choices offered in schools and chosen by students
- when support structures for students, households and families with additional needs are resourced in policies cross-sectorally (e.g. health, housing) as well as within education policy, students' futures have the potential to be much more positive
- the impact of the CAO system and excessive focus on college entry often drives the dynamics of teaching, learning and assessment. The resulting context presents many challenges to pursuing the purposes of senior cycle education across the entire duration of senior cycle.

Ultimately, for the purpose of senior cycle to be fully and meaningfully experienced by students, the factors constraining its realisation in schools need to be examined and, where possible, removed. It was also acknowledged that cultural and institutional norms, in society and in schools, will need to evolve over time for the purpose emerging from the review of senior cycle to be realised for all students in the fullest way possible.

Additional perspectives on purpose: international research

Comparative research across nine jurisdictions

During the scoping phase of the review of senior cycle, it was suggested that the review might benefit from an examination of the way upper secondary education is experienced by students internationally. Eight jurisdictions were identified, namely England, Finland, France, Netherlands, New Zealand, Ontario, Queensland, and Sweden. A desktop study comparing upper secondary education across these jurisdictions and in Ireland was then commissioned under a number of headings, including purpose, structure, pathways and programmes, inclusion and wellbeing, assessment, reporting, certification and transitions.

Upper Secondary Education in Nine Jurisdictions Overview Report (2017) explores similarities and variations in the way different jurisdictions conceptualise and articulate the overarching purpose and aims of upper secondary education. In light of discussions emerging from the school review, the observations below, which come from the Nine Jurisdictions report, may be of particular interest in the Irish context.

Personal development

A strong emphasis on the role senior cycle education plays in contributing to students' personal development emerged from the school review. Sweden and Finland similarly emphasise the importance of personal development, whilst the Netherlands emphasises helping learners to develop their talents. Ireland also places a strong emphasis currently on personal development as a core purpose of senior cycle education.

Citizenship and active participation in society and the economy

The school review affirmed that a core purpose of senior cycle education should be to contribute to full citizenship and active participation in society and the economy. Encouraging and facilitating active participation as citizens is a core purpose of upper secondary education in many jurisdictions with some differences of emphasis. For example, there is an explicit focus on the importance of [inter]cultural awareness in France. An open conception of citizenship and community is evident in

Finland, which emphasises citizenship as part of a local, national, European and global community. England and Ontario place meeting the needs of the economy and being economically productive on an equal footing with the aim of empowering learners to become successful, actively engaged citizens. Other jurisdictions, including Ireland, currently frame employment as an outcome of education that serves the individual, their community and the wider society and economy. Meeting the needs of the economy is not articulated as the singular or primary goal of education in any of these jurisdictions.

Knowledge and skills and building towards diverse futures

The school review affirmed that a core purpose of senior cycle education is to build towards a range of diverse futures for students. There was some debate during the school review and at national seminars about the extent to which the curriculum should or could respond to the changing nature of society and the extent to which senior cycle can or should prepare students for an unknown future and equip them with the adaptability they will need in their future lives. Other jurisdictions are clearly grappling with the same questions. A future focus and/or emphasis on students learning how to adapt to rapid changes in society, the economy and/or the global environment is an avowed purpose of upper secondary education in England, New Zealand and Queensland. Ireland and Finland similarly emphasise participation in and adaptation to a changing world, though with less emphasis on the idea that adaptation to change is a new requirement for learning or that change is occurring at a more rapid pace than for previous generations.

Questions arise about the extent to which adaptability is an innate character trait or an outcome of education and ability combined; whether a capacity like adaptability can or should be taught/learned and how education might develop or constrain the development of this trait, which may have implications for each young person's future life chances. This debate is also linked to discussions about the inter-relationship between knowledge and skills development; the range of pedagogies which contribute to the development of powerful knowledge; and to what extent the current focus on skills is a response to anxieties about societal change and economic competition in a global economy.

Note

It is also important to note that the observations above come from the desktop study *Upper Secondary Education in Nine Jurisdictions, Overview Report* (NCCA, 2017) but that each of these jurisdictions have different processes for and organisations that contribute to articulations of the purpose of upper secondary education. Policy documents from different agencies or with a particular focus (e.g. vocational education) may place an emphasis on slightly different things, as deemed appropriate to the specific context. Furthermore, a number of these jurisdictions were in the middle of reviewing

their upper secondary curriculum when this desktop research was taking place in mid-2016 so some of the observations listed above may already be outdated.

Summary remarks on purpose

This review affirmed the core purpose of senior cycle education, to help every student towards fulfilling their potential. Every student should be empowered to deepen their knowledge and skills throughout senior cycle as they mature and develop intellectually, personally and socially. The educational experience at senior cycle should equip students for diverse and sustainable futures so that they can embrace full, active citizenship and participation in society and the economy as they learn and as they make the transition to life beyond school.

Participants in the review thus far identified barriers to achieving the broad purposes of senior cycle education and repeatedly affirmed that the purpose of senior cycle is broader than – and must be broader than – fulfilling a selection function for third level education.

Chapter 3: Curriculum structures, pathways and programmes, wellbeing and inclusion

All aspects of curriculum (planning, teaching, learning, inclusion, wellbeing, assessment, reporting, and transitions) are interlinked, and participants repeatedly emphasised this throughout the review. Decisions in one area have a knock-on impact in another, irrespective of whether they relate to how the curriculum is structured; pathways and programmes available; considerations relating to wellbeing and inclusion; formal and informal assessment and reporting arrangements; and how reporting and certification are used to assist students to make the transition to a range of diverse futures beyond school. For the purposes of clarity, these areas are outlined separately below, and assessment, reporting and transitions are reported on in a separate chapter. However, it is acknowledged that a coherent picture only emerges when all aspects are considered in their entirety.

Structure and curriculum components

The main questions explored in relation to structure were:

- how long should senior cycle be? Should students have the option to complete it at varying paces or all complete it in the same time?
- what range of curricular components should students choose from?
- are there some subjects/areas/learning experiences that should be available to all students?

Structure discussions in school review

Teachers, students and parents explored questions relating to structure, affirming current areas that work well for students and schools, and querying aspects they see as overly restrictive. Discussions during the school review, as analysed by the ESRI, indicated the following:

Length of senior cycle

- there were different views as to how long students should spend in senior cycle, with two or three years generally viewed as an appropriate length for this phase of education

- some teachers and parents favoured making Transition Year mandatory for all students, either as a stand-alone programme or by integrating aspects of TY into a three-year cycle
- others were of the view that students should have the option to complete senior cycle to differing timeframes, to condense it into two years, expand it to three years or, if suited to their needs, to leave after one year with the option to return to senior cycle at a later date
- flexibility in the length and components of senior cycle were seen as particularly important for students with SEN
- students weren't explicitly asked how long senior cycle should be. Some students spontaneously commented that the current two-year cycle is too pressurised. Others expressed a reluctance to make TY compulsory for all students.

Curriculum components

- many schools and parents think that the components currently available to students (subjects, modules and units of learning) should continue to be available but with greater flexibility
- students should have flexibility to combine full subjects with learning of a shorter duration in a range of areas
- work experience and opportunities to sample different and new subject areas were viewed as helpful to students in making decisions about possible future careers
- many teachers and students suggest there is a need for less subject content or fewer subjects or major/minor subjects to facilitate more active learning methodologies, the development of a broader range of skills, such as independent and collaborative learning and research; and to reduce workload, stress and pressure on teachers and students
- some teachers think that more opportunities for interdisciplinary and cross-curricular learning could benefit students and teachers whilst others suggested that the curriculum should be structured solely through the lens of discrete subjects
- some students expressed a preference for existing subjects to be broken into a range of modules so that a student could study some modules without having to study all aspects of a full subject
- some concerns were expressed about the capacity of small and single-sex schools to offer a range of programmes and broad, non-gendered subject options, subject combinations and modules due to resourcing issues and lack of cross-school integration.

Subjects, work experience, and life skills/wellbeing

- teachers placed slightly more emphasis than parents and students on English/literacy and Maths/numeracy as core areas all students should experience. Students suggested that these subjects be sub-divided into different components, with a greater emphasis on the aspects of English and maths that are needed in day to day life as one component
- teachers, parents and students all think that increased attention should be given to wellbeing
- teachers, students and parents suggested that life skills should form a core component of the senior cycle curriculum as preparation for the future. This could enhance the development of personal and interpersonal skills and in turn enhance young people's wellbeing and ability to cope with challenges
- teachers, parents and students suggested that all students should have access to work experience
- parents highlighted the need to include ICT skills, work experience placements and physical education as core components of the senior cycle curriculum and some expressed a desire to see greater emphasis on non-exam subjects and areas of learning
- students particularly emphasised a desire to have relationships and sexuality education and financial literacy included in the senior cycle curriculum, with some students also emphasising the importance of physical education and ICT
- some schools, parents and students were of the view that providing the option for students to do fewer (exam) subjects in the Leaving Certificate Established without being penalised for the purposes of entry to higher education (five was frequently suggested) could provide opportunities for increased specialisation, reduce workload and homework pressures on students and allow space and time for students to continue engaging with extra-curricular and social activities
- some schools and parents and many students think that all subjects should be optional. Some students suggested that specialising too early might be risky if they changed their mind about their career direction in the middle of senior cycle
- students emphasised the enhanced motivation they experience when studying subjects they are were interested in; when they have opportunities to express their creativity and develop a love of learning beyond the syllabus; and when they and/or their teacher can relate learning to real world examples and applications
- teachers and parents spoke positively about the range and variety of subjects available. Many students expressed a desire to have a greater variety of subjects in senior cycle, including subjects

linked to third-level courses (such as psychology and law), more creative subjects (such as drama) and more vocational/practical subjects

- some students said that whilst they may wish to study a range of subjects, only those which are most relevant to the pathway they want to take after school should be what counts when transitioning from school to higher or further education, training or employment. The aggregation of points from all subjects examined was seen as an imprecise and unfair way of deciding whether a student may be suited to a particular course
- teachers expressed concern that students sometimes select subjects as a means to an end, rather than in response to their interests and aptitudes, often based on perceptions about how hard or easy they are and on predictions of what their 'value' in CAO points might be
- the current system of offering bonus points for maths through the CAO was queried. It was seen as impacting significantly on students in terms of workload, their broader subject selection and the levels at which they access and participate in other subjects
- many students think that Irish should be an optional subject, whilst some highlighted the importance of retaining at least some exposure to the language for students.

Structure discussions at national seminars

At national seminars, discussions on structure ranged broadly across many areas, with some observations focusing on how structure impacts on student opportunities to grow and develop; some focusing on proposing changes to existing structures and identifying what any such changes might mean for schools and the education system; others still relating structures to broader societal matters, such as the age students start school and models participants had encountered in other jurisdictions.

In considering how long senior cycle should be, whether students should have the option to complete it at varying paces, what range of curricular components should make up senior cycle, and whether there are some experiences all students should have, many ideas which emerged during the school review were reflected during the national seminars.

For example:

- less breadth in subject content could allow for greater depth of exploration using a wider range of methodologies, thus helping students to develop deeper understanding a wider range of skills. For others, breadth in subject content is a marker of the standards in the subject and thus the idea of a reduction in subject content was not welcome

- concern was expressed that timetabling and matriculation requirements sometimes steer students into overly focusing on one area (for example, languages frequently form three out of the seven subjects studied for the Leaving Certificate Established) which might not be their area of strength or interest and that, where this happens, it can lead to disengagement. This concern was also expressed in email submissions to the review.

A number of points made during the seminars expanded on ideas arising from the school review and offered further reflections on the structure of senior cycle. For example:

Length of senior cycle

- students should have the option to decide how long to spend completing senior cycle
- a compulsory three-year senior cycle could significantly raise the school leaving age due to demographic changes, with most children now starting school aged five
- some students might benefit from an option to complete one year of senior cycle and then transferring into an apprenticeship or trainee programme and/or employment

Curriculum components

- whilst a modular credit-based system might provide a sense of achievement over time, if this option were pursued, the CAO system would need to evolve significantly to value a broader range and type of learning and external oversight would be important to ensure fairness, as is currently the case in LCA
- some of the elements currently concentrated in TY (such as active and interdisciplinary learning; wide variety in learning methodologies and ways of displaying learning; work experience; social, emotional and personal development) should be integrated across the full duration of senior cycle
- if TY type experiences were integrated across the entire duration of senior cycle, entry into pathways after school (higher and further education, apprenticeships, traineeships and employment) would need to recognise the value of these experiences in some way and/or schools would need clear parameters to work within. Otherwise opportunities for creative, cognitive, social and personal growth and maturity could gradually be abandoned in favour of focusing on what would be rewarded for the purpose of CAO points
- the current structure of senior cycle is, to too great an extent, based on the assumption that the main purpose of senior cycle is access to higher education. The range of choices offered to students needs to be more diverse, balanced and inclusive

- another way to reduce the narrowing of senior cycle to primarily serve selection for higher education purposes would be for all students who progress to higher education to complete a general year of study in third level before specialising
- co-operation between schools (e.g. through clusters, teachers of specialist areas working across two smaller schools, online learning) could support continued provision of a wide range of subjects and modules to students, particularly for smaller and rural schools
- senior cycle needs constant review and changes should be monitored on a rolling basis so that unforeseen opportunities and challenges can be responded to in a timely manner
- a common discussion point was that any major change to the current structure would need to be supported by adequate resources and infrastructure.

Subjects, work experience and life skills / wellbeing

- students benefit from having access to career guidance and meaningful work experience which can lead to apprenticeships, traineeships and/or employment during holidays and beyond. It takes time, resourcing and effort from all involved, particularly employers, for this to be achieved and that rural schools can find this more challenging as small towns tend to have less diversity in workplaces/industries and inferior transport links
- a reduction in the number of subjects students study, if it were not accompanied by modules or major/minor subject options, might have unintended consequences, such as lessening student exposure to arts and practical subjects. Email submissions also suggested that it may also result in early specialisation which may limit options for students
- a range of views were expressed as to the number of subjects/modules students should study and the appropriate breadth in subject content
- the number of subjects students study and the volume and complexity of knowledge and skills they develop, particularly during study of the Leaving Certificate Established, were seen as posing a variety of challenges, such as demotivation for students who become overwhelmed and pressure to 'teach to the test' when the end goal of education is viewed exclusively through the lens of access to third level
- suggestions were made at seminars and in email submissions regarding the division of subjects into compulsory and optional areas (such as in mathematics for life and mathematics for further study). A similar suggestion was made to encourage spoken Irish, to have language and culture compulsory and offer literature as an optional additional module

- in email submissions concern was expressed over the possibility of reducing the number of subjects and the negative impact this could have on the compulsory nature of Irish. Some groups expressed the importance of maintaining the compulsory status of the language and that in order to encourage the spoken language, the oral component should reward fluency over memorisation. If, similar to junior cycle, T1 and T2 specifications emerged for senior cycle, it was suggested that the T1 specification should possibly attract more CAO points.

Additional perspectives on structure: international research

Upper Secondary Education in Nine Jurisdictions Overview Report (2017) explores similarities and variations in the way different jurisdictions structure upper secondary education. Some of the observations below may be of interest in light of feedback emerging from this review.

Length of senior cycle

Many jurisdictions are moving towards greater flexibility in terms of how long students spend in upper secondary education. The duration is flexible in Finland (three-year programme can be reduced to two years or extended to four years, with two percent of students completing a transition year), Sweden (three or more years), Ontario (four-year diploma can be reduced to three or extended to five years) and the Netherlands (talented students on an academic pre-university pathway may complete the three-year cycle in two years).

Curricular components

In considering what curricular components all students should have access to, it is noted that compulsory literacy and numeracy components are a consistent feature across all jurisdictions. In some jurisdictions, including France, Ontario, New Zealand and Sweden, students increasingly specialise as they progress through upper secondary education. In credit-based systems, such as Ontario and Queensland, a modular approach is followed. Students accumulate credits over the course of their upper secondary education and this is reported on in the final school leaving certificate or diploma. A work-based component is a compulsory element in vocational programmes in Finland, France, the Netherlands, Sweden and in the pre-vocational LCA programme in Ireland.

Summary remarks on structure and curriculum components

Discussions of structure revolved around three key questions. How long should it be? Should students have the flexibility to complete it at varying paces? What curriculum components should be available?

There were different views as to how long students should spend in senior cycle, with two or three years generally accepted as an appropriate length for this phase of education. Whilst three years was seen as helpful for many students, it was suggested that students at this stage in their lives should have the choice to condense senior cycle into two years; to expand it to three years; or, if suited to their needs, to leave after one year, with the option to return to senior cycle or further education at a later date. There was general agreement that it is a good idea to provide students with the flexibility to complete senior cycle to differing timescales.

The importance of subjects was affirmed during the review and flexibility for students to combine full subjects with learning of a shorter duration in a range of areas was seen as important. Review participants used different terms to describe this shorter-duration learning. The term modules was used, perhaps reflecting existing modularisation practices such as TY modules, LCA modules and LCVP link modules. Some participants used the term units of learning; others referred to major and minor subjects. Whatever language was used, the current structure of senior cycle is seen as too rigid and student choice in selection of subjects for Leaving Certificate Established is seen as too restrictive. It was suggested that students might benefit from the option to study subjects for one or two years and/or to study fewer subjects.

There were differing views on which curriculum components, if any, should be compulsory for all students, with English/literacy, mathematics/numeracy and life skills most frequently suggested. Digital literacy; financial literacy; work experience; social, personal and health education (including relationships and sexuality education); citizenship and political education; Gaeilge; sustainability and climate change education; culture and multiculturalism; and opportunities for interdisciplinary learning were among the curriculum components proposed. There were mixed views as to whether these areas should be optional or compulsory. Mixed views were expressed on retaining Gaeilge as a compulsory subject.

Pathways, programmes and flexibility in school review

The main question explored in relation to pathways, programmes and flexibility was the extent to which all students entering senior cycle have suitable pathways and learning experiences available to them. Participants explored strengths and limitations of current pathways and programmes in senior cycle education; the type of pathways available (academic, technical, vocational, professional or a combination of aspects of each); whether these pathways can or should be combined or ring-fenced; and whether different sites of learning can be used.

Discussions during the school review, as analysed by the ESRI, indicated the following:

Pathways available

- different views were expressed as to whether there are suitable pathways available to all students, with some schools and many parents viewing the current senior cycle as inclusive because it offers a variety of programmes tailored to student need and/or a variety of subjects and subject levels
- students said that the current senior cycle is not suitable for all
- most schools and many students and parents think senior cycle is too narrowly focused on academic and exam-focused learning
- senior cycle is viewed as geared more towards higher education entry than other potential pathways, such as apprenticeships
- many schools and students see a need to integrate more technical/vocational/creative pathways into senior cycle
- parents suggested embedding practical life skills and personal/social development across the senior cycle curriculum, as well as more project and practical work to encourage more students to combine academic, technical, creative and vocational learning
- schools recognised the challenge of securing parity of esteem for vocationally oriented pathways
- schools and parents suggest that students should not to be divided into academic and vocational tracks at an early stage in senior cycle and students echoed this idea, though they expressed it differently, as not wanting to see themselves or their peers labelled in particular ways
- particular gaps in provision for learners with a SEN were identified, with a lack of continuity highlighted for young people who experience junior cycle at Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes

- a number of students said that students with a SEN should have the option to complete the Leaving Certificate Established and pointed out that this is not always the case in special schools.

Combined or ring-fenced?

- support was evident for having greater flexibility to combine various aspects of existing programmes rather than having distinct pathways
- subjects combined with modules, work experience and cross-curricular learning could be possible if greater flexibility between programmes is introduced
- integration of TY-type learning experiences into the remainder of senior cycle was suggested, though reservations were also expressed by some teachers and students
- integrating some of the benefits of the LCA approach into the LCE and/or having less rigid separation between programmes was suggested
- many teachers and parents want to see more diverse pathways open up within senior cycle so that students can combine technical, academic, vocational, professional and creative components

Different sites of learning

- work experience with employers was the main non-school site of learning identified
- other sites of learning mentioned by schools included those associated with transition year, such as community involvement, volunteerism, and specific initiatives such as GAISCE, Young Social Innovators, and online courses such as the driver theory test, safe pass and safe food
- with the exception of work experience, parents did not comment on different sites of learning
- students spoke positively about the more fluid boundaries between school and other places of learning during Transition Year.

In discussing the programmes currently offered in schools, the following observations were made.

Transition Year

Teachers, parents and students view TY as a particularly positive feature of senior cycle. Positives identified by teachers and parents include:

- the variety of learning experiences students are exposed to over the course of the year
- the opportunity to sample different subject areas
- opportunities to develop a broad range of skills
- work experience and the chance to sample possible future careers
- the variety of ways students display their learning
- teachers and particularly parents value the opportunities young people have during TY to develop personal maturity and a wide range of personal and interpersonal skills.

Students were not asked about specific programmes but spontaneously commented positively on TY and mentioned a number of things which were less evident in teacher and parent feedback, such as:

- opportunities to deepen and build new friendships and to strengthen relationships with teachers
- the diverse teaching methodologies used in TY
- the more fluid boundaries between school and other places of learning
- valuable real-world experiences which would be relevant in their future lives beyond school.

Teachers also mentioned a number of challenges relating to Transition Year, including

- difficulties in planning, continuity and progression and fragmentation in learning caused by frequent outings, absenteeism and a wide range of activities interrupting the timetable
- lower motivation amongst students, which some schools linked to a lack of formal assessment.

Parents suggested that the broad range of learning and achievements in TY should be more valued. Similar insights are reflected in research into Transition Year. For more information see the Education Research Centre paper *What do we know about Transition Year? Looking to the Future* by Dr Aidan Clerkin (NCCA, 2018). Observations relating to assessment, reporting and transitions in Transition Year are outlined in chapter 4.

Leaving Certificate Applied

Teachers, parents and students were largely positive about the Leaving Certificate Applied programme and many similarities emerged in the positives emphasised in TY and LCA. Positives identified included:

- student-centred approach
- variety of classroom methodologies
- broader skills development
- emphasis on continuous tasks and project/practical work with frequent feedback
- smaller class sizes
- work experience placements informing career choices
- development of life skills and preparation for the world of work.

These features were viewed as key to enhancing engagement, attendance and retention as well as engendering confidence and a sense of achievement.

Teachers, parents and students mentioned a number of challenges relating to the LCA, including:

- stigma and lack of recognition for the programme and qualification
- outdated content in the programme and problems with overlap and repetition

Teachers also commented on:

- the low level of take up and/or reluctance in some schools to offer the programme due to the poor reputation of the programme and assumptions that it is designed for a particular cohort of students

Additional comments from students included:

- concern that students who select LCA can be treated differently within the school
- concern that there is insufficient cognitive challenge in the programme.

Similar insights are reflected in research into the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme. For more information see the Economic and Social Research Institute *Leaving Certificate Applied Discussion Paper* (ESRI/NCCA, 2018). Observations relating to assessment, reporting and transitions in Leaving Certificate Applied are outlined in chapter 4.

Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme

Teachers, parents and students were positive about many aspects of the Leaving Certificate Vocational programme and similarities emerged in the positives emphasised across TY, LCA and LCVP. Positives identified included:

- work experience and preparation for the world of work
- practical real-life experiences which could benefit students beyond school (parents and students)
- the broad skills development the link modules and portfolio/interview provide (parents/students).

Teachers, parents and students mentioned a number of challenges relating to the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme, including:

- restrictions on access to LCVP based on subject groupings/combinations excluding students who might otherwise benefit from experiencing the link modules
- the cap on the maximum number of points a student can be awarded for achieving a distinction in LCVP, which some suggested results in lower status for LCVP and discourages high achievers from opting for the programme.

Teachers also mentioned the lack of a clearly defined identity for the programme, which can be viewed as more equivalent to a subject in schools. Observations relating to assessment, reporting, certification and transitions in the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme are outlined in chapter 4.

Leaving Certificate Established

Teachers and parents spoke positively about the Leaving Certificate Established in a range of areas, including:

- the variety of subjects available to students
- parents emphasised exposure to a challenging curriculum as providing their children with valuable life skills for the future.

Many teachers also emphasised:

- the provision of different subject levels as facilitating learning and achievement for students of varying abilities

- the breadth of subjects studied, helping students to keep their options open for the future.

Students were not specifically asked about individual programmes but in speaking about their overall experience of senior cycle, they emphasised several positives about the Leaving Certificate Established, including:

- the variety of subjects on offer
- opportunities to specialise and select a subset of subjects they are most interested in, which they viewed as enhancing their engagement and giving them more in depth understanding
- personal and social development relating to self-reliance, time management, organisation and study skills
- mature, mutually respectful relationships with teachers
- teachers who are enthusiastic and help students to connect learning with the real world / real-world examples, though it was felt there was not always time to explore these connections fully.

Teachers, parents and students also mentioned a number of challenges relating to the Leaving Certificate Established, including:

- a lack of adequate preparation for life after school
- pressures and stress relating to time/workload/curriculum overload and the impact of this typically across seven subjects for students and in getting courses completed for teachers
- a one-size-fits-all approach, meaning that many students don't get to display the full range of their skills and strengths
- the neglect of wider skills (in teaching methodologies, learning, assessment and reporting) and ways of displaying learning not currently rewarded in terminal examinations and projects/practicals/orals was mentioned by some schools and by most parents and students
- discontinuity with aspects of junior cycle and TY, particularly a narrowing of the range of teaching methodologies used and ways of displaying learning was raised by some schools and many parents and students
- parents identified the lack of value attached to non-exam subjects as an issue.

In expanding on the challenges listed above, students expressed particular concern about:

- the mental health of young people

- time pressures resulting in withdrawal from sports and social activities
- lack of opportunities for creativity and to develop a love of learning beyond the syllabus
- the lack of relevance of many of the subjects they studied for their future lives.

Students expressed a range of views about the provision of different subject levels:

- some see this as facilitating learning and achievement for students of varying abilities
- some think it leads to lowered motivation and self-confidence and pressure to stay in higher level due to a fear of being labelled less intelligent if accessing a subject at ordinary level

Observations relating to assessment, reporting, certification and transitions in the Leaving Certificate Established are outlined in chapter 4.

Pathways, programmes and flexibility discussions at national seminars

At national seminars, discussions ranged broadly across many areas, with some observations focusing on how the level of flexibility or rigidity in the pathways and programmes available impacts on the opportunities the learner has to grow and develop; some focused on proposing changes to existing pathways and programmes and identifying what any such changes might mean for schools and the education system; others still related pathways to broader societal matters, such as Ireland's history in providing vocational pathways for students. In considering to what extent all students facing senior cycle have suitable pathways and learning experiences available to them, many ideas which emerged during the school review were reflected during the national seminars.

For example:

- the importance of career guidance to help students explore suitable pathways
- the absence of a pathway for students with significant special educational needs
- the overly academic, examination focus of the Leaving Certificate Established as negatively impacting on students' personal development
- the lack of parity of esteem for LCA. Whether this was a societal issue, where progress to an academic third level was seen as the ultimate form of success, or whether it was due to a lack of progression routes for students who complete LCA, was debated.

A number of points made during the seminars expanded on ideas arising from the school review and offered further reflections on pathways, programmes and flexibility in senior cycle. For example:

- the need for a more flexible structure that is student-centred rather than programme-centred
- the need for a single programme or curriculum that incorporates the best aspects of the current senior cycle while allowing for different pathways and curriculum components within it
- the merits of valuing TY type experiences across senior cycle were identified. Some concerns were expressed that merging TY across senior cycle could weaken the distinctive characteristics that make TY valuable
- TY is experienced differently by students depending on school context which can reinforce disadvantage. Standardised guidelines for TY to aid equity were discussed
- the effectiveness of TY in preparing students for the transition to senior cycle and beyond was debated
- off-site learning including work experience and other sites of learning should also be explored, including further education, vocational training or visiting Gaeltacht areas as a means of broadening the learning valued in senior cycle
- the need for a creative or arts-based pathway
- the need to develop positive dispositions towards life-long learning
- second chance opportunities for students
- the development of vocational pathways. Suggestions were made about adapting the German model of apprenticeships and encouraging more links with industry. The P-Tech model was mentioned as one way of approaching technical and STEM education that might be of interest
- many discussions urged recognition of our history in this area and referenced the VPT programmes and technical colleges as efforts to explore vocational pathways in the past which led to ghettoization and lack of parity in senior cycle experiences and outcomes
- the issue of school size, location and DEIS status were all discussed in relation to the challenges that local context can present in realising the aim of offering a broad choice to students
- the challenges of getting buy-in from industry for work experience and progression to employment

- in the email submissions, there was an emphasis on the need for pathways for routes other than direct entry to third level such as apprenticeships, traineeships and vocational training.

Additional perspectives on pathways: international research

Upper Secondary Education in Nine Jurisdictions Overview Report (2017) explores similarities and variations in the way different jurisdictions provide pathways, programmes and flexibility in upper secondary education. In light of discussions emerging from the school review, the observations below may be of particular interest in the Irish context.

More flexible and diverse pathways?

The school review revealed some frustration with the rigidity of the current senior cycle; with the relative prestige and stigma that can be attached to certain programmes, subjects and ways of displaying learning; and the constraints on student choice which funnel students into ringfenced programmes/pathways, making it difficult for students to combine different types of learning (generally labelled academic, technological, artistic/creative, vocational and professional).

- a range of pathways are available in the eight jurisdictions examined, including general academic, technological, technical, professional, vocational, applied and/or practical pathways and qualifications. In most jurisdictions, students can study towards an apprenticeship
- a movement towards greater flexibility and away from ring-fencing programmes and pathways is evident in Finland, the Netherlands, France, Ontario, Queensland and England. Students can combine different elements or move between programmes, so they do not get stuck in a track or with a combination of courses which they decide does not suit their learning needs and/or the future destination(s) they aspire to
- Queensland and New Zealand focus on offering tailored, more flexible pathways. New Zealand places a focus on improving relevant student-centred pathways, responsive to the diverse needs of students
- vocational pathways feature substantially in Finland, France, New Zealand, the Netherlands and Ontario. There is strong uptake of vocational programmes in Finland, France and New Zealand⁶ and Queensland are currently focusing on strengthening their vocational pathways.
- learning takes place in a variety of places in most of these jurisdictions. Students can complete part of their study in the workplace, in the local community and/or in an alternative provider to

⁶ Statistics for uptake of vocational programmes in the Netherlands and Ontario are not available.

the school, such as an apprenticeship centre, a technical or further education provider or in another school which offers a specific course they wish to study

- students and parents, often with support from teachers, and from guidance counsellors or external advisors in some jurisdictions, determine the pathway students will take through upper secondary. In many jurisdictions, including Queensland, Ontario, Finland, the Netherlands and England, all students have specific upper secondary education plans or study programmes
- second chance opportunities for learning for adults and young people who wish to return to and complete upper secondary education are facilitated in many jurisdictions, including Finland, and France in a range of ways. In Finland, adult learners can enrol in six 'folk high schools' which offer general upper secondary education and the matriculation examination. In France, students between the ages of 16 and 25 who have left education without a qualification can enrol in an upper secondary pathway with a view to achieving a qualification.

Summary remarks on pathways, programmes and flexibility

The main question explored in relation to pathways, programmes and flexibility was the extent to which all students facing senior cycle have suitable pathways and learning experiences available to them.

Mixed views were expressed in relation to the suitability of the pathways and learning experiences available to students. The many strengths of current programmes were identified during this review, including rich opportunities to mature and develop personally during transition year; the wide range of subjects available in TY and LCE, including new subject areas recently introduced in LCE; the modules offered in LCVP and LCA and work experience opportunities in TY, LCA and LCVP.

Some of the challenges identified included lack of access to technical, vocational, creative and professional learning; over-emphasis on a single pathway (LCE); lack of flexibility to combine aspects of different programmes; the absence of a follow-on pathway for students who access Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes in junior cycle; and insufficient supports for student progression to a range of future pathways, with an over-emphasis on progression to third level. Greater flexibility to allow students to navigate different pathways through senior cycle was seen as desirable.

Wellbeing and inclusion discussions in school review

The main questions explored in relation to inclusion were:

- 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?

Discussions during the school review, as analysed by the ERSI, indicated mixed views about the extent to which senior cycle is inclusive of all backgrounds, talents and abilities:

- the provision of a variety of programmes, pathways, subjects, experiences and teaching and assessment methods was seen as impacting positively on student wellbeing and enhancing and supporting inclusion
- school climate was mentioned as enhancing inclusion (parents and teachers)
- students, parents and teachers view transition year as a key contributor to student wellbeing but expressed concern about financial barriers to participation for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds
- career guidance is seen as an important support for wellbeing (parents and teachers)
- teachers emphasised the importance of pastoral care, learning support, and mentoring to student wellbeing, though of these areas, smaller schools placed less emphasis on learning support
- teachers and students view quality teaching as contributing significantly to student wellbeing
- students placed particular importance on varied teaching methods, including peer learning and varied ways of displaying their learning as having a positive impact on both their learning and their wellbeing
- relating material to real world experiences and examples, differentiation in the classroom, regular testing and revision and having time to interact with friends and family and engage in leisure and sporting activities were viewed by students as enhancing both their learning and wellbeing
- the Leaving Certificate Established, particularly the focus on terminal examinations, was viewed by most parents, students and teachers as impacting negatively on student wellbeing, though

some aspects of the programme were viewed as contributing to maturity, resilience and self-management

- teachers, students and parents suggested that the system favours those who are better at exams and more oriented towards written rather than practical displays of learning
- reliance on relatively long, written exams was seen as constraining the inclusion of some students whose talents lie elsewhere
- the current system was viewed by some as favouring more socio-economically advantaged students, given the 'grinds' culture of exam preparation and parents suggested that more needs to be done to support students who experience educational and social disadvantage
- students who are often referred to as academic may also not be benefitting fully from the current Leaving Certificate Established as they do not get sufficient opportunities to develop the full range of skills they need for third level education as a result of over-reliance on terminal exams to assess and certify achievement
- specific concerns were raised by teachers and some parents that senior cycle education currently may not be meeting the needs of all students. Students with special educational needs, students for whom English is an additional language and students from the Traveller community were particularly mentioned
- some parents suggested that students with more complex special educational needs require specific approaches
- schools mentioned a number of challenges to achieving inclusion including lack of resources, large class sizes and challenges differentiating course material and/or connecting course material to the world and to students' lives
- students suggested that those who prefer practical and vocational learning aren't adequately included and catered for. To make the curriculum more inclusive, students suggested providing more access to the kinds of learning which support students who wish to access apprenticeships, traineeships and employment
- the number of subjects studied and the volume of content in each subject was viewed as negatively impacting on student wellbeing.

Wellbeing and inclusion discussions at national seminars

At national seminars, discussions ranged broadly across many areas, with discussions exploring factors which enhance or diminish student and teacher wellbeing; and suggestions for a more inclusive senior cycle. In considering to what extent senior cycle is inclusive of all backgrounds, talents and abilities and enables all students to achieve their full potential, many ideas which emerged during the school review were reflected during the national seminars.

For example:

- student-teacher relationships were at the core of wellbeing discussions with positive classroom interactions providing the foundation for student and teacher wellbeing
- options for students to combine academic, technical, vocational, creative and professional learning and life skills were viewed as more inclusive of all talents and abilities
- lack of senior cycle options for students currently experiencing junior cycle at level one and two was raised as an issue
- discussions of the interaction between assessment methods and student wellbeing and inclusion

A number of points made during the seminars expanded on ideas arising from the school review and offered further reflections on pathways, programmes and flexibility in senior cycle. For example:

Inclusion, wellbeing and structures

- a reduced number of subjects and/or options to complete minor subjects, short courses or modules was suggested as one way of better meeting all students' needs
- learning a smaller amount in-depth rather than a broad curriculum superficially might enhance student wellbeing, but large courses and textbooks do not facilitate this
- time and opportunities to learn about themselves could potentially enhance student wellbeing. Credited modules in wellbeing were discussed, for example study skills and taking care of one's wellbeing. However, participants observed that wellbeing needs to be threaded throughout the school, in all classrooms and is not something which is simply timetabled, performed and assessed
- students suggested that homework and workload are causing them stress and that school becomes their whole life during the Leaving Certificate Established.

Inclusion, wellbeing and duration of senior cycle

- if there was no set time for programme completion, senior cycle would be more inclusive. When students have the credits required for their chosen pathway they could leave and progress or continue in senior cycle to gain more credits

Inclusion, wellbeing and pathways / programmes / flexibility

- there should be more flexibility and students should have opportunities to change pathway
- inclusion refers to a spectrum of abilities and includes the needs of exceptionally able students
- factors impacting on social inclusion/exclusion also need to be considered

Inclusion, wellbeing and assessment

- flexible assessment that is credit based with less emphasis on terminal exams might be more inclusive. Continuous assessment was seen as more accessible for students with SEN and those with a practical/technical orientation, but participants cautioned against assessment overload
- more phased assessments and different forms of assessment (practicals, projects) were viewed as impacting positively on student wellbeing. Particular subject projects were highlighted by students (History and Music for example) in this respect
- current curriculum, assessment, certification and transition arrangements can promote and/or result in an excessive focus on memorisation which can impact negatively on student learning, understanding and/or wellbeing

Inclusion, wellbeing and reporting and transitions

- the capacity to report on achievement in a flexible way was seen as an important way of enhancing inclusion. This is particularly important for the cohort of students with SEN who currently may not receive national certification of their achievements in senior cycle if they are unable to access the learning at the difficulty level of current programmes and/or display their learning through complete terminal written examinations
- the competitive nature of exams and the third level entry system can have a negative impact on student and teacher wellbeing and that change is required
- clarity around progression pathways could reduce stress. It was acknowledged that there are more options than progression to third level/college and that students should be aware of them all but

that enhanced resourcing of career guidance as well as more flexible pathways would be required if this broader perspective were to be achieved.

Teacher Wellbeing

- collaboration has the potential to reduce stress, but time is needed to allow space for meaningful collaboration
- effective CPD and training can enhance teacher wellbeing and resilience in coping with curriculum change and a gradual rollout of senior cycle changes might help to reduce teacher stress
- CPD should be more practical than theory based, that access to CPD should be available to all and that more CPD opportunities should be available
- the collaborative aspect of CPD was seen as important in terms of sharing resources and experiences and time is needed for teachers to reflect on the CPD and on their own practice
- the NCCA was commended for including teacher wellbeing in the conversation. It was suggested that teacher wellbeing and morale is currently quite low and that this has the potential to impact significantly on student wellbeing. Factors which negatively impact on teacher wellbeing which were mentioned included the number of new initiatives to know/manage/put in place, heavy workload/demands on teachers, subject planning, the intensity of inspections that accompany change, and paperwork
- teachers spoke about challenges encountered in finding time for individual planning and cross-curricular/whole-school planning. Groups discussed a move from planning for wellbeing in 'silos' to more collaborative planning and teaching
- if a senior cycle wellbeing programme is introduced in future, it would need to be clearly communicated and managed with clear timeframes for effective embedding. It should be designed around evidence-based programmes that have proven success in creating wellbeing.
- SPHE should be compulsory and wellbeing should be threaded throughout the school and evident in all classrooms. CPD would be required for all teachers to achieve this.
- in email submissions, several respondents commented on the need for an integrated wellbeing, RSE, SPHE programme that allows time and space for students to develop and explore issues. Central to that provision is the need for resourcing and CPD for teachers.

Additional perspectives on inclusion and wellbeing: international research

Upper Secondary Education in Nine Jurisdictions Overview Report (2017) explores similarities and variations in the way different jurisdictions approach inclusion in upper secondary education. In light of discussions emerging from the school review, the observations below may be of particular interest in the Irish context:

- increased focus on ensuring students' physical and mental wellbeing during upper secondary education is a feature of many jurisdictions
- groups recognised as being most at risk of exclusion include early school leavers; learners for whom English is an additional language; young people in care; the indigenous population; students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, students who are homeless and/or who are refugees; students with SEN; and those with disabilities
- there is general acceptance and policy that students with SEN participate in mainstream education and that some modifications and flexibility may be required to accommodate this
- planning for the upper secondary phase and beyond, particularly for students with SEN, begins age 13 or 14 in New Zealand, England and Ontario, including a career plan and/or a focus on living in the community, where appropriate
- in the Netherlands, since 2016, gifted and talented students on the academic pre-university (VWO) pathway can complete upper secondary education a year early.

Summary remarks on wellbeing and inclusion

The main question explored in the area of inclusion and wellbeing was the extent to which teaching and learning at senior cycle is inclusive of all backgrounds, talents and abilities and contributes towards all students achieving their full potential.

Many positive factors which can enhance wellbeing were highlighted during this review, including an open and supportive school climate; supportive student-teacher relationships; work experience and career guidance; high quality teaching; high quality CPD and teacher collaboration. Factors which can negatively impact on wellbeing emphasised during this review included curriculum overload across seven subjects; excessive focus on terminal examinations leading to narrowing of teaching and learning approaches, high stress and disengagement for many students; heavy workload; and concerns about the future.

There were differing views on the extent to which the current senior cycle is inclusive of all students. Transition year is seen as most inclusive of a wide range of talents and abilities; it was suggested that this is less evident as students progress through senior cycle with a narrower range of abilities being valued and less recognition for the learning students achieve in LCA and LCVP. The LCE programme was viewed as placing most value on written abilities and exam performance and as less inclusive of other talents and abilities, though some variation can be evident depending on the second assessment components connected to some of the subjects students choose and have available to them.

Concerns were expressed that students who wish to transition from senior cycle education to apprenticeships, traineeships and further education and employment are not adequately supported. It was suggested that increased attention is needed to enhance inclusion of all students. Review participants particularly mentioned students with SEN, students for whom English is an additional language and students from the Traveller community.

Chapter 4: Assessment, reporting and transitions

All aspects of curriculum and assessment are interlinked. For the purposes of clarity, discussions relating to assessment and to reporting, certification and transitions are outlined separately below. However, it is acknowledged that a coherent picture only emerges when assessment and reporting are considered in their entirety and in inter-relationship with curriculum structures, pathways and programmes, such that, in their totality, all of these areas exist to support and enhance the purpose of senior cycle education, to empower all young people to reach their full potential.

Assessment

The main questions explored in relation to assessment were:

- what, in your view, are the main positive and negative features of assessment approaches in current senior cycle programmes?
- what changes, if any, would you suggest to senior cycle assessment and why?
- what potential challenges might be encountered in making the changes you have suggested?

Assessment discussions in the school review

Teachers, students and parents explored questions relating to assessment, affirming current areas that work well for students and schools and questioning aspects they view as negatively impacting on teaching, learning, wellbeing, inclusion and transitions. Discussions during the school review, as analysed by the ESRI, indicated the following:

Comments on current assessment approaches

- the variety of assessment approaches used in TY are viewed positively as fully capturing the span of student learning and achievements. Schools emphasised projects, portfolio-based assessment, end-of-year interviews and in some cases modular credit-based learning and assessment as a good way to document, assess and report on student learning

- students particularly highlighted subjects which have a project or practical element, and which do not rely exclusively on terminal assessment for the purpose of certification
- some schools suggested there is insufficient assessment of learning during TY
- continuous / credit-based assessment, project and practical work and the fact that assessment is spread out over time were highlighted as the most positive aspect of LCA and viewed as key to enhancing engagement, attendance and retention as well as engendering confidence and a sense of achievement
- students suggested that the focus on continuous assessment (assignments, tasks, interviews) in LCA promotes independent learning and provides better preparation for further education
- the timing of some assessment tasks in LCA can result in pressure on students and teachers
- the approach to assessment in LCVP, including portfolio/continuous assessment, interviews and the May exam, was viewed positively as assessing a broad range of skills
- in the Leaving Certificate established, the objective, fair, standardised and anonymous nature of the various forms of external assessment used were seen as transparent and clear, with standards accepted and respected nationally. Similar opinions were expressed in the email submissions to the review.
- assessment of orals, projects and practical work was viewed positively as promoting and recognising a broader range of skills and achievements. An additional benefit of not relying exclusively on terminal assessment was reducing pressure on students
- the neglect of wider skills in teaching methodologies, learning, assessment and reporting and varied ways of displaying learning not currently rewarded in terminal examinations and projects/practicals/orals (some schools, most parents and students) was critiqued
- the gap in teaching, learning and assessment approaches between the revised junior cycle and the existing Leaving Certificate Established was highlighted, with some teachers, parents and many students suggesting that the type of assessments currently being introduced in junior cycle should follow through into the LCE and others suggesting it is too soon to comment on their effectiveness
- some teachers mentioned that the timing of deadlines for practicals/projects/orals within a narrow window in 6th year can add to student stress and pressure
- the volume of content and reliance on terminal examinations was seen as encouraging a grinds culture and over-dependence on notes and sample answers with students often seeking to

memorise rather than fully understand the material covered, as a means of coping with the volume of content across seven subjects (some schools and most parents and students)

- teachers, parents and students expressed concern about the stress and anxiety many students experience relating to Leaving Certificate terminal examinations, due to the volume of material to be explored in senior cycle, the pace of work, the dominance of exam-based assessment and the concentration of examinations over a short period of time
- the practical implications of students suffering illness or bereavement during the exam period and being required to repeat a full year were highlighted by teachers and students and many teachers suggested they would like to see students given the option to repeat their exams at an early stage without having to repeat an entire year
- mixed views were expressed about the provision of higher and ordinary level assessments, with some suggesting this increases equity and others suggesting it diminishes motivation and self-confidence and/or encourages students to struggle at higher level rather than take ordinary level
- overall, the approach to assessment and reporting in LCE was viewed as resulting in a neglect of broader skills and competencies and a lack of adequate preparation for life after school.

In expanding on the challenges listed above, students expressed particular concern about:

- the high stakes nature of examinations and the implications for their longer-term life chances
- undue emphasis on performance over a very short time frame
- the rigidity of marking schemes and a perception that what is deemed relevant and correct is narrow rather than open to interpretation and original thought.

Comments on possible changes to assessment

- schools, parents and students suggest that assessment be spaced out across senior cycle and involve a greater variety of assessment methods
- many teachers highlighted the potential to have exam-based assessment at different points during senior cycle, for example, at the end of fifth year and sixth year or at the end of particular modules. This was also mentioned in the email submissions to the review
- some students suggested continuous assessment via regular class tests which would add up to an overall grade. A number of students commented that getting regular feedback on where they have not performed well in assessments enhances / would enhance their learning

- staggering assessment could reduce the pressure and stress associated with one set of high stakes exams taken over a very short period of time
- offering modules, linking them to ongoing assessment and/or assessing them on completion was viewed as allowing students to incrementally build their knowledge and skills
- there was also a focus on the need for a diversity of assessment methods, including project and practical components, interviews, presentations, portfolios, and group projects / teamwork
- diversity was seen as crucial in helping students to further develop and recognising the broader skills and capacities across senior cycle
- teachers indicated that changes to the timing and/or methods of assessment should not undermine the continued role and value of external assessment in senior cycle education

Challenges in achieving changes to assessment

- schools emphasised the importance of retaining external assessment whilst only a few parents spontaneously mentioned the retention of external assessment when asked about changes needed to assessment. Parents and students focused primarily on a desire for greater integration of project and practical components, interviews, presentations, portfolios, and group projects / teamwork. A challenge to achieving changes to assessment will be in balancing a desire for greater diversity of assessment methods (perceived to enhance validity) with a desire to maintain external oversight and assessment (perceived to enhance reliability).
- avoiding assessment overload is an important consideration as some teachers suggested that the high stakes nature of assessment at this age and stage of learning could lead to constant stress rather than a reduction in stress for students, teachers and parents
- ensuring students take ownership of their own learning, particularly when completing projects, and that they don't plagiarise or get additional help to give themselves an unfair advantage was also raised as a potential challenge to diversifying assessment methods
- a major concern related to the effect of the points system on teaching and learning in senior cycle, with many schools suggesting that changes in assessment at senior cycle would not be effective without accompanying changes in the higher education entry process and greater insight into the needs of employers for students transitioning directly to apprenticeships/traineeships and employment.

Assessment discussions at national seminars

At national seminars, discussions ranged broadly across many areas, with observations about what is straightforward to assess and what is more challenging; who assesses and for what purposes; and when during senior cycle assessment takes place. Many ideas which emerged during the school review were reflected during the national seminars.

For example:

- the need for assessment to align with the teaching and learning in the classroom and for students to be given opportunities to draw on their strengths
- a strong belief was expressed in the fair and objective nature of the current system. The anonymity of students and external assessment of terminal examinations were seen as central.

A number of points made during the seminars expanded on ideas arising from the school review and offered further reflections on assessment in senior cycle. For example:

- the need for more flexibility in assessment approaches. Suggestions included open-book exams to encourage critical thinking and analysis; presentations to build on junior cycle learning; different types of questions; modular approaches; spreading out the timing of assessments; opportunities to complete assessments online; and the potential for more continuous assessment and/or more flexible weighting for additional assessment components in different subjects
- some participants questioned the validity of assessing subjects on the basis of a single method of assessment, namely written examinations, at a single point in time as is currently the case for 13 of the 37 subjects available for study in the Leaving Certificate Established
- assessment methods to capture soft skills and different learning experiences were discussed
- continuous assessment was discussed, and necessary supports were identified to empower professional judgement and structures needed for moderation. This was also raised in the email submissions to the review
- challenges were discussed such as authentication concerns, plagiarism, an increased number of stress points for teachers and students in a staggered assessment arrangement, assessment overload and increased workload
- one benefit of assessments being spread out over time is that it could allow for multiple exit points from and/ or re-entry points to senior cycle

- the need to learn from varied experiences of CBAs in junior cycle was discussed, particularly in relation to assessment timing and overlap; the impact on students of multiple assessments across multiple different subject areas; and the similarity of skills being assessed in different domains
- the need for increased resources to ensure equity was discussed.

Additional perspectives on assessment: international research

In the eight jurisdictions examined as part of the initial research for senior cycle review a wide variation in assessment practices and approaches was found. Assessment was often inextricably linked to the structure of upper secondary and the reporting mechanisms in place. For credit-based systems such as Queensland and Ontario, students accumulated credits over the course of the upper secondary cycle upon completion of modules or coursework.

In France, regardless of pathway (general, technological or professional), written, oral and practical examinations are externally set and marked. In Finland, the general upper secondary pathway is internally assessed and reported on in the school leaving certificate, but the matriculation examinations are externally set, teacher marked and externally moderated.

In the Netherlands there are external centrally set examinations and externally approved and school set and marked examinations. The final marks are calculated based on the average marks of both sets of examinations. In New Zealand, credits are awarded for 10 hours of learning (teaching time, homework and assessment) and accumulated to be reported on in the final certification.

Summary remarks on assessment

Review participants discussed strengths, challenges and possible areas for further development of assessment of learning in senior cycle.

Many strengths in current assessment arrangements in senior cycle were identified, including high levels of public trust; the variety of assessment approaches currently used (including interviews, portfolios, projects, practicals, orals, modules and credits) and assessment being spread out over time, as experienced in a number of senior cycle programmes.

Challenges include high stress levels for many students; assessment condensed in a narrow timeframe in LCE; limited second chance opportunities for students, particularly the requirement to complete a full repeat year to access second chances in the Leaving Certificate Established; and the impact of high stakes assessment on teaching and learning, with a perception that terminal assessment can contribute to over-reliance on memorisation, rote learning of sample answers, and a grinds culture.

There was strong support for assessment in senior cycle, at its most valid, valuing a wide range of knowledge and skills and a variety of ways of displaying learning. Greater flexibility in spreading out assessment over time is needed. Assessment should support the broad purposes of senior cycle and align with teaching and learning in ongoing classroom interactions between teachers and students.

Reporting and transitions

The main questions explored in relation to reporting were:

- what, in your view, are the main positive and negative features of reporting approaches in current senior cycle programmes?
- what changes, if any, would you like to see made to senior cycle reporting and why?
- what potential challenges might be encountered in making the changes you have suggested?

Reporting and transitions in school review

Teachers, students and parents discussed reporting, certification and transitions in relation to current senior cycle programmes and began to suggest future directions for senior cycle reporting. Discussions during the school review, as analysed by the ESRI, indicated the following:

Transition Year reporting and transitions

- Transition Year reporting was praised for capturing a broad span of student learning and experiences in a variety of ways, including portfolios, interviews, student reflections and/or credit-based modules. This diversity of methods was seen as a good way of fully capturing student learning and achievements
- some schools and parents view the lack of recognition for TY reporting and certification as a negative feature of TY and suggested that disconnecting TY reporting from the rest of senior cycle devalues the valuable learning students achieve during the year
- teachers, parents and students suggested that TY helps students to mature and that sampling a wide range of disciplines helps students to make informed subject choices which suit their interest, aptitudes and abilities when they transition to fifth year
- some schools expressed concern about student preparedness for the transition to a Leaving Certificate programme having taken part in TY due to the volume and pace of work required in fifth year, having become used to a wider variety of learning experiences and approaches
- parents similarly identified a number of factors which can make the transition to fifth year difficult, particularly for students who become demotivated during TY, including lack of structure, academic focus and formal assessment and the lack of a bridge between the two programmes.

Leaving Certificate Applied reporting and transitions

- several schools highlighted frequent reporting and certification in LCA (four times over the two years) as an effective way of capturing the broad learning experiences and skills acquired
- mixed views were expressed about the use of attendance as a prerequisite for LCA certification, with some seeing this as a positive feature of the programme and others suggesting it is counter-productive, particularly where the student completes the required learning but fails the programme due to not having attended frequently enough
- difficulties for stakeholders (parents, employers, the general public) and for students themselves in interpreting LCA reporting and results were discussed and this was linked to a wider lack of recognition for the qualification
- in terms of transitions, lack of progression opportunities from LCA was viewed as one of the main challenges the programme faces. The fact that achievement in the LCA does not provide a direct means to access higher education was also viewed as problematic
- concern was expressed that students who opt for LCA may be prematurely closing down their options for the future due to perceived difficulties in progressing to further education, training and/or employment after completing LCA.

Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme reporting and transitions

- the fair and objective nature of LCVP assessment and reporting was highlighted by teachers
- in relation to transitions, the cap on the maximum number of points a student can be awarded for achieving a distinction in LCVP was questioned, with suggestions that this results in lower status for LCVP and/or discourages high achievers from opting for the programme
- if students repeat their Leaving Certificate, they cannot resubmit their LCVP portfolio and some teachers suggested this was unfair as students could potentially improve if given the opportunity.

Leaving Certificate Established reporting, certification and transitions

- the approach to formal reporting in LCE was viewed as resulting in a neglect of broader skills and competencies and a lack of adequate preparation for life after school
- the certification of achievement in Leaving Certificate examinations was seen as being held in high esteem by teachers, students, parents and the general public
- at the same time, this certificate of examination results was seen by teachers as providing quite limited information due to the amalgamation of results in different assessments into a single grade

- students and parents expressed concern about the implications for students' longer-term life chances of narrow reporting and certification of their achievements and abilities
- students, teachers and parents expressed concern about undue emphasis on performance over a very short time frame in LCE certification
- over-emphasis on points and competition was seen as adding pressure and stress for students
- students commented on the gap in points value between higher and ordinary and suggested that students often choose to struggle at higher level rather than risk losing points by accessing the subject at ordinary level
- the requirement to repeat a full year if students are ill or suffer a bereavement during examinations (many teachers and students) was raised as problematic
- students, parents and some schools expressed concerns about students transitioning to further/higher education or employment without having developed sufficient capacity for critical and independent thinking during senior cycle. This concern with critical thinking was also raised in the email submissions to the review.

Comments on possible changes to reporting

- there was strong support for reporting across senior cycle capturing broader skills and activities and providing a more holistic picture of the student as a person and as a learner
- work experience, non-exam subjects, extra-curricular activities, participation and volunteering in school and in the community and personal qualities and capacities were all mentioned as areas which could be included in a senior cycle report of student learning and achievements.

Challenges in achieving changes to reporting

- ensuring broader reporting is equitable across schools and standards are consistent
- ensuring that the language used is meaningful for students and parents, allowing them to clearly identify the type of work completed and progress made as well as the level of achievement.

Reporting and transitions discussions at national seminars

Discussions arose in relation to broader reporting at senior cycle; how best this might be achieved; and what challenges this might present. Many ideas which emerged during the school review were reflected during the national seminars.

For example:

- the need for a method of marking the completion of school and recognising the broad range of student learning experiences beyond a certification of examination results
- reporting on participation and achievements besides exams was suggested, as this would give the message that the system values students' other strengths and capacities

A number of points made during the seminars expanded on ideas arising from the school review and offered further reflections on pathways, programmes and flexibility in senior cycle. For example:

- decisions about what to report on should link back to the broad purpose of senior cycle education
- the format of reporting at other stages in the system, primary, LCA, LCVP was seen as positive and as providing a broader picture of student achievement than current reporting in the LCE
- whilst extra-curricular school activities are valued, it was queried whether students who attend schools who cannot offer a full range of options might be disadvantaged
- concerns were expressed about the extra work the creation of a broader report at senior cycle might place on teachers and administration staff. It was noted that technology exists that could streamline this process and that this may need further resourcing.
- any senior cycle report should adopt a common template for all students
- reference was made to the adoption of a university-style GPA system where a student has access to their profile throughout their time in school

In exploring the relationship between reporting and transitions

- developments in junior cycle reporting were discussed. Students saw these as positive developments. The timing of when students receive the JCPA was viewed as problematic. It was suggested that a similar senior cycle report might be more valued if it were used as a basis for developing a personal statement along the lines of that used by UCAS
- it was further suggested that if students know that their JCPA, achievements from TY and school participation/community service etc. are going to be valued and can form part of a personal statement, this would encourage students to participate fully, which in turn could contribute positively to the holistic development of the young person

- reporting of cumulative rather than final, summative assessment was viewed positively, as this development could place higher value on what is done in fifth year and mean that students who leave school early would have something to show for their time in school
- participants highlighted the need for clarity on who a report is for - the student, parent, university, employer, teacher, school? Or is it for a combination of all these?
- a need for other stakeholders in the system, including employers, third level institutions and course providers, to agree on the value to be placed on achievements beyond examination results was identified
- it was queried whether a senior cycle report would receive the same recognition as a qualification and whether it could be externally verified. Whilst current certification in the Leaving Certificate Established is quite narrow in terms of what it reports on, it is a qualification which is recognised internationally.

The role of certification in relation to reporting was discussed and there were a number of suggestions as to how to certify what is reported on, including:

- at local level a credit system could be applied to school participation
- in TY students complete externally certified courses (GAA coaching, First Aid, RSA etc.). It was suggested that this practice could be continued and included in a school completion report
- alternatively, a Gaisce style approach to non-academic achievement could be adopted with achievements categorised in a similar manner and signed off by an acknowledged/trained person in the school. There was however, acknowledgment that this development would require significant investment at school level
- currently points are awarded to LCVP for merit, distinction etc, and it was suggested that this approach could be built on for extra-curricular involvement.

Additional perspectives on reporting and transitions: international research

Upper Secondary Education in Nine Jurisdictions Overview Report (2017) identifies a general principle across jurisdictions that upper secondary education should provide students with a clear picture of their achievements, through formal and informal reporting and certification. Some additional insights which may be of interest include

- several jurisdictions provide certification of participation to early school leavers. In Finland, this is a Certificate of Resignation recording students' achievements to date; in Ontario it is a Certificate of Accomplishment and in Queensland students who have learning difficulties not primarily due to socio-economic, cultural or linguistic factors, receive the Queensland Certificate of Individual Achievement, with a summary of their knowledge and skills that they can present to employers and training providers.
- national reporting and certification of aggregated student results at the end of their senior cycle is a common feature across many jurisdictions. In New Zealand and Queensland, students can access their upper secondary record online. In New Zealand, all the standards and national qualifications that students gain throughout their life are recorded and can be accessed online using their National Student Number.

Summary remarks on reporting and transitions

The main questions explored in relation to reporting were:

- what, in your view, are the main positive and negative features of reporting approaches in current senior cycle programmes?
- what changes, if any, would you like to see made to senior cycle reporting and why?
- what potential challenges might be encountered in making the changes you have suggested?

There was strong support for broader, more varied reporting in senior cycle.

Strengths in senior cycle reporting identified during the review included broad reporting of achievement in Transition Year and in the Leaving Certificate Applied programme, though some challenges in interpreting LCA reporting were identified.

Reporting of achievement in the Leaving Certificate Established programme through SEC certification and transition to higher education via the CAO system was broadly viewed as fair, impartial and transparent. It was also viewed as quite narrow. Reporting through certification was seen as providing students, parents, future employers and educators with a limited picture of the knowledge, skills, abilities and aptitudes of students when they transition to the worlds of work, training and higher and further education.

It was suggested that broader reporting could be particularly beneficial for the large cohort of students who transition from school to apprenticeships, traineeships, further education and training; and employment or a combination of these future destinations, as well as for students who transition to third level.

Review participants suggested that the transition into fifth year (direct from junior cycle or from transition year) can be challenging due to a range of factors, including increased volume and complexity of curriculum content and expectations within subjects and transition to different teaching and learning approaches, with fewer opportunities for active and independent learning.

Concerns were expressed about the transition from school to post-school destinations. There are insufficient supports for students transitioning to apprenticeships, traineeships and work. Student learning in school should help students to develop the capacities they need for adult life irrespective of their choice of post-school destination.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This interim report presented the main themes, ideas and perspectives emerging from the collaborative review of senior cycle conducted by the NCCA with teachers, students and parents from 41 participating schools, alongside seminar attendees, additional schools, educationalists, education stakeholders and members of the public who emailed to offer their perspectives on senior cycle education. The breadth, depth and range of perspectives emerging from this review is testament to the engagement and level of democratic discussion about the future of senior cycle education which has characterised the review thus far.

The strengths of senior cycle education in Ireland are clear. Public confidence in our education system is high. The strong sense of community which characterises our schools was evident throughout the review. Students recognise their teachers' dedication to student learning; parents recognise the challenge inherent in the broad curriculum their children experience; and teachers recognise the vital importance of providing every child with a high-quality education appropriate to their talents, abilities and interests.

The core purpose of senior cycle education emerging from this review is to help every student toward reaching their potential. Every student should be empowered to deepen their knowledge and skills throughout senior cycle as they mature and develop intellectually, personally and socially. The educational experience at senior cycle should equip students for diverse and sustainable futures so that they can embrace full, active citizenship and participation in society and the economy as they learn and as they make the transition to life beyond school. Teachers, parents and students aspire to a system which does not constrain participation or limit student choices if such limitations potentially impinge on young people's life prospects and chances. In offering robust feedback about the strengths and challenges of senior cycle education, review participants helped to identify a number of areas in need of further attention. These areas will form the basis of public consultation.

This interim report presents feedback arising from the review to date. An accompanying document, *Senior Cycle Review Public Consultation (NCCA, 2019)* outlines the main areas for development arising from this feedback. Stakeholder engagement to respond to feedback emerging from this review will be sought and facilitated on an ongoing basis. Such engagement will need to include robust dialogue about the resources and supports needed and the timing and phasing of any proposed future changes to senior cycle education. It is also acknowledged that further research and consultation relating to

specific aspects of any proposed changes may be necessary in due course, once priority developments for senior cycle education have been agreed.

The NCCA wishes to thank teachers, students and parents in the 41 participating schools; and all who have participated in the review to date. We invite you to stay involved for the next phase of the review, which is a shared public consultation on themes emerging from this review.

Next steps

An information bulletin (the third in a series) raising awareness of and inviting participation in the Senior Cycle review public consultation will be posted to all post-primary schools and to a wide range of stakeholders and will be available online. All groups and stakeholders who have participated in senior cycle review to date will be invited to take part in this consultation and asked to help raise awareness among others that the consultation is happening. The consultation is open to everyone.

Consultation event details will also be posted on social media and we encourage all stakeholders to raise awareness of and promote engagement with the consultation. People and organisations will be invited to participate in a few different ways, including through:

- an online survey
- written submissions
- focus group meetings
- a national consultation conference
- meetings with stakeholders.

Informed by feedback from this consultation, the NCCA will formulate priority areas and longer-term goals for the evolving development of senior cycle education in Ireland. Please take part in our public consultation by completing our survey at www.ncca.ie/seniorcycle, email a written submission or send expressions of interest to get involved in focus group meetings to seniorcycle@ncca.ie and we will endeavour to facilitate your request. This report is open for public consultation until 1st November 2019. Priority areas and a proposed timeline for developments in senior cycle education will then be formulated and presented to the NCCA's Board for Senior Cycle and subsequently to NCCA Council. Once agreed, an advisory report including the areas for development and advice on the pace and scale of senior cycle developments in the coming years will be sent to the Minister for Education and Skills for consideration.

Appendix 1: select bibliography

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Appendix 2: Participating schools

Alexandra College, Dublin

Ardscoil Rís, Limerick

Athlone Community College, Westmeath

Athy College, Athy

Ballincollig Community School, Cork

Beech Hill College, Monaghan

Catherine McAuley School, Limerick

CBS Synge Street, Dublin

Coláiste Chroí Mhuire, An Spidéal, Galway

Coláiste Éinne, Inis Mór, Árainn, Galway

Crana College, Bunrana, Donegal

Cross and Passion College, Kildare

Dunshaughlin Community College, Meath

Fingal Community College, Dublin

Gaelcholaiste Ceatharlach, Carlow

Gaelcholaiste Charraig Uí Leighin, Carrigaline

Good Counsel College, New Ross, Wexford

Holy Family School, Cootehill, Cavan

Killarney Community School, Kerry

Loreto Abbey, Dalkey, Dublin

Loreto Secondary School, Balbriggan, Dublin

Mercy College, Coolock, Dublin

Mount St. Michael, Claremorris, Mayo

Mount Temple Comprehensive, Clontarf, Dublin

North Wicklow Educate Together, Bray, Wicklow

Portmarnock Community School, Dublin

Presentation Secondary School, Warrenmount, Dublin

Ringsend College, Dublin

St Angela's College, Ballytruckle, Waterford

St. Brendan's College, Killarney, Kerry

St. Joseph's Secondary School, Drogheda, Louth

St. Joseph's Secondary School, Rush, Dublin

St. Louis Community School, Kiltimagh, Mayo

St. Mark's Community School, Tallaght, Dublin

St Mark's Academy CBS, Carlow

St Mary's CBS, Portlaoise, Laois

St. Vincent's Secondary School, Dundalk, Louth

Stepaside Educate Together School, Dublin

Scoil Iosaf, Tulla, Clare

Scoil Ruain, Thurles, Tipperary

Ursuline College, Sligo.

The profile of this group of schools, representative of a cross section of school types, can be accessed here: <https://www.ncca.ie/en/senior-cycle/senior-cycle-review/information-for-schools>