

## **INOTE Response to New LC English Draft Specification**

This statement evaluates the new draft LC English specification published by the NCCA on March 6th this year. A summary of the main points follows the main body of this response.

### **Overview of Redevelopment Process**

INOTE has been actively involved in the redevelopment process that has led to this new draft specification but we feel that the existing specification is still an excellent specification in its academic scope and rigour, inter-candidate equity as well as the rich selection of texts available for study. While not perfect, it is a high bar to emulate, and minor tweaking could have achieved significant improvement.

We know that reform is an important and necessary process, and we actively embrace meaningful reform, yet we are very concerned with the sheer speed and breadth of the proposed curriculum changes to Leaving Certificate study as a whole, not just English. It must be acknowledged that the proposed changes will radically transform the educational landscape for students, teachers, parents and schools, and consequently, Irish society as a whole, and some impacts are impossible to predict from this vantage point. For such wide-ranging seismic change to happen at such speed strikes us as ill-advised and we would urge the Minister to pause the redevelopment process so as to consider the potential shock to the education system.

All potential educational impacts should be identified, assessed and addressed satisfactorily in the light of where we are now in the redevelopment process, rather than when it began over 12 months ago for English. While we recognise that a phasing process has been planned for this transformation of Leaving Certificate study as we know it, the changes will be fundamental: such fundamental change must be completely positive. A pausing of the process now would not only allow for vital reflection but would also allow for schools to be properly resourced and for teachers to receive high quality CPD, both of which will be essential to ensure successful implementation of the various redeveloped subject specifications.

### **Overall Course: Rationale, Aims and Key Competencies**

It is encouraging that clear echoes of the existing course still sound through the new specification. Again, the existing course is an excellent course and it does a lot of things very well so it will be comforting for English teachers to know they already have significant existing expertise to draw upon.

It is also laudable that the overall vision of the new specification chimes very much with how we see English study: as an exciting exploration of multiple voices, of deep engagement in critical thinking and emotional responses and also providing myriad opportunities to create and shape individual student voice. The emphasis on enjoyment and empathy is foregrounded and this is to be strongly commended. While the overall course rationale promises an experience with a wide range of different voices, this depends very much on retaining the wide range of textual options the current prescribed texts list provides.

The various strands are already existent in the current specification but the new draft specification foregrounds the interconnectedness of these strands more explicitly. We appreciate the prioritisation of adventurous exploration of texts as the bedrock for analysis, comparison and creativity but we are wary of the potential open-endedness of the textual options specified.

While this clearly allows for maximum textual breadth and the construction of customised journeys through English in the classroom, we hope this does not result in it being impossible for students to be fully prepared for the written exam itself. It is essential that the “etc” used several times across the various strands represents liberating freedom of choice rather than something punitively unattainable. Clear boundaries must be delineated in this regard.

### Assessment

INOTE strongly welcomes the concept of an oral exam in English for the first time, introducing, as it does, a new mode of assessment to complement the written assessment of the terminal exam. Our conception of this examination is one that promotes a free-flowing, intelligent, nuanced discussion of literature where students have the opportunity to display their textual expertise as well as articulating enthusiastically their emotional responses to the texts they have studied.

It should promote the dialogic discussions that animate the best English classrooms and encourage students to engage with and refine their oracy skills. Having an assessment that explicitly tests speaking, listening and thinking skills is to be applauded as inevitably it will throw a new focus on these skills in the classroom space.

However, the proposal that this assessment take place at the end of 5th Year strikes us as not ideal at all. English, as has been said many times, is developmental by nature, students improve their skills in an iterative manner. The ability of students to discuss the comparative module, the most intellectually challenging study in English, suggests that this assessment should take place as late as possible in 6th Year.

For students who elect not to do Transition Year, heading straight from 3rd Year to 5th Year, and especially for boys who choose this journey, they are seriously disadvantaged by this proposal of having an oral at the end of 5th Year. English students must have the maximum opportunity to develop their ability to discuss literature in a nuanced way prior to an oral exam. We would further argue that the precise nature of this oral component needs more careful consideration so that the expectations are perfectly clear to English teachers and the students they must prepare for this assessment.

Promoting the writing process as an organic, distinctly individual, creative process is certainly admirable but trying to assess this process in itself is challenging. While the end product of this process has been successfully assessed in Paper 1 of the current specification for the past 25 years, engaging with, recording and reflecting upon the creative process is a new approach. The proposal of an AAC worth 20% of the final mark should work in an ideal world.

But unfortunately we do not live in an ideal world but one where this 20% will be extremely vulnerable to AI abuse in ways we cannot even conceive of now, in 2025. No one knows the capabilities generative AI will have in October 2027, when this proposed AAC will first take place. AI has already infiltrated our English classrooms and it represents the very antithesis of creativity, as we understand it; in fact, it short circuits this most human of endeavours.

Given the high-stakes nature of this assessment and the inability of teachers to ensure the authenticity of student work in an AI saturated world, INOTE would expect a detailed and convincing implementation document that can guarantee the same integrity as the current exam model. If student work cannot be authenticated satisfactorily, then this assessment moment needs a complete rethink or the weighting of this assessment should at least be reduced to 10%. Again, a pause in the redevelopment process might be prudent so as to allow the requisite time to resolve this issue.

The reduction of terminal exams from two to one is something that we understand, given the move to a more continuous assessment driven model, but we are concerned about the reduction from 3 hours 20 minutes to 2.5 hours if the exam is to contain separate sections on the Single Text, Prescribed Poetry and Comprehensions/ Functional Writing. This clearly needs more careful teasing out so that the expectations of this new exam are made clear from the very start. What will not be acceptable would be a more sophisticated version of the Junior Cycle English exam, which we deem not fit for purpose and itself in need of a careful redesign.

### Student Stress

Stress is inevitable in life and it certainly is inevitable in the points-race that the CAO engenders for our 6th Year students, however, we do not support the view that spreading the stress of terminal assessments across the two years is a good thing for students and certainly allowing high-stakes assessments to bleed into 5th Year should not be allowed.

To protect the wellbeing of students is a laudable goal for the new reforms but to assume that spreading high stress assessments in multiple subjects over the two year-cycle is misguided. This will only construct an experience where students experience a long accumulation of continuous stresspoints. Our experience is that this will lead to student exhaustion, and potential burnout, which is at odds with the aim of fostering student enjoyment of English.

Inevitably, this will also lead to a profoundly negative impact upon the ability of students to commit to extracurricular activities, activities that tend to alleviate, rather than aggravate, stress. The *duration* of stress experienced, rather than the intensity of stress experienced, will impact students' wellbeing profoundly. See Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy for an imaginative exploration of this very issue.

### Conclusion

While we are enthusiastic about certain aspects of the proposed draft specification, we are concerned about the overall thrust of the redevelopment process. The potential problems seem too substantial to justify moving away from the current specification, which is working very well and has done so for the past 25 years.

If the problems of ensuring authenticity and inter-candidate equity in the non-exam assessments can be convincingly addressed then there is substantial potential in the draft specification. However, we feel that this necessitates a pausing of the redevelopment process until such time as these conditions can be met.

INOTE knows that English teachers will give their very best to a redeveloped specification they believe to be in the best interests of their students and their subject. We believe in the professionalism and dedication of our fellow English teachers, who have always given their best in the delivery of previous specifications. However, we must state unequivocally that our students also deserve the very best in terms of a Leaving Certificate journey that is educationally sound and carefully thought out. A new English specification can only be a confident step forward for all involved - nothing else will do.

## **Summary of INOTE Response to New LC English Draft Specification**

### **Commendable Aspects of New Specification**

- ☐ The substantial overlap with the existing specification.
- ☐ The promotion of adventurous exploration of multiple textual voices.
- ☐ The promotion of fostering student empathy and enjoyment of English.
- ☐ The new oral assessment on the comparative in its offering of a new, complementary assessment mode and the subsequent promotion of student oracy.
- ☐ The promotion of the writing process as an important student experience.

### **Potential Problems of New Specification**

- ☐ The prospect of AACs in all subjects across the two year cycle will have profound implications for student wellbeing and on wider school life.
- ☐ The timing of new oral AAC is not conducive to students mastering the comparative skills assessed.
- ☐ The creative writing AAC is too vulnerable to abuse by AI and poses serious authentication issues.

### **Recommendations**

- ☐ A pausing of the redevelopment process to resolve the issues raised above.