

QQI SUBMISSION TO NCCA REVIEW OF SENIOR CYCLE EDUCATION

OCTOBER 2019



QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

Adding Value to Qualifications



Context of QQI submission

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) welcomes the opportunity to make this written submission on the review of Senior Cycle Education. QQI is an independent State agency responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training services in Ireland. It was established in 2012.

Our mission is to sustain public confidence in the quality of education and training, promote trust in the National Framework of Qualifications and drive a culture of continuous improvement by education and training providers in Ireland.

This submission is informed by our position as the national qualifications and quality assurance authority of Ireland. Our statutory functions are aimed at safeguarding the integrity of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), which includes qualifications offered in general secondary education.

Our statutory role is to:

- promote, maintain and develop the Irish NFQ, a 10- level framework for the development, recognition and awarding of qualifications in Ireland
- approve programmes offered at a variety of schools, colleges and further and higher education and training institutions
- regulate and promote the quality of programmes offered by providers of education and training leading to qualifications included within the NFQ for the benefit of learners, employers and other interested parties
- provide academic advice on the recognition of foreign qualifications in Ireland through a service called NARIC Ireland – the National Academic Recognition Information Centre. We also provide advice on the recognition of Irish qualifications abroad
- inform the public about quality assured education and training programmes and qualifications through a database of programmes and a register of providers
- advise the Minister for Education and Skills about national policy on quality assurance and improvement in education and training
- cooperate with professional bodies in assuring the quality of professional education and training



QQI wishes to acknowledge and commend the extensive work undertaken by NCCA to date on the review of senior cycle (the review). The case for reform of senior cycle education is underpinned by independent critical studies and sustained engagement with relevant stakeholders. The consultation document¹ assembles findings, issues and options within a coherent framework. With the trajectory of any change still emerging, the framing of the discussion in terms of purpose, vision, pathways, curriculum, assessment and reporting, provides a logical scheme for thinking about senior cycle. The document acknowledges the importance of the reciprocal investment in planning and capacity building will be required to support effective implementation of any reforms. The consultation document appears free of ideology or unduly shaped by vested interests. The consultation document advocates a range of student interests to be promoted in senior cycle. The interests of potential, enrolled and graduate students of senior cycle, should remain at the heart of the review so that senior cycle continues to be of public value.

Given our statutory remit and lifelong learning perspective, QQI has particular interest in the access transfer and progression arrangements that prevail in the senior cycle. We also offer a perspective on the reporting arrangements that typically accompany the leaving certificate as the qualification aimed at recognising learner achievements in senior cycle education.

Access, Transfer and Progression in Senior Cycle

National ambitions for lifelong learning should continue to shape decisions about the nature, structure and contribution of senior cycle. Senior cycle, with its associated programmes and qualifications, functions as both a milestone and a stepping-stone within the national education system. A systematic review and exploration of arrangements and opportunities for access, transfer and progression throughout senior cycle, should inform policy advice arising from this current review.

Post school transitions have received much attention in the course of the consultation exercise. The use of certification results as a sorting device for access to higher education have been well documented, as have the effects of such practice. Such effects,

¹ NCCA Senior Cycle review Consultation Document (July 2019)
<https://www.ncca.ie/en/resources/senior-cycle-review-consultation-document>



risk constraining reform and innovation within senior cycle. Arguably, the intrinsic value of the senior cycle has been 'lost in transitions' compromised by the effects of the clearing function of the CAO.

Adopting a systemic perspective on reform of senior cycle recognises the fact that senior cycle is imbricated within our national education and training system. Engagement with the higher education communities around the relationship between higher education and senior cycle should continue to strive to realise permeable arrangements for post school transitions that are fair and transparent but don't unnecessarily constrain curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practice in senior cycle.

Transitions from senior cycle to higher education attract much attention and commentary, but this is not the only transition that matters. Students enrolled in lower secondary general education deserve to have meaningful and valued pathways into senior cycle. The relationship between senior cycle and further education and training should be optimised to facilitate high quality, flexible and coherent learning pathways that are widely recognised and valued. Intra senior cycle transitions, i.e. efficient mobility options within and between prospective programmes or pathways in senior cycle, should be transparent and responsive to the needs of students.

Transitions from school to occupations are facilitated by programmes that have a strong vocational orientation. Comparative data from the OECD² and the EU³, shows the absence of a VET pathway in upper secondary general education in Ireland. This is an atypical phenomenon by international norms. QQI would welcome a conclusion under the current review on the prospects for the delivery of high-quality initial VET (IVET), within upper secondary general education. In considering this issue, the opportunity to integrate IVET in general education with initial and continuing VET further and higher education could also be explored. This line of inquiry is offered without prejudice to any particular outcome. QQI has observed much commentary about the need to strengthen a VET pathway during the course of the review of senior cycle and believes that an authoritative position on this prospect would be useful at this time.

QQI welcomes the adoption by the teaching profession and by the policy making community in secondary education to the use of the learning outcomes approach to guide

² OECD (2019) Education at a Glance 2018.

³ Burke N.; Condon, N.; Hogan A.; (2019). *Vocational education and training in Europe – Ireland*. Cedefop ReferNet VET in Europe reports 2018.
http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2019/Vocational_Education_Training_Europe_Ireland_2018_Cedefop_ReferNet.pdf



and inform the development of curriculum and associated qualifications. The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) represents a consensus view on the nature and complexity of knowledge, skill and competence, associated with qualifications offered in Ireland. Currently, the qualification associated with senior cycle is the Leaving Certificate, which is placed across levels 4 and 5 on the NFQ. Comparable upper secondary school leaving qualifications internationally typically compare to NFQ level 5, though there may be good reasons for national variation. Revisiting the levelling of the leaving certificate as a qualification would be timely as QQI initiates a re-referencing of the NFQ to the European Qualifications Framework in 2020. The inclusion of the leaving certificate within the NFQ facilitates an appropriate recognition of the standards of knowledge, skill and competence associated with each of the leaving certificate programmes. In this regard the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Amendment Act 2019, is significant, clarifying the necessary arrangements for establishing and maintaining the NFQ status of awards made under the Education Act 1998.

Key Competencies and other learning outcomes-oriented frameworks such as the NFQ, represent a continuum of learning for schools, FET, HET and professional education. As part of senior cycle review it would be instructive to reveal the extent to which assessment practice in particular has responded, or is planned to respond, to such learning outcomes based lifelong learning instruments.

Reporting and recognising student achievement in senior cycle

Qualifications are a formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to a given standard

Qualifications, including the Leaving Certificate are awarded following successful completion of an education or training programme. Qualifications are important for individuals, influencing their ability to get a job, to carry out an occupation or a profession and to pursue lifelong learning opportunities. International recognition of qualifications matters when they are presented for use in countries other than where they were gained.

Qualifications also express shared meanings about learning expectations and learning achievements. In this way, qualifications are **social constructs**, depending upon public understanding and confidence in what they purport to represent. However, reporting arrangements, as they are presented in the review, reveal little about what it means to



have successfully participated in senior cycle education or to have achieved a leaving certificate.

The State Examinations Commission (SEC) is the awarding body for the leaving certificate. Accordingly, the SEC sets and maintains the standard of knowledge, skill and competence associated with the Leaving Certificate as an award. The SEC are required to ensure that a learner acquires the standard of knowledge, skill and competence associated with the level of the Leaving Certificate on the NFQ before an award is made. It is arguable whether the leaving certificate, as currently issued, effectively communicates the nature and extent of what students know, understand and can do having successfully participated in senior cycle. A related concern is the capacity of a leaving certificate to equip graduates of senior cycle with evidence about how and where particular learning achievements were achieved and demonstrated. Rich accounts of learning are expected by post school credential evaluators in Ireland and abroad.

Reviews of international practice⁴ report **trends** in qualifications. These are not presented here as recipes or cookbooks for success. Rather they are offered to prompt reflection about reporting and recognition practices in senior cycle.

- **Learning outcomes approach** looks set to remain a central feature of qualifications reform.
- **Dissatisfaction** with qualifications and their accompanying records as a reliable proxy for employability
- **'Written transcript is dead'** Paper is an information dead-end. Digital passports, E-qualifications, 3D portfolios are emerging tools for exchanging trusted data about learning achievements and qualifications.
- Future of **digitised, portable, personalised, machine readable** credentials, enabling powerful data analytics.
- Emerging distinction between **Macro** (Leaving Certificate) and **micro credentials** (smaller qualifications issued closer to the site and time of learning – allowing us to pinpoint evidence of learning) Digital badges or industry certification in ICT may have a role in recognising certain learning achievements within a reformed senior cycle.

⁴ See for example UNESCO (2019) Inventory of national and regional Qualifications Frameworks or Cedefop (2018) European Inventory of National Qualifications Frameworks



- Recognition that **user involvement** in development of qualifications adds public value. Users of the leaving certificate include current and past students, teachers, further education institutions, employers, researchers, statisticians, the guidance community and policymakers. Qualifications are improved when there are mechanisms to systematically involve stakeholders in their development.
- **Increased interest in international comparability** as holders of qualifications use them outside the country in which they were achieved
- **Modularisation and unitisation**
- **Credit systems**
- Recognition of **non-formal and informal** learning
- Growth in **qualification supplements** accompanying transcripts of results but which provide more detailed descriptions about a student's learning achievements and the context in which they were attained.

The NCCA review to date proposes a range of personal, social and economic purposes of senior cycle. The leaving certificate as a qualification should offer appropriate recognition of learning achievements and signal suitability for progression to further study or work. It is possible to infer from the consultation and background reports a number of discrete functions of the leaving certificate as a qualification. These include:

- To enhance social and personal prospects
- To signify completion of stage of education
- To motivate learners
- To tackle social exclusion
- To promote lifelong learning
- To evidence capacity to progress to further education or training
- To signal skill and competence for employment

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The senior cycle review should examine the contribution of **existing reporting arrangements**, essentially the certification of examination results by the SEC, to the



realisation of these and other professed functions of the leaving certificate as a qualification.

A note on centralism v devolution

A recurring theme in the consultation document, is the tension between flexibility and centralism in the design, development, delivery, assessment and reporting in senior cycle education. This tension prompts questions about the role of teachers in guarding and promoting the quality of the senior cycle educational experience of young adults. QQI notes certain unresolved questions, surfaced in the review, that imply alternative trajectories for the leaving certificate as a qualification and the role of professional expertise and professional judgement of teachers.

To what extent should the Leaving Certificate as a qualification focus more on strengthening **stability and predictability** where reporting is valued for its signalling power

To what extent should the Leaving Certificate as a qualification become more **flexible**, providing the learner with ease of access, to build on a wide range of learning modes and components that can be reported and combined according to the needs and time perspective of the learner?

To what extent should the tendency towards **centralism** be challenged? What degree of devolution for the development, delivery, assessment and reporting of the Leaving Certificate as a qualification, is desired and desirable?

Conclusion

QQI considers the current review of senior cycle education, to be timely and necessary. The high profile of senior cycle and the Irish leaving certificate in society, presents a challenge and opportunity for those charged with its reform. There will be no shortage of rich and expert advice advocating particular priorities and concerns. The task of plotting a way forward and offering policy advice to the Minister will necessitate brokering among various and sometimes competing interests and marshalling the other forms of evidence that is to hand. The guiding principles underpinning the reform of our education system are set out in the 1995 White Paper on Education⁵. This foundational text remains relevant for the next generation of reform, but policymakers face new challenges and

⁵ Charting our Education Future. Government White paper on Education 1995



opportunities. Senior cycle, post 2020 will continue to occupy a key stage in the formation of 16-19-year olds. Its future value will depend on our collective capacity to offer a learning experience that is stable and durable and is also appropriately responsive to greater uncertainty about how we will learn, live and work.