To: NCCA – from a coalition of the Gamechanger Dialogue

1 November 2019

In May 2019, around 70 education professionals came together in a three-day conference (Gamechanger Dialogue) to address a range of critical issues in the existing education system. Participants came from a variety of education-focused State departments and organizations, education professionals, children, parent and youth bodies as well as from trade unions and universities. Following on from the Gamechanger Dialogue conference, SIFI (Social Innovation Fund Ireland), under its Education Fund, is currently facilitating the development of a collaborative network that ranges across three interlinked platforms that focus on aspects of educational disadvantage. To date these have been framed as: Alternative Education, Getting to College, and Pathways to Inclusion (lifelong learning).

This submission, in two parts, brings together some perspectives of five diverse organisations that share an interest in the NCCA-led Second Level review process, in the context of addressing educational disadvantage in Ireland.

The first section (pages 2-5) combines views from Citywise, Aspire2, Trinity Access 21 and iScoil, each of whom directly facilitate individual progression to higher education, recognising the value of non-formal education within the formal system. These views are presented through a series of quotes combined into a narrative in response to the consultation questions.

The second section (pages 6-9) is a separate input on behalf of Foróige that contextualises the organisation's work, and addresses the consultation themes of purpose, vision, pathways and programmes, and assessment.

This submission has been channelled to the NCCA by SIFI (Social Innovation Fund Ireland): SIFI itself is not a contributor.

We thank you for the opportunity to consult so fully on the issues, and for the highly productive and probing process the NCCA has enacted.

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Section 1 – combined input

Comments (other than questions directly asked)
As regards the overall Review, observations include that the review process is succeeding in surfacing all the main issues that concern students, parents, teachers and other educators, and that overall the NCCA review/consultation document is positive.

Although outside the scope of the NCCA, a pivotal consideration in any Senior Cycle review must be the CAO. It would be valuable for the NCCA to initiate dialogue around better coherence between the two systems, and move to alleviating the stresses referred to on page 6 of the consultation document.

To an observation made on page 7 of the consultation document regarding '**evolution not revolution**', one contributor to this submission notes that "education systems are notoriously slow to change but the pushback against the junior cycle reform process should not be allowed to dictate the pace of senior cycle reform. If an 'evolution not revolution' approach to change is to be followed it may take very many years for meaningful change to occur. This is not fair to the students who will go through the senior cycle in the meantime and given the serious global challenges Irish society is facing over the next period – climate change and the rise of AI and robotics – it is not clear that we have the luxury of moving slowly."

Another contributor comments that in light of the evident fact that the pace of change across the entire curriculum will be slow, it is necessary that an 'evolution not revolution' approach accounts for the intersected educational system's capacity for any change. A realistic timeline for system change should be built within phased curriculum change. Student voices need to be at the forefront of consultation and decision-making.

Theme 1: Purpose (of education)
To the first question as to "*what extent do you agree with the purposes for senior cycle emerging from the review?*", it is viewed that the document reflects key purposes of education: namely, equipping students for the future, promoting and allowing active citizenship.

In relation to the question on whether there is "*too much or too little emphasis on particular aspects?*", one student-voice contributor to this submission thinks "that the purpose outlined in the NCCA report puts too much of an emphasis on the future, and in doing so diminishes the value of education in itself and later aspects which it states education seeks to promote. For example, the focus on the future overlooks the effects and the need for young people to have purpose (in themselves), to make an impact and to have a high quality life during the process and not just at the end of their education". In a similar vein, "education should play more of an empowerment role than is suggested in the report in terms of skills transfer to allow students to fully participate in a pluralist society and not just an economy". "Finally, it is positive to see "relevance and enjoyment" mentioned in the report: these both should be viewed as the capstone of education which the other pillars and the foundation seek to support. In this way, it takes the purpose of education out of the future and into the present while inculcating the above values and achieving subsequent goals. For example, instilling a love of life-long learning."

Is there anything you would like to see added to the conversation about the purposes of senior cycle education? It is important that "recognition is given to the purpose of education that goes beyond what can be achieved in the classroom and must consider the impact of informal learning which takes place in the community for example, volunteering in groups like Citywise or taking part in leadership programme (as LCA does)".

Theme 2: Vision

Alignment was expressed with the observation that the students' cognitive, physical, social and emotional development and wellbeing are significantly enhanced by an inclusive school culture. To be realized, and not simply rhetoric, such inclusivity needs to be designed as flexible and responsive to the lived day-to-day realities of students' emotional and social experiences. This comes down to teachers in the classroom, and the system should allow for personalised or individuated learning, blended learning or a mixed methodologies approach.

"Under **vision for senior cycle learners** there is a tension between the "central importance of disciplinary knowledge" being fully affirmed and objective of deepening skills. In the past the former has trumped the later and is likely to do so again going forward."

For students to not just learn about the relevance of curriculum content but to have opportunities to actively apply their knowledge and skills into the real world and not just in a classroom context. For example, as mentioned above [under Purpose] in recognising volunteering, informal learning, etc.

Wellbeing is a term that is referred to many times in this review, so schools need to acknowledge this in order to support positive mental health among students at senior cycle. Further, teachers need to be "more aware of the negative impact they can have on students' sense of belief. Young people have enough limiting beliefs attached to them without adults/teachers attaching further limiting beliefs".

Theme 3: Pathways and programmes

There is an out-weighted emphasis on a single pathway within the current Senior Cycle system. This needs to be balanced by the development of a structure within the system that can accommodate, support and offer guidance in alternative technical, vocational professional and creative pathways. The issue of 'ringfencing' subjects far back in the cycle is far too limiting for students and pushes them towards stratified career-thinking only. This approach can produce undue pressure (to maximise points), and could be mitigated by finding pathways (for example to STEM through vocational routes) that suit the student, and account for their social, emotional, personal and learning growth, rather than just pushing him or her to achieve maximum points.

To what extent do you agree with the proposed areas for development above? Is there too much or too little emphasis on particular aspects? "Perhaps too little emphasis is put on the need for increased career guidance particularly where programmes are changing. This is especially important because the barriers to entry that currently exist for certain pathways are somewhat dependent on factors decided by students much earlier for example subject choice/level".

Is there anything you would like to see added to the conversation about pathways and programmes in senior cycle "In recognition of the fact we want to affirm all talents and skills we should consider greater flexibility in transitioning between programmes for example supplementing Leaving Cert established classes with LCA components".

Theme 4: Curriculum components

To what extent do you agree with the proposed areas for development above? Very positive elements such as volunteering/work experience and allowing for flexibility in programmes.

What solutions do you envisage for addressing problems relating to curriculum overload?
The curriculum should not be static, it is particularly notable in the speedily-evolving world of work that the subject choice in the curriculum has remained largely static. A solution to accommodate this constantly evolving world of work, and to maintain relevance, would be to combine full subject curricula with modules of learning, and systemising assessment of these. More importantly, such modular learning allows flexibility to the students' learning method, and held within a continuous assessment model de-stresses the social and emotional environment in which learning is taking place.

Theme 5: Assessment

A variety of comments were gathered on the issues related to assessment, and are quoted by bloc: "Under **assessment** the statement that the system is fair and transparent is highly problematic. The recent report from the HEA which found that "*among students scoring 405 to 600 Leaving Cert points, more than one-quarter – 27 per cent – were from affluent backgrounds, compared with just 3 per cent from disadvantaged areas*" would suggest that what we assess is far from fair."

"I was surprised to see, or not see .. any recommendations about homework. Personally I feel students do enough work "in school" and homework should either be abolished at Senior Cycle or made more relevant to the exams they are sitting. Homework causes students at senior cycle high levels of unnecessary stress in the lead-up to exams. Feedback from students is that time that should be spent studying is spent on unrelated homework."

"The review suggests positive changes re: LCA but it doesn't address the biggest challenge with LCA. LCA is totally undervalued in most schools. This undervaluing translates to young people and seriously impacts their self esteem in a negative way. Schools need to begin to value LCA equally to other traditional forms of LC."

"While it is positive to read many recommendations related to assessment and curriculum components, we could learn a lot from the Finnish System whereby young people can sit exams, then return to sit the exam at a later stage to improve their result and chances of progression at University/college level."

Is there anything you would like to see added to the conversation about assessment in senior cycle?
"The idea of more time is a positive to a degree but as noted this can lead to spreading pressure out rather than decreasing it. A better approach would be to increase the flexibility available in the system. For example, exploring the idea having multiple sittings of exams in a year (decrease workload and give 2nd chances)."

"Increase the amount of 'assessment with purpose'. The LCE is weighted towards exam assessment which has seems to have little part to play in the learning process where elements of LCA, LCVP and some aspects of LCE have learning built into the assessment through portfolios and projects, etc."

"I would like to stress that continuous assessment may reduce the pressure but it must consider the impact on other important aspects of education such as extra/co-curricular activities alongside the social implications. Giving credit for these activities may work to counter some of the negative impact."

Continuous assessment allows students to build a portfolio of pieces of their work. These attest to the individual's attainment, and demonstrate the breadth of their learning.
Continuous assessment for QQ3 and onwards – this allows students to experience success as they progress along their learning path. The experience of those using this approach confirms the cumulative effect as overtly and positively 'scaffolding' learning.
Endpoint assessment in a single exam excludes those unsuited, for a variety of reasons, to the associated pedagogies.

Theme 6: Reporting
Is there anything you would like to see added to the conversation about reporting in senior cycle?
The "negative backwash effect" of the CAO cannot be overestimated. "The key to whole senior cycle reform process is the CAO process. It can be argued that this is outside the scope of the NCCA to address, as the CAO system is owned by the universities. We value what is measured and unless the higher education sector begins to value more than the current very narrow definition of academic attainment then the reforms to the Leaving Cert Established will be of minor impact. The aspiration expressed to "…explore the reporting needs of students, further education institutions and other learning environments, including the needs of students returning to education…"[1] is far too mild a statement for such a pivotal determinant in the reform process."

Is there anything you would like to see added to the conversation about reporting in senior cycle?
There are evident benefits to students' further educational opportunities by structuring student achievements based on portfolio continuous assessment: the portfolio provides a comprehensive showcase of achievement.

For entry to 3rd level, the portfolio can be useful to determine the shape of further education (akin to how physical Senior Cycle art portfolios are presently utilised for entry to art college). In this way, rather than being merely a stationary record of years of work, this collection becomes active in the on-going learning path.

Section 2 – input by Foróige, National Youth Development Organisation

Introduction

Foróige welcomes the review of Senior Cycle education and in particular the emphasis on the inclusion of young people and their voice throughout the review process. Senior Cycle comes at a pivotal time in young people's lives, a time where they are leaving adolescents and entering adulthood. Yet this is also a time where young people face many challenges and require an education system that meets their needs. There is a profound gap between the knowledge and skills students learn in school and the knowledge and skills they need to excel in 21st century communities. There is a growing movement, echoed by this review, to address this gap and develop a more rounded version of student success.

We believe that if young people are provided with skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, planning, communication and teamwork and then given the opportunity to practice them they can not only have a positive influence in their own development but also in the development of Ireland's economic future.

Founded in 1952, Foróige has a long and highly respected tradition both nationally and internationally. The organisation has guided generations of young people to lead happier, healthier and more fulfilled lives. Today, Foróige works with over 50,000 young people and 6,000 volunteers across all 26 counties, every year. Or to look at it another way, one in ten of all young people in Ireland are part of Foróige.

Foróige was founded to enable young people develop through hands on learning (learning by doing) and to complement formal education in schools. Over the years we have developed a range of programmes and methodologies, which are evidence based, extensively evaluated and have excellent outcomes for young people. The skills developed by young people engaged in Foróige are those most highly sought by employers and skills best developed through non-formal education.

Young people who are involved in Foróige are empowered to develop their own abilities and attributes, to think for themselves, to make things happen and to contribute to their community and to society. As a result, they develop greater self-confidence, self-reliance and greater capacity to take charge of their lives.

We believe that in order to make real, impactful change within the Senior Cycle, non-formal learning must be valued within the formal system.

Themes 1 & 2: Purpose & Vision of Education

When we think about young people leaving Senior Cycle, we envision young people exiting equipped with a broad range of skills and knowledge, empowered to think for themselves, positively contribute to the world around them and ready for active participation in the knowledge economy. To achieve this, reform to Senior Cycle education may have to be revolutionary rather than evolutionary, as outlined in the consultation document and this 'revolution' is needed now; without it, current and future generations of young people in Ireland will continue to be failed by the current education system.

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, whose members include Microsoft, Apple and Cisco, identify these skills as the 4 C's;
1. Critical thinking and problem solving
2. Communication
3. Collaboration
4. Creativity and innovation

Education systems, by their very nature, can be slow to adapt. Therefore, non-formal education programs are ideally placed to facilitate young people to develop and practice these skills. They bring

a mix of innovative learning methodologies, including a strong emphasis on learning by doing, coupled with rigorous evaluation to ensure young people achieve the outcomes essential for success in today's world.

Achieving this vision for Senior Cycle education will require the creation of a full 3 year cycle. In this framework, year 1 will focus on the development of these skills, similar to the current Transition Year model, with year 2 and 3 building on this learning while also focussing on core subjects.

Programmes provided over the three years but particularly in year 1, should include an emphasis on entrepreneurship, leadership, active citizenship, relationships and sexuality, health and wellbeing and practical life learning skills.

This approach will ensure the curriculum is flexible and responsive to individual needs of students and allow for personalised, blended and mixed methodologies learning. Combining full subject curricula with these programmes also creates the real potential for the Senior Cycle to be constantly updated. A challenge currently highlighted by this review

Theme 3: Pathways and Programmes
The current Senior Cycle places an over emphasis on a single pathway for students to achieve 'success' measured only by the achievement of points. This needs to be balanced in favour of all young people by the provision of a multitude of individualised pathways capable of assessment throughout the 3 year cycle.

Allowing young people to choose modules within year 1 of the 3 year cycle provides the opportunity for them, with mentorship and guidance, to create their individual education pathways and collect 'credits' for achievement and learning.

Foróige has developed a suite of evidence based programme (listed below) using international best practice and backed by UNESCO, that have proven positive outcomes for young people in key areas. Across a range of disciplines, research has conclusively shown that programs that focus on development of skills such as leadership, citizenship and entrepreneurship and engagement in local society, are related to positive social, psychological and personal development outcomes.

With a partnership approach between the non-formal and formal education systems, these programmes could be made available to students in Senior Cycle in schools across Ireland in the very near future.

Theme 5: Assessment
A desire to broaden and rebalance existing assessment approaches, building on key strengths already evident in senior cycle assessment emerged from the review. It was also suggested that assessment could be further spread out over time. This could have a range of benefits giving students an opportunity to be assessed in a variety of areas which in turn will broaden what is assessed and what success looks like. Placing a value on non-formal education within the formal education system creates the opportunity to recognise "service learning" altruism, empathy, volunteering and the practice and mastery of a wide range of skills. In the current Senior Cycle young people experience too much unnecessary stress feeling the pressure of single examination.

The new cycle need to 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.

This can be introduced through further developing 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 for non-formal education programmes.

Foróige programmes in the Senior Cycle
Our programmes strengthen the curriculum for young people to bring real and transformative change to the lives of the learners. Education is considered a key driver of Economic and Social Success for Individuals and Employers. A higher level of education can lead to series of positive outcomes for both the individual and society related to employment, higher salaries, better health, less crime, higher social cohesion, lower public and social costs, and higher productivity and growth (European Commission /EACEA/ EURYDICE/Cedefop, 2014). It is vital that together we can provide the highest standard of education to all young people in Ireland with equal opportunities for all. The cascading impact will positively affect their future careers, their families, their community and society as a whole. At the heart of the programmes is a belief that young people, no matter what their circumstances, inherently want to succeed in life and our programmes will create opportunities for young people to successfully navigate a successful career and a brighter future. It is the importance of a partnership between formal education and training and non-formal education.

<u>**Foróige Programmes**</u>
1.   The Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship Programme
The Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) is a world renowned, youth entrepreneurship education and development programme. It is managed and provided by Foróige in Ireland and is affiliated to NFTE International.

Involvement in the Foróige NFTE programme improves the business, academic and life skills of young people. It gives young people the opportunity to create, develop and sell their product/service while learning skills in the areas of business planning, marketing and finance.

Research collated by Harvard University on the impact the NFTE programme concluded that:
•   Career aspirations increased by 44%
•   Interest in attending college increased by 32%
•   Students' business knowledge increased by 20 times vs. control group
•   Leadership behaviour increased by 13.2%
•   Belief that attaining one's goals is within one's control significantly increased

Young people who engage in NFTE participate in a 40 hour (minimum) programme facilitated by a teacher or youth worker who has been trained in the delivery of the programme. The young people come up with a business idea, do a business plan and importantly trade in the real world environment. All through the process the young people are supported to reflect on what they are learning and how this can help them in their future lives.

2. Leadership For Life
This is a year long program which consists of 30 hours of taught material and 30 hours of practical work. The program aims to enhance the vision, passion and idealism of young people by teaching them key leadership skills and challenging them to use these skills for their own and society's benefit.

The program encourages young people to develop and practice leadership skills including critical thinking, problem solving, goal setting, communication and public speaking. The program is accredited in Ireland by the National University of Ireland, Galway with a Certificate in Youth Leadership.

3. Be Healthy Be Happy
The Health & Well-being Program is a holistic 12 hour program that explores mental, physical, social and spiritual health. This programme aims to engage young people in a process of exploring

characteristics that impact their health and well-being, and to position them so that they have the tools to lead healthy, happy lives.

Topics explored across the four focus areas of include; nutrition, hygiene, stress management, substance use, healthy relationships, bullying, social identity, community involvement, problem solving skills, understanding and expressing feelings, strategies to deal with negative thinking, fairness, love and forgiveness, understanding mindfulness and practicing relaxation techniques.

4. REAL U (Relationships Explored & Life Uncovered)
Relationships Explored and Life Uncovered (REAL U) allows us to express and explore our own, and others, views on issues that affect us all around Relationships and Sexuality.

REAL U covers topics that affect us both personally, and in our face to face and online relationships, with our; friends, siblings, parents/guardians, crushes, partners and any other relationship we have, or will have throughout our lives! REAL U provides a safe space to engage in a range of fun activities while building knowledge, confidence and self-awareness.

It explores conversations around relationships, sexuality, as well as, our own personal development and journey in uncovering some of the tools for life:

5. Youth Citizenship Programme
This is a one year taught program which sets out to enable young people to explore pertinent social and cultural issues and examine how they can impact on society. The program is broken down into 3 components; awareness, action and evaluation. The awareness and evaluation components of the program takes approximately 20 hours to complete with the action component varying depending on the project chosen.

The program aims to instil personal responsibility so that young people are able to deal with the challenges of anti-social behaviour and drugs. The program also aims to help to instil respect and understanding of different cultures and religions and helps to create a more compassionate society.

6. Ready Steady Life
The Ready, Steady, Life programme aims to serve as a resource for youth workers working with young people who are preparing to make the transition to independent living. Deciding to leave home is a change that many young people go through as they make their way to adulthood. We believe that this change need not be a daunting experience for young people. This manual has been developed in conjunction with young people, who have already experienced living independently, to help make this transitionary change as smooth as possible for other young people.