



Introduction

Gaisce - The President's Award welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the review of senior cycle education. In addition to reviewing all consultation documentation associated with the review, Gaisce participated in one regional focus groups (Dublin, 10th September) and the national conference (Dublin, 16th October).

Gaisce notes and welcomes the acknowledgement of schools as the setting in which far more than academic attainment is achievement, and the importance - and challenge - of due and balanced recognition of this broader purpose of education. In the interest of brevity, we restrict our submission to situating Gaisce - The President's Award with respect to the specific thematic areas outlined in the consultation document and highlighting the role the programme currently plays in providing schools with a mechanism to engender and recognise personal development. Further, as a proven, evidence-based programme found to meet the inclusion criteria to be termed a Positive Youth Development Programme, we point to potential opportunities of the Gaisce programme with respect to delivering on the emerging vision for senior cycle education.

Whilst we endeavour to be succinct, it is important to begin by explaining the Gaisce programme and to put its relationship with senior cycle into context. Gaisce - The President's Award is a three-tiered (Bronze, Silver and Gold) personal development programme for young people aged 15¹-25. It was established in 1985 (UN International Youth Year) as the national youth award and the nation's highest recognition of a young person's initiative, achievement and voluntary contribution. The programme is self-directed and non-competitive. Participants set and achieve their own goals across four challenge areas: physical activity, community involvement, personal skill and a team adventure journey. At Gold level, a further residential project is required.

Participants are supported through their Gaisce journey by a trained adult mentor - their President's Award Leader, or PAL. Gaisce has been independently proven² to enhance confidence and wellbeing in participants and to develop the 'protective factors' that help young people respond to adversity, make positive life choices and reach their potential. Since its inception, the number of young people participating in the award has continued to grow and we conservatively estimate that, over the last 34 years, more than 190,000 awards have been achieved across all levels. In 2018, more than 1,200 PALs supported over 15,000 young people achieve their Gaisce Award across more than 800 organisations in Ireland.

Although a non-formal learning programme, Gaisce has thrived within formal education and it is within second level senior cycle that the vast majority of participants access and achieve their Gaisce Award. The extent to which Gaisce is embedded in formal education is revealed in the following figures:

¹ With consent, young people aged 14 can begin their Gaisce Bronze award. In addition, Gaisce is currently piloting Bronze Gaisce for second year school students, including in partnership with the Schools Completion Programme.

² Independent research towards a PhD available here: https://www.gaisce.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Niamh-Clarke-MacMahon-Thesis_Gaisce.pdf.



- 82% of all second level schools in Ireland offer Gaisce (60% of all DEIS schools and 91% of non-DEIS).
- 94% of registrations for Gaisce in 2018 were from second level school students.
- 96% of Awards achieved in 2018 were from second level school students.
- 76% of active Gaisce Award Partners in 2018 were second level schools.
- 74% of PALs active in 2018 were school-based (i.e. second-level teachers).

Gaisce has particularly flourished within Transition Year. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Gaisce is synonymous with TY and it is certainly central to the experience of TY for a significant, and growing, number of students. Crucially, however, Gaisce was not designed as a TY programme, nor is it only a TY programme: in addition to the many non-school organisations that deliver Gaisce, more than 40% of schools support young people in 5th and/or 6th year to achieve their Gaisce Award at all levels. Gaisce has prospered within TY because the purpose of Gaisce, and that of TY, is to encourage personal and social development – and it is within this broader ‘values’ fit that opportunity exists for the Gaisce programme to potentially play a greater role in senior cycle reform.

Consultation Themes and Gaisce – The President’s Award

The purpose of senior cycle education proposed in the consultation document emphasises personal and social development, as well as the importance of both empowering young people to reach their potential and preparing them to embrace full active citizenship and participation in society. There is near-perfect alignment with the mission of Gaisce which, in providing a structured and progressive framework through which young people learn and develop physically, cognitively and socially, is to encourage and reward young people to discover their passions and challenge themselves, positively impacting themselves and the world around them. Significantly, Gaisce is also proven to enhance wellbeing, a specified aim of senior cycle education.

Of the named skills and qualities the consultation document asserts senior cycle education should help students to develop, it is in relation to the second grouping that Gaisce is particularly relevant. Gaisce was specifically designed to develop intrapersonal and interpersonal skills and has been proven to enhance a range of social and emotional competencies in participants, including resilience, confidence and empathy. The purpose of the ‘adventure journey’ challenge is to develop teamwork, as well as organisational and self-management skills.

Gaisce delivers on the vision for teaching and learning outlined in the consultation document by challenging and empowering young people to set and achieve their own goals across four diverse areas. Gaisce was designed to be accessible to all young people, hence the self-directed and non-competitive nature of the programme. PALs consistently remark that the programme enables them to develop a different and more positive relationship with students, as well as between students. In addition to learning about themselves and the world around them, Gaisce is experiential and the various and individual challenge experiences have been found to open up new areas of enquiry for participants, including future career avenues.



Gaisce is currently undertaken by students across all senior cycle programmes (TY, LCA, LCE and LCVP) as well as second-chance education and provides recognition and affirmation of all talents and abilities, regardless of learning needs. In opening up potential areas of interest, Gaisce serves to broaden learning pathways and, indeed, was referenced by schools as an alternative 'site of learning' during the consultation process.

Gaisce notes that, when asked which curriculum components, if any, should be compulsory, 'life skills' was one of three most frequently suggested by review participants. Whilst the central importance of disciplinary knowledge was fully and rightly affirmed in the review, there is no doubting the prominence attached to learning and development outside formal subject areas.

Finally, in achieving a medal, pin and certificate signed by the President of Ireland, Gaisce Awardees receive 'creditation' for their achievement, and their Gaisce Award is recognised both nationally and internationally. As an approach to recognising non-academic achievement, Gaisce is already utilised significantly in senior cycle and was suggested during the review process as a potential means of broader and universal recognition (albeit requiring significant investment).

Conclusion

Introduced almost 35 years ago, the Gaisce programme continues to grow because its relevance and value have only increased over time. The scale of its impact on students in senior cycle, for teachers in senior cycle and the broader community is simply unquantifiable. As was clear from the references to Gaisce in the review, and backed up by research, Gaisce is held in very high esteem in Ireland.

The Gaisce programme is not offered in this submission as the panacea or answer to senior cycle reform. Rather, in the spirit of 'evolution, not revolution', we have sought to highlight the role delivery of Gaisce in senior cycle is already playing with respect to personal and social development of students and supporting their wellbeing, and to propose, at a minimum, that there is scope to explore how the programme might be utilised further in achieving the emerging vision of senior cycle education.

Any such exploration would, of course, require careful thinking. Providing the integrity of the Gaisce programme would remain paramount in any such consideration, however, Gaisce would be open to further discussion on the matter towards ensuring that all young people in Ireland have the opportunity to dream big and fulfil their potential.