



Submission to the NCCA's Senior Cycle Review

30th October 2019

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Young Social Innovators (YSI) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the NCCA's Review of Senior Cycle, not only through this submission but also through the regional seminars and National Forum.
- 1.2. YSI recognises the NCCA's attempts to ensure all stakeholders have had an opportunity to have their opinions heard throughout the review process and commend the NCCA for the open and transparent manner in which the review has been conducted.
- 1.3. YSI is a not-for-profit education body. We work with up to 7,000 young people in the Senior Cycle Social Innovation Programme and another 2,000 in our junior Social Innovation Programme every academic year. Our vision is to fire young people's passion to change the world for good. Through a number of programmes, we encourage young people to: select social issues that they are interested in and care about; identify social changes they would like to see; and put in place innovative actions to bring about real and meaningful social change.
- 1.4. Many schools offering YSI's programmes do so in Transition Year; however, programmes have also been completed as part of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and Leaving Certificate Applied and, more recently, within the Junior Cycle Wellbeing Programme.
- 1.5. All of YSI's programmes have been designed to complement the Key Skills for Senior Cycle. Our programmes give young people opportunities to develop the skills of innovation, entrepreneurship such as information Processing and analysis, Communications, Critical and Creative Thinking, Collaborating and Working with Others, Problem Solving and Being Personally Driven. In addition, the programmes support the development of empowerment, self-efficacy, resilience and connection with community. We believe these skills and values will be increasingly important given the changing needs of individuals, society and the economy.

2. Observations

- 2.1 YSI generally supports the broad purposes of senior cycle education is to help every student towards fulfilling their full potential as set out in the Interim Report of Review of Senior Cycle Education.¹ 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.
- 2.2 In particular, we share the view that the core purpose of senior cycle education is to help every student towards fulfilling their full potential.
- 2.3 Furthermore, YSI notes that, for many young people, their experience of upper secondary education is positive, with the existing senior cycle providing a suitable pathway to third level education. Census 2016 shows that 56.2% of people aged 15-39 possess a third level qualification² and the OECD's Education at a Glance 2019,³ shows that adults with a tertiary degree earn on average 81% more than those with upper secondary education. However, rather than looking at these statistics too positively, we feel it is vital to understand why the opportunities, earning potential and life chances of those young people who do not progress onto university are so poor. Why is the senior cycle not enabling all young people to reach their full potential?
- 2.4 YSI fully recognises the amazing work of schools and teachers throughout Ireland and strongly believes that reform of the senior cycle should build more effective teaching and learning and allow all educators to use the full range of their professional abilities without creating an excessive workload.
- 2.5 YSI shares the view, which has been widely voiced during the review process to date, that while the senior cycle in Ireland remains a 'competition' to attain the most CAO points, it will not meet its stated purposes. Young people will not be able to reach their full potential or develop holistically. Currently, the senior cycle is overly concerned with young people's progression to third level education and a career. This is at the expense of supporting and empowering young people to have the skills required to cope with the change and uncertainty that will be major characteristics of future social and economic life.
- 2.6 Furthermore, the pressure to attain CAO points has a detrimental impact on the quality of teaching and learning as well as the use of formative assessment in the classroom.
- 2.7 YSI is concerned about the perception surrounding the pathways currently on offer to young people in senior cycle. There is a view that Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) is the 'gold standard' in education and, subsequently, all other options, such as Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and apprenticeships have lower status.
- 2.8 Significantly, the NCCA's interim report notes that an over emphasis on LCE means that key skills are being underdeveloped: technical, vocational, creative, innovative and professional learning are all underdeveloped. YSI believes that the very skills that young people will

¹ <https://www.ncca.ie/media/4025/senior-cycle-review-interim-report-july-2019.pdf>

² <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp10esil/p10esil/le/>

³ https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/EAG2019_CN_IRL.pdf

increasingly need are being undervalued as the system funnels young people towards a series of tests and the quest for CAO points.⁴

2.9 Furthermore, given the many challenges facing contemporary society, at a local, national and global level, YSI believes that learning at senior cycle needs to support the development of balanced, rounded members of society who can be life-long learners and who take on an active and responsible role in democratic society. Values such as inclusion, equality and a respect for social justice ought to be fostered through a broad curriculum.

2.10 Currently, the opportunity to develop many important skills, values and attitudes in the senior cycle takes place in Transition Year (TY). This gives young people the space to engage in initiatives, activities and programmes that nurture their full potential in a more holistic way.

2.11 YSI welcomes the NCCA's report into Upper Secondary Education in Nine Jurisdictions⁵ and notes how the purpose of this phase of education should go far beyond preparation for employment and should produce lifelong learners, adaptable individuals and active citizens. The report highlights jurisdictions where citizenship and active participation in society are valued to a greater degree than in Ireland:

*"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."*⁶

Ireland compares poorly to these jurisdictions where benefits to community and wider society are framed as a consequence of employment.

2.12 From our experience at YSI, the space to engage in activities that nurture the full potential of young people and enable them to be engaged, resilient and active citizens diminishes significantly as young people exit TY and begin to focus on exam-based studies.

2.13 Furthermore, there is little incentive for young people in senior cycle (outside of TY) to engage in such activities. Currently, there is no mechanism for young people to show the learning they have developed through extra-curricular activities such as sport, volunteering or participating in programmes such as Young Social Innovators, Green Schools or Gaisce (The President's Award). These activities allow young people to develop a full range of skills, abilities and attributes valued by universities and employers such as teamwork, leadership, critical thinking, creativity and resilience. In addition, as previously stated, these are the very skills that will support young people as they navigate their way through a future that will increasingly be characterised by risk, uncertainty and change.

2.14 Finally, given that the Education Sector is one of the main stakeholders identified in the Government's National Implementation Plan for the Sustainable Development Goals⁷, it

⁴ <https://www.ncca.ie/media/4025/senior-cycle-review-interim-report-july-2019.pdf> (pp 51)

⁵ <https://www.ncca.ie/media/3337/scoping-report-online-2.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.ncca.ie/media/4025/senior-cycle-review-interim-report-july-2019.pdf> (pp 32-33)

⁷ <https://www.dccae.gov.ie/documents/DCCAE-National-Implement-Plan.pdf>

seems appropriate that all young people, including those in senior cycle, should have opportunities to engage with both life and work projects that will help Ireland meet its targets while gaining the many skills acquired through Education for Sustainable Development. Indeed, promoting participation by young people is one of the priority actions identified in the Department of Education and Skills' National Strategy for Sustainable Development in Ireland 2014 – 2020.⁸

3 Recommendations

- 3.2 Based on the above observations and our belief that the current senior cycle neither meets the needs of all young people nor allows teachers to use the full range of their professional abilities to result in effective teaching and learning, we ask the NCCA to consider the following recommendations.
- 3.3 Include more space in the curriculum for senior cycle students to engage in activities and programmes that result in a more complete and holistic experience. This may require fewer subjects being studied for the Leaving Certificate or a reduction in course content, and subsequently, contact time for each subject. However, we believe this would be a small price to pay to ensure the full range of objectives of the senior cycle are met for the greatest number of young people.
- 3.4 Expose students to innovative programmes beyond the physical school environment; thereby, helping them to see beyond the school walls:
- Working in the community
 - Experiencing workplaces (One example of this is YSI's Innovation exchanges, where young people collaborate with staff at a business to identify social issues they are interested in and develop potential solutions to them)
 - Visiting places of culture, such as museums
 - Experiencing third level institutions
- 3.5 Incentivise participation in such activities by providing appropriate rewards.
- 3.5.1 This could take the form of CAO points for providing evidence of the impact an activity has had and the learning gained through participation.
- 3.5.2 Alternatively, young people's progression to Further and Higher Education could be supported by something other than a quantitative measurement. The Personal Statement, used by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service in the United Kingdom⁹, is an effective example of how young people can describe their ambitions, skills and experience to university and college admissions staff. It allows young people to display the skills they have developed and explain where their passions lie. The inclusion of such a statement as part of the CAO process would

⁸ <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/National-Strategy-on-Education-for-Sustainable-Development-in-Ireland-2014-2020.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/applying-university/how-write-ucas-undergraduate-personal-statement>

encourage young people to build a diverse range of skills and incentivise schools to provide a broader range of opportunities for their students.

- 3.6 Provide a senior cycle experience with a range of pathways, tailored to the needs of learners who are empowered to make the best choices for themselves. Appropriate and timely career guidance should be available to all young people to facilitate learners to make the best choices. It is vital that steps are taken to remove the perception that certain pathways and subject choices have lower status than others.
- 3.7 Take steps to provide a suitable pathway for young people to continue their education through completion of an apprenticeship. YSI notes the work taking place in this area and supports current efforts by SOLAS¹⁰ and others. We believe that all stakeholders – Government, schools, parents, the FET sector, and employers – should be encouraged to collaborate and develop creative solutions that provide meaningful work-based education that is seen as valuable and creates a wider range of opportunities for young people.
- 3.8 Conduct further research on the feasibility of using a broader range of assessment and reporting strategies in senior cycle. Portfolios, interviews, project-based learning, oral and practical methods are all options that might suit a broader range of learners and support the development of a wider range of skills for all learners.
- 3.9 Finally, we believe several steps could be taken immediately that would help move the senior cycle towards the type of holistic education envisioned in the consultation documents:
 - 3.9.1 A civic action project be created each year by students.
 - 3.9.2 A significant reduction in homework and that homework facilities be available in all schools, recognising the somewhat chaotic nature of some home life.
 - 3.9.3 The introduction of multiple choices for completing the senior cycle, including short units or modules of learning, which are credited.
 - 3.9.4 The creation of more bridges between the community and senior cycle students in school, including the sharing of facilities and human resources.
 - 3.9.5 A review of the role of subject based teachers as a step towards more applied learning projects.
 - 3.9.6 The introduction of an active local and global citizenship module, in particular Young Social Innovators, be promoted and available to all students in senior cycle and that their projects be credited and recognised as part of their graduation.
 - 3.9.7 An increased focus on student voice and student-led learning through personalised learning plans, differentiated learning and effective student leadership.
 - 3.9.8 Allow principals, school management and others involved in education the resources, space and time to experiment, test learning, prototype ideas and applied learning experiences.

¹⁰ <http://www.apprenticeship.ie/en/SitePages/Home.aspx>

4 Conclusion

YSI believes that many of the existing problems identified in the senior cycle are a consequence of the excessive focus on the Leaving Certificate and the acquisition of CAO points. This impacts on many areas: the development of key skills; the stress placed on young people and their educators; the use of effective teaching methodologies; the employment of creative and formative forms of assessment; the choice and flexibility on offer to young people; and, most importantly, the opportunity for all young people to reach their full potential. We believe that a broader senior cycle that provides space for schools to meet the needs of their young people and empowers young people to engage in a wide range of academic subjects and non-academic activities will result in a senior cycle that supports the greatest number of young people reaching their fullest potential.

The purpose of senior cycle education set out in the Consultation Document is 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.

YSI would like a broad-based discussion among the population around the implications of this vision. It would require, in our view, a major overhaul of the senior cycle curriculum. It questions the very nature of education as it is today in second level schools. It questions the assessment and reporting systems, the expectations of students, the nature of success and achievement, the role of the educator, the subjects offered, the wellbeing of students and the basis and demands of homework. All these issues are addressed somewhat in the review and this is to be welcomed.

If we are to help every student towards fulfilling their potential, we must ask if the current points system and how it is driven by the third level sector, helps or impedes this ideal. In our view, it is for many, an impediment.

Fulfilling potential must recognise the talents of every individual student. It should not be based on a system of achieving points in a limited range of subjects. It should not be based on placing a higher value on future academic qualifications than on other professions; it should be based on individual achievements and development of potential as an individual and as an individual within the context of their community and society.

More than ever, education for sustainable living will require a different approach to learning and living. Education must place value on contributing to collective wellbeing. Acknowledgement within the purpose of equipping “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” is greatly welcomed. How though is this translated into the senior cycle teaching learning, pathways, programmes, curriculum components, assessment and reporting?

We would like to see some stated principles or approaches to sit alongside the major focus areas, to give direction and criteria against which to plan the senior cycle curriculum:

1. **Learner choice:** the senior cycle must provide flexibility to the learner in choosing subjects of interest to them. These may or may not be currently available in the senior curriculum, e.g.

areas within the arts and humanities such as dance, sound production, social innovation and social justice.

2. **Pathways:** a provision for digital pathways to meet diverse range of need, giving more options to students within and outside of the school walls. e.g. students, who for one reason or another, cannot attend school for a period could access modules online which would prevent them falling behind in preparation for school leaving. Students who want to do a short module on something not offered in school would have time allocated to them to do this or join an on line class in another area or country.
3. **Apprenticeships:** an option to enter the first stage of apprenticeship while still studying core subjects to attain an end Certification. This would be suitable for students who want to begin work at an earlier age (and many do) but not be penalised at a later stage for having no Certification. Many students now are over 18 and still in second level education. Such provisions would be under the guidance of a career guidance counsellor who would help and support students to design their own Personal Learning Plan and identify an appropriate pathway for them.
4. **Assessment:** we would like to see a separation between graduating from post primary education and an entrance system to Third Level or Apprenticeship education. Graduation should be seen as a significant rite of passage where all students are celebrated for their achievements rather than the current system where there is a stressful 'results day' where students are measured on points largely dictated by the third level entry system. A joint YSI/Amarach survey shows that one of the highest causes of stress and anxiety amongst 16 years is exam related.

Young people who have progressed through senior cycle should be set up to succeed from the very outset; not to fail. This requires sufficient access to learning support to all students, based on their individual needs.

We look forward to the day when, like in primary schools, leaving secondary school will be a major rite of passage for young people; they will have a leaving experience which captures their learning, efforts and the skills they have developed.