Developing Senior Cycle Education

Consultative Paper on Issues and Options

National Council for
Curriculum
and Assessment

An Chomhairle
Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus
Measúnachta

NCCA

contents

foreword

The senior cycle of post-primary education has been the focus of considerable change and development in the last ten years. The emergence of Transition Year, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied, together with changes to syllabuses in the Leaving Certificate (established) have radically altered the educational landscape for students and schools.

The questions raised in this paper arise from that decade of change. The landscape may have changed. But have the educational experiences of young people undergone the radical shift envisaged by those innovations? Or is the landscape still dominated by the shadow cast by the towering presence of the Leaving Certificate examination? Is senior cycle education still about 'getting the Leaving' rather than about preparing for the transition to adult and working life or to further training or study?

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment is asking these questions of itself in the first instance. It played a key role in shaping the reforms of senior cycle over the last ten years. The Council has been successful in its task of reform. As part of its commitment to ongoing review, it now faces the question of whether those reforms brought about the educational experiences needed for young people in the Ireland of the 21st Century.

These questions are also asked of all involved in education – teachers, parents, students, school management. They are not new questions. They were raised by the Commission on the Points System in the course of its deliberations and in its final report. That report suggested that the focus of reform should be on the path to the points – senior cycle education – rather than on the points system itself. This consultative paper represents NCCA's response to that recommendation.

The consultation process proposed in the paper includes a National Forum on Senior Cycle Education to take place in the Autumn of 2003. There are other strands to the consultation process, and through the use of on-line consultations and engagement with student councils, and youth groups and fora, the Council will be supporting the inclusion of the student voice in the consultations and debates.

The Senior Cycle Committee chaired by John McKay, C.E.O. of Cavan Vocational Educational Committee supported the development of the paper and its preparation for the approval of Council. They are owed a considerable debt of gratitude for the time and consideration they gave to this task. The NCCA team was led by John Hammond, Deputy Chief Executive who brought to the work both his depth of expertise and his convictions as an educator. A number of NCCA staff - past and present - contributed to the drafting process. Particular thanks are due to Stephen McCarthy and Peter Johnson.

The NCCA is committed to advising the Minister for Education and Science on the issues outlined in the paper by the end of 2003. I invite you to participate in the process that will shape that advice in the year ahead.

Anne Looney
Chief Executive

Introduction

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1.1 Purposes of the paper

This paper, *Developing Senior Cycle Education – Consultative Paper on Issues and Options* is published with several purposes in mind. It follows the publication of the report of the Commission on the Points System and seeks to address some of the recommendations and unresolved curriculum and assessment issues contained in that report. Chief among these is the review and reform of the Leaving Certificate (established)[1] and the paper sets out a schedule for action in this context. But it also presents for discussion and debate, a wide range of issues pertaining to the development of senior cycle as a whole in the medium to long term and draws attention to the implications of these for both the structure of senior cycle provision and for the day-to-day work and organisation of schools.

The starting point for the paper is the extensive development of senior cycle education that has taken place during the 1990s and the recognition of how much has been achieved in successfully diversifying the curriculum at this level. However, the paper also recognises that the Leaving Certificate (established) has not received the attention it requires in this process and that an extensive review of this programme now needs to be undertaken by the NCCA. In the context of a rapidly changing society, a clear vision is now required of how senior cycle education can be further developed to ensure that the needs of individual learners and of society are met.

It is in the spirit of the need to, and the belief in our ability to, continuously improve the quality of senior cycle provision that this paper is presented.

The ultimate purpose of this paper is to revisit, review and refine the policy of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) on senior cycle education as published in its policy documents *Curriculum and Assessment Policy – Towards the New Century* (1993) and *Assessment and Certification in the Senior Cycle – Issues and Directions* (1994). In so doing, it will provide the basis on which the NCCA will develop its current policy on, and prepare a programme of action for, the development of senior cycle education into the future.

1.2 Structure of the paper

The paper comprises seven sections

1. Introduction

2. Rationale for review and reform

3. Developments at senior cycle - national and international

4. Aims and purposes - envisioning the future

5. Developing in curriculum, assessment and certification

6. Some options for developing senior cycle education

7. Implementing change

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1 This paper adopts the convention of distinguishing the Leaving Certificate taken by the majority of students by the title 'Leaving Certificate (established)'. This title is used with reluctance as both the LCVP and LCA can also claim to be 'established' at this time. Perhaps the consultation process will give rise to a more appropriate title for use in the future.

It commences with the presentation of a rationale for the paper and for further review and reform at this level. It proceeds to consider the changes to senior cycle that took place during the 1990s and compares these with trends internationally.

The structure of the paper beyond section four reflects the view that reform of curriculum and assessment provision should, in the first instance, be rooted in the aims and purposes of senior cycle education. The curriculum structures established, assessment modes and techniques used and the range of educational programmes provided should be consistent with an agreed view of the overall aims and the purposes of senior cycle education. Equally they should be associated with a vision of education in the future for the learner, for learning institutions and for education systems. In turn, the emphasis on implementation in section six of the paper draws on experience of implementing change in the Irish education system over the last decade or so and also reflects the emerging view in the literature on educational change that planning for reform, without engagement at the outset with issues of implementation (particularly resourcing), ensures that the reform, however worthy, will in large measure fail (Fullan, 2000; Sarason, 1990).

1.3 The consultation process

The senior cycle paper *Developing Senior Cycle Education – Consultative Paper on Issues and Options* is precisely that – a paper which will be the subject of extensive consultations. The consultation process will follow the distribution of the paper early in 2003 and is outlined in more detail in the table below. The period of consultation will involve a series of NCCA events associated with the consultations to take place and will also provide adequate time for the partners in education and interested individuals and groups to reflect on, consult on, organise events and make submissions on the issues under discussion. During the period of consultation, a series of shorter papers exploring the main issues and options presented in the paper will be published to further advance discussion. Finally, the paper will be revised and presented to the Department of Education and Science as an NCCA policy paper in 2003.

Ahead of any possible medium to long term reform of senior cycle education that may occur as a result of the consultation process it is envisaged that incremental development of the Leaving Certificate (established) will continue to take place. There is a strong expectation within the education system that a number of revised Leaving Certificate (established) subject syllabuses, already prepared and approved by the NCCA, will be implemented by the Department of Education and Science.

CONSULTATION PROCESS

December 2002 – January 2003	• Launch of the paper *Developing Senior Cycle Education: Consultative Paper on Issues and Options* • Distribution of the paper for consultation

February – April 2003	• Publication of the final report of the international, thematic seminar on *International Developments in Upper Secondary Education* prepared for the NCCA by Dr. Joanna Le Métais of the National Foundation for Educational Research (UK)
	
	• Issues papers on
	    • *Basic and key skills*
	    • *Modularising the curriculum?*
	    • *Curriculum structures and programme requirements at senior cycle*
	    published and discussed at invitational seminars.

May – June 2003	• Series of meetings between the NCCA and representatives of the partners in education and others to discuss issues raised by the senior cycle paper and the issues papers. • NCCA will finalise a *Report of the Consultations on Senior Cycle Education,* including an account of its main findings and recommendations
September – October 2003	• National Forum on *Developing Senior Cycle Education: Issues and Options.* The forum will report on the findings of the consultation process and signal the directions that the emerging 'policy paper' on senior cycle education is taking
Final Outcome	• An NCCA policy paper, advising the Minister for Education and Science on future developments in senior cycle education.

Rationale for review and reform

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2.1   Introduction to section two

This section of the paper considers the question of review and reform at senior cycle level. It starts by considering the developments that occurred at this level during the 1990s and proceeds to present a rationale for the publication of this paper and for review and reform at this point in time.

2.2   Senior cycle developments in the 1990s

The senior cycle of post-primary education was transformed during the last decade of the twentieth century. The Leaving Certificate (established), which up to that point was the only option available to most schools, was augmented by the Leaving Certificate Applied, and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). In addition, the option of a three-year senior cycle, comprising the Transition Year followed by one of the three Leaving Certificate programmes, was made available.

This transformation was based on a review of senior cycle education conducted in the early 1990s. In the first instance the review arose out of the need to establish continuity with changes introduced in the junior cycle in the late 1980s. But it also arose out of trenchant criticism of the education system in general and of the Leaving Certificate (established) in particular. This criticism came from within Ireland and from external sources. Among others, the Culleton Report and the OECD focused on the inequality inherent in our education system and its impact on the educationally disadvantaged and those with special educational needs, the over-academic nature of the curriculum, the lack of choice available to students with differing abilities and aptitudes, and the limited range of assessment approaches and pedagogical methods in use.

The review gave rise to the policy of diversification of the senior cycle curriculum.

The NCCA played an instrumental role in the review. In 1993 the NCCA published *Curriculum and Assessment Policy – Towards the New Century.* This provided a basis for subsequent changes to senior cycle provision implemented by the Department of Education which began in 1994. In the context of areas of discussion that will arise later in this paper (see 5.3), it is worth noting that not all the NCCA's ideas and recommendations were acted upon. Its suggestion that the Transition Year and Leaving Certificate (established) or the LCVP could be merged in a balanced way in the context of a three-year senior cycle was not taken up. Proposals on 'Leaving Certificate Senior Courses', which became Leaving Certificate Applied courses, and on the LCVP, included the potential for students to mix and match between such courses and modules and those of the Leaving Certificate (established). However, a 'ring-fenced' approach towards the development of the senior cycle programmes was the preferred option taken by the Department of Education. It must be recognised that some of the decisions regarding provision were, at least in part, strongly influenced by parameters attached to European funding provided to support the implementation of

some senior cycle programmes with a vocational dimension. The net effect of this decision is that while considerable resources have been successfully provided to develop the teaching and learning approaches of these new Leaving Certificate options, these areas in relation to the Leaving Certificate (established) itself have remained largely unchanged.

Since the changes at senior cycle were introduced, the NCCA and its Senior Cycle Committee has continued to advise the Minister for Education and Science on this area. During this period, Council's work has focused on the implementation of the new/revised programmes in schools, on their subsequent 'rolling' review and fine-tuning and on the review of a number of Leaving Certificate (established) syllabuses. However, Council now feels that it is timely, for a number of reasons, that the NCCA revitalise debate and action on senior cycle education and the Leaving Certificate (established) in particular.

2.3   Rationale for the paper and for continuing review and reform

Reviewing and reforming the Leaving Certificate (established)

An important rationale for continuing review and reform is that during the development of the senior cycle options, the concerted attention given to elaborating the purpose, nature, aims, objectives and content of those options drew into sharp focus the fact that the Leaving Certificate (established), as opposed to its constituent subjects, had not been subject to the same degree of consideration. Some reflections on the established Leaving Certificate as an educational programme were included in the NCCA's 1993 policy paper and its 1994 consultative paper on assessment and certification. Subsequently, a paper *The Established Leaving Certificate and its Subjects* was presented to the NCCA Senior Cycle Committee in 1998. However, discussions within this committee concluded that it would be unwise to review an educational programme as substantial and influential as the Leaving Certificate (established) in isolation. The future role of the Leaving Certificate (established) as an educational programme was inseparable from consideration of the future development of senior cycle education as a whole.

This view was underscored by the recommendations of the *Commission on the Points System: Final Report and Recommendations* (1999), which suggested that a substantial review of the Leaving Certificate (established) as an educational programme is overdue. It recommended that such a review should be fundamental, addressing matters such as the nature of the senior cycle experience, issues of curricular breadth and balance and of differentiation, the broadening of assessment approaches, and the establishing of provision that would contribute to social cohesion. The relationship of the Leaving Certificate (established) to other senior cycle programmes would also need to be reconsidered in these contexts. Many of these concerns were echoed in the findings of the NCCA's research study *From Junior to Leaving Certificate – A*

Longitudinal Study of 1994 Junior Certificate Candidates who took the Leaving Certificate Examination in 1997: Final Report (1999).

It is important to clarify that, notwithstanding the rising tide of opinion in favour of a more fundamental review, the Leaving Certificate (established) has, during the 1990s been subject to review of a limited nature. Most syllabuses of recognised Leaving Certificate subjects have been reviewed and revised. A number of these have already been implemented in schools. Yet the scope of change has been limited and the pace of the implementation of change slow and this has given rise to a backlog of subject syllabuses (and their revised assessment arrangements) awaiting implementation and a sense that the reform of the Leaving Certificate (established) programme as a whole lacks momentum. Lack of momentum in the process of review and reform of the Leaving Certificate (established) is becoming a critical issue at a time when there is every expectation that this programme, taken by the vast majority of senior cycle students, will prove responsive to a rapidly changing society and economy. It follows that the issue of how further reform of the Leaving Certificate (established) can be achieved represents a substantial theme of this paper.

Taking stock

Secondly, it is also important to take stock of the changes that have taken place at senior cycle to date and to assess the strengths and weaknesses associated with these developments with a view to continuously improving the quality of the education experienced by young people at this level. A diversified curriculum has been introduced. The Transition Year, the Leaving Certificate Applied and the LCVP have all gained a foothold in the system. They have been successfully implemented in many schools. They have improved the educational experience of many students at this level and broadened the professional development and expertise of many teachers. But even within these programmes, and particularly in the case of the Leaving Certificate (established), it is arguable that while there has been change, the change has not been deep enough. Some of the most important things haven't changed, particularly in areas such as those of teaching, learning and assessment. It is also arguable that the pace of change has been too slow, particularly in the implementation of revised subject syllabuses of the Leaving Certificate (established) and in the broadening of approaches to assessment.

Keeping pace with change

Thirdly, significant changes have taken place in Irish society and in the Irish economy since the early to mid 1990s, reflective of wider global change. The modernisation of Irish society has proceeded apace and resulted in the emergence of an increasingly pluralist society. These changes have been significant in nature but the pace of change has proved to be of even greater significance with many young people emerging from school to an adult world radically different from the world of their parents. The

economic development of Ireland during the late 1990s and into the new century has surpassed all expectations and given rise to increased awareness of the pivotal role education plays in increasing economic prosperity and the responsibility education has in promoting social inclusion. Economic development has taken place against a backdrop of change in the globalisation of goods, capital, labour, services, knowledge and ideas; in scientific and technological development; in the impact of multinational enterprise, changes in work organisation and consequent skill requirements; and in the participation of learners in lifelong education and training (Green, Wolf and Leney, 1999). It is incumbent on education systems, in the interests of learners, to review provision continuously in order to consider and take account of these changes. It is equally incumbent on these systems to take account of new understanding of the processes of education itself.

Report of the Points Commission and other developments

Fourthly, this period has also seen the publication of a number of important policy documents and reports. Most noteworthy in the context of senior cycle education are the *Commission on the Points System: Final Report and Recommendations* (1999), the White Paper on Adult Education, *Learning for Life* (2000), the National Development Plan 2000-2006 (1999), the EU Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (2000) and the range of legislation including the Education Act (1998), the Education Welfare Act (2000), and the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act (1999) which create a legislative basis for the operations and work of the education system, particularly in areas such as those of equality, special educational needs, welfare and lifelong learning.

Taking account of international trends

Fifthly, since the early 1990s considerable debate has taken place internationally with regard to this stage of education. In an effort to successfully align educational developments with changing societal and economic conditions, debate in relation to what is known as the *initial post-compulsory period of education* has been widespread. It is important that international developments and trends inform the development of the Irish education system.

Taking account of national developments in education

Finally, many aspects of the Irish education system are undergoing processes of change arising from the policy developments referred to above and subsequent initiatives put in place. These changes need to be reflected in the ongoing development of senior cycle. They include

- the increased emphasis on enabling individual schools to clarify their educational programme and curriculum and to plan for its effective implementation through school development planning and whole school evaluation processes

- the implementation of the revised primary curriculum and the ongoing development of junior cycle

- the growth and importance of the adult and continuing education sector, reflected by increasing government investment in this area

- the advent of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland charged with establishing and reviewing the operation of a national qualifications framework covering all vocational education and training qualifications in the non-formal sector

- developments in higher education, in particular the outcomes of the review of teacher education at post-primary level and recent research on Higher Education entrants (Clancy and Wall, 2000) and on non-completion in university courses (Morgan, Flanagan and Kelleghan, 2001).

2.4   Approach to review and reform

In concluding discussion of the rationale for review and reform, it is important to clarify that review should not be automatically associated with or confused with large-scale curriculum reform. Education systems are usually conservative (in the best sense of the word) in that ideally they conserve and protect what is of abiding value and change only in the interest of improvement of the quality of provision. Curriculum review need not, of necessity, give rise to reform on a large scale and where it does, need not give rise to expectations that such reform would be achieved over a short period. Change for the sake of change is not the starting point for these discussions.

Discussion of review and reform at senior cycle in this paper is based on clarification of the aims and purposes of senior cycle education, on envisioning the future of senior cycle education, on an articulation of the range of educational experiences students should have, on the identification of the outcomes that should be associated with the total experience of senior cycle education and on engagement with the realities as experienced by schools, teachers and students in trying to implement and realise change. Finally, review and reform must also remain cognisant of policy parameters already agreed and established. Most noteworthy here is the policy of retention of the maximum number of pupils to the completion of senior cycle education (NCCA, 1993).

Developments at senior cycle – national and international

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3.1   Introduction to section three

This section provides an overview and analysis of current senior cycle provision, within which specific and general issues related to the various programmes are identified. The section concludes with a summary of international trends at this level, placing the Irish experience in a broader context and identifying points of similarity and difference in developments.

3.2   Senior cycle – current provision

The senior cycle of post-primary education now comprises a two or three-year senior cycle programme. This is a direct outcome of the policy to improve retention rates at this level through diversification of curricula. Where previously there was little choice, now learners can take an initial Transition Year Programme and proceed to choose one of three Leaving Certificate programmes – the Leaving Certificate (established), the LCVP and the Leaving Certificate Applied. Alternatively, they can proceed directly to one of the Leaving Certificate options and, in the cases of the Leaving Certificate (established) and LCVP, avail of the potential to repeat the examination.

These developments aimed to improve the choice of programmes available to learners while retaining the unifying idea that each comprised a Leaving Certificate. Given the status of the Leaving Certificate within the education system, this was a worthy idea. The programmes were implemented as 'ring-fenced' programmes. By and large, participants cannot move between programmes easily or mix-and-match elements of the programmes. The exception to this is the LCVP where the same subject syllabuses as for the Leaving Certificate (established) are undertaken within the parameters set by permitted vocational subject groupings.

As a result, it is arguable that while we have retained the appearance of a unified Leaving Certificate, the reality as experienced at the level of the school or education provider is that we have a senior cycle with a number of tracks with all the difficulties this can give rise to in terms of parity of esteem between programmes and consistency and coherence across programmes. On the other hand, the benefits of this approach include clarity of provision and options for providers and learners and the concerted focus that individualised programmes provide for implementation support.

3.3   Leaving Certificate (established)

The Leaving Certificate (established) offers learners a broad, balanced education while incorporating some potential for specialisation towards a particular career orientation. Performance of participants in the Leaving Certificate examination can be used for purposes of selection into further and higher education. In general, five or more subjects (usually seven) are taken for examination.

It is largely a requirement-free programme. The arrangements pertaining to

participants taking subjects are clearly outlined in the Department of Education and Science's *Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools.* For students taking the established Leaving Certificate

> *"the approved course for recognised senior pupils must include not less than five of the subjects specified….of which one shall be Irish."*

There are 31 specified subjects listed. Each of these is assigned to a subject group as outlined in the table below. Two subjects, Home Economics (General) and Physics and Chemistry, are each assigned to two groups.

In addition to the subjects listed the Department of Education and Science will provide, where the status of the applicant/candidate is seen as appropriate, examinations in any of the recognised languages of the European Union.

SPECIFIED LEAVING CERTIFICATE SUBJECTS

Groups	Subjects	Total
Language Group	English, French, German, Irish, Italian, Latin, Greek, Spanish, Classical Studies, Hebrew Studies	10
Science Group	Applied Mathematics, Biology, Chemistry, Mathematics, Physics, Physics and Chemistry	6
Business Studies Group	Accounting, Business, Economics, Economic History	4
Applied Science Group	Agricultural Science, Agricultural Economics, Construction Studies, Engineering, Home Economics (General), Home Economics (Scientific and Social), Physics and Chemistry, Technical Drawing	8
Social Studies Group	Art, Geography, History, Home Economics (General), Music	5

The Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools recommends that

> *"…each pupil should take at least three subjects from the group of subjects for which he (sic) is best fitted, and at least two subjects from outside that group."*

There are some limitations to the freedom of choice in this context. Undertaking combinations of subjects where there is common syllabus material is not permitted.

The grouping of subjects would seem to have little relevance to the decisions schools or centres and participants make in providing and taking subjects respectively. It is arguable that most Leaving Certificate participants see themselves not as undertaking a 'programme' of education incorporating a 'grouping' of subjects but as undertaking a selection of relatively independent subjects. Furthermore, the choice of available subjects for learners is often limited by the resources available to the individual school and by the history and culture of subject provision in the school. However, a further difficulty related to the grouping of subjects is that the current provision of subjects reflects a decided bias in favour of certain forms of knowledge and understanding - the linguistic and logical-mathematical. (NCCA, 1994). As a result the issue of arriving at a more balanced schedule of subjects and courses has always been a salient one.

Nonetheless, the Leaving Certificate (established) has a high profile, and in the context of its selection function for Higher Education, a high stakes educational programme taken in almost all schools and by an annual cohort of around 60,000 learners. It enjoys public confidence in its standards, status and currency. It is the terminal examination for the vast majority of school leavers and a reference point for agencies and individuals involved in employment and training. Where questions have been raised regarding the quality of the educational programme provided they have mainly related to

- the potential for lack of breadth and balance in the programme of an individual student

- abiding, gendered patterns of subject uptake

- the quality of provision for those students taking subjects at ordinary level and its relationship to patterns of underachievement at this level

- the difficulty experienced by those with special educational needs in accessing the programme and its inflexibility in meeting their needs

- the extent to which the selection function results in 'teachers teaching to the test' rather than to the curriculum through use of traditional teaching and learning practices with an over-emphasis on the use of textbooks and sample examination papers

- the extent to which the selection function results in students choosing subjects perceived as 'easier' and therefore likely to yield a higher points gain for selection

- in the context of the latter point, the increasing evidence of significant variations, in comparative terms, in grading patterns both between subjects and within subjects over time (NCCA, 1999)

- the marginalisation of non-examination subjects.

In the area of assessment and certification, related and other questions have been raised

- the failure of assessment and certification to reflect adequately the diverse purposes of curricula, due mainly to the undue emphasis on the selection purposes of the certificate and its related techniques of assessment (NCCA, 1994)

- consequently, the limited range of assessment modes and components used

- the lack of congruence in many cases between course objectives and assessment components employed

- the lack of momentum in moving towards a uniformly criterion-referenced approach towards awarding marks and grades in examination subjects

- inadequate attention to the critical role of formative assessment in the teaching and learning process

- the limited scope of the certification provided and the impact this has on the status of non-examination subjects and co-curricular, educational activities

- the lack of clarity regarding equivalence with other education and training qualifications nationally and internationally.

The concerns above featured significantly both in the *Commission on the Points System: Final Report and Recommendations* (1999) and in a range of NCCA publications during the 1990s including the Longitudinal Study (1999). They are the questions and concerns that need to be addressed in reforming the Leaving Certificate as an examination and as an educational programme.

There is a tendency to view review and reform of the Leaving Certificate (established) as review of its constituent subject syllabuses and their assessment arrangements. However, in the broader contexts of lifelong learning and developments in teaching and learning, relatively little attention has been given to the total experience of students within the programme, addressing areas such as time spent in different learning modes, access to different learning sites, the role of basic and key skills, the role of homework and study, etc.

3.4 Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP)

The LCVP can be described as an educational intervention in the Leaving Certificate (established), which is designed to enhance that programme. The enhancement is of a vocational nature, preparing learners for further and continuing education and for the

world of work. The focus of the programme is on participants taking greater responsibility for their own learning, becoming more innovative and enterprising, communicating well, working in teams, and on accessing and using technology.

The LCVP requires that participants, while taking the Leaving Certificate (established) in the usual way, ensure that two of the subjects chosen constitute a vocational subject grouping (e.g. Engineering and Physics) from the list of 13 or so specified. They must also study a continental language but, most significantly, they take Link Modules in Enterprise Education and Preparation for the World of Work. The Link Modules are assessed, the results achieved are recorded on the Leaving Certificate and they can be used to generate points for the purposes of progression to third level. The points allocated fall short of those awarded for a Leaving Certificate subject and the allocations for Institutes of Technology and for universities differ. The LCVP was introduced to schools in its present format in 1994. In 1999, it was offered in approximately 480 of the 770 or so schools and centres to almost 30,000 participants.

Evaluations and reviews of the LCVP to date (DES, 1998; Granville, 1999; NCCA, 1999) indicate that the programme has taken root. In particular, the Link Modules have become the focal point of the programme and through them much of value in terms of teaching approaches, learning activities and assessment methods has been achieved in the implementation of the programme. Indeed, the success of the Link Modules in addressing key skills such as those in the areas of communication, ICT, project management and problem solving has given rise to the question – why are the Link Modules not available to all those participating in the Leaving Certificate?

However, it is important to emphasise that given that the LCVP largely comprises Leaving Certificate (established) subjects, many of the criticisms that are regularly visited on that programme can equally be made of the LCVP. This goes some way towards explaining why success in implementing certain aspects of the LCVP, for example the cross-curricular and inter-disciplinary dimensions of the programme – making links between what is learned through the Link Modules and learning in Leaving Certificate subjects – has proved particularly elusive. Furthermore, the LCVP has not proved the most accessible programme for those with special educational needs and for both repeat and external examination candidates.

3.5 Leaving Certificate Applied

The Leaving Certificate Applied, introduced in 1995, is a discrete, educational programme offered under the umbrella of the Leaving Certificate. The programme is pre-vocational by nature, and aimed mainly at those who do not wish to proceed directly to Higher Education and for those whose aptitudes, needs and learning styles are not fully catered for by the Leaving Certificate (established). Participants in the Leaving Certificate Applied are predominantly engaged in work and study with an active, practical, task-based orientation.

The programme is structured around three elements – Vocational Preparation, Vocational Education and General Education. Within these elements, courses comprising a number of modules are taken. It is an innovative programme in terms of what participants learn, of the methodologies employed in the learning process and of the ways in which their achievement is assessed. On completion of the programme, participants generally proceed to Post-Leaving Certificate vocational education and training courses or directly to the labour market. In the school year 1999/2000, the programme was offered in 209 schools and education and training centres to 7,000 participants.

Since its introduction in 1995, the programme has been under a process of continuous monitoring and review by the NCCA. In 1998 the NCCA produced a *Review of the Leaving Certificate Applied: Report on Programme Structure.* The review found that the existing programme structure and its constituent components did not require a fundamental re-evaluation. However, it did recommend several changes and adjustments to the programme structure and to assessment arrangements. The changes recommended resulted in the generation of discretionary time through a reduction in the number of student tasks and in the time spent on modules (reduced by 25%). The principle of integration was underscored by improving the assessment weighting in favour of student tasks and by providing greater specification in relation to the tasks. New off-the-shelf courses/modules in a number of areas, including religious education and science, were introduced. These changes were introduced to schools and centres in 2000.

The report also drew attention to a range of other quite fundamental issues identified in the review, which were not addressed in its recommendations. These included the difficulties that the 'ring-fencing' of the programme gave rise to. The programme has proved quite inflexible in continuing and further education contexts and non-school settings. Many programme participants would ideally combine elements of the programme with subjects of the more academic Leaving Certificate (established) but were prohibited from doing so. The public perception of the programme as one for 'weaker students' resulted in lack of parity of esteem with other Leaving Certificate programmes notionally under the same umbrella. This reality was sometimes further exacerbated by lack of recognition of the programme, in particular cases, by employers, education and training institutions. Further issues identified included the difficulties experienced in managing and providing for the programme due to organisational constraints within formal school settings, the growing problem of early leaving (30% according to the NCCA Destination Study, 1999), and concerns at the gender imbalance in favour of males in the uptake of the programme.

In many ways, the introduction of the Leaving Certificate Applied has proved successful. Participation in the programme has reached and is surpassing the targets set at its inception. As Boldt (1998) has established in his study/appraisal of the

programme *Unlocking Potential,* it has met the needs of participants and of schools and is regarded well by both. It has contributed in a very significant way to national education policy by retaining young people who would otherwise have left school at 15, in full-time education. These participants are now gaining a qualification and making vocational choices regarding employment and the pursuit of further education and training. On the evidence of destination surveys of graduates, undertaken by the NCCA, between 1997 and 2000, approximately 89% proceed to work or further education on completion of the programme. In addition, a number of aspects of the programme, for example the assessment of student tasks and its modular structure, have proved successful enough to prompt the view that these aspects might transfer well to other senior cycle programmes. However, as with Transition Year, it is important to stress that the Leaving Certificate Applied is under-evaluated and under-researched.

3.6   Transition Year

Transition year is an optional, one-year educational programme offering the potential for the holistic development of young people as flexible learners, active citizens and future workers. It is envisaged as an interdisciplinary programme developed by the individual school. Its flexible structure allows for the provision of a broad range of learning experiences with an emphasis on personal development including social awareness and increased social competence. It is offered in over 500 schools involving over 30,000 students.

The evaluation of the Transition Year by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Science (1996) noted the consensus among principals, teachers and students that the Transition Year gave schools an opportunity to engage in genuine in-school curriculum development (DES, 1995). Research carried out by the NCCA has shown that participation in Transition Year is associated with improved performance in the Leaving Certificate examination (NCCA, 1999).

But at this point in time the Transition Year is under-evaluated and under-researched. Where specific school programmes are successful in the terms outlined above or in other terms, there is little evidence as to why or how such success is achieved. The NCCA is in the process of undertaking a review of Transition Year and its findings will be of importance to the recommendations of this paper with regard to the future role of the programme in senior cycle education. The review will comment, in particular, on programme design and balance of programme elements (new learning experiences, remediation of learning difficulties and preparation for Leaving Certificate), on assessment, and on organization, planning and outcomes. Equally, forthcoming research on Transition year by the ESRI will feed into the review.

3.7 Overview of developments

The introduction of a diverse range of programmes represented a major improvement in the quality of senior cycle provision and the implementation of these programmes has proved a significant achievement for Irish education. The achievement was all the greater given the implications the developments had for stretching resources, especially in the case of smaller schools, for increased flexibility in organisation and curriculum provision, for facilitation by schools and centres of the involvement by teachers in professional development, for changes in professional teaching practice and for increased engagement by all with the 'vocational' dimension of the curriculum, with outreach to the community and business sectors, and with key skills associated with improving the communication, ICT, enterprise and problem solving skills of students.

The challenge into the future is to build on these achievements in order to achieve further improvements in quality. This involves addressing the weaknesses identified in the existing programmes in addition to considering how well current provision is likely to serve in future scenarios (see section four), how existing programmes might be further developed (see section five) and how the education system can best facilitate the realities of the implementation process (see section six). Some consideration should also be given to what has been happening at this level internationally, during this period of reform in the Irish education system.

3.8 International trends

Across a large number of countries, initial post-compulsory education is the focus of attention and review. In many ways this is not surprising. More than any other, this is the level of education systems which draws into sharp focus the interface between education and society. This is the point at which the transition takes place between the close of formal compulsory schooling and the world of work and further education. At a time of rapid change in cultures, societies and economies it is inevitable that attention turns to the issue of whether the final years of second level schooling provide the kind of educational experience that will result in young people making a successful transition into further learning, working and living.

What developing trends can we establish in relation to curriculum and assessment provision at this level internationally? Green, Wolf and Leney (1999) have undertaken a study of convergent and divergent trends in education and training systems in Europe. Their findings on convergent trends in the areas of curriculum and assessment at the initial post-compulsory level are of particular relevance for this paper.

3.9   International trends in participation and curriculum

Education at this level across Europe is generally characterised by high participation rates. More and more young people are participating in full-time education and are leaving with formal qualifications. As a result there are significant levels of activity in relation to curriculum review and development across many countries. Educational courses and programmes are becoming longer in duration, as in the case of the three-year senior cycle in Ireland.

There is evidence of 'academic drift' both in the nature of courses and programmes and in the choices participants make in their uptake. School-based pre-vocational and vocational courses and programmes are increasingly available and both are characterised by increased levels of 'general education' content in addition to their more specialised elements. A fall in the uptake of specialised vocational options is apparent. These trends are consistent with the convergence of the interests of education and the world of business in terms of the premium both place on the value of a broadly based education with a focus on generic, transferable skills as the ideal basis for future working life and lifelong learning. Increasingly, governments are stressing the importance of aligning education at this level with future skill demands and the tensions that can arise in this context have been eased by this convergence of interests.

In general terms, pathways crossing 'academic' and 'vocational' programmes are becoming more clearly articulated, presenting learners with the option of mixing and matching in order to develop more individualised learning programmes and paths. Clearly national qualifications frameworks play an important role in these developments.

3.10   International trends in assessment

When provision for assessment across European countries at this level is considered, a number of trends emerge. In order to facilitate valid and reliable assessment processes, course outlines and programme statements are generally expressed in terms of learning objectives and outcomes, often on a modular basis. Assessment methods are largely reflective of historical practice in individual countries and of the fact that assessment and certification is subject to public scrutiny to the extent where many members of the public have considerable knowledge and understanding of assessment and certification arrangements at this level. Consequently, in a high-stakes environment where the outcomes of assessment serve a selection function in relation to Higher Education, and where public knowledge of increasingly transparent assessment systems is high, extensive debate about and developments in assessment are few and far between. This sounds very familiar in an Irish context.

The strongest trend in assessment provision in Europe is towards greater systematisation of assessment involving increased central involvement and control. The trend towards systematisation is often focused on issues of standardisation such as comparability of assessment components, criteria, grading processes and results between subjects. This trend has proved problematic for many pre-vocational and vocational programmes as tension develops between standardisation through central control and the operation of valid assessment approaches in local school and work-based settings. The added complexity of measuring competency in key skills and accrediting prior learning represent further challenges. Yet even strong proponents of locally developed vocational programmes recognise that the business world and Higher Education value the reliability associated with traditional assessment methods and that vocational programmes at this level must recognise this to achieve status and survive. Issues surrounding assessment in the Leaving Certificate Applied clearly resonate with these points.

While assessment at this level in Europe is currently characterised by lack of debate, limited development and greater systematisation, it is important to stress that the starting point for individual countries in terms of assessment modes and techniques employed and in terms of the nature of certification provided, differs radically from country to country. For example, in many countries teachers assess their students' coursework or projects as part of the assessment arrangements. Equally, many countries offer certification in the form of portfolios of qualifications recording a range of achievements rather than specific course or programme certificates.

3.11 Overview of international trends

When considering international trends it is important to avoid trying to compare 'apples' and 'oranges' and even more important to avoid the delusion that you can turn apples into oranges. In reality, a range of cultural, social and economic factors not necessarily common to all countries mediate developments in curriculum and assessment provision in individual countries. For example, level of funding and flexible resourcing plays a critical role in the pace, scale and success of developments in areas like assessment.

Nonetheless, it is clear that, broadly speaking, trends in the development of curriculum and assessment provision in Ireland at this level do not diverge radically from those in Europe, especially in those features associated with 'flagship', high-stakes programmes related to the selection function for entry to higher education. Other countries, however, do present learners with greater flexibility in making and taking curriculum choices and with access to a broader range of assessment modes and methods and possibilities for certification. In addition, European countries are increasingly recognising the need for curriculum and assessment provision at this level to clearly relate to frameworks, structures and institutions established for adult and continuing education.

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Aims and purposes: envisioning the future

SENIOR CYCLE
CONSULTATIVE
PAPER

4.1 Introduction

This section of the paper examines the aims and purposes of senior cycle education. It starts by briefly summarising the current aims and purposes underpinning education at this level in Ireland and by offering international comparisons as appropriate. It offers a view of the potential needs of learners today and into the future and addresses whether current aims and purposes meet these needs. It presents a vision of education in the future for the learner, for learning institutions and for education systems. The section concludes with a proposed set of purposes and aims for senior cycle education into the future.

4.2 Current aims and purposes - general

The White Paper on Education *Charting our Education Future* (1995) establishes the fundamental aim of education as

> *...to serve individual, social and economic well-being and to enhance quality of life.*

The White Paper cites pluralism, equality, partnership, quality, and accountability as educational principles derived from this fundamental aim of education. These same principles were enshrined in the Education Act 1998 (PT.I S.6) as the objects of that Act. Ten specific educational aims are then outlined in the White Paper as guides to policy formulation and practice. In summary, these are to:

- develop personal qualities such as personal identity, self-esteem, awareness of abilities, aptitudes and limitations, self-reliance, a spirit of enquiry/innovation, personal initiative

- develop intellectual skills, analytical skills

- develop expressive, creative, imaginative and artistic abilities

- promote physical and emotional health and well-being

- create tolerant, caring and politically aware members of society

- understanding and critical appreciation of the values which have been distinctive in shaping Irish society

- promote awareness of national and European heritage and identity, global awareness, respect and care for the environment

- provide education and training to support economic development

- promote quality and equality in education for all.

  Summarised from Charting Our Education Future - the White Paper on Education, p10

In broad terms, these aims fall into three groups. The first group emphasises the development of individual qualities and capacities (1-4). The second focuses on the individual in society, on promoting citizenship, a sense of community and an appreciation of cultural heritage (5-7). The final group (8-9) suggest parameters for policy and practice.

Some of these aims are supported in other documents published by the Department of Education and Science such as the *Report on the National Education Convention* and the Department's own *Strategy Statement – Implementation of the Public Service Management Act,* 1997.

The White Paper on Adult Education, *Learning for Life,* makes a further important contribution when it adds to the list of principles governing education policy formulation the commitment to lifelong learning. This, it states, is the governing principle of Irish education policy.

4.3   Current aims and purposes – senior cycle education

Chapter 3 of the White Paper provides a description and account of the second-level education system. The curricular aims/principles of breadth and balance, relevance, quality, continuity and progression, and coherence are endorsed. The particular purpose/aim of senior cycle education is clearly stated,

> *…to encourage and facilitate students to continue in full-time education during the post-compulsory period by providing a stimulating range of programmes suited to their abilities, aptitudes and interests….to develop each student's potential to the full, and equip them for further work or further education.*

To this end, during the 1990s, senior cycle education has experienced change on an unprecedented scale with the provision of three distinctive, Leaving Certificate 'orientations' - the Leaving Certificate Applied, the LCVP and the Leaving Certificate (established) - within a Leaving Certificate framework.

This framework underscored the provision of a broadly based general education up to the end of senior cycle. However, it also advanced the consideration that these curriculum changes aimed to achieve a balance between the retention of the best elements of existing programmes with an increased emphasis on vocational orientation, the artistic dimension, fostering of cultural identity and development of an active appreciation of the European dimension. Finally, the White Paper states that educational programmes at senior cycle are based on achieving an appropriate balance between personal and social (including moral and spiritual) development, vocational studies and preparation for work and for further education, the actual balance achieved varying from programme to programme.

On the inside covers of subject syllabuses at Leaving Certificate level, a preamble outlining the aims of education in general, the various Leaving Certificate programmes collectively and each individually, is presented. The general aim of education, as

outlined, is very broad in scope. In most respects it mirrors the aims of education as expressed in the White Paper but, in addition, emphasises the application of these aims in personal and home life, working life, living in the community and in leisure activity. The more specific purpose of all Leaving Certificate programmes is viewed as

...the preparation of students for the requirements of further education or training, for employment and for their role as participative, enterprising citizens

Leaving Certificate Subject Syllabus, Inside Cover

It is further stated that all Leaving Certificate programmes emphasise the importance of "self-directed learning and independent thought".

According to the preamble, the Leaving Certificate (established) is viewed as providing a broad, balanced education while allowing for some specialisation. The specific programme aims cited focus, as is customary, on fulfilling individual potentials and, as is appropriate to senior cycle education, on preparation for progression.

The purpose of the Leaving Certificate Applied is to provide an alternative programme to the Leaving Certificate (established) for those not wishing to proceed to third level directly or for those with different educational needs, aptitudes and aspirations. As a programme, it is viewed as adhering to the overall principle of breadth and balance but its main aim is to provide meaningful, vocational preparation and education to students through an active, practical and learner-centred methodology.

The LCVP is an intervention in the Leaving Certificate (established). Therefore, the purposes and aims of the latter apply to the LCVP. In addition, the preamble states its aims as

To foster in students a spirit of enterprise and initiative. To develop students' interpersonal, vocational and technological skills

Leaving Certificate Subject Syllabus, Inside Cover

Interestingly, this statement represents the first inclusion within either the expressed general aims of education or those pertaining to senior cycle education of a reference to technology.

The Transition Year is another programme whose purpose and aims should be considered. The White Paper sees the purpose of the programme as to allow participants a special opportunity to experience a flexible curriculum focused on the learner, on self-directed learning, self-evaluation, and on gaining active learning experiences. Its aim is to contribute to "an education which faces the demands and pleasures of life, work, sport and leisure" (p51). The first appearance of the word 'pleasure' is noted in this context. The White Paper proceeds to suggest a number of potential key emphases for the programme, namely Irish language and culture, the European and global dimensions, creative and performing arts, and gender equity.

The table below summarises the principles, aims, and purposes of education in general and senior cycle education in particular as outlined in the previous two sections. For purposes of comparison and analysis a set of international criteria taken from the International Review of Curriculum and Assessment Frameworks (INCA) publication *Values and Aims in Curriculum and Assessment Frameworks* (NFER/SCAA, 1997) are presented in the left-hand column.

In recording the incidence of particular principles, aims and purposes an effort has been made to distinguish between general principles, fundamental aims and educational aims in the column on 'General Education'. The column 'Senior Cycle' distinguishes between principles, general aims and programme aims. The table is best viewed as providing a general impression of what we see as the principles, aims, values and purposes of education in general, and senior cycle education in particular.

Summary of existing principles, aims and purposes of general education and senior cycle education in Ireland

Internationally	Ireland General Education	Ireland Senior Cycle
Excellence	*Principle* – quality and accountability *Educational aim*	*Principle* – quality
Individual development	*Fundamental aim*	*General aim* – achieve potential, several aspects of development *Programme aims* – several qualities
Social development	*Fundamental aim*	*General aim* *Programme aim* – interpersonal skills
Personal qualities	*Educational aims* – several	*General aim*
Equal opportunity	*Principle* *Educational aim*	*Programme aim* – gender equity
Developing the national economy	*Fundamental aim* *Educational aim*	*Programme aim* – enterprise

Internationally	Ireland General Education	Ireland Senior Cycle
Preparation for work		*Principle* – progression *General aim* *Programme aim* – progression *Programme aim* – vocational preparation and education
Basic skills		*Programme aim* – technological skills
Foundation for further education		*Principle* – progression *General aim* *Programme purpose* – selection *Programme aim* – progression
Knowledge/skills/ understanding	*Educational aim*	*General aim* – self-directed learning *Programme aim* – self-directed learning
Citizenship, community, democracy	*Principle* – pluralism *Educational aim* – qualities *Educational aim* – Europe	*General emphasis* – European dimension *General aim* – life in the community, participative and enterprising citizens *Programme aim* – active citizenship *Programme aim* – European and global dimension
Cultural heritage/literacy	*Educational aim* – values *Educational aim* – Europe	*General aim* – cultural identity *Programme aim* – Irish language and culture
Creativity	*Educational aim*	*General aim* – artistic dimension *Programme aim*

Internationally	Ireland General Education	Ireland Senior Cycle
Environment	*Educational aim*	
Health/physical/ Leisure	*Educational aim*	*General aim* *Programme aim*
Lifelong learning	*Principle*	*General aim* – self-directed learning *Programme aim* – self-directed learning
Parental participation	*Principle* – partnership	
Other – quality of life	*Fundamental aim*	*General aim* – contribute to personal and home life *Programme aim*
Other – retention in full-time education		*General aim*

4.4   Current aims and purposes – international comparison

The INCA study findings as outlined in the table above show that the expression of aims and purposes in Irish education is broadly comparable to that of most countries listed in the study. Most of these countries, regardless of geographical location and culture, place significant emphasis on individual development, equal opportunity, social development, preparation for work and further education, and citizenship/community/democracy. Ireland also places emphasis on cultural heritage/literacy while many of the larger western democracies do not. Most countries value knowledge, skills, understanding and basic skills in their statements of general purposes and aims. Perhaps the finding that Ireland places less emphasis on these areas is reflective of the fact that for the purposes of this paper, the general aims of primary and junior cycle education have not been factored in. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that references to what are commonly called key skills or core skills are relatively few and far between in Ireland's statements of purposes and aims at all levels.

Of course policy statements of purposes and aims are, in the first instance, simply statements. The next stage of the process is for them to be translated into workable policies, curriculum structures, curricular programmes and subjects, and congruent assessment strategies. In this process, the relative importance and prioritisation of aims and the extent to which they are translated into statements of curricular programmes and subjects, and into compulsory requirements for participation in programmes, become highly significant issues. Finally, aims and purposes are realised through the ethos, learning environments and teaching, learning and assessment methods that are part and parcel of the daily life of schools.

4.5   Envisioning senior cycle education into the future

It is a long journey from rhetoric to reality and much that is worthy in original intentions can be diluted, compromised and lost along the way. However, it is important that clear statements of purposes and aims should be the starting point of this process (and the revisiting and revisioning point throughout the process). It is also critical that these statements reflect consideration of what education is for at this point in time and of how participants are to benefit from their education. Accordingly, the needs of learners entering senior cycle education into the future, and the changes in learning, schools and education systems required to meet these needs are now explored.

4.6   Meeting the needs of learners

The fundamental purpose of education is to enable learners to live their lives to their fullest potential as individuals within democratic society. In this sense educational aims must attend both to the needs of the individual, to the needs of society and to the interface between the two– the domain of the individual in society. In many ways, the success of education must be measured not only by the quality of individual learners it develops but by their ability to apply that learning on a continuous basis to the challenges which life presents to them as individuals, family members, parents, workers and citizens.

Many countries are now focusing considerable attention on the conjecturing of educational futures. Driven by reflection on the pace and nature of change in the last ten years, educationalists and policy makers are now considering how education can, not simply respond to that change, but continue to be a force for development. A key strand in this thinking is clarification of the range of challenges that people will meet in the future. In his book *Learning beyond the classroom – Education for a changing world* (1998), Tom Bentley identifies such a range of challenges. These are summarised in the diagram opposite.

Challenges at various levels faced by young people (adapted from Bentley 1998)

Level of Challenge	Nature of Challenge
Global	Globalisation
	Environmental issues
	Political issues
	Global media and levels of information
Society	Political participation
	Participation in economic activity
	Finding interesting, gainful work regularly
	Satisfying material needs
	Sustaining forms of community
	Managing the framework of law
Local	Running and participating in changing organisations
	Creating good working and other environments
Family	Family life
	Providing for dependants
	Succeeding in long-term relationships
	Coping with insecurity and hardship
Personal	Making successful life choices
	Finding work
	Deciding where and how to live
	Choosing between different career paths
	Achieving ambitions
	Coping with inner stress and insecurity

Bentley proceeds to provide evidence of education systems failing to prepare young people to meet these challenges. This includes:

- **Basic educational failure:** the standards of achievement in basic literacy and numeracy and the number of learners who leave full-time education without significant qualifications

- **Relationships:** increasing evidence that many young people are failing to sustain long-term relationships

National Education Aims

Educational aims and purposes, *as stated in documents consulted.*

INCA (International review of curriculum and assessment frameworks archive) 1998 QCA/NFER

	Eng	Aust	Can	Eng	Fran	Ger	Hun	Italy	Jap	Kor	Net	NZ	Sing	Sp	Swe	Swit	USA
Excellence	X	X	X	X						X		X	X				X
Individual development	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Social development	X	X	X	X				X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Personal qualities	X	X	X	X				X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	
Equal opportunity	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
National economy	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X		X	X	X			X
Preparation for work	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Basic skills	X	X	X	X				X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Foundation for further education	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X	X	X	X	X		X	
Knowledge/skills/ understanding	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Citizenship/community/ democracy	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Cultural heritage/literacy		X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Creativity		X	X					X	X	X	X		X				
Environment		X	X							X			X				
Health/physical/leisure		X	X					X	X	X	X		X	X	X		
Lifelong education		X	X							X		X	X		X		
Parental participation		X	X					X				X	X		X	X	X
	Eng	Aust	Can	Eng	Fran	Ger	Hun	Italy	Jap	Kor	Net	NZ	Sing	Sp	Swe	Swit	USA

- **Employability:** evidence that many young people are ill-prepared for a changing work environment where high levels of proficiency in generic skills are valued and where personal qualities are of paramount importance

- **Citizenship**: increasing evidence among young people of disaffection with and alienation from formal politics and institutions while sustaining interest in social, environmental and political issues and commitment to volountary activity and practical altruism

- **Well-being:** young people are experiencing increasing difficulty coping with the stresses of life, evidenced, for example by increased incidence of mental health problems and of suicide among young people

- **Educational Success?:** many young people, despite their 'success' in gaining educational qualifications, are unable to apply their learning in real situations even where the learning achieved is specific to the situation at hand. "It is not clear that those who can learn enough to pass written exams are being equipped with the self-awareness, mental discipline and depth of understanding needed to use their knowledge to best effect" (Bentley, 1998, p15). Many well-qualified students show little predilection to being lifelong learners.

In the context of the perceived failings of education systems to adequately meet the needs of young people, Bentley poses three questions that education systems must address. Firstly, what is the place of education in an information society? Secondly, can education continue to identify and develop in young people values, attitudes and understandings that can be identified as core values to which society, in general, subscribes? And lastly, can education motivate young people to commit themselves to the process of continuous learning on the understanding that what is learnt will prepare them for real life and can be applied in real situations?

4.7 Future learning, schools and education systems

The means to addressing these questions through changes to education systems and the educational process is suggested by Lawton in *The Future of the Curriculum* (1998). There are four clearly identifiable directions that progressive education systems are taking into the future. Firstly, they are moving from a predominant focus on curricular content to emphasising skills and processes. Secondly, a parallel movement from subjects and cognitive attainment as the primary source and basis of learning to a more holistic view of learning sources and ways of generating and inspiring learning. Thirdly, a related movement away from didactic teaching methods towards greater potential for self-directed learning. Finally, a breaking down of the false dichotomy of academic and vocational and an integration of both with all the implications that the latter bears for the merging of the schooling model of education with the credentialist model associated with vocational education and training (Young, 1998), the blurring of boundaries between work and learning and the embedding of learning in a range of contexts.

Clearly, the Irish education system, particularly at post-primary senior cycle, has been moving in these directions, witness developments in the Transition Year, LCVP and Leaving Certificate Applied cited elsewhere in this paper. But has it moved far enough in these directions, particularly for those learners whose experience of senior cycle comprises a two-year, 'academic' Leaving Certificate (established)? It is arguable that such a learner would remain untouched by these continuing developments. This is particularly the case when the question of the kind of knowledge and understanding required of learners in the knowledge/information society is addressed.

Changes in learning

In order to generate new knowledge, which will provide the basis for economic development in the knowledge society, learners must be knowledgeable. They must be able to absorb and understand existing knowledge. They must be able communicate their knowledge and understanding effectively. But they must also be able to apply existing knowledge and understanding creatively in generating new knowledge. In order to facilitate this, the curriculum must place a strong emphasis on developing skills and competences associated with creativity, problem solving and decision making. In turn, the curriculum offered in schools, and schools themselves, must be viewed as part of an infrastructure for lifelong learning which learners access throughout their lives to continuously update their knowledge, skills and competences.

Again, these reflections on knowledge and learning are not new. Many of the senior cycle programmes place considerable emphasis on the skills, competences and processes associated with the generation of deep knowledge and understanding. But, for many learners, the senior cycle experience is too often based solely in the absorption and understanding of existing, received knowledge. This is partly because the kind of education being envisaged here has major implications for schools as learning environments and for teachers as facilitators of learning.

Learning institutions and environments

In *The Creative Age: Knowledge and Skills for the New Economy,* 1999 Seltzer and Bentley offer their views of the changes needed to learning environments and to the curriculum in order to accommodate the kinds of directions and learning espoused above. They suggest that future learning environments should be characterised by "trust, freedom of action, variation of learning contexts, the right balance between skills and challenge, interactive exchange of knowledge and ideas, and real world outcomes". They further suggest that the measures needed to effect these changes include reductions in existing curriculum content, extended project-based learning, use of IT based learning portfolios, greater school-community links, tight skill specifications, and new models of inter-disciplinary teaching and learning.

In these visions of education in the future, it is clear that schools as places of learning will be characterised by greater flexibility in curriculum provision, greater variety in learning environments, greater levels of outreach to the world of work and to the community and greater integration with other learning institutions providing opportunities for lifelong learning.

Changing role and responsibilities of teachers

Equally, the role of the teacher will be subject to substantial development, although many teachers are already engaging with these developments in their role through their involvement in the Transition Year, LCVP and the Leaving Certificate Applied. Increasingly, and into the future, co-ordinators of educational programmes will be appointed – sometimes with associated posts of responsibility or time allocations. Programme teams will be established with responsibility for the delivery of the whole programme and for cross-curricular dimensions of programmes. These roles will in many cases require a teacher to have a proclivity towards collaboration, skills of collaboration, planning and evaluation skills. Equally, an understanding of, and the skills and expertise associated with curriculum development will prove necessary.

The challenges associated with teaching specific elements of future programmes will be manifold. They include engagement with

- realignment and revisioning of traditional subject disciplines

- increased emphasis on cross-curricular dimensions of programmes

- the development of generic core skills, aptitudes and qualities across the full range of the programme

- a range of teaching methods associated with active learning and self-directed learning

- a broader range of assessment modes and techniques

- greater likelihood of mixed ability classes

- integration of students with special educational needs and adaptation of learning programmes in this context

- facilitating learning through technology and learning beyond the classroom.

Within the classroom, the repertoire of the teacher in the areas of teaching methods and assessment techniques will broaden. Specifically, existing and future education programmes require teachers to have the ability to

- handle open or structured discussion

- apply briefing and debriefing skills to learning activities such as visits, classroom visitors, tasks, projects, etc.

- implement problem-solving methods

- make formal presentations

- use technologies in structured sessions

- apply experiential methods such as role-play, simulation, etc.

Equally, and partly as a consequence, the need for teachers to have a greater understanding of the role of assessment in teaching and learning, and become practised in a wide range of assessment techniques will arise. Teachers have always been well-versed in terminal, external assessment of student performance. They have been less well-prepared and less knowledgeable about the pivotal and formative role of assessment in the day-to-day progress of the learner.

The continuing and future development of the role and expertise of the teacher can be summarised as a shift from the teacher as purveyor of largely subject-specific learning products to teachers as managers of learning environments, as facilitators of learning processes and as instrumental contributors to planning processes for developing learning institutions.

Developments in The Netherlands at this level

The challenge of progressing towards the kind of future envisaged may appear daunting, particularly while, at the same time, aiming to retain the best features and the central functions of senior cycle today. However, other countries like The Netherlands, have already have taken radical steps in this direction. Reforms under way (1998-2003) in Dutch upper secondary education will result in the abolition of free choice of examination subjects. Instead, learners opt for one of four 'profiles'

- science and technology

- science and health care

- economics and society

- culture and society.

Each profile consists of a common component (50% of time), a specialised compulsory component characteristic of the profile (>33% of time) and an optional component. The components comprise areas of study, some in the form of traditional subjects, others more broadly based.

What is of further interest in the requirements associated with these profiles is that they specify a time allocation for an overall 'study load' which includes contact hours, independent study time and project work. Considerable attention is also given to broadening the concept of places of study to include learning sites beyond the school. Assessment processes associated with the profiles include both externally-based and school-based dimensions.

Applying the vision to Ireland

In the context of the Irish education system, what is most daunting about the overall vision of future education presented in this section is the extent of change required in the long term to fully achieve this kind of vision. What is encouraging in relation to senior cycle is that the foundations have been laid by the reforms of the 1990s and, in many cases, schools and teachers, through the implementation of existing programmes, are already embarked on this journey. What is incontrovertible about this vision is that it is resource intensive. Schools will prove unable to effect change without improved investment in education and teachers will require extensive professional development to continue to transform their role.

What is desirable, as a starting point, is that the aims and purposes associated with education in general and senior cycle in particular are consistent with this view of the future. It is clear that the aims and purposes presented earlier in this section go a long way towards accommodating the vision of senior cycle education subsequently presented. However, there are also some areas of deficit particularly with regard to emphasis on basic and core skills, learning to learn in lifelong education, education for personal well-being, and education for citizenship. These should be addressed in setting out the proposed aims and purposes of senior cycle education in the future.

4.8 The purpose and aims of senior cycle education

A statement of the purpose and aims of senior cycle education is outlined below for consultation and discussion. The statement is based on the considerations presented in this section and seeks to retain what has characterised a successful Irish education system in the past. It also takes into account envisaged challenges and developments presenting themselves to learners, society and, in turn, the education system.

Purpose

The fundamental purpose of senior cycle education is to enable and prepare people to live their lives to the fullest potential within democratic society.

General aims of senior cycle education

- To provide continuity with the junior cycle of post-primary education and to allow progression to further education, the world of work and higher education

- To provide a curriculum characterised by breadth and balance, while allowing for some degree of specialisation

- To contribute to equality of opportunity and outcome within a context of lifelong learning

- To contribute to the development of each individual's moral, social, cultural and economic life and to enhance his/her quality of life

- To educate for participative citizenship at local, national, European and global levels

- To ensure that the highest standards of achievement are obtained by every person, appropriate to his/her ability

These aims must lay the basis for more specific curriculum objectives and learning outcomes. On the one hand, a commitment to these principles and aims provides for a comforting degree of continuity with senior cycle programmes already in existence. On the other hand, they carry implications for existing curriculum structures, for the content of curricular programmes and subjects, for decisions on compulsory requirements for participation in programmes, for the ethos and learning environments provided by schools and for the teaching and learning methods used in our schools.

Developing curriculum,
assessment and certification

Section

5

5.1   Introduction to section five

This section of the paper aims to clarify the key issues related to curriculum, assessment and certification at senior cycle. The clarification provides a basis for setting a course of action for reform of the Leaving Certificate (established) in the short term and for generating discussion of the future shape and content of senior cycle education as a whole in the medium-long term.

This section builds on the rationale for review and reform, the analysis of current senior cycle provision and the account of international trends outlined in sections two and three of the paper. It examines how the structure and features of curriculum, assessment and certification at senior cycle might best reflect the provisional purpose and aims set out in section four. In so doing, a wide range of issues are discussed including

- access and participation for all, including the educationally disadvantaged those with special educational needs

- programme requirements

- the nature of assessment and certification

- the role of key skills

- the future alignment of existing programmes

- the 'approved' list of Leaving Certificate (established) subjects

- relating 'academic' to 'vocational' qualifications.

Attention is also given to programme-specific issues and concerns.

5.2   The main issues introduced

The paper has established that the main aim of review and reform is to improve the quality of education provided for the individual learner. Review and reform must also be cognisant of changes in the Irish education system, Irish society and the Irish economy, and of developments internationally, particularly the merging of 'academic' and 'vocational' curricula, assessment arrangements and qualifications structures. Section two of the paper clarified that in order to improve quality, the senior cycle programmes must also be subject to rolling review and reform.

The review and analysis of aims and purposes in section four arrived at the view that there is a need for a greater focus in the curriculum than at present on

- basic and key skills

- learning to learn in a lifelong learning context

- education for personal well-being

- education for active citizenship.

In addition, the aims presented for discussion in that section place considerable emphasis on curricular breadth and balance, on addressing issues of inequality, on meeting the future cultural, social and economic needs of learners, on sustaining the highest standards of achievement and on the pursuit of the maximum benefit for individual learners from resources.

A further, though complementary set of concerns arises from the *Commission on the Points System: Final Report and Recommendations* (1999). Here, the Department of Education and Science and the NCCA is exhorted to redefine and develop the senior cycle experience of learners, address the limited range of assessment modes and methods currently in use, consider broadening the basis of certification, improve the quality of differentiation of curricula, ensure all developments are consistent with the principle of social cohesion, and adopt measures leading to improved parity of esteem between the Leaving Certificate (established) and the other senior cycle programmes. The Commission also makes a specific recommendation in relation to the connection between certification and requirements for entry to Higher Education.

> *The Commission is of the opinion that while a broad senior cycle education should be provided, and students' attainment in that senior cycle assessed and certificated, in some instances the certification might be of the nature of a record of participation and involvement rather than a grading of achievement. Some element of the certification might not count for points purposes, but would be a prerequisite for entry to third-level education.* (p61)

In order to achieve the aims and purposes established in the previous section and to meet the vision of what education at this level might become, what issues will need to be addressed and how will the existing suite of programmes need to be developed in the short, medium and long terms?

- Should the current provision remain in place? For example, would more extensive reform of the Leaving Certificate (established) in the areas of assessment and certification and internal modifications to the other existing programmes represent an appropriate focus for developments in the short to medium term?

- Will a merger between the Leaving Certificate (established) and the LCVP be required?

- Should the development of a three-year educational programme at senior cycle, merging the best features of the Transition Year, the LCVP and the Leaving Certificate (established) become a priority?

- Should a more radical option be pursued? For example, a unified, modularised senior cycle programme with accessible, internal tracks to meet the full range of student needs?

These options are discussed in more detail in section six of the paper. To consider the merits of each, it is necessary to clarify the issues that are pivotal to the future development of senior cycle education. For convenience they are categorised, in a sequence moving from the more specific to the general or systemic, as follows:

1. Assessment, certification, qualifications

2. Curriculum development

3. Programme requirements

4. Equality, access, lifelong learning.

This approach towards presenting the main issues involved is also chosen with a view to emphasising the sequence in which these issues might be considered and acted upon. For example, it is the view of the NCCA that much can be achieved in the short term to broaden assessment and certification provision within senior cycle programmes while the issue of curriculum requirements merits extensive consideration and further analysis. Each of these issues is now considered in detail in order to identify suggestions for further consideration and action.

5.3 Assessment, certification, qualifications

Assessment is at the heart of the process of learning. Assessment for learning (formative assessment) plays a crucial role in progressing learning and in developing effective learners. Assessment of learning (summative assessment) in Ireland and internationally is intrinsic to senior cycle education, where the results of such assessment convert into certification, qualifications, a passport to Higher Education and become an important factor in the future work and life prospects of learners. Much can be achieved in improving the quality of senior cycle education by focusing on how assessment arrangements and the nature of certification can be developed.

Considerable progress has already taken place in the range of assessment approaches used at senior cycle. Assessment within the Transition Year is characterised by a strong emphasis on formative assessment, on assessment methods that inform, and are informed by, teaching and learning processes. In addition, many Transition Year programmes offer stand-alone qualifications, for example in the area of ICT. Assessment of the Link Modules of the LCVP has pioneered the use of prepared material and of video material within formal examination contexts and has given rise to a growth in expertise within the system in the area of portfolio assessment. The Leaving Certificate Applied has also pioneered new assessment approaches in the area of crediting module completion and in the assessment of project-based student tasks. In addition, the use of interviews in which learners discuss their work has proved particularly successful as an assessment method.

So much has changed within these programmes. What has not changed is the assessment mode in operation; the use of externally based assessment only with all that this implies in terms of general failure to assess process over product. This is

particularly problematic in programmes such as the Leaving Certificate Applied where many of the learning objectives are process based. For example, it is difficult to envisage the Personal Reflection Task of this programme, work on which commences early in year one, being adequately and appropriately assessed by an external examiner at the end of year two. Nonetheless, much of value has been achieved in these developments both for the learners involved and in terms of the professional development of teachers conducting the assessments.

However, little has changed in the area of assessment within the Leaving Certificate (established). While oral and aural examinations continue within languages, as do practical projects and tests within the technology subjects, other subjects are assessed entirely on the basis of terminal examinations, externally examined. The introduction of additional assessment components, whether based on practicals or projects of various kinds, has proved one of the major stumbling blocks in implementing revised syllabuses. The lack of momentum in Leaving Certificate (established) reform might, equally accurately, be described as lack of assessment reform. The revised syllabuses introduced to schools since implementation of review and reform commenced in this area in the mid 1990s share one common characteristic – none carried implications for immediate implementation of additional assessment components.

The reluctance to introduce new assessment components and arrangements at this level is understandable. As this paper has already established (see 3.3), the assessment arrangements associated with the Leaving Certificate (established) enjoy public confidence in terms of standards, status and currency. They serve a selection function in relation to higher education. They have stood the test of time, are operated with commendable efficiency, transparency and commitment by teachers, schools and the Department of Education and Science, and have proved a reliable reference point for agencies and individuals involved in employment and training. A premium is placed on tried and trusted assessment modes and methods characterised by rigour, yielding results with high levels of reliability. The perceived objectivity of assessment arrangements is seen as a major strength of the Leaving Certificate. In the process, the validity of the assessment modes and methods, their compatibility with the aims and objectives of subjects, are often viewed as secondary concerns.

Yet the *Commission on the Points System: Final Report and Recommendations* (1999) suggests that little will change in the areas of teaching and learning and the quality of the educational experience offered to students unless reform of the Leaving Certificate (established) encompasses assessment change. The change need not involve a diminution in the reliability of results and, in this regard, the NCCA has conducted research, drawing on international experience, into the impact of second assessment components on examination of subjects in high-stakes examinations. The research highlights how statistical moderation of assessment components results might prove a way forward in finding the right balance between the validity of assessment approaches and the reliability of results at this level.

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The second assessment components arise from the ongoing revision of Leaving Certificate (established) subject syllabuses. Typically, they comprise coursework components, projects, portfolios or practical tests depending on the subjects in question. For example, it is proposed that, in addition to a terminal examination, practical work in the science subjects of Physics, Chemistry and Biology should be assessed through a second assessment component and that students taking History and Geography should complete a research study and field study respectively.

The broadening of the range of assessment components in use is essential to improving the quality of the Leaving Certificate (established). It will ensure that assessment better reflects the diverse purposes of revised curricula. It will achieve the desired congruence between course objectives and assessment components. Of their nature, second assessment components will underscore the movement towards criterion-referenced approaches to assessment. Most importantly, it will contribute to a more varied and interesting learning experience for all learners, which in turn should be reflected in improved motivation to learn and improved achievement. In broadening the range of components, the experience of other senior cycle programmes in this area can be drawn upon, particularly the use of module completion, assessment of tasks, the use of interviewing and assessment of portfolios in the Leaving Certificate Applied and the LCVP.

Developments in the mode of assessment within the Leaving Certificate (established) and other senior cycle programmes should also be considered. Predominantly, assessment is conducted in an external mode with teachers not assessing the work of their own students for the purpose of the State examinations. It is important to recognise that, at this level, this arrangement is widely viewed as contributing directly to the perceived objectivity, fairness and impartiality associated with the examination.

However, a case can be made that, where it is proposed that assessment components are introduced which place a strong emphasis and apply a weighty reward to practical work, movement towards an internal mode of assessment should ultimately be encouraged. Subjects such as those associated with the technologies, a proposed physical education syllabus, and aspects of the LCVP Link Modules come to mind in this context. These are areas where there is a concern to assess the process and progress of learning involved in arriving at a product or the performance of an activity. It is arguable that the teacher is uniquely placed to conduct this assessment and that approaches developed in other senior cycle programmes, such as module or task completion, might provide insights into how this could be achieved, while retaining the sense of objectivity, fairness and impartiality that should continue to be associated with assessment arrangements at this level. Equally, developments in assessment provision proposed by the NCCA at junior cycle level over the coming years could contribute to building the professional expertise and the confidence of teachers in the area of assessment to an extent where, at a future date, the broadening of assessment modes at senior cycle level would become feasible.

While few would question the towering presence that the Leaving Certificate (established) represents, many would wish to recognise the achievements of learners in non-examination subjects and in co-curricular activities, especially where they have undertaken a three-year senior cycle. The range of achievements currently certificated is narrow and consideration should be given to broadening the basis of certification. This may prove of particular importance in the context of the raising of the compulsory school attendance age to 16 and compatible with increasing availability nationally of modularised educational and training programmes. The development of an over-arching portfolio of qualifications or record of achievement is also consistent with the views of the Commission on the Points System.

However, the Commission went further, suggesting that a broadened form of certification would be best reinforced and supported through linkage to the requirements associated with senior cycle education. This could be achieved by making such certification, expressed through a record of achievement/portfolio, a pre-requisite for access to higher education. It is arguable that, given the high-stakes nature of the Leaving Certificate examination, without such reinforcement, and over time, there might be limited uptake and limited currency associated with a new form of certification.

With the advent of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, charged with establishing and reviewing the operation of a national qualifications framework covering all vocational education and training qualifications, it may well transpire that a portfolio of qualifications rather than a more descriptive record of achievement is the direction to take. The operation of such a framework will have significant implications for senior cycle education in the formal sector. At the very least, in pursuit of the principle of lifelong learning, clear articulation will need to be established between 'formal' educational qualifications and other qualifications. Whether, as in many other countries, specific measures of equivalence (e.g. credits) are utilised or broader notions of equivalence (e.g. progression) are employed, the need to relate all qualifications in ways that people, employers and higher education can understand and agree with, is indisputable.

The inclusion of senior cycle qualifications in a national framework of qualifications should contribute to the narrowing of the perceived gap between 'academic' and 'vocational' education and the lack of parity of esteem that this often gives rise to. It is also consistent with a view that all senior cycle participants should have learning experiences that span what would traditionally have been described as 'academic' and 'vocational' education. Nonetheless, the advent of a qualifications framework might also present challenges to senior cycle education in terms of how programmes are designed and specified and, in this context, the nature of the relationship between senior cycle and further education may take some time to define.

Clearly, developments in the areas of assessment and certification on the scale proposed in this section carry with them very significant resource implications. These are addressed in the final section of this paper.

5.4   Assessment, certification, qualifications – suggestions for further consideration and action

The **broadening of the range of assessment components** employed in the Leaving Certificate examination should proceed as quickly as possible. In particular, assessment arrangements associated with the introduction of revised Leaving Certificate (established) subject syllabuses should be prioritised. Work should commence immediately on implementing a practical assessment component for use within the recently introduced revised science syllabuses. A commitment, both in operational and investment terms, to resourcing these developments should be undertaken.

The planned NCCA issues papers should include discussion of **changing the nature of the certification learners receive,** in particular the development of a portfolio of qualifications, which would prove compatible with inclusion on a national qualifications framework. This could result in a situation where learners leave senior cycle education not only with the results of their Leaving Certificate, but with a record of their achievements beyond the examinations as well. The idea of a portfolio serving a function in relation to senior cycle requirements should also be discussed in the paper.

NCCA should engage with the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland to progress articulation and a form of equivalence between 'formal' qualifications and other qualifications in the context of a national qualifications framework. In the broader context of bridging the gap between the 'academic' and the 'vocational', and between formal, school-based learning and continuing education in a range of settings, this represents an essential step forward. It has been addressed in most EU countries and must be addressed here.

5.5   Curriculum development

Leaving aside areas such as those of curriculum design, programme provision and requirements, which will be discussed in 5.6, there are a number of more specific aspects of curriculum to be considered. In what ways can the quality of existing courses and programmes be improved in the context of rolling and more general review? How can greater breadth and balance with potential for limited specialisation be provided for in the curriculum offered to students? How is the issue of ensuring competence in basic and key skills to be addressed?

5.5.1 Programme development

Leaving Certificate (established)

The Leaving Certificate (established) is in the process of being reviewed and reformed. To date, review has mainly focused on subject syllabuses and their assessment arrangements. The rationale for syllabus review and reform arose out of criticism of the education system in general, and of the Leaving Certificate (established) in particular, in the late 1980s and 1990s. The criticism centred on the over-academic emphasis in many subjects; inadequate levels and quality of differentiation between Ordinary level and Higher level courses; related insufficient attention to the differing abilities, aptitudes and learning styles of participants; and the limited range of assessment approaches and pedagogical methods in use. Such criticism has always been, and continues to be, tempered with regard for the overall quality, particularly in the areas of knowledge and understanding and verbal and logico-mathematical achievement, of those who complete the Leaving Certificate successfully. The Leaving Certificate, nationally and internationally, is well regarded in general terms.

Syllabus revision over the past ten years has concentrated on addressing the criticisms outlined above. The revised syllabuses introduced and those awaiting introduction are characterised by

- modernisation and increased relevance

- an outcomes-based approach to expressing course and assessment objectives

- increased attention to the vocational aspects of subjects – to the application of learning to real-life situations

- greater attention to differentiation, often in the form of different learning outcomes for Ordinary and Higher levels

- broadening of the basis for and the methods for the assessment of achievement

- greater consideration of gender issues and of special educational needs.

So from the perspective of syllabus review, a considerable amount has been and continues to be achieved. The problem is that in the area of implementation the pace of reform has proved tortuously slow. A significant number of revised or new syllabuses are in various stages of preparation leading to implementation. Furthermore, while revised syllabuses have been introduced, revised assessment arrangements involving second assessment components have not. The pace and scope of implementation of revised Leaving Certificate subject syllabuses needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency in order to consolidate the developments achieved in syllabus review.

At the same time, further development in the review of the subject syllabuses of the Leaving Certificate (established) must also proceed apace, not least in order to provide

learners with the choices from which they might take a programme characterised by breadth and balance. In the latter context, additions will need to be made to the subject list of the Leaving Certificate (established). Given the aims and purposes established in section four there are currently gaps in subject provision in the areas of

- information and communication technology (ICT)

- civic and political education

- social and health education

- physical education

- religious education.

While these areas may be provided for at school level, in various forms, they are not provided for in the existing 'currency' of this programme, as full, optional, examinable subjects. In the case of physical education and religious education work is already under way by the NCCA and the DES to establish provision. In the case of ICT, NCCA has completed an impact study in collaboration with the University of Limerick to establish the potential for provision in this area (2002). The main decision to be made in addressing gaps in provision in the areas of ICT, civic and political education and in social and health education relates to the form of provision. Should they comprise short or full courses? Should they comprise cross-curricular strands? Should they be examination or non-examination subjects? Other issues related to their status, such as requirement, are linked to the broader questions being discussed in this paper.

However, in the contexts of lifelong learning, requirement and developments in teaching and learning, the reform of the Leaving Certificate (established) must involve a more fundamental reappraisal of the total experience of learners within the programme. The reappraisal should move away from an emphasis on subjects and take an overview of what learners experience in the totality of the 'programme': what they learn across subjects; the range of teaching and learning methods they encounter; the ways in which their work is assessed in class and in the examinations; and the gaps and overlaps they experience in the 'programme' taken. This reappraisal, with an eye to the future, would focus on areas such as time spent in different learning modes (from instruction to self-directed learning), teaching/learning styles (from didactic to activity based learning), access to different learning sites (in-school, out-of-school, virtual), the role of basic and key skills, and the role of homework and study. Findings in these areas would, in turn, need to inform the rolling review of subject syllabuses and assessment arrangements.

A reappraisal of the Leaving Certificate (established) would also need to be cognisant of specific, abiding issues that have proved difficult to address. These include

- decreasing uptake in subjects such as those in some areas of science and technology

- gendered patterns in subject uptake

- flexibility of subjects in the context of the integration of learners with special educational needs

- quality of differentiation of curricula for Ordinary level learners

- underachievement and the quality of achievement by learners in subjects such as English, Mathematics and Gaeilge

- the adequacy of the Leaving Certificate as a preparation for the nature of the learning demands in higher education.

The findings of such a reappraisal would also prove of particular relevance to decision-making on the alignment of existing senior cycle programmes into the future.

LCVP

Many of the needs associated with the development of the Leaving Certificate (established) apply equally to the LCVP. They share the same subject syllabuses and the assessment arrangements associated with these. However, with regard to breadth and balance the LCVP can be viewed as sending contrary signals.

On the one hand, the provision of the Link Modules and the specification of related learning activities and experiences contribute significantly to the principle of breadth and balance. On the other, the vocational subject groupings of the LCVP were originally based on a conservative interpretation of the term 'vocational'. In the early stages the groupings largely comprised 'technical/practical' subjects and this, in some cases, had the effect of skewing the balance in the combinations of subjects taken and resulted in predictable patterns of gendered uptake. However, a recent DES developmental initiative facilitating schools in developing, justifying and planning a programme around their own vocational subject grouping has the potential to broaden, in a meaningful way, the definition of a vocational subject and address issues of potential imbalance. The outcomes of this initiative may have significant implications for the development of the LCVP.

Leaving Certificate Applied

The Leaving Certificate Applied is characterised by curricular breadth and balance and, following the recent adjustments to the programme, incorporates increased potential for improvements in this regard through the development of off-the-shelf discretionary modules such as those developed in science and religious education.

Transition Year

There is insufficient research evidence available to offer an analysis of whether the most effective Transition Year programmes are characterised by curricular breadth and balance. There are some indications that areas such as those of science and

technology feature less regularly in programmes than, for example, the arts, but objective data is limited. The NCCA review of the Transition Year should shed more light on this issue and provide a basis for recommendations in this context.

5.5.2 Basic and key skills

Provision for basic and key skills is a feature of the curriculum of many countries at this level. In general terms, the focus on key skills can be viewed as an extension of the trend towards expressing curricula in terms of outcomes. The advent and articulation of key skills is also closely related to the desire of many countries to effectively align education at this level with the future skills needs of the workforce. As many western economies move from a manufacturing to a high-skills focus, congruence emerges between the skills identified as contributing to the knowledge economy and those that would be viewed as educationally appropriate at this level. Generic, transferable skills have become the order of the day.

There are a number of important issues relating to key skills to consider. Firstly, decisions must be made on what is a key skill and what is not. The list in some countries numbers close to 30 while in others it comprises five or six. Some skills are clearly more 'key' than others.

Secondly, how are key skills to be provided for? What is to be achieved in terms of competence or ability can be expressed as learning outcomes and embedded (but tagged) within programme and subject curricula. Key skills can also be expressed as learning outcomes and their implementation left to the discretion of the individual school. They can be treated as free-standing modules as in the case of the LCVP. These can be made available to schools 'off-the-shelf' on an optional basis.

The third issue is assessment and certification. Some countries assess key skills and certificate achievement in them, some treat them as aspirational attainments. Choosing the form of curriculum provision is clearly central to the issue of assessment – one must be compatible with the other.

The following is a 'working' list of key skills assembled from the lists of a number of countries and from consideration of the emphases current in the Irish education system.

- General skills

    Communication

    Numeracy

- Technical skills

    Information and communications technology

- Personal and social skills

    Self-management

    Thinking skills

    Working with others

    Physical skills

    Work, learning and study skills.

Clearly, many of these skills are catered for to a greater or lesser degree across senior cycle programmes. The Transition Year, the Leaving Certificate Applied and the LCVP are designed to make significant contributions in areas such as those of ICT, communication, self-management, problem solving, and work-related skills. Equally, many of those studying the Leaving Certificate (established) are enabled to develop learning and study skills. However, criticism of the latter programme, not least by learners themselves, has often centred on the lack of provision for the range of skills outlined above. The general problem with key skills at senior cycle is that while most people are confident that they are catered for to a certain extent, nobody is in a position to state categorically what is provided for, what is achieved and what is assessed in the case of each student. Provision in this area needs to become more explicit.

A similar statement might be made in relation to the basic skills of literacy and numeracy and, while it is not suggested that senior cycle represents an opportunity for the remediation of learning difficulties in these areas, there is a strong case to be made for greater clarity in learning outcomes in these skills and for increased levels of monitoring of the achievements of learners, not least because concern is expressed on a regular basis at a diminution of standards of literacy and numeracy at this level.

5.6   Curriculum development – suggestions for further consideration and action

A **schedule for the implementation of the revised subject syllabuses** of the Leaving Certificate (established) should be agreed and implemented as a matter of urgency.

The NCCA proposes to commence a broader **review of the Leaving Certificate (established).** This should comprise a fundamental reappraisal focusing on the total educational experience of learners within the programme. The review should move away from an emphasis on subjects and take an overview of what learners experience in the totality of the 'programme': what they learn across subjects; the range of teaching and learning methods they encounter; the ways in which their work is assessed in class and in the examinations; and the gaps and overlaps they experience in the 'programme' taken. The findings of such a review would inform decision making on the alignment of existing senior cycle programmes into the

future. Meanwhile, in order to cater for greater curricular breadth and balance, the **list of recognised Leaving Certificate subjects** might, subject to impact and feasibility studies, be augmented to include provision in the areas of information and communication technologies (ICT), civic and political education, and social and health education. Discussions need to take place on the form of such provision.

Where the **other senior cycle programmes** are concerned, adjustments might be made, as appropriate, to cater for the principle of breadth and balance e.g. to the vocational subject groupings of the LCVP. The NCCA review of Transition Year should provide useful insights into the contribution this programme makes to overall provision in the contexts of breadth and balance and in the area of key skills.

Provision for basic and key skills is gaining an increasing profile in the education systems of many European countries. An **NCCA paper** should be developed on the role that provision for **basic and key skills** might play in senior cycle education. The paper should report on the experience of providing for key skills in other countries before proceeding to establish a list of basic and key skills for discussion, and to analyse senior cycle programmes to identify areas of strength and weakness in providing for the development of key skills. The paper would also need to consider the assessment of key skills either on an integrated basis within existing programmes and assessment arrangements, on an optional stand-alone basis, on the basis of meeting specified outcomes, or on some other basis. The relationship between assessment of key skills and certification would also need to be considered.

5.7   Programme requirements

The issue of programme requirements and how they contribute to the totality of the educational experience at senior cycle is a medium to long term issue worthy of detailed analysis. A consensus is evident across most sectors of society that senior cycle education should comprise a broad and balanced educational experience with the potential for limited specialisation built in. There is some evidence that this is being achieved within the Transition Year (DES, 1997). However there is concern that it is not a reality for many Leaving Certificate (established) participants. Those who take the LCVP, given its emphases and learning activities, should be somewhat catered for in this regard while the Leaving Certificate Applied is characterised by breadth and balance while retaining its pre-vocational emphasis. But how do we ensure that the experience is broad and balanced for all? The answer may lie in consideration of the issue of programme requirements across the senior cycle educational experience.

The Transition Year and the Leaving Certificate (established) are minimalist programmes in terms of requirement. The subject groupings of the Leaving Certificate (established) and recommendations relating to these (see 3.3) seem to carry little

weight in the planning of schools. Transition Year curricula are developed by schools on the basis of broad curricular parameters that are well balanced but incorporate considerable flexibility. Both the LCVP and the Leaving Certificate Applied are rich in requirements.

Decisions to increase or reduce levels of programme requirements have far reaching implications, not least in terms of resourcing the education system to meet the requirements. But the starting point for discussion of this issue is the level of requirement compatible with the aims and purpose of senior cycle education. The second point of departure is consideration of how to ensure that the requirements are met in the case of each learner.

With regard to the level of requirement, the current situation at senior cycle is a confused one. Level of requirement varies radically from programme to programme and there is no statement of requirement with regard to the senior cycle educational experience as a whole. One interpretation that can be placed on current requirements at senior cycle is that a significant degree of requirement is acceptable in 'alternative' programmes but not in the Leaving Certificate (established). Given that the vast majority of learners take the Leaving Certificate (established) the conclusion that a relatively requirement-free approach is currently favoured at this level would seem a reasonable one.

A wide range of factors can be involved in ensuring that requirements are met, including provision of resources to ensure schools have the capacity to meet requirements, monitoring procedures, integration of the task of meeting requirements into processes of school development planning etc. But perhaps the *form* of requirement is the most significant in this regard. There are many ways to frame requirements. One way is to specify a list of compulsory subjects or areas of study. A lighter approach is to identify a number of areas of experience such as those at junior cycle which the learner must have access to over the period of their study at this level. In the case of the junior cycle these include

- language, literature and communication

- mathematical studies and applications

- science and technology

- social, political and environmental education

- arts education

- physical education

- religious and moral education

- guidance counselling /Pastoral care.

In the case both of mandatory areas of study/subjects and of areas of experience,

requirement can be increased through the allocation of a specified amount of time to each.

Building on the areas of experience model, but viewing it in the context of lifelong learning, another approach towards requirement is to identify the essential learning outcomes required at senior cycle or the essential learning experiences and activities, or both. The emphasis here might be on requirements such as limited degree of specialisation, provision of certain key, transferable skills and engagement with the vocational dimension of learning among many others.

In all forms of requirement discussed, the ultimate reinforcement would be achieved through linking the fulfilment of requirements with certification and progression as suggested by the Commission on the Points system. This could be achieved by making the outcomes of requirements, expressed through a record of achievement/portfolio, a pre-requisite for access to Higher Education.

It is worth restating the point that the greater the degree of requirement pursued, the greater the implications for resourcing. In other words, a school or educational centre must be given the capacity, in human and capital resource terms, to fulfil the requirements. A further point worthy of consideration is that requirement-rich curriculum provision and learner access/flexibility are uneasy companions, particularly where the issue of optimal school size has not been addressed. Small schools faced with extensive curriculum requirements to meet may find it difficult to provide the levels of access and flexibility needed by future learners.

5.8   Programme requirements – suggestions for further consideration and action

There is considerable consensus on the principle of curricular breadth and balance incorporating the potential for a limited degree of specialisation at this level. Turning this principle into reality for all learners involves consideration of the issue of programme requirements. Perhaps, into the future, requirement should be viewed in the context of senior cycle as a whole rather than in relation to individual programmes. Extensive discussion, based on an **NCCA paper**, should take place on the **level and form of requirement** viewed as appropriate to senior cycle. The forms considered should include compulsory areas of study/subjects; the areas of experience model; the essential learning outcomes, experiences and activities model; and any variations of, or alternatives to, these.

5.9   Equality, access, lifelong learning

As Ireland develops further as an information society and a knowledge-based economy, the role played by of education in laying the foundations and providing the conditions for continuous, lifelong learning is critical. In this context, the principle of equality draws into sharp focus the primary issue of access. How well can learners access senior cycle programmes? Can they do so in amenable, flexible ways? Can they construct an individualised learning path that traverses specific programmes? Are there particular impediments facing the educationally disadvantaged? Are the learners with specific learning difficulties or disabilities experiencing ease of access and flexibility at this level? The answer to these questions in the context of current senior cycle curriculum provision must be that flexibility is not its greatest quality. However, where 'formal' senior cycle curricula are combined by the learner with vocational education and training options through FETAC (Further Education Training Awards Council) qualifications at Levels 1 and 2 (Post Leaving Certificate), the outlook on access and flexibility is more positive.

The Leaving Certificate (established) and the Transition Year, by their nature and by the level of requirement related to them, can prove quite flexible. But the Leaving Certificate Applied, as a ring-fenced programme, has proved highly inflexible for non-school centres and adult learners and those with special educational needs. The LCVP, mainly through the specification of required vocational subject groupings involving largely technical/practical subjects, has also proved inaccessible to many learners with special educational needs, particularly the disabled. Furthermore, there is little meaningful flexibility in terms of the learner's ability to combine elements of different programmes for study.

The realities of senior cycle education as outlined above are inconsistent with the principle of lifelong learning. It is arguable that educational programmes at all levels should be characterised by ease of access and flexibility as these are prerequisites in providing for continuous learning. However, the case for educational programmes largely aimed at school-going learners being tailored or targeted in that context is also a compelling one. Would the Leaving Certificate Applied provide the holistic educational experience it does if the ring-fencing were removed? If the assessment methods associated with examination of the subjects of the Leaving Certificate (established) were to be solely determined by the needs of adult learners or external candidates, the potential for developments in assessment aimed at improving the experience of the vast majority of participants would be limited.

Many countries address this problem by offering more than one version of the same programme or course. So a version of the Leaving Certificate Applied, built upon a common framework but designed for use in the context of non-school centres and continuous learning environments, including part-time study, could be developed. Equally, alternative Leaving Certificate subject syllabuses aimed at external candidates

and those adult learners who are not in a position to undertake, for example, practical assessment components, might be provided. In the case of the Leaving Certificate Applied, the NCCA has recently embarked on the development of an alternative version of the programme involving a radical rethink on how the programme might be offered on a part-time basis over a longer period of time in non-school centres with all this might entail for the nature of the curriculum, the modes of assessment employed, the range of providers etc.

What appears incontrovertible in looking at these issues, particularly within the context of lifelong learning, is that future curriculum design at senior cycle, even where more than one version of a course or programme is envisaged, needs to be inherently flexible. This points clearly, as it has in many other countries, in the direction of modularisation of curricula. Modularisation can be very simply described as the organising of the curriculum and the assessment of learning into bite-sized chunks and this is often viewed as the most flexible way of providing educational opportunities for learners. However, it should be stressed that there are various forms and degrees of modularisation. The best forms achieve a balance between providing flexible, bite-sized learning/assessment chunks on the one hand and achieving reasonable levels of continuity and progression within areas of study or subject disciplines on the other. Modularisation can make a significant contribution to effective differentiation of curricula and allow for greater flexibility in providing for and meeting the needs of Ordinary level students, those with specific learning difficulties and those with special educational needs. Expertise in the development and teaching of modular courses and programmes is increasing in Ireland as more schools and teachers avail of the LCVP, Leaving Certificate Applied and Post-Leaving Certificate programmes.

However, providing for a flexible, accessible modularised curriculum is resource intensive. Improving access to programmes of study, providing flexibility for learners to mix and match programme elements in individualised learning programmes carries with it implications for the resourcing of schools (particularly small schools), for learning environments (size of class or learner groups) and for the work of teachers (planning and organisation of teaching time) and for provision of vocational and educational guidance.

Internationally, the existence of qualifications frameworks based on modularised learning units has also given rise to concerns about the degree to which the learning based on an extensive range of choices for the learner can result in the fragmentation of the learning experience – in the whole being less than the sum of its parts. In the context of social inclusion, concern has also risen that almost inevitably, in situations where learners must make informed choices about the learning path to take, it is the advantaged who have the social and cultural capital to make the best decisions about learning thereby further disadvantaging those with less access to information and educational guidance (NFER, 2002).

The thrust of national policy in the areas of education and training and the trend in recent legislation has underpinned the principles of equality of access and equality of opportunity for all learners, particularly those with special educational needs and those experiencing educational disadvantage (Education Act, 1998). In order for these learners to experience similar outcomes from their education as others, changes will be required of schools as institutions, classrooms as learning environments, and teaching and learning programmes as they apply to individual learners. But it would be a mistake to think that the need for change in this context will be confined to the school. Nationally devised curricula and assessment methods will need to prove more easily accessible, flexible and transparent in the future and it is in this context that discussions of significant changes to existing forms of provision, such as alternative programme and course arrangements and modularisation of the senior cycle curriculum, will take place.

5.10 Equality, access, lifelong learning – suggestions for further consideration and action

In keeping with the principle of lifelong learning, that we are learners from the cradle to the grave, senior cycle education will need to be more flexible, more easily accessible and provide a greater range of learning opportunities on an equal basis in the future, particularly for those with special educational needs and the educationally disadvantaged. So consideration must be given to how this can best be achieved.

Where difficulties are experienced with access to and flexibility of particular courses and programmes, consideration should be given to adopting the principle of developing **alternative versions of courses or programmes.** Changing arrangements applying to the course or programme, which do not compromise its central aims and purposes, is also an option. The development of an alternative version of the Leaving Certificate Applied for use in non-school settings and continuing education should prove a useful starting point for the NCCA in exploring this area further.

In the contexts of the issues outlined above and of international trends, active consideration must be given to **modularisation** as the basis of future curriculum programme and course design. However, this is a very significant step to take. A productive starting point on this road would be to bring together in an **NCCA paper,** examples of differing approaches to and experiences of modularisation.

**Some options for developing
senior cycle education**

SENIOR CYCLE
CONSULTATIVE
PAPER

6

6.1 Introduction to section six

How can existing senior cycle programmes be aligned and restructured in the future in order to facilitate the kinds of developments discussed in this paper? In this section four possible ways of aligning and restructuring existing senior cycle programmes (which were outlined as questions in the previous section) are presented and some of the pros and cons associated with taking particular options are examined.

The approach taken in outlining four options below is largely speculative. None of the options preclude proceeding on areas for action in the short term related to existing programmes. But each embodies a range of potentialities when considered in the context of the larger-scale, medium to long-term issues identified for discussion in the paper.

Given that their features are not mutually exclusive, in many ways the journey through the options can also be viewed as a potential course of development for senior cycle education into the future – in other words much can be achieved through Option one at this point in time but the developments associated with that option would almost certainly lead senior cycle education in the direction of the other options in the medium to long term.

All options assume further reform of the Leaving Certificate and the adoption of a system of rolling review related to all programmes. Should developing policy point in this direction, all can accommodate the introduction of alternative versions of courses and programmes. All, to a greater or lesser extent (probably on an ascending scale), could facilitate conversion to a modularised curriculum if this were viewed as desirable. The qualifications and achievements associated with each could be included in, and articulated with other qualifications in, a national qualifications framework. All are amenable to, though the latter two are probably more facilitatory of, a broadening of the basis of certification at this level.

The latter two options are more compatible with the suggested idea that the level and form of requirement at senior cycle be viewed and specified in the context of senior cycle as a whole rather than in relation to individual programmes.

It is also important to consider the options through the eyes of those who would be closely involved in their operation (schools and teachers) and in their use (learners, parents and employers). Perhaps the most important consideration in these contexts, beyond those of resourcing and implementation support, is the merit of adopting a relatively fragmented curriculum or a more integrated one.

The general public may more easily understand the former. Making choices and interpreting results in relation to clearly identifiable, 'ring-fenced' programmes is straightforward once adequate public information has been provided. Integrated curricula and qualifications incorporating a variety of tracks and modules are less easily understood and engaged with by those not involved on a regular basis. However, it is

arguable that integrated curricula are more school friendly and teacher friendly in that they operate within a single framework and reduce fragmentation of organisational and work tasks. Any senior cycle teacher with responsibilities and duties in three or four of the existing programmes will recognise the value of a more integrated curriculum in this regard.

6.2 Option one – the status quo

While maintenance of the status quo curriculum structure might initially be viewed as the lesser of the options it has much to recommend it. In this option, the four senior cycle programmes retain their independence and maintain their current relationship with each other. For an education system where there is serious concern regarding 'change fatigue' among the education partners there is considerable merit in this option. It is an appealing option for those who believe that reform of the Leaving Certificate (established) is central to developing senior cycle education, that recently introduced programmes need time to embed themselves in schools and that current programmes would prove more effective if they were more extensively resourced.

A more concerted, well-resourced approach to reform of the Leaving Certificate (established) and its examination, and the adoption of a system of meaningful rolling review related to all programmes is crucial to this option. The introduction of the full range of revised and new Leaving Certificate syllabuses and their associated assessment arrangements allied with consideration of a broadened form of certification would have a significant impact on senior cycle education. Rolling review of programmes could address issues such as requirements of programmes and across programmes, access to programmes, and adjustments made to existing arrangements as appropriate. The main strength of this option is continuity of provision with built-in potential for incremental improvement.

6.3 Option two – Leaving Certificate (established) and LCVP merge

This can be viewed as a medium term development of Option One. A new senior cycle programme is developed combining the best features of the Leaving Certificate (established) and the LCVP. The Transition Year and Leaving Certificate Applied retain their 'ring-fencing'. This option has the attraction of providing access to the unique features of the LCVP for all Leaving Certificate students. It might also serve the function of improving the aspect of the LCVP that has proved least successful in practice, namely the cross-curricular dimension, especially if the latter were included in assessment arrangements. Again, the strength of this option is natural continuity with built-in potential for incremental improvement.

6.4   Option three – a three-year senior cycle

A new three-year senior cycle programme would be developed combining the best features of the Transition Year, the Leaving Certificate (established) and the LCVP. The Leaving Certificate Applied retains its 'ring-fencing'. Teachers and schools have often proposed this option as a practical and meaningful development from the status quo, which would present schools with many creative possibilities. It potentially implies greater prescription of the Transition Year but would be particularly compatible with the idea of a holistic three-year senior cycle experience, with an appropriate balance between assessment for learning and assessment for certification and selection, with the notion of enhanced, portfolio certification and with comprehensive provision for key skills.

6.5   Option four – a unified senior cycle programme

A new three-year senior cycle programme would be developed combining the best features of all existing programmes. This is the only option presented that abandons the ring-fencing of the Leaving Certificate Applied. The option could have many configurations. One such configuration would incorporate a certificated foundation year (up to the completion of compulsory schooling) and the potential to then proceed to a variety of broadly based, vocational options in the final two years. Again, this option would be compatible with the idea of a holistic three-year senior cycle experience, with the notion of enhanced, portfolio certification and with comprehensive provision for key skills. In addition, it could prove particularly amenable to modularisation.

At an appropriate point in the future, when discussions on the key issues related to development at senior cycle are further advanced, NCCA will produce a position paper outlining the strengths and weaknesses of the various models presented here and of others generated through the consultation process associated with this paper.

Implementing change

7.1   Introduction to section seven

This section addresses the most critical stage of the process of review and reform, implementation. The implementation stage is one where intentions to and aspirations for change meet reality in terms of the capacity and resources of the system to achieve the change required. The section commences with a plan of action associated with the issues raised in this paper. This plan is then considered in the light of recent experience of implementation of change and change processes. It concludes with discussion, in an Irish context, of the capacity of the education system, including learners, teachers, schools and system structures and institutions to embrace and effect change and the key approaches that will need to inform implementation of change at senior cycle.

7.2   Plan of action

A plan of action is presented on the following pages. The focus of the plan is on the suggestions for further consideration and points of action identified in the previous section of the paper. The plan is presented with due recognition of the range of interests the NCCA will need to engage with in developing policy and advice in these areas over the coming years. The plan presented is *provisional* – it is a first effort at bringing together the range of matters and decisions facing the education system at this level into the future.

The operation of a plan of action such as this must be based on effective links being established between the NCCA and what will comprise a wide range of other agencies and bodies over the period of the plan of action. These include, and will include, the Department of Education and Science, the education partners, a group of organisations recognised by the statutory NCCA as 'Designated Bodies', the Examinations Commission, the National Council for Special Education, the Equality Authority, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, the Human Rights Commission, the Teaching Council, the Education Welfare Board etc.

7.3   Effective change

It is important to follow the outline of such an extensive plan of action with some discussion of how it can happen without placing the education system under undue pressure and stress. The international literature on educational change holds few surprises in this regard. Effective consultation and deliberation on ideas about change and the areas to be changed needs to take place with as wide a range of those who will be involved in the change as possible. The implementation of change needs to be planned with due consideration given

- to the capacity of people and structures to change

- to provision of the usually extensive resources needed to fund the change

- and to the model of implementation and how it will be put in place.

NCCA Draft Plan of Action based on the paper
Developing Senior Cycle Education – Consultative Paper on Issues and Options

2003	• Complete the consultation process associated with this paper (outlined in Section 1.2)
	• Advise the Department of Education and Science (DES) on a schedule for continued reform of the Leaving Certificate (established)
	• Develop second assessment instruments and components for use in the science subjects
	• Present final advice to DES, based on research evidence, on statistical moderation of second assessment components in the context of traditional examinations
	• Develop a curriculum framework for Guidance
	• Review syllabuses in Applied Mathematics, Classical Studies, Greek, Jewish Studies and Latin
	• Develop alternative arrangements for the operation of the LCA in the adult and continuing education sector
	• Engage with the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and FETAC on developing articulation between senior cycle qualifications and other qualifications associated with a national qualifications framework
	• Review Transition Year
	• Continue review of the LCVP, LCA and Leaving Certificate subjects on a rolling basis
2004	• Take a series of actions arising out of the consultation process associated with this paper, particularly those related to the review of the Leaving Certificate (established)
	• Implement revised syllabuses in Agricultural Science, Economics, Geography, History and Physical Science, including second assessment components
	• Implement new syllabus in Leaving Certificate Physical Education on a phased basis
	• Implement practical assessment component in the LC (established) science subjects
	• Take decisions on the form of provision for areas such as ICT, Civic and Political Education, Social and Health Education
	• Decisions on implementation dates for revised syllabuses in Applied Mathematics, Classical Studies, Greek, Jewish Studies and Latin
	• Continue review of the LCVP, LCA and Transition Year on a rolling basis
2005 onwards	• Continue actions arising out of the consultation process associated with this paper
	• Implement new/revised syllabuses in Architectural and Construction Technology, Art, Design and Communication Graphics, Engineering Technology, Technology, including revised assessment arrangements
	• Implement other new/revised syllabuses on basis of decisions made in 2004
	• Continue review of the LCVP, LCA and Transition Year on a rolling basis.

In summary the approach to change must be concerted, the nature of the change clearly signalled and understandings related to change shared.

It follows that ad-hoc approaches, lack of planning, and the implementation of a plethora of unconnected initiatives simultaneously have proved themselves to be the enemy of effective change (Fullan, 2000). More often than not they result in *The Predictable Failure of Education Reform,* to use the poignant title of Sarason's (1990) book on educational change. This is not to say that effective implementation of change is a simple matter. On the contrary, it is highly complex. But, in looking at how to achieve effective implementation of change, consideration of issues of capacity for change and of approaches to change in an Irish context represent a useful starting point.

7.4   Capacity for change

A key element in decision-making on implementation of educational change is the capacity of the education system at all levels to engage with change effectively. The gap that can develop between the rhetoric of educational programmes and the reality of their implementation often reflects lack of adequate consideration of the capacity of system structures, schools, teachers and students to handle the change envisaged. Human and system capacities are not fixed entities and can be developed and expanded but cognisance must be taken of current and potential future capacity.

Since the late 1980s much has been experienced and much has been learned in Irish education about the process of implementation. The education system has progressed from one where implementation planning and support associated with the introduction of educational initiatives was at a premium to one where it is viewed as a prerequisite in any discussion of change.

During this period, early efforts at implementation failed to adequately recognise the culture of schools, teaching and learning in which, it was hoped, fundamental change would become embedded. More recently, implementation processes have been characterised by increased levels of resources and investment, by improved consultation and planning, by efficient and effective support structures with responsibility for professional development of teachers, by greater attention to engagement with the organisational realities and culture of schools, by linkage with the providers of teacher education, and by attention to providing public information on the area of change.

However, approaches to implementation have also been characterised by fragmentation – too many separate initiatives operating in isolation from each other, often trying to achieve very similar aims. Over a period of time this has led to the capacity of the education system to engage with and absorb change being put to the test. There is emerging experience and evidence, for example in the areas of school organisation and of the operation of the examination system, of the system beginning

to creak with the totality of implementation change over the period in question. This is why engagement with the capacity of system structures, schools, teachers and students for change must be the starting point for future developments in senior cycle education. It is why the implementation of actions associated with senior cycle and this paper cannot be divorced from developments at junior cycle and elsewhere, all of which place demands on those involved in education and bring into sharp relief the question of relative priorities. Finally, it is why the matter of the adequate resourcing of schools and teachers to implement change must also be examined afresh.

System structures and institutions

In recent times, the focus on the impact of proposed changes in curriculum and assessment on the overall capacity of the education system has sharpened. While there has been recognition of the merits of the Leaving Certificate as an externally conducted examination and the Department of Education and Science has reiterated its intention to retain this feature of the system, schools have experienced difficulty in facilitating, and the Department of Education and Science's Examinations Branch has had difficulty providing for the examinations process across all levels and programmes.

Schools have experienced increasing difficulty coping with the demands placed on staff through their involvement as external examiners during the course of the school year. At critical times during the school year, significant numbers of teachers are absent from their schools, working as external examiners elsewhere in the system. As a result, school management and parent representatives are increasingly concerned with the preservation of the integrity of the school year and attention has correctly begun to focus on reappraising the duration of the current school year.

Examinations Branch has found that the supply of examiners is far from inexhaustible and recently the task of finding the required number of examiners for some specific subjects or programme areas has proved difficult. In the latter context, under current arrangements, the system is operating almost at full capacity. Therefore, it is difficult to foresee expansion in the total number of assessment components employed in the Leaving Certificate examination, as proposed in this paper, without some scaling back of externally examined assessment components elsewhere.

Proposals for change must also be considered in the context of the potential burden for review, monitoring and evaluation they will place on the education system, particularly during the early years of their implementation. Of particular pertinence here is the NCCA's stated intention that, as a statutory body, it will conduct its monitoring of the effectiveness of provision for curriculum and assessment on the basis of rolling review. Equally, the developing role of the Department of Education and Science's Inspectorate in Whole School Evaluation points to greater involvement in coming years in the area of monitoring the experience of schools in implementing curriculum change. Furthermore, the need to improve the performance of the education system in providing for the early/concurrent, external evaluation of specific

initiatives in the area of curriculum change will prove of increasing importance in the context of increased accountability and the imperative of providing value for money invested in the education system.

Schools

Schools represent the most important site of educational change. The capacity of schools at a given time for handling change is constrained. The DES initiative under way promoting the process of school development planning should prove instrumental in enabling schools, among many other things, to prepare for how impending changes will be facilitated. But changes can place significant demands on the human resources and the capital resources of schools. For example, the introduction of the new Leaving Certificate Technology subject will give rise to both human and capital resource requirements in many schools that any comprehensive implementation plan will need to provide for.

Equally, time is a critical resource in the life of a school – time required for individual subjects, time required for special student events and learning activities, time required for assessment of student achievement, time required for planning for the effective implementation and operation of educational programmes, time required for the in-career development of teachers, time absorbed through the work of teachers as external examiners. Again, it is difficult to envisage creating the time needed for the implementation of the developments at hand without recourse to discussion of the organization of and duration of the school year. Some of the broader issues raised in this paper, such as those of access and programme requirements, also draw into focus the question of optimum school size and the issue of smaller schools pooling and sharing resources in a local context.

Based on their experience of implementation in recent years, schools are often critical that, at the stage of planning for implementation, too little attention is given to adequately quantify the resources needed to implement the required change effectively. In particular, aspects of implementation such as teacher supply, availability of resource materials or textbooks, equipment or learning aids required, changes to school facilities needed and level of professional development required, have often been inadequately quantified and provided for. A further criticism is that, at the developmental stage for which the NCCA holds responsibility, the implications of proposed developments for increased resources has not been adequately taken into account. Greater attention to resource implications and the quantification of resource requirements must become a greater feature of work on implementation into the future.

Teachers

In order to implement change teachers must be facilitated in understanding and sharing the meaning of change. If teachers are not enabled to act as the agents of change it is likely that the rhetoric-reality gap will become unacceptably wide. Clearly, planning for the pre-service and in-career development of teachers in this context is crucial. Teachers must be able to clearly identify the new knowledge, understandings, concepts, skills and attitudes their teaching will need to underpin.

Changing requirements in terms of their teaching practice must also be clearly identifiable. The impact of changes in terms of increased organisational roles in planning, co-ordination of activities, evaluation, etc. must be recognised and signalled. In short, the nature, meaning of and rationale for the change should be transparent both to teachers and those involved in decision-making on implementation in order that the capacity of teachers to act as agents of the change can be adequately supported.

The literature exploring the extent to which teachers absorb educational change frequently draws our attention to the fact that, as a result of educational change in the areas of curriculum and assessment, teachers frequently expand the range of resources and materials they teach with, they sometimes change their pedagogical practice, but they seldom change their fundamental educational beliefs (Fullan, 2000). Yet, in the case of many of the issues dealt with in this paper, it is changes to pedagogical practice and educational beliefs that are required. In order to achieve this, a greater focus on the comprehensive professional development of teachers will be needed than in the past.

It is the emphasis on 'comprehensive' here that should be underscored by action. To this should be added the need for professional development to be more 'individualised', focusing on the specific needs of teachers at differing stages in their professional careers. Rather than implementation being viewed as simply comprising the preparation of teachers to introduce changes in subjects and programmes and implementation structures, for example support services, being organised along these lines, it is time that professional development of teachers came to be seen in more holistic terms. At this point in time, it is feasible to clarify some changes associated with developments in teaching, schooling, curriculum and assessment which will place professional demands on teachers over the coming decade and prepare a plan for the professional development of teachers to enable them to work through these changes. At a practical level, this may well entail agreement being reached on a specific number of days per year being set aside when this development could take place.

Learners

Educational change is, in the final analysis, aimed at improving the educational experience of learners. Yet their views on proposed developments in education at this

level are almost never sought. It is often assumed that because educational change is usually developmental in nature that 'it must be good for learners'. But questions should be asked in the context of any new developments, both individually and as a whole, as to whether all change will necessarily be positive. The impact of the changes in terms of potential increased difficulty of subjects and programmes, the required balance between study in school and at home, the totality of the assessment burden placed on learners taking subjects and programmes with a number of assessment components must be considered. Issues related to the extent of overlap, or on the other hand, reinforcement of knowledge, concepts and skills across the range of courses and the programme studied must also be taken into account. While the majority of these represent development rather than implementation issues, the views of learners should be sought on a regular basis and fed into the processes involved.

In all the contexts outlined above, system structures and institutions, schools, teachers and students account must be taken, when decisions are being taken on implementation, of the capacity to handle change. But the starting point for such consideration must not be the notion of fixed capacity. The capacity of the Irish education system for change is neither limitless nor limited. Chronic under-funding of implementation may be a thing of the past as funding of this and many aspects of education improves annually but current levels of funding are inadequate to meet the programme of reform envisaged by this paper. Nonetheless, the capacity for change, even on an incremental basis, is great. For example, increased investment in assessment at senior cycle, aimed at broadening the range of components in use, would result in very significant change in the educational experience of students and such change would be absorbed and widely welcomed within the education system.

Equally, in all the contexts outlined above, improving the capacity of the system for change will involve addressing structural and organizational issues related to the work of schools and the education system. Improving the quality of implementation involves appraisal by the partners in education of

- the organization and duration of the school year

- processes for the quantification of resource needs

- the changing professional role of teachers and its implications for defining the work of teachers

- our approach to the professional development of teachers, in order to make it more comprehensive, yet individualized, and providing for a guaranteed level of professional development/number of in-service days

- the views of learners.

7.5 Approaches to Change

Successful implementation of change is achievable through meaningful discussion of and consultation on change, through considered planning for change, through a comprehensive approach to provision for implementation, and by incorporating processes of evaluation from the outset. In an Irish context, communication and co-ordination between the DES, the NCCA, the education partners and other national bodies is of the utmost importance at every stage. In order to improve the scale and quality of implementation associated with the actions proposed by this paper, these discussions need to take place as a matter of urgency.

In looking at how to achieve effective change at senior cycle into the future a number of positive contributing factors can be cited in an Irish context. Increasingly, the education system operates on principles of partnership and the manifestations of this are apparent at each stage of the change process. From the mid 1990s, the introduction of a range of senior cycle programmes and subjects was accompanied by intensive implementation support involving extensive resources. The experience of this on the whole has been positive and a great deal of expertise on the process of implementation has been generated within the system. In addition, a number of developments currently taking place have the potential to contribute to more effective implementation of change at senior cycle in the future. These include

- The establishment of a Second Level Support Service (SLSS) aimed initially at co-ordinating implementation support at this level and in facilitating a transition to a more coherent, generically based approach towards professional development of teachers at this level

- The developing role of the network of Education Centres

- The initiative on School Development Planning

- The developing process of Whole School Evaluation

- The evolving co-ordination of initiatives in the area of Special Educational Needs, educational disadvantage and social inclusion.

On the other hand, many initiatives under way are correctly perceived by those working in the education system as ad hoc in nature, not contributing to any clearly established developmental strategy. Equally, while effective and meaningful contributions to the professional development of teachers (in-career) have increased in number and quality over the last decade again the approach here has been characterised by 'ad hocery'.

In conclusion, building on the experiences of implementation to date and the various developments currently in place, the following approaches to change (based on Fullan, 1991, 1993) are presented for discussion of how successful implementation of change at senior cycle in the short, medium and long-term, based on the ideas in this paper, can take place.

- Develop a strategic plan for the professional development of teachers and school management with a view to upgrading the human resources of the education system in preparation for future change

- Consult and promote discussion extensively on the nature and meaning of the changes proposed in order to ensure those involved identify with them

- In addition, involve all partners in discussions of detailed planning for implementation of change (the when, where, how questions)

- Co-ordinate changes in ways which ensure there is a meaningful and concerted focus to change, even where a number of initiatives are involved. Make change coherent.

- Provide the resources to support change on a continuous basis.

- Provide for variety in the models of implementation used in different contexts

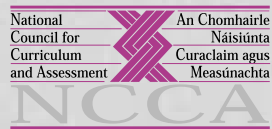- Evaluate the change processes and implementation strategies and models used.

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