



# Senior Cycle Review Public Consultation





# Introduction

The NCCA started a review of senior cycle education in late 2016. First, we looked at senior cycle / upper secondary education across nine jurisdictions internationally. Next, a school review and a series of national seminars took place. Teachers, students and parents across 41 schools worked with the NCCA during the school year 2018/2019 to identify key strengths in senior cycle and areas where senior cycle could develop further.

The next phase of the review is public consultation.

What follows is a snapshot of the areas for development which will be discussed during the public consultation. We invite you to read the full Senior Cycle Review consultation document (NCCA, 2019) that this bulletin summarises, and the accompanying Interim report on the review of senior cycle education (NCCA, 2019). These documents draw upon multiple sources which are informing the review, including *Upper Secondary Education in Nine Jurisdictions: Overview Report* (NCCA, 2017), *Student, teacher and parent perspectives on senior cycle education* (ESRI, 2019), National Seminars feedback summary (NCCA, 2019) and research into senior cycle education in Ireland more generally.

Please make your voice heard by getting involved in the consultation. Take part in a focus group meeting, complete our online survey or make a written submission. See [ncca.ie/seniorcycle](https://ncca.ie/seniorcycle) for more details. The consultation is open until 1st November 2019.



## Emerging ideas: some reflections

Listening to participants in the review, it's clear that there is much that is valued in the current senior cycle and that there are high levels of public trust and confidence in many aspects of the education our young people currently experience. Student-teacher relationships strengthen and evolve during this phase of education as students mature and take increasing responsibility for their own learning and decisions. A wide range of learning opportunities are available to students via subjects, modules and work experience across four different senior cycle programmes, Transition Year (TY), Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). Students have many opportunities to contribute to their school community and to their wider community and society, particularly during transition year.

As senior cycle progresses, a focus on Leaving Certificate examinations often comes to dominate the senior cycle experience. Concerns were raised about the sometimes negative backwash effects on learning and teaching resulting from the extensive focus on and preparations for high stakes examinations. Beyond transition year, it was suggested that there is an over-emphasis on a single pathway, the Leaving Certificate Established, with excessive societal and media focus on the very highest achievers. Attention to the full range of skills and qualities students develop during senior cycle can gradually diminish, with attention placed primarily on the knowledge and skills which are formally examined and valued for certification. A narrow, if understandable focus on examination performance and on maximising CAO points across a range of subjects can emerge and can heighten stress for teachers and students alike. Access to technical, vocational, creative and professional learning is limited and transitions to apprenticeships, traineeships and employment can lack coherence and be unevenly supported.

A clear vision for an evolved senior cycle which meets the needs of all young people is emerging from this review. In this future, students have more diverse pathways to choose from, with scope to combine learning in a variety of ways. Senior cycle builds upon the learning students have achieved across their time in education, from early childhood, through primary and junior cycle education. More technical, vocational, creative and professional learning options are available. Enhanced support for students to assist their decision-making is provided, with flexibility for students to adapt their pathway through senior cycle as their sense of the future they envisage for themselves emerges. All pathways contribute to students social, personal and intellectual development, across the entire duration of senior cycle, as they deepen and develop their knowledge, skills and qualities. Broader approaches to assessment complement examinations and some form of record of achievement provides a fuller picture of student learning and achievement which can be used to access a variety of post-school pathways. Learning happens in many places, including some which are outside of schools. Second chance opportunities for learning and assessment are provided.



In setting out how senior cycle may develop over the coming years, it will be important to think carefully about pacing; to maintain open lines of communication with schools; to continue and build further stakeholder engagement; to build capacity for change collaboratively, to provide the necessary supports and to plan carefully for enactment of any changes. A significant reform of junior cycle is still embedding in schools and developments at senior cycle will need to be considered in light of the opportunities and challenges this reform has presented to date. In this context, it would appear that growth and development rather than radical overhaul of senior cycle – evolution not revolution – is called for. This was certainly the view of educational change at senior cycle that was voiced most often in the review to date.

Achieving this future will require continued and ongoing engagement from all stakeholders and a commitment to building on the strengths of our existing senior cycle to realise an improved, more responsive and holistic senior cycle experience for all. Stakeholders will need to recognise their ideas in the developments and feel that the realisation of what is proposed is supported and is something they can meaningfully work towards.





## Consultation areas for discussion

The main areas for development emerging from the review so far are listed below and are being explored further during the consultation. The consultation also invites conversations about the resources, supports and capacity building across schools and stakeholders that may be required for changes proposed to be realised meaningfully in schools.

### **Purpose**

Fundamental to a review of senior cycle education is the task of identifying and agreeing the purpose underpinning education in the senior cycle of post-primary schooling. In the review to date, the purpose that has emerged could be described along the following lines:

Senior cycle education aims to help every student towards fulfilling their potential. Every student is 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 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.

#### **Purpose - focus for consultation**

To what extent do you agree with the purposes for senior cycle emerging from the review?

Is there too much or too little emphasis on particular aspects?

Is there anything you would like to see added to the conversation about the purposes of senior cycle education?



# A vision for senior cycle learners

## **Knowledge, skills and qualities**

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 and skills was repeatedly iterated during the review, particularly;

- 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 sexuality) and the world of work.

## **Teaching and learning**

Participants in the review suggested that teaching and learning at senior cycle should be appropriately challenging, enabling students to use their minds well and to be open to new and deeper learning experiences and possibilities; empowering all students to learn; recognising and affirming all talents and abilities; addressing all learning needs; enhancing peer-to-peer and student-teacher relationships; contributing to students' personal development, maturity and responsibility for their own learning; encouraging reflection on the learning

process and lay a foundation for lifelong learning; providing links within and across learning areas; and have meaning for students and connect with their lives and the wider world.

During the review, various teaching and learning approaches were affirmed, including direct instruction, class discussion, peer learning, pair and group work, linking learning to real world examples and applications, project and research-based learning, portfolios, practical learning by making/creating, oral communication of learning and interdisciplinary learning. The potential of digital technologies to enhance learning and improve accessibility across all disciplines was also discussed.

### **A vision for senior cycle learners - focus for consultation**

**To what extent do you agree with the vision for senior cycle learners emerging from the review?**

**Is there too much or too little emphasis on particular aspects?**

**Is there anything you would like to see added to the conversation?**



## Pathways and programmes

Participants in the review reaffirmed the need for senior cycle to recognise and affirm all talents and abilities, supporting all students towards fulfilling their potential. There is strong support for providing a wider range of options for learning pathways at senior cycle. Areas for development discussed include to:

- reduce the ring-fencing of existing programmes
- explore the possibility of combining existing programmes into a single senior cycle curriculum for all students with multiple pathways and combinations available for students to choose and follow, accompanied by appropriate assessment and reporting arrangements
- enhance career guidance to support students in making decisions about what pathways and combinations might best suit their needs and future plans
- explore ways of providing further options in the areas of technical, vocational, creative and professional learning
- scope ways for senior cycle learning to be experienced and optimised across a range of contexts and locations, including across schools, through online courses, in the Youthreach sector, in special schools, in adult education settings etc.
- provide follow-on learning for students who complete junior cycle at Level 1 and Level 2, thus allowing for age-related participation in senior cycle programmes whilst a different level of qualification is being achieved
- explore the range of off-site learning in use currently (such as work experience locations, co-location of schools on a single campus, utilising the learning available where a school is co-situated with a further education centre,) and those with potential for further expansion (such as online

learning opportunities) with a view to enhancing the range of sites for learning in senior cycle.

- explore meaningful ways to support at-risk groups of students, including supporting schools in creating and maintaining safe, supportive and inclusive environments.

### **Pathways and programmes - focus for consultation**

To what extent do you agree with the proposed areas for development above?

Is there too much or too little emphasis on particular aspects?

Is there anything you would like to see added to the conversation about pathways and programmes in senior cycle?



## Curriculum components

Review participants spoke in positive terms about the wide variety of curriculum components currently available in senior cycle, including subjects, modules and work experience. Areas for development related to curriculum components in senior cycle include to:

- review the current list of subjects and consider whether subjects should remain/be added/be discontinued within the overall context of continuing to offer a wide range and variety of subjects
- scope ways for students to combine full subjects with shorter-duration learning in the programme they are following. This would facilitate breadth of experience whilst also allowing for increased specialisation and greater flexibility in the curricular components students can select and combine
- explore the practical challenges and resource implications in offering a wide range of subjects, modules and learning experiences to all students and devising solutions to support all schools, including small and single-sex schools, to do so
- consider what provision, if any, should be made for subject areas that have the potential to directly enhance student wellbeing such as physical education, CSPE and SPHE and explore other factors which enhance and inhibit wellbeing in senior cycle.

Review participants spoke in positive terms about the wide variety of curriculum components currently available in senior cycle, including subjects, modules and work experience. Areas for development related to curriculum components in senior cycle include to:

- maintain breadth by making modules available in areas such as civic, social and political education, social, personal and health education, career guidance, work experience, volunteering, etc.
- develop all senior cycle curriculum components, including subjects, in manageable but substantial units to facilitate flexible school programme design and also provide the flexibility to students to follow pathways and change them.
- explore the overall volume of learning/curriculum components/time that should be associated with senior cycle programmes, including the number of full subjects studied in the Leaving Certificate Established
- scope which curriculum components or curriculum areas, if any, should be compulsory in a revised senior cycle.

### **Curriculum components - focus for consultation**

**To what extent do you agree with the proposed areas for development above?**

**What solutions do you envisage for addressing problems relating to curriculum overload?**

**What curriculum components, if any, do you think should be compulsory in senior cycle?**

**Is there anything you would like to see added to the conversation about curriculum components in senior cycle?**

## Assessment

The many strengths of current senior cycle assessment approaches were affirmed during the review. Review participants spoke positively about the varied ways teachers use assessment to scaffold and support student learning, with a variety of approaches to assessment used across the four programmes, including projects, tasks, key assignments, reports, portfolios, practicals, orals, interviews and examinations. Teachers and parents place high value on having a system of assessment at senior cycle which is widely viewed as objective and fair. A desire to broaden and rebalance existing assessment approaches, building on key strengths already evident in senior cycle assessment emerged from the review. Areas for development in assessment include to:

- further develop existing assessment arrangements experienced in LCA, LCVP, TY and LCE, for example by exploring the possibility of utilising portfolios, interviews, task completion and accumulation of credits in aspects of senior cycle assessment
- explore the role that additional assessment components currently play in subjects and scope the suitability of the range and number of assessment components in use across all subjects (currently, 24 of 37 subjects include two or more assessment components in the form of projects, orals, practicals etc)
- review the potential to increase the weighting currently given to additional assessment components
- consider the potential benefits and drawbacks of further spreading out assessments over time, for example, by having two examinations in each subject, one at the end of fifth year, one at the end of sixth year
- explore ways to provide assessment arrangements that enhance second-chance opportunities for learners

- in general, scope ways to broaden assessment and examination approaches and methods so that students have opportunities to display a wider range of learning in a variety of ways.

## Reporting

Reporting at senior cycle serves many purposes including as a statement of learning, as a student record of their achievements in post-primary school and as a selection mechanism for employment, apprenticeships, further education and third level based on their assessment results. In the review it was suggested that reporting of student achievement needs to more fully reflect the range of learning experiences, knowledge, skills, qualities and achievements students have gained from their time in senior cycle or may be gaining from a future senior cycle. It should also recognise and affirm the diverse range of talents and abilities displayed by students and so provide for meaningful and coherent transitions to further learning.

In order to achieve these aims, areas for further development include:

- exploring ways to provide a fuller picture of students' achievements and contribute towards making reporting broader, more valued and more meaningful
- explore the reporting needs of students, further education institutions and other learning environments, including those of students returning to education
- explore creative and practical ways of incorporating broader reporting arrangements, building on existing broad reporting practices in TY and LCA, and at junior cycle.

## **Assessment and reporting- focus for consultation**

**To what extent do you agree with the proposed areas for development above?**

**Is there too much or too little emphasis on particular aspects?**

**Is there anything you would like to see added to the conversation about assessment and reporting in senior cycle?**

## **Priorities and supports**

There were many discussions during the review about the nature, pace and scale of change in and introduction of any possible developments at senior cycle. Participants in the consultation will be asked which areas for development they think should be prioritised in creating a timeline for developments over the coming years and which supports are most needed to facilitate and create sustainable and meaningful evolution in senior cycle.



## Next steps for Senior Cycle Review



The consultation is open to everyone. People and organisations are invited to participate in a number of different ways, including via an online survey, written submissions, focus group meetings, a national consultation conference and meetings with stakeholders. Please take part in the public consultation by completing our survey at [www.ncca.ie/seniorcycle](http://www.ncca.ie/seniorcycle), by emailing a written submission or by sending expressions of interest to get involved in focus group meetings to [seniorcycle@ncca.ie](mailto:seniorcycle@ncca.ie). The consultation will remain open until 1st November 2019.

Following the consultation, priority areas, longer-term goals and a proposed timeline and advice on the pace and scale for developments in senior cycle education will be generated in the form of an advisory report, which will issue to the Minister for Education and Skills for consideration.