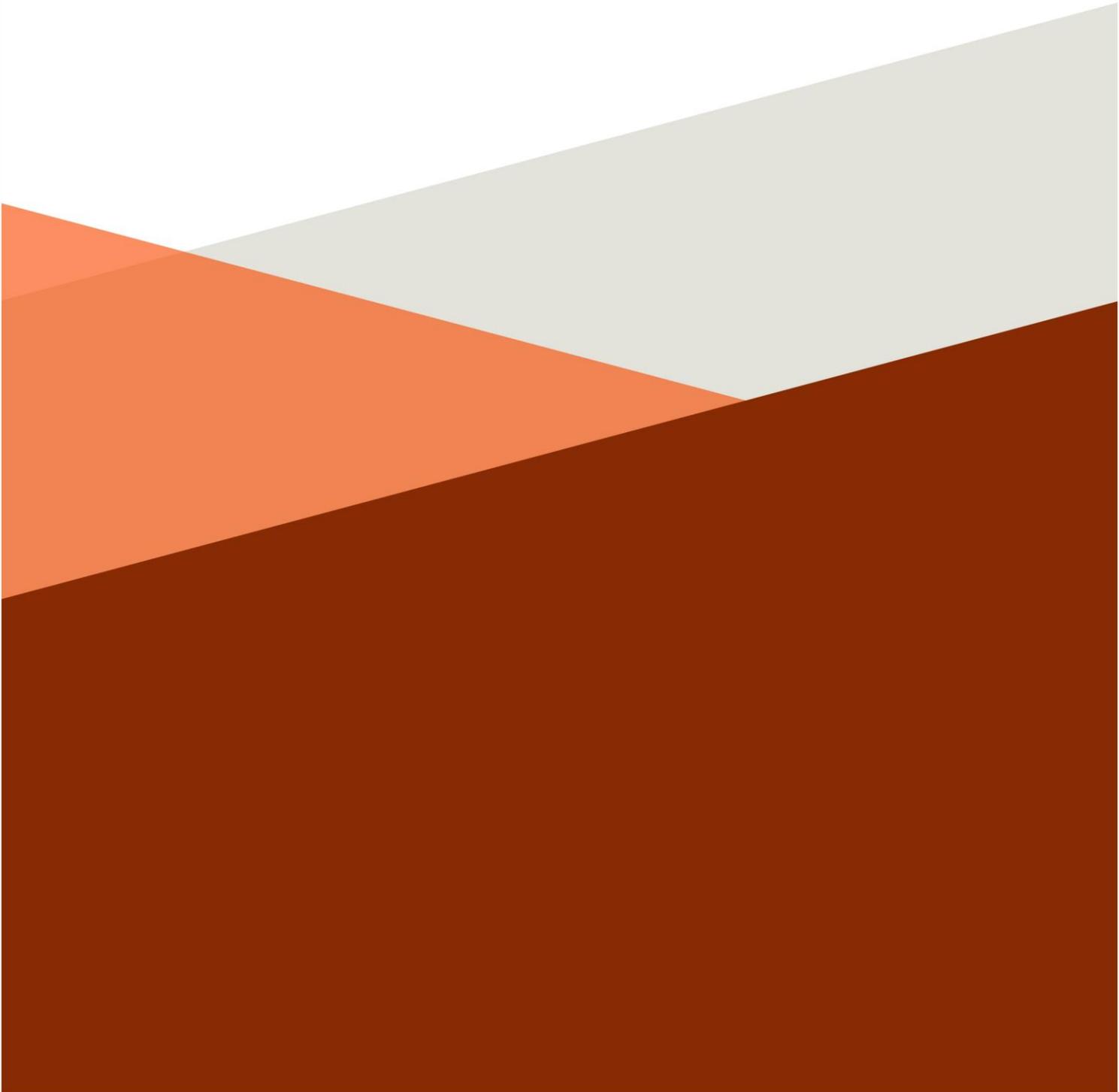




**NCCA** An Chomhairle Náisiúnta  
Curraclaim agus Measúnachta  
National Council for  
Curriculum and Assessment

# Background Paper and Brief for the review of Leaving Certificate Music



# Contents

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<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>1. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT</b> .....	<b>5</b>
Section Summary .....	6
<b>2. MUSIC IN THE CURRICULUM</b> .....	<b>7</b>
Music in junior cycle.....	7
Junior Cycle Music.....	7
Artistic Performance Short Course .....	8
Music in senior cycle .....	8
Leaving Certificate Established.....	8
Leaving Certificate Music in focus.....	9
Student participation.....	9
Assessment for certification .....	10
Insights from recent Department of Education Inspection Reports .....	- 12 -
Insights from Chief Examiner’s Report.....	- 12 -
Section Summary .....	- 13 -
<b>3. INSIGHTS FROM SCHOOL VISITS</b> .....	<b>- 14 -</b>
Approach to Integration of Musical Components.....	- 14 -
Curriculum continuity .....	- 17 -
Scope of the subject.....	- 18 -
Additional Assessment Component (AAC) .....	- 18 -
Section Summary .....	- 18 -
<b>4. INTERNATIONAL TRENDS IN MUSIC EDUCATION</b> .....	<b>- 20 -</b>
Introduction .....	- 20 -
England.....	- 20 -
Context: place and purpose of Music.....	- 20 -
Curriculum and Assessment .....	- 20 -
Qualification in A Level Music Technology .....	- 21 -
International Baccalaureate (IB) .....	- 21 -
Context: place and purpose of Music.....	- 21 -
Curriculum and Assessment .....	- 22 -

<b>Northern Ireland</b> .....	- 23 -
Context: place and purpose of Music .....	- 23 -
Curriculum and Assessment .....	- 23 -
<b>Victoria (Australia)</b> .....	- 24 -
Context: place and purpose of Music .....	- 24 -
Curriculum .....	- 24 -
<b>Section summary</b> .....	- 25 -
<b>5. ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION</b> .....	- 27 -
Integration of core musical components .....	- 27 -
Curriculum continuity .....	- 27 -
Scope of the subject .....	- 28 -
The Role of Digital Technology in Music .....	- 28 -
Assessment .....	- 28 -
Section Summary .....	- 29 -
<b>6. BRIEF FOR THE REVIEW OF LEAVING CERTIFICATE MUSIC</b> .....	- 30 -
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	- 32 -
<b>APPENDIX 1: OVERARCHING PARAMETERS FOR THE DESIGN OF ASSESSMENT ARRANGEMENTS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPECIFICATIONS FOR ALL TRANCHE 3 SUBJECTS</b> .....	- 35 -



## Introduction

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The Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report (NCCA 2022a) was published in March 2022 following the response from the Minister for Education, Norma Foley, TD. Actions outlined in the Advisory Report include a review of existing curriculum components - subjects, modules, and programmes. In March 2022, the Minister for Education requested that NCCA undertake a series of actions to support the realisation of her vision for a redeveloped senior cycle as set out in [Equity and Excellence for All](#) (Department of Education, 2022.) One key action set out in this plan was that a schedule of senior cycle subjects and modules for redevelopment be prepared for approval by the Minister.

NCCA subsequently prepared a schedule of subjects for review, which was organised into a number of tranches. The redevelopment of Music is included in Tranche 3, which will be completed in 2026 for introduction to schools in September 2027.

This paper provides a context for the review of Music and has been informed by the views of teachers, school leaders and students gathered through school visits conducted in a representative sample of schools. It begins by considering the background of Music with Section 1 presenting an overview of the current context, including consideration of relevant policy developments. Section 2 sets out how Music related education is currently provided for within the Irish curriculum before focusing in more detail on the subject. Section 3 provides an overview of the insights gained through the school visits conducted and the lived experience of schools, teachers, and students. Section 4 considers similar education opportunities internationally and presents an overview of four different jurisdictions. Section 5 draws on the previous sections to categorise and briefly discuss some issues identified for consideration in the redevelopment of Music before finally setting out a proposed brief for this work in Section 6, which will guide the work of the Development Group.

## 1. Background and Context

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This section sets out some developments in the area of Music since its initial introduction, before focusing on the education and broader policy landscape which are important contextual considerations for the review and redevelopment of Music.

The current [Leaving Certificate Music syllabus](#) was introduced in 1996 and first assessed in 1999, replacing a curriculum which dated from the 1970's. The 1996 syllabus aims to provide continuity and progression from the Junior Certificate syllabus (1989), and a general education in music for all students, regardless of whether or not they proceed to further study or a career in music. The syllabus aims to follow the structure of the Junior Certificate syllabus by encouraging the development of musical creativity, sensitivity, expression and potential of students through active involvement in composing, listening and performing. In the intervening period, and in line with the Framework for Junior Cycle (2015), the Junior Cycle Music curriculum was updated in 2018, replacing the 1989 Junior Certificate syllabus. This revised specification includes a move from higher and ordinary level to common level, a learning outcomes-based approach and the introduction of a dual approach to assessment. Further information relating to Junior Cycle Music can be found in the next section.

Within the broader education policy landscape, the [Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027](#) recognises the potential of digital technologies within the curriculum. It places an emphasis on the role of digital technology in supporting and enhancing teaching, learning and assessment. Appropriate use of digital technologies in the music classroom has the potential to enhance learning and creative opportunities for students. This is of particular significance due to the growth in the range of applications and the plethora of software packages which can be used to support music practices in areas such as music notation, creation, analysis, virtual instruments, recording, mixing and music production.

The [Arts in Education Charter \(2012\)](#) was a joint initiative by the then Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (DAHG) in conjunction with the Department of Education (DE), working with the Arts Council. The charter underwent a review in 2020. It aims to integrate the arts into the education system, emphasising the importance of the arts in fostering creativity and developing the whole student.

In September 2015, as part of the charter, the Arts Council published a ten-year strategy, [Making Great Art Work](#), setting out its aims to lead development of the arts in Ireland. The third publication, *Making Great Art Work: Three Year Plan 2023-2025*, aims to continue to invest in children and young people. Part of this investment is €3 million yearly into the *Creative Schools* initiative in partnership with the Department of Education. The report states that this initiative has reached 831 schools and engages 80 creative associates to work in those schools.

Creative Youth aim to increase opportunities for activity and participation in creativity both in formal education and out-of-school settings. [The Creative Youth Plan \(2023 - 2027\)](#) is based on a number of key principles: We listen, We collaborate, We innovate and We are Inclusive. Since the introduction of the plan there has been a broad range of projects and initiatives available to support young people in the area of creativity. These projects and initiatives include Creative Clusters, DesignSKILLS, Early Years and Care Bursary Projects.

As part of the Creative Youth Plan, the Department of Education announced the launch of BLAST (Bringing Live Arts to Students and Teachers). Over the 2024/2025 school year BLAST will enable 425 new arts in education residencies in schools with the aim of providing students with time and space to work with a professional artist/creative practitioner on imaginative and creative projects. The project aims to support the development of skills and competencies such as collaboration, critical thinking, problem solving and innovation. Cruinniú na nÓg is another initiative of the Creative Youth Plan designed to unlock the creative potential of young people through a wide array of creativity events including music, visual arts, dance and coding.

Oide Creativity (formerly *Arts in Junior Cycle*) presents a series of professional learning experiences open to all teachers to support their engagement with the arts and learning. The learning experiences aim to provide teachers with practical, creative methodologies to use in their classroom practice. The vision of Oide Creativity is for all teachers to value, enjoy and be enriched by the arts and creative practices, and to see creativity as integral to teaching and learning, enhancing well-being and reflective practice. Workshops are offered to teachers both in person and online nationally.

The mission of Music Generation is to empower children and young people, from age 0 to 18, in Ireland to realise their full potential through access to and participation in performance music education. Currently, there are 25 Music Generation areas in Ireland offering music education initiatives to engage and inspire children and young people living and learning in their locality.

## Section Summary

- The syllabus for Leaving Certificate Music was revised in 1996 and was first assessed in 1999. It aims to provide continuity and progression in the skills acquired through the Junior Certificate syllabus and a general education in music for all. It encourages the development of musical creativity, sensitivity and potential through active involvement in composing, listening and performing. A new junior cycle Music specification was introduced in 2018.
- There has been increasing efforts to foster creativity and music engagement among students and teachers with the introduction of initiatives and policies such as the Arts in Education Charter (2012) Creative Youth Plan (2023 – 2027), BLAST, Cruinniú na nÓg, Oide Creativity and Music Generation.
- In the context of increasing opportunities to access creativity and music engagement, a revised Leaving Certificate Music curriculum is important and timely.

## 2. Music in the curriculum

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This section provides an overview of the opportunities for learning related to music currently available to students within the junior cycle and senior cycle programmes. It then focuses on the participation rates in Leaving Certificate Music and explores insights from the most recent Chief Examiner's Report and considers relevant learning from subject inspection reports from the Department of Education (DE).

### Music in junior cycle

#### Junior Cycle Music

In accordance with the [Framework for Junior Cycle 2015](#), a revised [subject specification for Junior Cycle Music](#) was introduced to schools in September 2018 replacing the Junior Certificate Music syllabus (1989). The learning outcomes-based specification aims to '*...contribute to the development of artistic awareness and understanding*', broadening students' capabilities to create and engage with authentic and original music for today's musical world through three interconnected strands: Procedural knowledge, Innovate and ideate and Culture and context (NCCA, 2017, p.6).

Students' engagement and learning are optimised by a fully integrated experience across these three strands. To give further emphasis to the integrated nature of learning, the outcomes for each strand are grouped by reference to three elements: Creating and exploring, Participating and music-making and Appraising and responding. Moving from a syllabus which contained both prescribed and choice listening material, the revised specification offers teachers flexibility and autonomy to facilitate learning that reflects students' own interests, choices and their creative spirit.

Another significant change in junior cycle Music is in the area of assessment. Formative assessment practices, alongside the two Music Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs), are complemented by a practical examination (30%) and a written examination (70%), both of which are marked by the State Examinations Commission (SEC). The CBAs are designed to offer students the opportunity to demonstrate understanding and skills in a way which would not be possible in a traditional written examination. CBA 1: The Composition Portfolio is assessed in second year and provides students with an opportunity to celebrate their achievements as creators of music. CBA 2: The Programme Note is assessed in third year and is designed to inform the audience on the content of the students' upcoming practical examination performance.

As part of the practical examination, students perform three musical songs/pieces. Solo and group performing may be freely mixed on a variety of instruments or through a combination of voice and instruments. The specification has been designed for a minimum of 200 hours of timetabled engagement.

Junior cycle Music underwent an [Early Enactment Review](#) in 2024. The flexibility afforded by the specification was broadly welcomed with a focus on creativity and music-making viewed as increasing the relevance and enjoyment of music for students. The introduction of CBAs was viewed as largely positive with aspects such as the development of key skills, student choice and different modes of assessment welcomed. There was also broad welcome for the parameters of the practical examination which were viewed as inclusive and facilitating student ownership of

music-making. The written examination was viewed as reinforcing the non-linear approach to engaging with the specification and promoting the integrated nature of music learning. There was feedback which indicated a lack of continuity and progression from junior cycle to Leaving Certificate Music. Some concern was expressed in relation to a reduced emphasis on the development of musical literacy and critical analysis skills and the need for additional clarity in relation to some learning outcomes was identified. The findings from this review are timely and provide important details worthy of consideration in the context of a revised Leaving Certificate Music curriculum.

## Artistic Performance Short Course

The provision of Short Courses at junior cycle offers students further opportunities to engage in the arts. [Artistic Performance: Engaging with the Arts](#) provides a framework for schools to offer a variety of artistic disciplines to students. It gives the students the opportunity to engage in the planning for and participation in an artistic performance. The specification is structured around three strands: Experiencing the Arts (gaining insights into the art form, how it is communicated and potential roles); Planning and preparing (researching, observing, practicing and rehearsing); and Participation and performance (demonstrating and communicating skills developed in a final performance). This course is assessed through one Classroom-Based Assessment of the group performance and rewards technical control, creativity, interpretation and teamwork. The performance options include staging of a school play, a musical, scripting, editing and filming a screenplay.

## Music in senior cycle

Students at senior cycle have the opportunity to study the subject of Music through the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programmes. Transition Year (TY) offers schools a high degree of autonomy and flexibility when designing their programme. In TY, students may have the opportunity to engage in learning associated with music depending on the design of the schools' TY programme. Traditionally, in many schools, TY is the site of an annual school musical or drama production.

In September 2024, as part of the redevelopment of Senior Cycle, a new [Transition Year Programme Statement](#) was published. The new programme statement is '*designed around the development and learning of students moving from junior cycle into senior cycle*' (DE, 2024, p.7). Learning for students and the experiences which can support student development are described in four Student Dimensions: Personal Growth, Being a Learner, Civic and Community Engagement and Career Exploration.

## Leaving Certificate Established

The Senior Cycle Review Advisory Report (NCCA, 2002) highlighted the need for additional opportunities for students in senior cycle to engage in the creative arts. A new Leaving Certificate subject, [Drama, Film and Theatre Studies](#) is due to be implemented in a number of schools from September 2025. This subject extends the range of practical, arts-based subjects on the senior cycle curriculum, encouraging and promoting a well-rounded education. This subject will support students to develop creative and critical thinking skills and learn to apply their competencies in creative situations.

The current [Leaving Certificate Music syllabus](#) was introduced in 1996 and first assessed in 1999. The aims of the syllabus are:

- to provide continuity and progression in the skills acquired through the Junior Certificate syllabus in music, consistent with individual and special needs
- to provide a general education in music for all students, whether or not they proceed to further study or a career in music
- to encourage the development of musical creativity, sensitivity and potential through active involvement in performing, composing and listening to music
- to cultivate musicality and its expression
- to develop an informed interest in music and the enjoyment of music-making
- to foster a spirit of musical enterprise
- to develop the critical and imaginative faculties. (DES, 1996, p.1-2)

The structure of the Leaving Certificate Music syllabus follows on from the 1989 Junior Certificate syllabus with three essential music activities: composing, listening and performing. The objectives are that students will acquire sufficient knowledge and understanding to practice listening and composition with greater proficiency and interest and for students to become informed in relation to performing skills and to develop understanding of how music contributes to the social, historical, technological, economic and cultural aspects of life.

## Leaving Certificate Music in focus

This section explores participation rates in Leaving Certificate Music drawing on statistics from the State Examinations Commission (SEC) and provides an overview of assessment for certification and insights from SEC and Department of Education (DE) reports.

### Student participation

The number of students participating in the Leaving Certificate has increased from 2019-2024. Music participation rates have decreased slightly (1.04%) within the same time period, as indicated in Table 1 below.

Year	Higher Level	Ordinary Level	Total Candidates	Total LC candidates	Music as a % of total candidates
2019	6,234	425	6,659	56,071	11.87%
2020	6,509	427	6,936	57,569	12.04%
2021	6,435	425	6,860	59,852	11.46%
2022	6,234	485	6,719	58,056	11.57%
2023	5,869	416	6,285	58,006	10.83%

Table 1: Number of students sitting Leaving Certificate Music at higher and ordinary Level 2019-2023/4

These statistics provide an indication of the need to retain existing student numbers participating in music, in addition to considering how to broaden the appeal and attract more students to the subject. This will be an important consideration in redeveloping the subject.

## Assessment for certification

Leaving Certificate Music is currently available at two levels: ordinary and higher level. At both levels, each student must study three essential components: Composing, Listening and Performing and each component is allocated 100 marks and equates to 25% of the overall total of the final result.

Composing component:	100 marks	25%
Listening component:	100 marks	25%
Performing component:	100 marks	25%

A total of 400 marks are available at both ordinary and higher level.

At ordinary level the component in which the student achieves the highest mark is treated as a weighted component and is reweighted to a mark out of 200. The other components, having a mark allocation of 100 marks each, brings the total to 400 marks.

At higher level, the assessment structure is devised to allow students to select and specialise in one of the three components of the course, and to gain up to 50% of the total marks available in the component best suited to their skills, interests and abilities. The structure requires students to nominate one of the three components of their choice as their elective. For each component nominated, the student must undertake additional studies. [The Chief Examiner's Report for Music \(2012\)](#) states that in 2012, 99.7% of students who studied higher level opted for the higher level elective in performing.

The performing component is assessed by external examiners appointed by the State Examinations Commission (SEC) typically during March/April of sixth year. The composing and listening components are assessed by aural and written examinations respectively, which are held in June of sixth year and both examinations are of 90 minutes duration. An outline of the content of these assessments is provided in Table 2 below.

Examination Component	Ordinary Level Requirements	Higher Level Requirements	Examination format and duration
<b>Practical Component</b>	Students must perform one unprepared test and one ordinary level performing activity: Two prepared songs or pieces or Two pieces demonstrating one type of improvisation or Conduct two pieces or songs and answer questions on unprepared score or Input using technology one score of two parts, print, record, save, close, retrieve and three edits.	Students must perform one unprepared test and one higher level performing activity or two ordinary level performing activities. Higher level performing activities: Three prepared songs or pieces or Three pieces demonstrating three types of improvisation or combination or Conduct three pieces or songs and answer questions on unprepared score or Input one score of two parts, print, record, save, close, retrieve and six edits and play two pieces from electronic repertoire or compile and play to own previously compiled backing track. Students taking the higher-level elective in performing are required to perform a programme that reflects a further expansion of the higher-level requirements.	Typically, in March/April by an external examiner appointed by the SEC. Ordinary level maximum time 10 minutes. Higher level (25%) maximum time 15 minutes. Higher level elective (50%) maximum time 25 minutes.
<b>Composition Component</b>	Melody writing eight bars in one of the following ways: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continuation of a given opening or</li> <li>• Setting music to a given text or</li> <li>• Composing to a given dance rhythm or metre or form,</li> </ul> Harmony exercises in one of the following ways: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Composing Melody and Bass Notes from a set of chords or</li> <li>• Adding bass notes and chord indications at cadence points or</li> <li>• Adding descant notes and chord indications at cadence points,</li> </ul>	Melody writing sixteen bars in one of the following ways: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continuation of a given opening or</li> <li>• Setting of a given text or</li> <li>• Composing to a given dance rhythm or metre and or form.</li> </ul> Harmony exercises in one of the following ways: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Composing melody and bass notes from a set of chords or</li> <li>• Composing bass notes and chord indications to a given tune or</li> <li>• Adding a countermelody or descant and chordal support to a given tune.</li> </ul> Students taking a higher-level elective in composition must do so by completing additional work in the form of a portfolio.	Written examination in June 1hour 30minutes duration
<b>Listening Component</b>	Answer questions based on four prescribed works, Irish music and Aural Skills. There are two groups of Set Works which rotate every three years.	Answer questions based on four prescribed works, Irish music and Aural skills. There are two groups of Set Works which rotate every three years. Students taking a higher-level elective in the listening component will select their own special study, topic subject to criteria set out in the syllabus.	Written examination in June 1hour 30minutes duration

Table 2: An outline of assessment requirements at Leaving Certificate ordinary and higher level Music.

## Insights from recent Department of Education Inspection Reports

In preparing the Background Paper and Brief, Department of Education Music [Inspection Reports](#) from the last five years were examined. These inspection reports do not examine practices specific to Leaving Certificate Music but they provide valuable insights into the types of learning experiences music students are engaging with and recommend approaches which are worth considering in the redevelopment of the subject.

Across the reports there was strong reference to learning experiences being most successful when all three disciplines of music (composing, listening and performing) were integrated effectively, contextualised and rooted in meaningful, practical music-making and listening activities.

In addition, reports frequently recommend providing opportunities for students to make meaningful connections between composition and real-life music. It was suggested that students should be afforded the opportunity to perform or listen to their compositions to support amending or adjusting them. In some reports, it was recognised that composition was being experienced as a theoretical, technical exercise and there was reference to composing 'hints and tricks' which helped students to acquire technical features of composition. Where theoretical aspects of music were experienced, the sound before symbol approach was lauded to enable students to explore the parameters of music more meaningfully, reinforce musical concepts, develop understanding of the composition process and to encourage students to think musically.

## Insights from Chief Examiner's Report

The most recent [Chief Examiner's Report for Music](#) (SEC, 2012) provides insights into the choices made by students in the examination and provides observations from the Chief Examiner.

The report states that in 2012, 19 students (0.3% of the total HL candidature) elected to present a higher-level elective, in a component other than performing (i.e. composing or listening). 99.7% elected a higher level performing elective. In feedback related to performing, the report notes that the 'popular' genre was the preferred style, with students also presenting in areas such as rap, technology and traditional Irish music and on both traditional and non-native instruments. The report notes that some students performed their own compositions. Sight-reading and aural memory rhythm were the most popular unprepared tests at both higher and ordinary level.

Lack of critical analysis skills, ability to provide descriptive or explanatory answers to the required level and an unfamiliarity with some musical terminologies were identified as challenges for students in completing the listening examination.

In the composition examination, students are required to complete one melody and one harmony composition question. At both higher and ordinary level, the report notes that out of the six possible options available to students, the same two were taken by the majority of students. The most popular melody option was *Continuation of a Given Opening* while *Composing Bass Notes and Chord Indications to a Given Tune* was most popular harmony option.

## Section Summary

- Junior Cycle Music was introduced in 2018. It promotes an interconnected and integrated approach through the three strands and three elements. Student learning is captured through two Classroom-Based Assessment and through a practical and written examination.
- An Early Enactment Review of Junior Cycle Music (2024) highlights a number of opportunities and challenges in enacting the specification.
- There has been an emphasis on supporting students to engage with creative arts at both junior and senior cycle. The provision of the junior cycle short course [Artistic Performance: Engaging with the Arts](#) and the introduction of a new subject, [Drama, Film and Theatre Studies](#) extend the range of practical, arts-based subjects on the curriculum.
- Senior cycle students have a range of opportunities to engage in music-related learning across senior cycle in the current Leaving Certificate Established Programme, Leaving Certificate Applied Programme and the Transition Year Programme.
- Leaving Certificate Music was introduced in 1996 and was first assessed in 1999. At both higher and ordinary levels, students are required to study three essential components: Composing, Listening and Performing.
- The terminal assessment of Leaving Certificate Music consists of a practical examination and two written examinations. There are a number of options for students to present for practical examination including group/solo, performing to one's own accompaniment and use of technology.
- The Composition examination requires students to complete one melody question and one harmony question. The Chief Examiner's Report states that students are engaging with a limited number of options in the composition examination.
- The listening examination assesses student learning in relation to four prescribed pieces of music, traditional Irish music history, song and dance and aural skills.
- Recent Department of Education Music school inspection reports emphasise a need for learning experiences to integrate composing, listening and performing. They recommend opportunities for students to make meaningful connections between composition and real-life music and to have opportunities to perform or listen to their compositions.

### 3. Insights from school visits

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School visits were conducted as part of the scoping work for this Background Paper. A representative sample was selected from the 48 schools that expressed an interest in becoming involved in music curriculum developments. Six schools were selected using criteria relating to DEIS status, gender, school size and type. Visits to these schools took place in September - October 2024 and involved focus group meetings with 41 senior cycle students, 11 teachers of music and 15 school leaders. The following section provides an overview of the insights gathered through these visits.

#### Approach to Integration of Musical Components

Feedback highlighted limited integration of the musical components of composing, listening and performing. Feedback suggested that the segregation of the components was related to content overload, structure of the syllabus, but predominantly related to the predictability of the assessment structure of the terminal examination. Where options are available in the current syllabus, students are choosing to engage in focused areas across the two years of study. Feedback in relation to each component is outlined below.

#### Composing

It was clear from feedback that participants felt that music has the potential to encourage creativity, self-expression, resilience, confidence and enjoyment. Participants indicated that the composition component, arguably one of the most significant areas for the expression of musical creativity, was constrained at leaving certificate. The predictability of the terminal examination questions was seen as the main cause of this constraint.

There were few, if any, references to students composing outside of the completion of, or preparation for, examination questions. There were some references to utilising themes from study materials such as prescribed set works or Irish dance tunes. Their use was also examination focused.

Feedback indicated that the presence of options within the melody and harmony on the examination paper has led to teachers and students specialising in a limited range of composition skills and techniques. In all schools, students and teachers reported engaging with only one melody question (Continuation of a Given Opening) and one harmony question (Composing bass notes and chord indications to a given tune), out of a possible combination of six available over the two years of study. Composition skills and techniques such as descant, countermelody and text setting were seldom engaged with. Teachers reported time to be the biggest challenge in engaging in other composition options or skills. A minority of teachers expressed feedback that the current composition options were adequate and should remain unchanged.

Students stated that they felt restricted in terms of the creative possibilities in composing. This restriction related to Western Classical music notation being the only option currently available for assessment in examination. Most students and some teachers suggested that other avenues for composition including composing on an instrument and the use of other forms of notation (guitar tab, digital technologies) should be explored in the redevelopment of the subject.

Students reported that the composition component was approached mainly in a theoretical, rather than a practical way. Feedback strongly indicated that composition in the classroom tended to focus on using a set of rules, tips and tricks and a structure to guide students in the completion of their composition activities. This tended to limit opportunities for authentic creativity and the development of other skills and techniques.

Feedback indicated a hope that the redevelopment of Leaving Certificate Music would give careful consideration to providing opportunities for all students to create and explore composition in a manner that will be inclusive of all styles, formats, instruments and student interests. Specific suggestions during school visits included:

- incorporating an element of free composition
- supporting the development of a composition portfolio
- facilitating the use of instruments and/or technology in composition
- providing opportunities to examine how composers and songwriters create music in the real-world
- increasing the relevance of composition for student learning
- providing opportunities for students to reflect on their work.

### **Listening:**

Some students indicated that the listening component was their favourite component. Students could relate it to their prior learning in junior cycle music. Students referenced satisfaction in being able to apply their musical knowledge, understanding, skills and critical thinking in the examination paper. Some students perceived the four set works as being too narrow a focus and they expressed a desire to engage with a broader range of musical styles and genres. Most students enjoyed the inclusion of some unstudied or unseen music which drew on the students' knowledge from across the two years of learning. Students and teachers stated they would like to see increased opportunities to engage in this type of learning in a redeveloped specification.

Teachers and students spoke positively about the development of score reading, analytical skills and musical literacy. Traditional Irish Music was viewed as important, but the range of material and content was considered too broad, tending to give rise to rote learning.

Teachers and students reported that the prescribed material should be updated and should integrate more readily with the composing and performing components. Their suggestions for the redevelopment of the subject included:

- the inclusion of a broader range of musical styles including choral music, modern or contemporary music, jazz, RnB and opera
- increasing the breadth of musical styles and genres so that students can broaden their musical knowledge and their understanding of the relationships between different genres, styles and their historical contexts
- providing greater autonomy and flexibility for teachers and students in choosing what to listen to

- reducing the breadth of content for Irish Traditional Music in favour of more in-depth development of aural skills, musical literacy and understanding in this genre
- incorporating more female representation across the specification.

### **Performing:**

School leaders, teachers and students reported that the music-making or performing component of the syllabus was the most important for cultivating musicality and student expression of music. Most teachers and school managers spoke positively about the opportunity to obtain up to 50% of the overall grade through this component. While this 50% is available in composing and listening also, all students in the focus groups were selecting the higher level elective in performing.

It was interesting that both students and teachers reported that some students were able to complete parts of components outside the music classroom. This related principally to the performing component. The majority of students who were completing this component outside of the music classroom, saw this as a distinct advantage. While these students made reference to the compilation of performance programmes and rehearsing, refining and practicing in the classroom, there was little if any reference to the development of instrumental skills, techniques or learning to play the instrument within the classroom setting. In feedback, these students stated that they would welcome more opportunities to develop their performing skills throughout the two years of study using an integrated approach.

In schools where the performing component was taught in the classroom setting, students and teachers reported that they were engaging with composition, listening and performing in an integrated manner. The development of performing skills within the classroom facilitated collaborative learning, where they were learning to compose, listen and perform together. This approach helped students to draw together and understand the interconnectedness of composition, listening and performing.

All students in focus groups were selecting the higher-level elective in performing. Some students expressed satisfaction with the weighting for the elective while others were apprehensive. Most teachers expressed satisfaction with the weighting of the performing component. Teacher feedback indicated that their selection of the elective, reflected the one with which they were most comfortable. Teachers and students appeared unfamiliar with the requirements for other elective options.

Feedback on the option to use technology as part of the performance assessment highlighted that there was limited development of music skills or performing skills. It was viewed as mechanistic and procedural. Feedback questioned whether digital technology would be a more useful approach in developing creativity and composition skills, rather than performing skills. The higher-level elective in technology was viewed as beneficial to student learning because students are required to compile a backing track. Teacher feedback indicated that the option was 'useful' for students who were not confident instrumentalists/vocalists.

In redeveloping the subject, suggestions which emerged in relation to the performance component included:

- embedding performing within the everyday teaching and learning in the classroom
- promoting collaborative practice in the area of performing
- promoting learning in performance in conjunction with the learning in the areas of composing and listening
- examining the role and nature of digital technology in the area of performing and updating digital technology to reflect modern technological advances, providing new ways to learn and engage with music.

Integration of the three components of composing, listening and performing will be central to considerations in redeveloping the subject. The structure (strands and learning outcomes), language and contexts within which students engage with music will require careful examination. The specification will need to provide opportunities for all students to engage with each of the components within the music classroom.

### Curriculum continuity

The current syllabus aims 'to provide continuity and progression in the skills acquired through the Junior Certificate syllabus in music' (DE, 1996 p.1). It is not surprising that because the junior Certificate syllabus was replaced by the junior cycle Music specification in 2018, a lack of continuity and progression in the skills and types of learning acquired through junior cycle was identified by participants.

The majority of students in focus group sessions had studied junior cycle music. Many teachers and students welcomed the flexibility and autonomy offered through the learning outcomes at junior cycle. Classroom-Based Assessment 1: Composition Portfolio was frequently referenced by teachers for its ability to support student choice and promote creativity. Students and teachers stated that they enjoyed the freedom to compose and create new music using instruments, voices, traditional notation and notation software and digital technology in a variety of ways for a variety of purposes at junior cycle. Teachers welcomed the broadening of performance parameters at junior cycle and stated that similar consideration should be given in redeveloping the subject at leaving certificate. New areas of study at junior cycle such as music industry, sight-reading rhythm and improvisation were reported to be having a positive impact on students' musical skills as they progressed to Leaving Certificate.

Many of the key skills which students had developed throughout junior cycle, most notably working with others and being creative, were reported to be less visible in Leaving Certificate Music. This was echoed by students who asked for more opportunities to engage in group work when composing, listening and performing in the redeveloped specification while also recognising that working individually was beneficial.

Providing continuity and progression in the learning and skills acquired through the Junior Cycle Music specification will be an important consideration in the redevelopment of the subject.

## Scope of the subject

In all schools visited, it was reported that students who had not studied the subject at junior cycle were supported to engage with the subject ab initio, although it was viewed as more challenging for students who did not sing or play an instrument. Some reported that musical activities in Transition Year were acting as a catalyst in encouraging students to consider the subject for Leaving Certificate.

The objectives of the current syllabus include, to better inform students in relation to performing skills and to develop understanding of how music contributes to the social, historical, technological, economic and cultural aspects of life (DES, 1996, p.1-2). Overall, the subject was reported to have little relevance for life beyond school in contemporary careers relating to music such as songwriting, music production, sound engineering or other careers.

In a redeveloped subject greater access to technology, stimulation of curiosity and an enjoyment of learning as well as catering to students' interest in and their ability to adapt and apply their learning in other contexts were viewed as important in order to broaden the scope of the subject and attract students to the subject.

## Additional Assessment Component (AAC)

Teachers, students and senior management broadly welcomed the opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning in a manner not currently facilitated by the terminal examination. The AAC received considerable feedback in relation to the weighting of the component. Senior management, teachers and some students expressed concerns regarding a weighting of 40%, a reduction from the current potential 50% available for students selecting the higher-level elective in Performing. A musical performance was suggested as the most appropriate form of AAC.

In some feedback, students and teachers stated that the AAC might provide opportunities to experience composition in a more creative, authentic, real-life manner, facilitating the development of creative skills through digital technology, instrument(s) and voice(s).

## Section Summary

- The components of music are integrated in the new junior cycle music specification. A redeveloped Leaving Certificate Music should build on this integrated approach to avoid the components being engaged with in isolation.
- The redevelopment of Leaving Certificate Music was viewed as providing opportunities to develop many of the key competencies of senior cycle such as working with others and being creative.
- The opportunity to gain 50% in the Leaving Certificate Music practical examination was highly valued by the majority of participants. Some feedback indicated that the content and balance of the practical assessment must ensure that it is accessible to all students.
- The redevelopment of the subject was viewed as an opportunity to broaden its appeal, through the updating of material and inclusion of more creative composition opportunities which are relevant and related to real-life musical experiences.

- It was noted that the design of a new Music specification would need to reconsider the nature and use of digital technologies and to ensure their integration across the specification in teaching, learning and assessment.
- Careful consideration will need to be given to the design and content of the Additional Assessment Component, to ensure access for all students.

## 4. International trends in Music education

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### Introduction

To inform the redevelopment of senior cycle education, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is examining the provision of senior cycle subjects in international jurisdictions. This section considers the music education landscape internationally. A review of upper secondary Music education in a number of jurisdictions: England, the International Baccalaureate (IB), Northern Ireland and Victoria (Australia), illustrates the main areas of study within these curricula and offers some perspectives of upper secondary music curriculum, structures and approaches to assessment.

The jurisdictions were selected as they offer the curriculum through English, and all offer stand-alone music specifications. The curricula are relatively recent in all jurisdictions. Two of the jurisdictions (GCSE Music UK and IB) were included in the Background Paper and Brief for the review of junior cycle Music (2016), a deliberate overlap to facilitate consideration of alignment between junior and senior cycle.

### England

#### Context: place and purpose of Music

Students in senior secondary education in England, aged 16-18, can choose up to five A Level subjects, but usually take three. Those choosing the two-year [Music A Level](#) offered by the AQA awarding body learn to develop and apply musical knowledge, understanding and skills to form a personal and meaningful relationship with music. They are encouraged to engage critically and creatively with a wide range of music and musical contexts, and to reflect on how music is used in the expression of personal and collective identities. The course, which was introduced in 2016, and first examined in 2018, is designed for 360 hours of guided learning.

The [AQA Music A Level specification](#) aims to allow students to develop particular strengths and interests, encourage lifelong learning, and provide access to higher education and university degree courses in music and music-related subjects as well as music-related and other careers. The specification builds on the knowledge, understanding and skills established in music at Key Stage 4 (secondary phase education for age 14 to 16) and in GCSE qualifications (taken at age 16). Students may study Music A Level ab initio, although many schools have a GCSE music requirement for entry to the course.

#### Curriculum and Assessment

Music A Level has three core areas: Appraising Music, Performance and Composition. Assessment requires students to develop a broad understanding of the connections between the knowledge, understanding and skills set out in the specification as a whole; and to demonstrate their understanding of the relationships between theory and practice.

Appraising Music: students appraise, develop and demonstrate an in-depth knowledge and understanding of musical elements, musical contexts and musical language. They develop this knowledge and understanding through three of seven areas of study: one which is compulsory and two which are selected from other areas. Content for each area of study is prescribed in the specification.

The assessment of Appraising Music is an externally marked examination and constitutes 40% of the total marks for qualification.

**Performance:** students learn to interpret musical elements, using resources and techniques as appropriate, and to communicate musical ideas with technical and expressive control. They are able to demonstrate understanding of context, including the chosen style or genre of the music being performed and the composer's purpose and intention.

The Performance assessment is externally marked and constitutes 35% of the total marks for qualification. The student can perform through one of the following, or through a combination of: instrumental/vocal solo and/or in an ensemble; and/or music production via technology.

**Composition:** students learn how to develop musical ideas, including extending and manipulating musical ideas, and compose music that is musically convincing. They compose one or both of: instrumental/vocal music and production - generating music entirely digitally, using music software, without notated score but with accompanying annotation.

The Composition assessment is externally marked and constitutes 25% of the total marks for qualification. Each student must compose two pieces. One composition must be in response to an externally set brief and the other composition is freely composed by the student. For both compositions, students must be able to present written evidence that details the composition's structure and musical substance. A Programme note of approximately 150 words must be provided for each composition.

## Qualification in A Level Music Technology

England also offer a separate A Level qualification in Music Technology called the [Pearson Edexcel Level 3 Advances GCE in Music Technology](#). First introduced in 2017, the qualification aims to support students to form personal and meaningful relationships with music technology by placing emphasis on both practical and theoretical elements. It is designed to develop a broad range of musical technology knowledge and skills as well as transferable skills including project management, creativity, imagination, appraising and analysis which are relevant for students and who can see their practical application in everyday life. The course also aims to support students to progress to further study in Music Technology, Sound Production, Sound Engineering or other courses requiring a similar skill set.

Three Areas of Study underpin the qualification. They are:

1. Recording and production techniques for both corrective and creative purposes.
2. Principles of sound and audio technology.
3. The development of recording and production technology.

Assessment involves four components: recording, technology-based composition, listening and analysis and a written/practical examination.

## International Baccalaureate (IB)

### Context: place and purpose of Music

With a presence in over 150 countries/territories, the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme (DP) is a two-year pre-university programme for students aged 16 to 19.

The [DP Music course](#), which sits under the arts academic area along with dance, film, theatre and visual arts aims to enable students to explore a range of musical contexts and make links to, and between, different musical practices, conventions and forms of expression, both individually and in collaboration with others; and evaluate and develop critical perspectives on their own music and the work of others. It combines practical work, theoretical and technical training and the development of creative competencies. It integrates deep listening skills, performance proficiency, compositional craft, the ability to discuss music critically, justify creative choices, and develop a capacity for entrepreneurship in the musical world.

Similar to higher and ordinary level at Leaving Certificate, the Diploma Programme Music is available at standard level and higher level. Students may take Music ab initio. The programme was published in 2020 and first assessed in 2022.

## Curriculum and Assessment

Throughout the programme, students embody three roles: the researcher, the creator and the performer. Each role is related through teaching and assessment to the three processes of exploring, experimenting and presenting music.

The programme focuses on four syllabus components, three at standard level and one which is for higher level only. These are:

- Exploring music in context
- Experimenting with music
- Presenting music
- The contemporary music maker (higher level only)

The course aims to be inclusive of students with wide-ranging personal and cultural musical backgrounds and, for that reason, in place of prescribed musical content, students and teachers have the agency to personalise the curriculum to include unique approaches to musical forms, genres and pieces. There are also four areas of inquiry which are: music for sociocultural and political expression; music for listening and performance; music for dramatic impact, movement and entertainment and music technology in the electronic and digital age.

Engagement with the areas of inquiry takes place across three contexts - personal, local and global, encouraging students to move beyond familiar musical material (personal context), to experience music from the culture or community around them (local context), as well as engaging with previously unfamiliar music (global context).

The aim is that, by the end of the course, students will have analysed a wide range of music; engaged with music technology; gained confidence in the essential processes associated with music-making; developed as holistic musicians; developed both independent and collaborative working skills; and honed their inquiry, reflection and critical thinking skills.

Students taking the course are assessed through coursework: Common Assessment Tasks such as an exploratory portfolio, an experimentation report, a musical presentation and a multimedia presentation. The assessment tasks aim to address the concept of holistic musical development by removing optionality, and consequently the possibility of students specialising in one skill at the expense of others, and all tasks incorporate practical music-making. The discrete HL extension

component encourages students to work within the parameters of real-life music industry practices.

## Northern Ireland

### Context: place and purpose of Music

The CCEA [GCE A Level in Music](#) is a two-year senior secondary course which aims to allow 16- to 18-year-old students to create and perform music which expresses their own interests and style. It promotes knowledge, understanding and appreciation of past and present musical styles, traditions and contexts, and aims to accommodate the needs and interests of a wide variety of students.

Although students do not need to have reached a particular level of attainment before beginning to study GCE A Level Music, [the specification in Music](#) builds on learning from compulsory secondary education and the subject knowledge and skills developed during Key Stages 1 to 3 (ages 4/5 to 14) and in GCSE Music (the examination taken by 16-year-olds at the end of compulsory secondary education in Key Stage 4). Many of the students following the A Level Music course will be experienced performers and the specification aims to provide them with an opportunity to develop this talent, and to broaden their understanding of compositional techniques and the evolution of a variety of musical styles.

Introduced in 2016, the GCE A level course is available at two levels: Year 1 of the course leads to GCE AS Level, which can be taken as a standalone qualification; Year 2 to the full (A2) A Level. Guided learning hours (as for all GCE A Level courses) are 180 hours for the (one-year) AS Level course and 360 hours for the (two-year) full A Level course.

### Curriculum and Assessment

The CCEA GCE A Level Music curriculum incorporates three fundamental musical activities:

- **Performing:** students develop skills in singing and/or playing an instrument of their own choice. They create a performance with technical control and accuracy and in doing so interpret and communicate the composer's intentions with an appropriate sense of style. Students also engage in reflection, analysis and evaluation in preparing for their performance.
- **Composing:** students develop their ability to create, organise and develop musical ideas; use harmony effectively; control and use instrumental and textural resource effectively; make use of music technology; and analyse and reflect on their work.
- **Responding to music (listening and appraising):** students develop an awareness of the relationship between music and its context, including the influences that maintain continuity and cause change, and develop knowledge, understanding and appreciation of music through the composing and performing activities and the breadth and depth of study.

The above key areas are set out as six units in the GCE A Level Music specification: three (Performing, Composing, and Responding to music) making up the Advanced Subsidiary Level qualification, and a further three making up the full Advanced Level. Content for 'Responding to music', including the study of specific genres, works and composers, is prescribed.

Units are assessed at a standard appropriate for students who have completed the first part (year 1) of the GCE A Level course. Teachers are expected to manage the assessment conditions of internally assessed tasks for composing to ensure fairness and reliability. For the A2 2 Unit in composing, marks and samples are externally moderated. It is worth noting that at both AS and A Level, marks across each of the musical activities (composing, listening and responding to music) are given equal weighting in the assessment.

The GCE Music programme provides the following interesting approaches to composition. One type of composition task asks students to compose one piece of music. Students may choose their own brief, compositional style and resources. Another composition task utilises technology. This task asks students to create an arrangement based on their choice of stimulus from two provided for in pre-release stimulus material. Each stimulus is a melody. Students use sequencing technology, multitrack recording technology or a combination of both to create their arrangement. For their composition tasks, students must submit an analytical and reflective written commentary.

## Victoria (Australia)

### Context: place and purpose of Music

The study of [Music](#) for the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) (the senior secondary leaving certificate) is based on active engagement and participation in all aspects of music through creating, performing, responding and analysing.

The two-year VCE Music course aims to enable students to develop and practise musicianship; perform, create, arrange, improvise, analyse, recreate, reimagine and respond to music from diverse times, places, cultures and contexts including recently created music; communicate understanding of cultural, stylistic, aesthetic and expressive qualities and characteristics of music; explore and strengthen personal music interests, knowledge and experiences; and use their imagination and creativity, and personal and social skills in music making. It also aims to enable students to access pathways to further education, training and employment in music, and to participate in lifelong music learning and the musical life of their community.

There are no prerequisites for entry to the VCE course in Music. The two-year course, which sits under the [Performing Arts](#) learning area, alongside dance, drama, and theatre studies, was introduced in 2022.

### Curriculum

The VCE Music curriculum comprises four overarching units:

- Unit 1: Organisation in Music: the exploration and development of students' understanding of how music is organised and the possibilities of musical organisation.
- Unit 2: Effect in Music: the way music can be used to create an intended effect.
- Unit 3: Music Inquiry: Influence in Music; Music Contemporary Performance; Music Repertoire Performance; Music Composition.
- Unit 4: Music Inquiry: Project; Music Contemporary Performance; Music Repertoire Performance; Music Composition.

Teachers are expected to develop courses that provide appropriate opportunities for students to demonstrate satisfactory achievement of unit outcomes. Content is not prescribed, although guidance for teachers is provided. There are four focus areas for the study of music:

- Performing: the intentional communication of musical ideas to an audience.
- Creating: the processes used to improvise, arrange and compose music.
- Analysing: in-depth investigation of music works/styles.
- Responding: the perception and understanding of organised sound via listening.

All assessment for Units 1 and 2 of VCE Music is school-based and procedures for the assessment of levels of achievement are a matter for school decision and are not reported to the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA).

For Units 3 and 4, the VCAA specifies the assessment procedures through designated assessment tasks. Students' level of achievement is determined by school-assessed coursework (SAC), externally assessed tasks (EAT), and external assessment (examinations which are set and marked by the VCAA). Performance examinations are a live performance before a panel of assessors. Students may present as a soloist or as a member of a group. School-assessed coursework tasks must be a part of the regular teaching and learning programme and must not unduly add to the workload associated with the programme.

Externally assessed tasks are a folio, submitted by the student. It includes original music work between 4 and 5 minutes in total and presented in a digital notation and audio format and documentation which includes a description of the creative process, an analysis of the final work(s) and a discussion piece

Folio submissions are assessed by a panel appointed by the VCAA, in accordance with the VCAA assessment criteria for the task.

## Section summary

- As in Ireland, where Leaving Certificate Music is assessed at either ordinary or higher level, the IB Music Diploma Programme, GCE A Level Music in Northern Ireland, and A Level Music in the UK are offered at two levels.
- While there are nuances in the individual jurisdiction curricula and contexts for the teaching and learning, across the four jurisdictions, the curriculum focus is similar to that in Ireland – composing (creating), and listening (responding to, appraising and analysing music) and performing.
- In the majority of jurisdictions, the assessment weighting for the performing component is different from the current Leaving Certificate performance elective option of 50%. At A Level Music, performing constitutes 35% of the total marks, in the IB Music Diploma this figure is 30% and at GCE A Level this figure is 32.5%.

- In each jurisdiction, music curricula emphasise the development of students' personal musical interests and style, while building their knowledge of a wide range of music and musical contexts, and the social, cultural and historical significance of music.
- There are aspects of curricula examined which mirror musical activities at junior cycle level, for example the inclusion of a Programme Note (A Level) and Portfolio (IB and Victoria).
- Music technology (in which there are also separate A Level qualifications in England) is integral to the curricula of jurisdictions selected and offers opportunities for students to engage in creative composition and production, providing a solid foundation for students who wish to pursue learning or careers related to Music Technology.
- In the IB Diploma programme the deliberate removal of optionality in order to avoid students specialising in only one skill, is at odds with the current Leaving Certificate composition requirements of the syllabus where there is optionality.

## 5. Issues for Consideration

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This section sets out a number of issues for consideration in the redevelopment of Leaving Certificate Music. These arise from the nature of the subject itself, in addition to drawing on themes emerging in the previous sections of this Background Paper.

### Integration of core musical components

The central issue for consideration in redeveloping Leaving Certificate Music is the integration of the three components: composing, listening and performing. This paper has highlighted a lack of integration between the three components and a predominance of assessment driven teaching and learning. Integrating the three components will require significant structural changes in a redeveloped subject.

This paper has highlighted that some learning in the current syllabus can, and is, being engaged with outside of the music classroom. This is most evident in the performing component. In a redeveloped specification, the key consideration in promoting the integration of the components is to ensure that performing is embedded into teaching, learning and assessment.

Teachers and students are confining composition to a focused set of skills and techniques, despite the availability of a number of composition options in the current syllabus. The current syllabus requires students to present their compositions using Western Classical music notation. Other forms of notation and options for students to present their compositions could be considered in the redevelopment of the subject. Opportunities should be provided for personal expression and for reflecting their own lived musical experiences and those of other composers.

How to engage students with a broader range of musical styles and genres in addition to the issue of autonomy versus prescribed material will also need to be considered. If material is prescribed, it is important to think about whether students should be exposed to material in addition to what is prescribed and examine approaches which will help to achieve this.

### Curriculum continuity

The current syllabus (1996) predates the reform of junior cycle Music (2018). It is not surprising therefore that the Background Paper has identified a mismatch between the junior cycle Music specification and Leaving Certificate Music. An important consideration in the development of the new Leaving Certificate Music specification is the need to ensure continuity from junior cycle so that the types of learning, such as portfolio development, music industry, and areas of interest such as creative composition and choice which motivates students at this level progresses into their study of music at Leaving Certificate. In addition, the progression of opportunities to develop skills such as working with others and being creative will need to be considered.

Key questions for consideration in the redevelopment of Leaving Certificate Music include:

- How to progress learning from junior cycle through Leaving Certificate Music.
- How will the redeveloped subject support both students who have, and have not, engaged with junior cycle Music?
- How will the redeveloped subject support and progress students' prior learning in the area of music?

- What opportunities are there for music students to integrate their learning in music with their learning in other subjects?

## Scope of the subject

The Background paper has indicated that the current syllabus is not adequately preparing students for careers in music or supporting students to develop understanding of how music contributes to the social, historical, technological, economic and cultural aspects of life. In redeveloping the subject, careful consideration will need to be given to:

- Identifying the types of learning most important and most relevant for students at this age and stage of learning. This will foster a lifelong engagement with music and equip students for further studies in music and the arts and for future careers,
- Promoting student self-expression and student choices across the specification,
- Determining the most effective teaching, learning and assessment approaches and activities to challenge, engage, and support high quality learning for all students engaging with the subject,
- Providing opportunities for students to engage meaningfully with composing, listening and performing in an integrated way,
- Being responsive to rapidly changing musical styles, existing and new genres of music, historical contexts and advances in digital technologies.

## The Role of Digital Technology in Music

Digital technology presents opportunities to enhance student experiences in Leaving Certificate Music, making it more engaging, relevant and accessible for students. This Background Paper has highlighted that the technology elements of the current syllabus are outdated and in need of modernisation. In reviewing technological advances and the inclusion of digital technology in a redeveloped specification, consideration needs to be given to: its authentic integration into the curriculum; maintaining a balance between traditional or other forms of notation and digital formats; utilisation of technology to enhance creativity and providing opportunities to use technology in ways which reflect real world music production and composition. The updating will need to be cognisant of the resource implications of such integration for schools.

## Assessment

The current assessment structure dominated feedback from students, teachers and school leaders during school visits. Each of the three musical components is currently assessed as a discrete entity: a composition examination, a listening examination and a practical examination, contributing to a lack of integration.

The predictability and optional nature of the composition examination has led to a narrow focus on the assessment of composition skills, with an over reliance on Western Classical forms of notation. The assessment of the listening component emerged as in need of updating. The performance component, which many were engaging with outside the classroom context, needs to be embedded into teaching, learning and assessment. The study and integration of the three components will need to be reflected and rewarded in the assessment structure of the revised specification.

Key considerations in redeveloping the subject in relation to assessment include:

- How the structure, strands and learning outcomes of the specification can support and promote an integrated approach to the musical components throughout the two years of Leaving Certificate,
- How to avoid the tendency to specialise in any one particular musical component to ensure instead that students can experience a broad range of musical learning,
- How to provide opportunities for student to engage in elements of creative composition using a broad range of formats,
- How the structure and format of the AAC can be designed so that there is parity of assessment approaches for both ordinary and higher level and how they can provide a common brief for all students to be assessed at the level at which the student sits the final written examination,
- How to motivate student engagement and participation in the subject through the AAC,
- How to ensure that the AAC remains relevant for students as areas such as technology and musical styles continue to evolve into the future,
- How the AAC can highlight and make visible, student learning in music and the relevance of music to their lives.

## Section Summary

- In redeveloping the specification, consideration will need to be given to its capacity to promote the vision and guiding principles of senior cycle.
- The revised Leaving Certificate Music specification will need to align its approach with the junior cycle specification with consideration given to autonomy and flexibility and with an emphasis on the integration of the musical components.
- The specification will seek to broaden the scope of teaching and learning to ensure it reflects traditional and contemporary musical experiences.
- A revised specification should incorporate digital technology, recognising its potential to enhance creativity and learning, student engagement, relevance and accessibility.
- Assessment in the new specification should seek to support, improve and recognise student learning using an integrated approach.

## 6. Brief for the review of Leaving Certificate Music

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NCCA has established a Development Group to undertake the task of redeveloping a curriculum specification for Leaving Certificate Music. The work of the Development Group is, in general terms, agreed by the NCCA Board for Senior Cycle and by the Council in the form of the brief set out below.

This brief is designed to provide the basis for redeveloping Leaving Certificate Music. While the brief is derived from the key insights and issues for consideration identified in the previous sections of this paper, it is also guided by the parameters for the design of assessment arrangements in the development of specifications for all Tranche 3

The specification will be student-centred and outcomes-based and in general terms, the specification should be broadly aligned with levels 4 and 5 of the National Framework of Qualifications. It will be available at both higher and ordinary level, and it will be designed to be taught and assessed in a minimum of 180 hours.

The specification will align to the template, agreed by Council, for curriculum specifications as set out in the [\*Technical form of curriculum specifications for subjects and modules in a redeveloped senior cycle\*](#) (NCCA, 2023). The Senior Cycle Key Competencies will be embedded in the learning outcomes.

The specification will be completed for Q2 2026.

More specifically, the development of the new specification for Music will address:

- How the specification aligns with the guiding principles of senior cycle and the vision for senior cycle education.
- How the specification can support continuity and progression, including how to connect with and build on learning at junior cycle and transition year and in other senior cycle subjects and modules as well as future learning in life, study, further education and training, higher education, apprenticeships, traineeships and the world of work regardless of whether students pursue a career in music or other pathways.
- How the specification can support the development of as wide a range of key competencies as possible relevant to future life, work and study.
- How the rationale for Leaving Certificate Music makes the ambitions of the subject visible and evident to students, teachers and parents.
- How to broaden the appeal of the subject and continue to promote uptake of the subject.
- How the specification can promote an integrated approach to composing, listening and performing.
- How the specification can support students to see music as relevant and related to their own real-life musical experiences, and the real-life musical experiences of musicians, composers and those who listen to music.
- How the specification, in its presentation and language register, can be student-centred and have a clear focus on how students will develop and demonstrate their learning in Music.

- How the specification can embrace and embed the potential of digital technology and technological advances in teaching, learning and assessment making the subject more engaging, relevant and accessible for students.
- How to offer increased, diverse and appropriate opportunities for student to develop critical, creative and innovative thinking.
- How the assessment of Leaving Certificate Music will align with the parameters for the design of assessment arrangements in the development of specifications for all Tranche 3 subjects and modules (Appendix 1). As noted in Appendix 1, there should be two assessment components: one written examination and one other assessment component.
- How the specification, in its structure and presentation, can help to support teachers in planning for teaching, learning and assessment.

The work of the Development Group will be based, in the first instance, on this brief. In the course of the work and deliberations of the Development Group, elaborations of some of these points and additional points may be added to the brief.

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## Appendix 1: Overarching parameters for the design of assessment arrangements in the development of specifications for all Tranche 3 subjects

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### 1. Executive summary

- The Minister for Education announced an update on September 20, 2023, on the approach to be taken to the introduction of new and revised subject specifications including how assessment would be addressed in those specifications. Specifically, each subject shall have an assessment component in addition to the final written examination.
- This assessment component (an AAC) will be worth at least 40% of the total available marks.
- Each subject is to have one written examination; typically marks for the written examination will be 60%.
- Typically, there should be two assessment components: One written examination and one other assessment component (an AAC).
- More than one AAC or written examination may be justified in exceptional circumstances and after extensive consideration of the overall assessment load on students. Such exception, however, would be based on strong, clear evidence that a second AAC or a second written paper in the final examination is essential to assess student learning which cannot be achieved through a single AAC and a single written examination paper.

### 2. Introduction

This document outlines the overarching assessment arrangements and parameters to guide the design of specifications for all Tranche 3 subjects which include:

- Agricultural Science
- Computer Science
- Design and Communication Graphics
- History
- Home Economics
- Mathematics
- Music
- Physics and Chemistry.

This advice is informed by ongoing work with Tranche 1 and 2 subjects and will be amended, as appropriate, for future tranches which may take account of their subject areas and existing assessment arrangements.

The arrangements as detailed here reflect the policy direction issued by the Minister of Education that all subjects will have an assessment component, to be in a form that is not a traditional written examination, for those components to be set and assessed by the SEC and thereby lead to a reduced emphasis on final examinations in June of 6<sup>th</sup> year.

Specifically, the arrangements for all assessment components as outlined in this document are framed by the Minister's announcement(s) on March 29, 2022, and subsequently on September 20-2023. Underpinned by the following understandings, the assessment components:

- will not take the form of traditional written examinations.
- will be set and marked by the SEC.

- will be subject to SEC arrangements for their completion, authentication, and submission.

In developing the arrangements outlined below, the following rationale for moving towards all subjects having another assessment component is central. This rationale is informed by deliberations on research commissioned by the NCCA and the SEC, and on the assessment literature more generally. From this work, it is evident that these components have the potential to:

- **Reduce dependence** on written summative examinations and therefore provide for a **broader assessment system**; written examinations have an important role but can be seen as a 'snapshot' of learning and can lead to teaching and learning having an excessive focus on examination preparation; other forms of assessment can mitigate the potential for this narrowing of learning by assessing aspects of student learning better and/or more comprehensively than written examinations alone can do; or assess learning that is not readily assessable through written examinations.
- Support and enhance teachers' understanding and assessment of **key competencies** by contributing to a greater understanding of how students' knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions are assessed.
- Provide opportunities for students and teachers to **reflect on student learning**, boost students' motivation to learn and enhance opportunities for formative feedback practices.
- Extend the range and diversity of assessment opportunities; including **spreading the assessment load** over the course of the last two years of senior cycle and thus contribute to a reduction in or spreading of pressure on students.
- Build and develop **teachers' assessment skills and assessment literacy** as teachers support students in working through the assessment activities as detailed within assessment briefs or guidelines.
- Generate student assessment data which can help reduce the vulnerability of the system to future unprecedented or unexpected system shocks such as COVID.
- Allow for assessment opportunities that are more **authentic** than a system relying on terminal written examinations solely.

It is also important to note that a review of the assessment literature more generally also indicates that when introducing other assessment components, it is necessary to consider how to mitigate risks, for example, of:

- over-assessment of students
- over-rehearsal of assessments
- the assessments becoming overly structured, compartmentalised, repetitive, and routine.

As is already the case where other forms of assessment apply, the new assessment arrangements will be guided by the overarching principles of equity, fairness, and integrity.

In addition, at a programme wide level (i.e. taking account of all subjects and modules implemented across schools), it is necessary to have regard to the overall assessment load on students primarily as well as on schools more generally. Whilst it can be expected that SDGs might focus on the approach to assessment in their own subject initially, they are encouraged to be mindful of the overall assessment load across all subjects and modules. Such programme level considerations will also include the methods of assessment being undertaken. As stated above more than one AAC or written examination may be justified in exceptional circumstances and the following section outlines the process for such cases.

### 3. Process

This section sets out the process through which a variation to the parameters defined in this document will be considered and decided upon; for example, an additional AAC or a second final written examination.

1. Following extensive discussion by the SDG and after exploration of a range of options for a single suitable AAC/single written examination for the subject, the NCCA Executive generates a written note setting out the strong, clear case being made by the Development Group.
2. The written case is agreed and signed off by the Development Group.
3. The written case is discussed with the Board for Senior Cycle.
4. The written case is discussed with the Council. On foot of this discussion, the Council decides whether or not to send the case forward to the Department.
  - a) Having considered the importance of managing and spreading the assessment load for students, if the Council decides that the case isn't sufficiently strong to merit consideration by the Department, the Council requests the Development Group to work on the basis of one AAC and one written examination.

OR

- b) Having considered the importance of managing and spreading the assessment load for students, if the Council decides that the case is sufficiently strong to merit consideration by the Department, the Council agrees to send the case forward to the Department of Education.
5. In the case of 4b, the written case is sent to the Senior Cycle Redevelopment Programme Management Office (SCRPMO) in the Department of Education for consideration and response.
6. The Department may convene the Senior Cycle Redevelopment Implementation Group (SCRIG) to support its consideration of the request for a variation. The SCRIG is a Department-led structure established to provide oversight and support the co-ordination of work across the key agencies/organisations contributing to the redevelopment of senior cycle. Its members include senior officials from the Department (Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit, Inspectorate, Teacher Professional Learning [TPL]), NCCA, SEC and Oide.
7. The Department decides to support or decline the request for the variation sought and communicates its decision in writing to the NCCA in a timely manner.
8. The Subject Development Group progresses its work in line with the Council's response (arising from 4a) or the Department's response (arising from 4b and 7).

#### **4. Timelines**

The process outlined above will require time. Such time, if involving a number of weeks, could have significant implications for the timeline for specific stages of work on the subject specification and/or the overall completion of the specification ahead of sending it to the Department for consideration. This time factor may necessitate NCCA organising additional online meetings of the Board for Senior Cycle and the Council in order to ensure the development work remains within the overall timelines.

Table 1 below sets out the general parameters and processes to guide the work of the subject development groups (SDG) as they consider the most appropriate assessment for each subject. The specific parameters for each of the Tranche 3 subjects are set out in Table 2.

**Table 1: Assessment parameters and processes – general application to tranche 3 subjects**

Considerations	Parameters to guide the work of the development group.
<b>Nature</b>	<p>The purpose and nature of the assessment component will be clearly outlined in the subject specification and accompanying guidelines to support the completion of the assessment. Details will be provided on the nature of the component. Existing examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• research project/extended essay</li> <li>• oral assessment</li> <li>• performance assessment</li> <li>• portfolio assessment</li> <li>• creation of an artefact</li> <li>• field study</li> <li>• experiment/ proof of concept/ practical investigation.</li> </ul> <p>The subject specification and the accompanying guidelines will articulate clearly what the students are required to do, the form(s) in which it can be carried out and submitted, and the workload expectations associated with the assessment. The alignment of the assessment component to a particular set of learning outcomes from the subject specification will be provided, as well as details on which key competencies and associated learning outcomes will be assessed. This does not preclude the same LOs from being assessed in the final examination.</p>
<b>Weighting</b>	The assessment component in each subject will be worth at least 40% of the total available marks.
<b>Timing</b>	The SDG will advise on the time required for the carrying out of the assessment component across the course of study.
<b>Completion and Submission</b>	<p>While the SDG may suggest when this may occur (as referenced above having regard to the assessment load on students in particular), a final decision will be made by the SEC following consideration of the overall schedule of completion dates for all assessments across all subjects. This will be finalised by the SEC following engagement with the NCCA and DE.</p> <p>The dates for final completion and/or submission of the assessment component by the student will be published by the SEC and this detail will not be included in the subject specification. (See table 1 below in relation to Mathematics also)</p>
<b>Design</b>	<p>The majority of assessment components will result in a completed item that is materially different to a traditional written examination and which tests different competencies being transmitted to the SEC and assessed by the SEC.</p> <p>In some instances, the design of the assessment may require examiners to visit schools to conduct the assessment but manageability at school and system level will need to be considered.</p>
<b>Guidance</b>	Guidelines to support the assessment components will be specific to each subject. These guidelines will be developed collaboratively by the NCCA

	<p>and SEC. They will be informed by the deliberations of the SDG during the development of the specification and will detail:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the purpose of the component concerned i.e., what it is intended to assess.</li> <li>• the nature of the assessment component/activity.</li> <li>• descriptors of quality in the form of a graduated rubric and details on assessment standards at higher and ordinary levels if deemed necessary by the assessment method.</li> <li>• details on the timing of the assessment (its duration and when it could happen).</li> <li>• guidance on the processes that may be used for the administration of the assessment.</li> </ul>
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**Table 2: Parameters for assessment arrangements for each Tranche 3 subject**

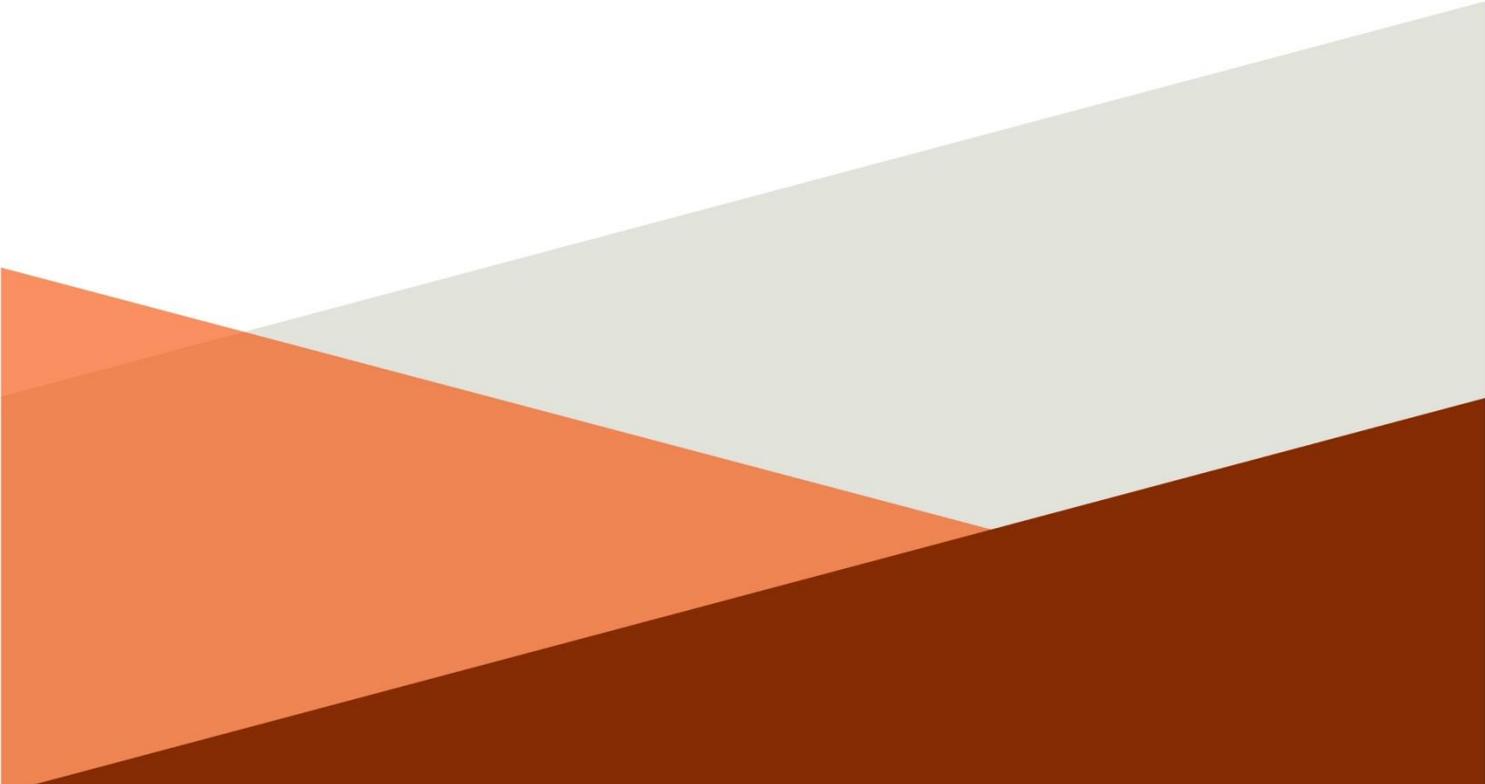
Subject	Current arrangements	Parameters for new assessment arrangements
<b>Agricultural Science</b>	<p>Written examination is 2.5 hours duration for higher level and ordinary level students and is awarded 300 of the 400 marks available (75%).</p> <p>Coursework is an Individual Investigative Study, which is done in response to a common brief from SEC and is worth 100 marks (25%).</p>	<p>Written examination: typically, 60% weighting.</p> <p>Assessment component: minimum 40% weighting.</p> <p>Written examination will be set at higher and ordinary levels.</p> <p>Assessment component would be based on one submission to SEC in response to a common brief.</p>
<b>Computer Science</b>	<p>The final examination is worth 70% and is 2.5 hours duration on one day towards the end of May. There is a paper-based element (1.5 hrs.; 130 marks) followed by a computer-based element (1 hr.; 80 marks).</p> <p>The coursework is worth 30% of the final marks. The common brief is released in December of 6<sup>th</sup> year and a report and summary video (90 marks) is typically submitted in March of 6<sup>th</sup> year. This is completed over a 10-week period.</p> <p>Coursework and practical are set at a common level but are graded in line with the standards that apply to the level at which the candidate sits the written examination.</p> <p>Written examination is examined at higher and ordinary levels.</p>	<p>Written examination: typically, 60% weighting.</p> <p>Assessment component: minimum 40% weighting.</p> <p>Written examination will be set at higher and ordinary levels.</p> <p>Assessment component would be based on one submission to SEC in response to a common brief.</p>

<p><b>Design and Communication Graphics</b></p>	<p>Written examination has 1 paper worth 240 marks which is 60% of the marks available. This paper is 3 hours in duration.</p> <p>Written examination is examined at higher and ordinary levels.</p> <p>Student assignment is worth 160 marks which is 40% of the marks available.</p> <p>The student assignment at higher level differs from the student assignment at ordinary level with a different brief set for HL and OL students. There are 9 outputs required in a portfolio for both levels with the HL page limit set at 14 pages and OL page limit 12 pages.</p>	<p>Written examination: typically, 60% weighting.</p> <p>Assessment component: minimum 40% weighting.</p> <p>Written examination will be set at higher and ordinary levels.</p> <p>Assessment component would be based on one submission to SEC in response to a common brief.</p>
<p><b>History</b></p>	<p>Written examination is worth 80% of the total marks available, and the exam is 2 hour 50 minutes in duration.</p> <p>Coursework is a Research Study Report (RSR) and is allocated the remaining 20%. There is a different word count for HL and OL students, with the OL word count set at 800 words and the HL word count set at 1600.</p>	<p>Written examination: typically, 60% weighting.</p> <p>Assessment component: minimum 40% weighting.</p> <p>Written examination will be set at higher and ordinary levels.</p> <p>Assessment component would be based on one submission to SEC in response to a common brief.</p>
<p><b>Home Economics</b></p>	<p>Written examination is 2 hr 30 minutes duration and worth 280 or 320 marks (out of 400) depending on the elective chosen.</p> <p>For students who choose the <b>Home Design and Management</b> or <b>Social Studies</b> electives, the written examination is worth 80% and the <b>Food Studies Coursework</b> is worth 20%.</p> <p>For those who choose the <b>Textile Fashion and Design</b> elective, the written exam is worth 70%; the <b>Food Studies Coursework</b> is worth 20% and the <b>TFD Coursework</b> is allocated 10%.</p> <p><b>Food Studies Coursework</b> is based on 4 assignments completed by</p>	<p>Written examination: typically, 60% weighting.</p> <p>Assessment component: minimum 40% weighting.</p> <p>Written examination will be set at higher and ordinary levels.</p> <p>Assessment component would be based on one submission to SEC in response to a common brief.</p>

	the beginning of November of 6 <sup>th</sup> year and submitted to the SEC.	
<b>Mathematics</b>	<p>There are 2 written papers that are worth the full allocation of marks.</p> <p>Paper 1: HL OL and FL is 2.5 hrs duration.</p> <p>Paper 2: HI and OL 2.5 hrs duration.</p>	<p>Written examination: typically, 60% weighting.</p> <p>Assessment component: minimum 40% weighting.</p> <p>Written examination will be set at higher ordinary and foundation levels and it would be expected to take the form of a single paper</p> <p>Assessment component would be based on one submission to SEC in response to a common brief. Assessment component to be completed in Year 1 of the two-year programme.</p>
<b>Music</b>	<p>There are 3 areas for assessment:</p> <p>Composing element is worth 25% and assessed by a written paper of 1.5 hours duration.</p> <p>Performing element is worth 25% and is assessed by a performance of 3 or 4 pieces depending on the selection of one performance format or 2.</p> <p>Listening element is worth 25% and is assessed by an aural exam and written paper of 1.5 hours duration.</p> <p>HL Elective: Higher level students select one of the 3 areas above and choose to increase mark allocation to 50% by including an additional assessment activity.</p> <p>For ordinary level students, their best mark in one out of the three areas is doubled to reach 100%-mark allocation.</p>	<p>Written examination: typically, 60% weighting.</p> <p>Assessment component: minimum 40% weighting.</p> <p>Written examination will be set at higher and ordinary levels.</p> <p>Assessment component will be based on a brief issued by the SEC.</p>
<b>Physics and Chemistry</b>	<p>Written paper at HL and OL worth full mark allocation of 400 marks. 3-hour paper.</p> <p>Section 1 Physics worth 200 marks.</p> <p>Section 2 Chemistry worth 200 marks.</p>	<p>Written examination: typically, 60% weighting.</p> <p>Assessment component: minimum 40% weighting.</p> <p>Written examination will be set at higher and ordinary levels.</p>

		Assessment component would be based on one submission to SEC in response to a common brief.
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Whilst an AAC in each subject must have a minimum weighting of 40%; an SDG may propose a weighting of 50%. In these circumstances, the process outlined at Section 3 above will apply to determine if such a weighting receives further consideration as to whether it shall be applied or not. It would not be anticipated that an SDG would seek to apply a weighting to the AAC above this level.



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