



# Senior Cycle Redevelopment Looking to the Future

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**NCCA**

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta  
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta  
National Council for  
Curriculum and Assessment





## Introduction

This bulletin gives an overview of the recently published Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report, which details plans for the redevelopment of senior cycle education in Ireland.

The report captures and responds to the views expressed by teachers, students, school leaders, parents, education partners, researchers, and wider civil society about our existing senior cycle, across almost five years of review activity. It acknowledges the differing views expressed about how senior cycle could or should change in the years ahead and emphasises the significant common ground that emerged during the review. That common ground centres on a renewed purpose and vision for senior cycle education. This purpose and vision, supported by a set of guiding principles, is the bedrock on which the Advisory Report is built.

Reading the report, chapter one offers you a clear picture of the purpose, vision and guiding principles that will act as a compass for everyone involved in education as senior cycle is redeveloped in the years ahead. Moving on, chapter two proposes the work to be undertaken by NCCA, in collaboration with schools and stakeholders, across three main areas: Pathways and Flexibility, Curriculum Components and Assessment, Reporting and Transitions. Chapter three focuses on the key factors – known as ‘conducive conditions’ – which are necessary to support the redevelopment of senior cycle. Finally, chapter four sets out a plan for the redevelopment of senior cycle in three overlapping stages.

As you read, you’ll see that the Advisory Report provides a roadmap, which leads, at each stage, to the gradual creation of a Framework for Senior Cycle. This work will be carried out in a way that respects the multi-faceted, complex and relatively high stakes nature of senior cycle education. Having read the Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report, you may also wish to explore the multiple sources which informed the report at [ncca.ie/seniorcycle](https://ncca.ie/seniorcycle)

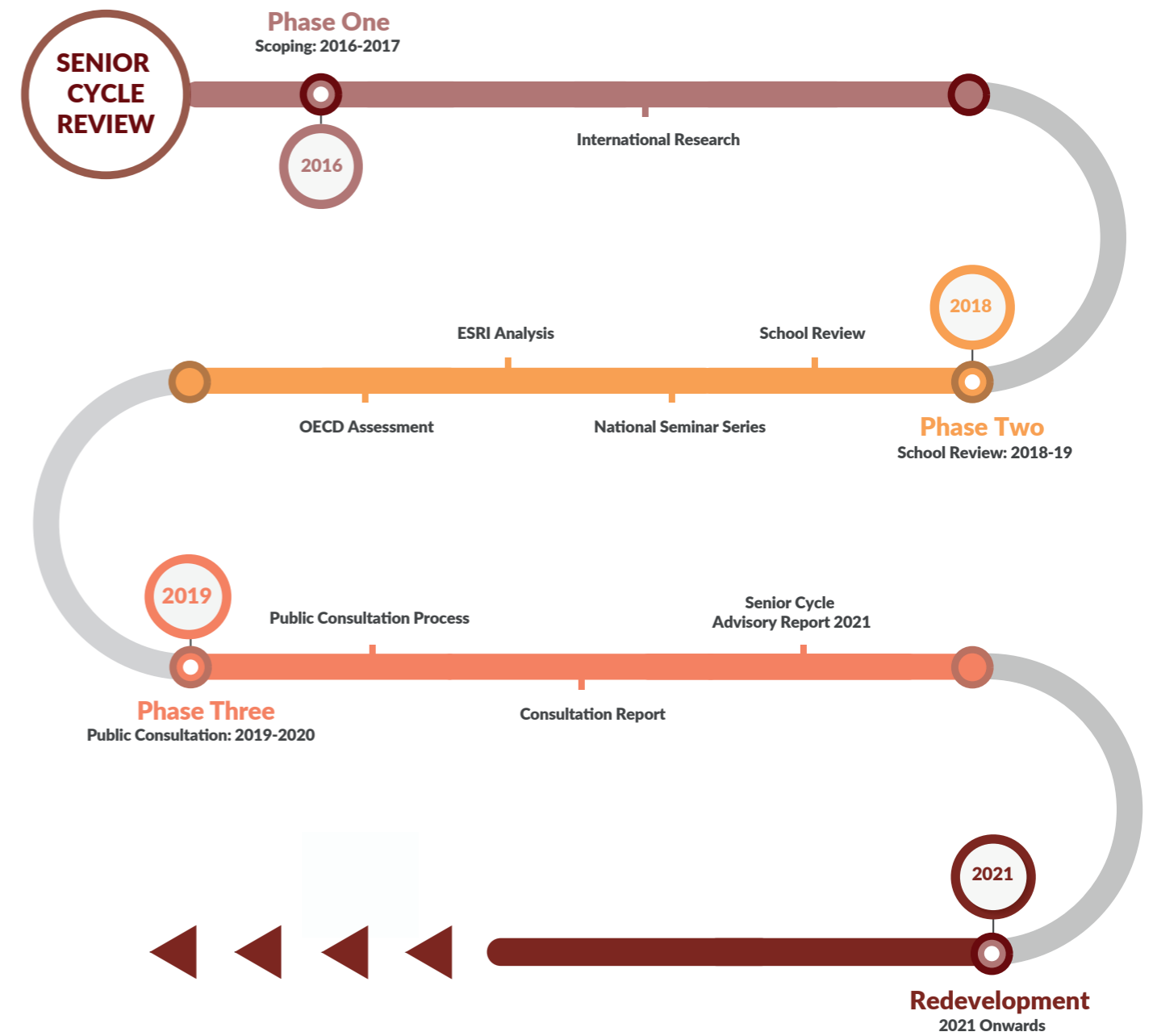
# What has happened so far?

The review of senior cycle began in late 2016 and involved three phases of work.

**Phase One (2016 – 2017)** focused on researching how senior cycle is structured internationally. It culminated in the publication of a report comparing upper secondary education in eight other jurisdictions and in Ireland.

**Phase Two (2018 – 2019)** took place in schools, capturing the views of teachers, students and parents on what they believed should be the purpose of senior cycle. It provided the opportunity to listen to their experiences of existing senior cycle programmes and to hear about the changes or adjustments they would like to see made to this phase of education. Next, feedback from this school-based review was independently analysed by the ESRI. During phase two, a series of seminars around the country brought teachers, school leaders, students, parents and stakeholders together for further discussion of emerging ideas and opened the conversation to a wider audience. An interim report, which identified emerging themes and areas for further exploration, was then published. In addition NCCA invited the OECD to assess the implementation of the senior cycle review process. The OECD team visited schools, attended seminars and met various stakeholders to hear their views on senior cycle education and on the review process. This OECD assessment helped to inform the design of phase three.

**Phase Three (2019)** focused on further consultation. Teachers, students, parents, stakeholders and the wider public were invited to read the Interim Report and respond to it. Participants took part in this consultation in a range of ways, via national focus groups, written submissions and/or an online survey. A series of bilateral meetings with education stakeholders also took place. The findings were analysed and a report on the consultation was published in December 2019. Drawing on the feedback across the three phases of review, work on the Advisory Report commenced, and, though the COVID-19 pandemic led to some delays, this report now sets out a path forward in the redevelopment of senior cycle education in Ireland. The graphic on the next page details the phases and timeline of the review of senior cycle.



# Purpose, vision and principles for senior cycle

Chapter one of the Advisory Report establishes the purpose, vision and guiding principles that provide a bedrock for the redevelopment of senior cycle. This chapter emphasises the importance of the integrated development of knowledge, skills, values and dispositions throughout senior cycle. It notes the importance of using a wide range of approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, to support students' learning throughout their experience of senior cycle education. The purpose, vision and principles outlined in this chapter will guide the redevelopment of senior cycle in the years ahead.

## Purpose of senior cycle

Throughout the review much discussion focused on the purpose of education generally and senior cycle education specifically. The review established that the educational experience at senior cycle should:

- continue to educate the whole person
- help every student to become more enriched, engaged and competent, as they further develop their knowledge, skills, values and dispositions in an integrated way
- serve collective as well as individual purposes in the school community and the wider society
- help students to access diverse futures, by providing firm foundations for transition to further, adult and higher education, apprenticeships, traineeships and employment; and participation in civic society and adult life.

## Vision for senior cycle

The Advisory Report creates a vision for how a redeveloped senior cycle should contribute to students' growth and maturity, to their continuing intellectual, social and personal development and their overall health and wellbeing. Flexibility to create varied pathways through senior cycle, in schools, educational settings, and other sites of learning, and offering opportunities for broad learning and increased specialisation, will support the realisation of this vision.

## Guiding principles

Eight guiding principles are outlined, based on extensive discussions throughout the review regarding what we value the most in senior cycle and the purpose of, and vision for, this stage of education. These principles, set out on the next page, aim to enhance the educational experience of all who undertake learning in senior cycle. These principles will act as a guide for all stakeholders involved in the redevelopment of senior cycle education in the years ahead.



Further details on the purpose, vision and guiding principles for senior cycle are set out in Chapter 1 of the Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report which can be read online at [ncca.ie/seniorcycle](https://ncca.ie/seniorcycle)

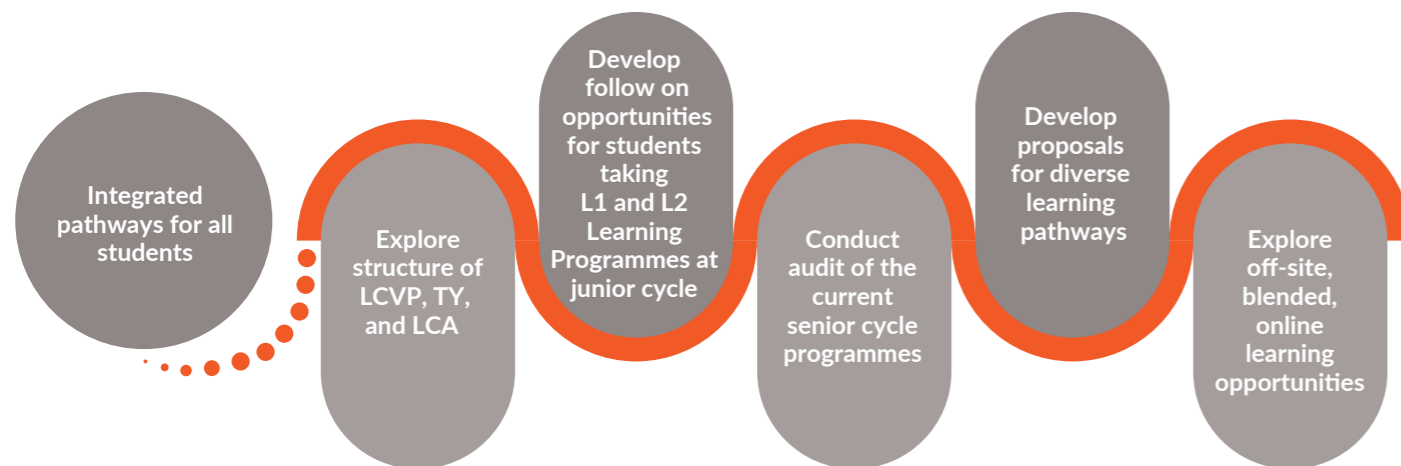


# Realising the vision for senior cycle

Chapter two of the Advisory Report is titled 'Realising the Vision'. Three over-arching aspects that require redevelopment – namely Pathways and Flexibility, Curriculum Components and Assessment, Reporting and Transitions – are explored. A summary of the findings that emerged during the review is offered and areas needing further research and development are identified. The report then considers what these findings might mean in a redeveloped senior cycle and the proposed work to be undertaken in collaboration with schools and stakeholders to realise this. Further details are set out in Chapter two of the Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report which can be read online at [ncca.ie/seniorcycle](http://ncca.ie/seniorcycle)

## Pathways and flexibility

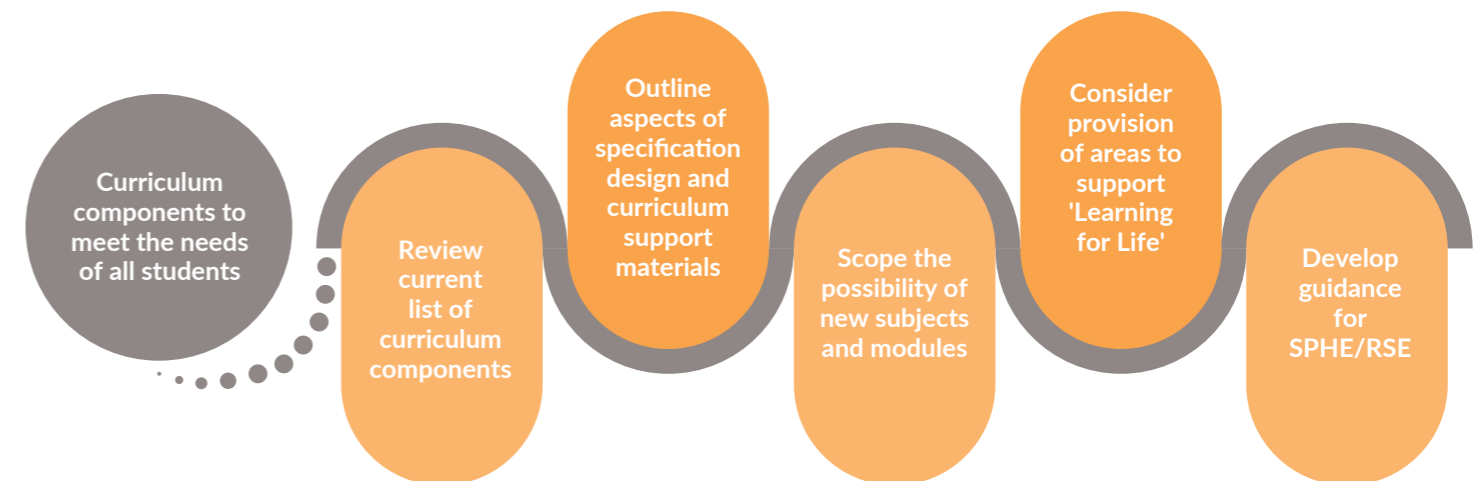
The need for increased flexibility and choice for students, through the provision of a more integrated senior cycle and improved pathways was identified. In response to this need, areas for action include the development of a series of modules for students in senior cycle who follow a Level 1/Level 2 Learning Programme at junior cycle. In addition we will undertake an audit of the TY, LCA and LCVP programmes to identify and determine aspects of the programmes that could be incorporated into more integrated pathways for all students. Further research will be conducted and proposals developed for a range of diverse learning pathways that complement and contribute to concurrent developments in the Further Education and Training and Higher Education sector. Work will be undertaken with schools to explore more flexible options, including ways to combine learning in subjects and modules in a range of ways and the potential of both offsite and blended/online learning to contribute to enhanced flexibility.



## Curriculum components

Feedback from participants throughout the review highlighted the need for the development of curriculum components to meet the needs of all students and to aid the continued, integrated development of their knowledge, skills, values and dispositions throughout senior cycle.

In response to this feedback, the actions outlined in the Advisory Report include a review of existing curriculum components – both subjects and modules – and scoping the need for new curriculum components. A brief for the review and development of these components will be developed which will inform the design of future curriculum specifications, accompanying guidelines and exemplification materials. Feedback throughout the review also made it clear that further research is needed to offer advice on how best to incorporate 'learning for life' into the senior cycle curriculum.

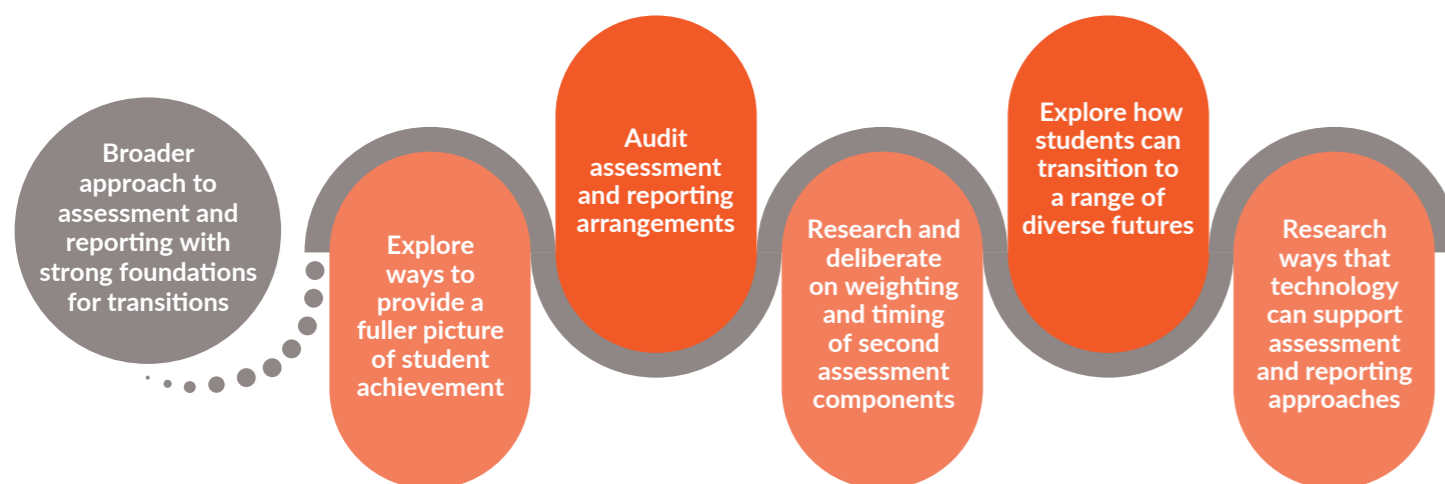


## Conducive conditions

### Assessment, reporting and transitions

There was considerable interest in, and attention given to, assessment, reporting and transitions during the review, reflecting a range of perspectives. There was recognition of the public support and trust attached to the current external mode of assessment. In addition, a widely held view which emerged from the review is that current assessment arrangements are limited and overly concentrated into a narrow three-week examination period in June. It was suggested that a broader approach to assessment and reporting should be considered. There was broad consensus that senior cycle should support all students as they transition from senior cycle to higher education, further education, adult education, apprenticeships and working life.

In response to this feedback, the actions outlined in the Advisory Report include an audit of assessment and reporting arrangements at senior cycle across all four programmes; research on the weighting and timing of additional assessment components and research into the potential of technology to support greater coherence and flexibility in assessment and reporting. A focus on transitions and particularly on ensuring that senior cycle provides a strong foundation for transition to a range of diverse futures will be needed. Collaboration with all stakeholders involved in this phase of education and in these transitions will be central to redevelopment.



Chapter three of the Advisory Report outlines the key factors – known as ‘conducive conditions’ – that will support the redevelopment of senior cycle. For senior cycle redevelopment to work, concerted action and the collective involvement of education stakeholders is required. All involved must continue to help generate ideas and build capacity for change.

Eight key factors have been identified as conducive conditions for senior cycle redevelopment. These were identified during the review by drawing upon what has been learnt in Ireland from previous educational reform and from our work with the OECD. The conducive conditions will continue to be informed by research into the implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle.

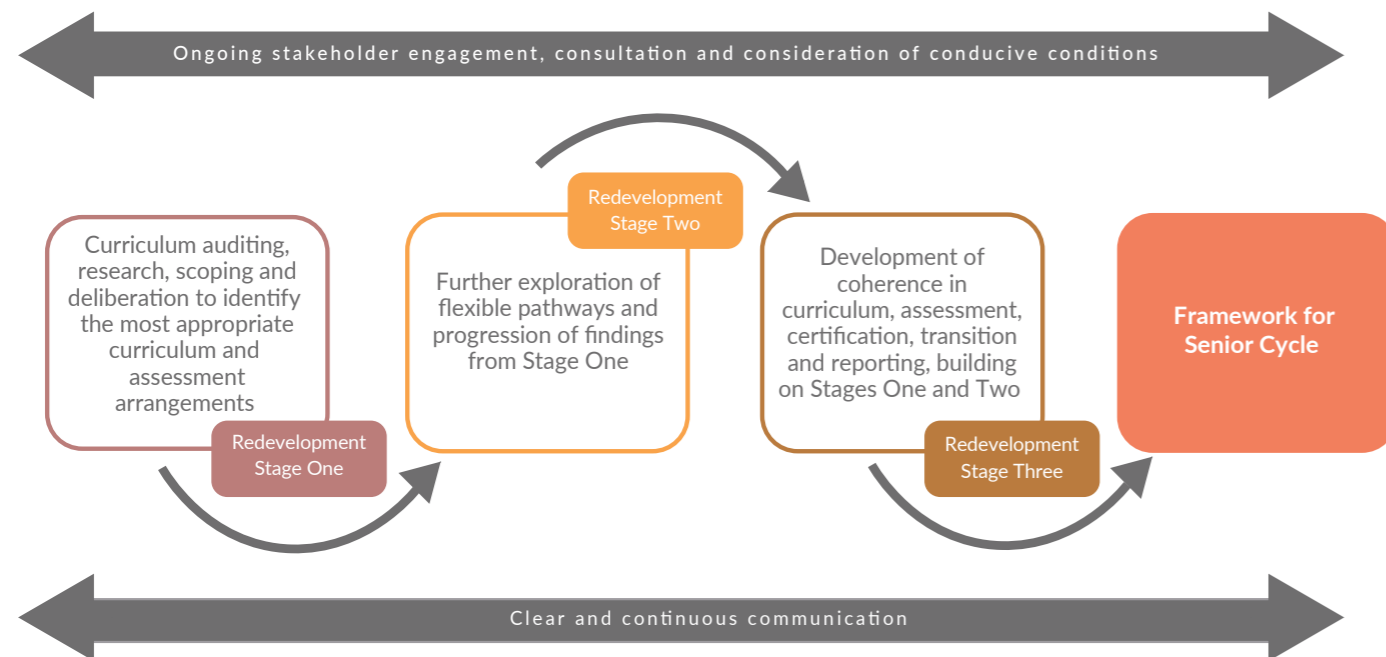
These eight key factors are: shared purpose, vision and principles; continuing use of research, data and information; a strong focus on stakeholder engagement, planning and collaboration across a wide range of schools and organisations; effective communication; the securing of resources; judicious timing and pacing of change; provision for enhanced professional support and learning; and the alignment of complementary policies.



Further consideration of each of these can be found in Chapter three of the Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report which can be read online at [ncca.ie/seniorcycle](https://ncca.ie/seniorcycle)

# Redeveloping senior cycle

The final chapter of the Advisory Report sets out a plan for redeveloping senior cycle in three stages, which overlap and build upon each other. Redevelopment work will focus on enhancing senior cycle for future generations of students. Stage One of redevelopment will identify the most appropriate curriculum and assessment arrangements for a redeveloped senior cycle. Stage Two will identify and develop diverse pathways through a redeveloped senior cycle. Stage Three will build on the work of the previous stages, leading to the publication of a Framework for Senior Cycle. Building on the process used in the review of senior cycle, stakeholders and schools will be central to this process throughout.



## Redevelopment Stage One

This stage will begin with a curriculum audit, informed by the review findings, of curriculum components and assessment and reporting procedures within current senior cycle programmes.

This audit will inform much of the work in this, and in later stages. For example, it will clarify the implications of removing ring-fencing of the LCA programme; it will identify the most effective aspects of existing senior cycle programmes including TY; and it will establish which aspects should be incorporated into redeveloped senior cycle pathways.

Research on knowledge, skills, values and dispositions, and how they can be embedded within the senior cycle curriculum will be conducted. Research into additional assessment components, weighting and timing of assessments will begin, along with research into reporting arrangements. There will also be an exploration of online, blended and offsite learning and the potential of technology to support learning, assessment and certification.

## Redevelopment Stage Two

Stage Two will include the exploration of flexible pathways and will consider how various subjects and modules can be combined and incorporated into a redeveloped senior cycle. Key activities are likely to include, but are not limited to, looking at pathways from school to Further Education and Training, developing apprenticeship taster modules and identifying and developing modules that could become an integrated part of redeveloped senior cycle programmes.

During Stage Two the implications of new and flexible pathways for schools and for students will be considered, with a focus on creating more coherent transitions to a broad range of learning destinations beyond school, including higher education, further education, adult education, apprenticeships and working life.



### Redevelopment Stage Three

Stage Three of redevelopment will build on the work carried out in Stage One and Stage Two and will lead to the publication of a Framework for Senior Cycle. The focus of this work will be on ensuring coherence in curriculum, assessment, certification, transition and reporting arrangements in a redeveloped senior cycle.

Collaborative engagement with stakeholders will involve working closely with schools and other educational settings. As part of this, the conducive conditions which can support the experience of students and their teachers in a redeveloped senior cycle will need to be considered and planned for. This will support plans for the introduction of a Framework for Senior Cycle. This framework will outline a redeveloped senior cycle which can realise the purpose, vision and guiding principles for this stage of education.

Findings from each stage will be published as redevelopment progresses. This will support discussion and deliberation before the Framework for Senior Cycle is finalised. Further details of the work within of each of these stages of redevelopment can be found in Chapter Four of the Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report which can be read online at [ncca.ie/seniorcycle](https://ncca.ie/seniorcycle)



**NCCA would like to sincerely thank all who participated in the review of senior cycle since 2016. We will continue to listen to and consult with teachers, students, parents and education stakeholders as we progress this important work on the redevelopment of senior cycle.**

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# Publications and reports

This list of publications and reports gives an overview of the work carried out across the phases of the review of senior cycle. For a full list of publications please see the full Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report which can be read online at [ncca.ie/seniorcycle](https://ncca.ie/seniorcycle)

## Phase 1: Scoping and international research (2016/2017)

Areas to be explored in the review were established. Research into upper secondary education in eight jurisdictions in addition to Ireland was conducted and a report arising from this comparative study was published.

**Read more:** [Upper Secondary Education in Nine Jurisdictions Overview Report \(NCCA, 2018\)](#).

## Phase 2: School review and national seminar series (2018/2019)

Teachers, students and parents in a representative cross-section of schools nationwide took part in a review of existing senior cycle purposes, pathways and programmes. Feedback from this review was analysed and reported on by the ESRI.

**Read more:** [Student, Teacher and Parent perspectives on senior cycle education \(ESRI, 2019\)](#).

Review feedback to date was then analysed and emerging themes and areas for further exploration were identified. An interim report was compiled to inform the public consultation.

**Read more:** [Interim report of review of senior cycle education \(NCCA, 2019\)](#).

OECD education policy advisors conducted an assessment of the senior cycle review process.

**Read more:** [Ireland Senior Cycle Review: An OECD assessment \(OECD, 2020\)](#).

## Phase 3: Public consultation and advisory report (2019/2020)

A consultation document which summarised areas for further exploration emerging from the review was compiled to inform the public consultation. The findings were analysed and a consultation report was published.

**Read more:** [Senior Cycle Review: Consultation Document \(NCCA, 2019\)](#).

**Senior Cycle Review: Consultation Report** [\(NCCA, 2019\)](#).

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