

Executive Summary

Developing Senior Cycle Education

Consultative Paper on Issues and Options



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December 2002

Education, it is claimed, is the pulse of a society. It reflects both today's tensions and tomorrow's aspirations. When the International Commission on Education in the Twenty-first Century gathered under the auspices of UNESCO in 1993, those convened considered that they were in a position to articulate both the tensions and the aspirations for education in the industrialised world. It is testament to the pace of change that the submissions to that commission, while continuing to have some relevance, already seem somewhat dated.

The claim that

...education is variously seen as the gateway to future economic prosperity, the chosen instrument for combating unemployment, the driving force behind scientific and technological advance, the essential prerequisite for the cultural vitality of increasingly leisure-intensive societies, the spearhead of social progress and equality, the safeguard of democratic values, or the passport to individual success

may have inspired those reflecting on education in the 21st century from the perspective of the 20th century. However, to those working in education in the future, this hymn of praise to education lacks a global perspective, takes no account of the dynamics of lifelong learning, makes no reference to the value of diversity, and understates the key role of education in the promotion of mutual understanding. In ten years, the tensions and aspirations have moved on.



It would be difficult to find a country where that movement has been felt more acutely than in Ireland. The changes in Irish society have been documented, and continue to be a source of considerable reflection and consideration for all who live here.

As in other industrialised nations, the development of the education system in this context of rapid change has been propelled by a combination of its own internal dynamics and by external forces and pressures. The characteristic feature of all education systems in the last 20 years is that they have been subject to greater change in that period than at any other time since the introduction of formal schooling for the general population.

This period of change has given rise to three ironies.

- despite the degree and pace of change, the demands for even more change are increasing.
- despite the benefits of change, there is increasing resistance, especially from those working in and with schools, to further change.
- despite the strong focus in education on the future, there is nostalgia for 'how things used to be'.

Because senior cycle education is at the interface between formal schooling and the world of further education and training, and because it is the site of the 'gateway' qualification (the Leaving Certificate) in the Irish education system, it has been subject to a number of significant changes in that period. A number of senior cycle options such as the Transition Year (TY), the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) have been introduced. Changes have also been made, and are continuing to be made, to a number of Leaving Certificate (established)¹ subjects. Most importantly, there are more learners than ever remaining on to the end of senior cycle with a resulting change in the profile of the student cohort. The three great ironies of educational change have now found a home in senior cycle education.



- 'There has been a lot of change – more is needed'.
- 'There has been a lot of change – enough is enough'.
- 'There has been a lot of change – it was better before'.

It is time to take stock, to step back and to consider what has happened, what is happening and how best to plan for the future of senior cycle education.

Traditionally, a high value has been placed on education in Ireland. We have moved from seeing 'an education' as a young person's greatest asset when leaving the country, to lauding 'the educated young population' as a national treasure when enticing inward investment. Such rhetoric is powerful. It ensures that education remains on the agenda and the focus of ongoing debate and contestation. However, rhetoric like this can also mask some very important questions in relation to aims and purposes.

¹ Both the executive summary and the discussion paper adopt the convention of distinguishing the Leaving Certificate taken by the majority of students by the title 'Leaving Certificate (established)'.



We may be able to say what education does, but can we say what it is for? We may engage in much debate as to how education serves, and must continue to serve, the needs of the economy, but we hear little of how education serves the needs of learners and citizens. We can look at the range of programmes available and conclude that there is 'something for everyone' at senior cycle, but fail to ask important questions such as

- which learners have access to what programmes?
- How are their choices influenced?
- Which students benefit from the diversity on offer?

The purpose of this paper is to take a step back, to give an account of the developments to date, to raise questions of aims and purposes and to offer some options for future development. As we look back upon the changes that have taken place and project forward to plan the direction that education will need to take in the future, more questions are raised than answers offered. The paper should be seen as an invitation to reflect, to consider and to debate the complex and challenging issues presented and to participate not just in planning for the future of education but in actively shaping it.

Structure of the Paper

The paper has seven sections. A brief outline of each section follows.



medium to long term. Significantly, it draws attention to the implications that any suggested changes might have both for the structure of senior cycle educational provision and for the day-to-day work and organisation of schools.

The paper concludes with an outline of the schedule and events associated with the period and processes of consultation. This is presented in Table 4, pages 19 and 20.

This section of the paper covers two important issues. Firstly, it considers the implications of some of the recommendations of the report of the *Commission on the Points System* for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Chief among these is the review and reform of the Leaving Certificate (established). Secondly, it presents for consultation, discussion and debate, a wide range of issues pertaining to the development of senior cycle education in the



A rationale for considering a process of review and reform of senior cycle education is presented and discussed. The Leaving Certificate (established), as opposed to its constituent subjects, has not been subjected to the same degree of scrutiny in relation to its aims and purposes as the LCA and the LCVP. The Leaving Certificate *examination* serves a very particular purpose, but what is the purpose of the two years of study that constitutes the Leaving Certificate *programme*?

This section also discusses the need to examine and look at the changes that have taken place to date at senior cycle, especially the introduction of a number of senior cycle options such as the Transition Year, the LCA and the LCVP.

The need to consider the impact that significant social and economic change, both at home and abroad, has had on Irish education is emphasised. The need to reflect on change that has taken place in the primary school curriculum, at junior cycle level, and in further and higher education is stressed. In addition, the implications of the advent of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland are examined.

The emphasis on equality, special educational needs, education welfare, and lifelong learning in recent national and education policy documents is considered. The potential of curriculum development and assessment trends at an international level to inform the future of senior cycle education in Ireland is also explored.

The strengths and weaknesses of the Leaving Certificate options currently available are examined here. The paper makes the point that, while it is arguable that the development of these options has sought to retain the *appearance* of a unified Leaving Certificate, there is the danger that a dual-track system is developing. The paper raises the question of the continued 'ring-fencing' of the LCA in this context.

International comparisons are presented in the second part of this section. It is suggested that, in a general European context, developments in relation to senior cycle curricula have moved towards learning

pathways that have both an 'academic' and 'vocational' dimension. Increasingly, learners are being afforded the opportunity to design their own learning programmes within a national framework for lifelong learning.

In relation to international trends in assessment policy, the strongest trend emerging in Europe is towards greater central involvement and control. However, the nature of certification and elements that may be included in that certification, such as extra-curricular activities, examination results, or personal or social skills differ radically from one country to another.

Having considered how senior cycle education is constructed and operates, the paper moves on to reflect on aims and purposes. The current stated aims and purposes underpinning education at this level in Ireland are presented and international comparisons are offered. By way of a critique, the potential needs of learners, both now and in the future, are considered, and questions are asked as to whether current aims and purposes meet these needs.

The direction that some education systems are taking in order to prepare learners for these challenges is described. These include a movement towards a greater emphasis on skills and processes, the development of a more holistic view of learning, more self-

directed learning, and the greater integration of academic and vocational education. Irish education has already begun to move in these direction, but has it moved far enough? Are there learners who are swamped by the requirements of subjects, the demands of a timetable and the preparation for terminal assessment, notwithstanding the aims and purposes of senior cycle, even as these are currently articulated.

The section concludes by presenting for discussion a set of purposes and aims for senior cycle education in the future. See Table 1, page 12.

This section, the largest and most important section of the paper, aims to clarify the key issues related to curriculum, assessment and certification at senior cycle. A number of questions are posed:

- Is the current provision adequate and does it provide a good foundation for development? 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, that merges the best features of the Transition Year, the LCVP and the Leaving Certificate (established), become a priority?
- Should more radical options be pursued? What about a unified, modularised senior cycle programme with accessible, internal tracks?

To consider the merits of each, the paper suggests that it is necessary to clarify the issues that are central to the future development of senior cycle education.



These are listed as

- assessment, certification, qualifications
- curriculum development
- programme requirements
- equality, access, lifelong learning.

The paper discusses each of these issues at length and provides suggestions for further consideration and action. These are presented in Table 2, pages 13 to 16. However, it is important to stress that a full understanding of these can only be achieved by referring to the main text of the Consultative Paper.



This section of the paper takes the four speculative or possible ways of aligning and restructuring existing senior cycle programmes (which were outlined as questions in the previous section) and

examines some of the pros and cons associated with taking particular options. These options are summarised in greater detail in Table 3, pages 17 and 18.



The final section of the paper begins the process of examining the major challenges that any change will bring. It states that effective change can only occur if consultation takes place and if that process of engagement results in a conviction that change is needed and is possible. The paper also addresses broader issues related to the implementation of change. In particular, it asks about the capacity of the examination system to cope with change. It also questions the broad educational system's capacity to monitor, evaluate and review change.

The paper also recognises that change places a huge demand on schools and on teachers. Some consideration is given to the need for new models of teacher professional development, which move beyond supporting teachers in delivering change (for example, in in-service courses for new syllabuses) to supporting teachers in becoming agents of change. In addition, it calls for the views of learners to be sought on a regular basis and fed into the processes involved.

Table 1. Purpose and aims

For consultation and discussion

Purpose

The fundamental purpose of senior cycle education is to enable and prepare learners 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.

Such aims must lay the basis for more specific curriculum objectives and learning outcomes. On the one hand, a commitment to these 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 schools.

Table 2. Issues for discussion and consideration

1. Assessment, certification, qualifications

The first question the paper raises in this area is whether the work of learners is adequately assessed in the Leaving Certificate (established). Performance in terminal examinations, alone, is a narrow basis on which to assess the talents and abilities of learners. Why not **broaden the range of assessment components** employed in the Leaving Certificate (established) examination and do this as quickly as possible? This can be achieved by prioritising the introduction of second assessment components such as projects, portfolios, research studies etc. in revised Leaving Certificate (established) subjects that are already in place or awaiting introduction.

In addition, the idea of **changing the nature of the certification learners receive** should be further explored. This could result in a situation where they 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. For example, shouldn't the range of skills, abilities and important experiences a learner has gained through participation in the Transition Year programme be recorded and certificated?

In the future, all Irish qualifications will be described on a national qualifications framework, currently under development by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI). It is intended that both qualifications gained through schooling and other qualifications will be included on the framework and that the value, worth and transferability of the qualification will be clear to all learners. This provides an important context for developments in senior cycle assessment and certification.

2. Curriculum development

The paper recognises the ongoing developments taking place in Leaving Certificate subjects. The 1990s have witnessed extensive reviews of subjects and the NCCA has developed a proposed **schedule for the implementation of new/revised subject syllabuses**. In order to keep syllabuses up to date, a schedule should be agreed and implemented as a matter of urgency.

However, review of the Leaving Certificate (established), needs to go further. The NCCA proposes to commence a broader **review of the Leaving Certificate (established)** addressing areas such as the teaching and learning styles used. Should 'chalk and talk' dominate classroom experience at this level or is a balance between this and self-directed learning more desirable? Should learning be more practical and experiential, with learning taking place both within and beyond the school? The review should move away from an emphasis on subjects and consider 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. Meanwhile, **other senior cycle programmes** should be kept under rolling review.

An aspect of the proposed review that will require close attention is the question of the role that provision for **basic and key skills** should play in senior cycle education. How, for example, should basic literacies, interpersonal skills, technical skills, the ability to manage one's work, the ability to use the mind well, and the ability to work with others and solve problems, be best catered for in the curriculum at this level?



3. Programme requirements

A central question raised by the paper, and one which spans the areas of curriculum and assessment, is **what level of programme requirement** and **what form of programme requirement** should prevail in order to ensure that learners gain the educational experience that is appropriate to senior cycle? The issue of requirement is complex. It is closely linked to issues of equality and to the capacity of the education system to fulfil requirements through the provision of resources and effective processes of implementation. The NCCA intends to publish an issues paper on this aspect of senior cycle education during the consultation process.

4. Equality, access, lifelong learning

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 equal access to a greater range of learning opportunities, particularly in the case of those with special educational needs and those who are educationally disadvantaged. Consideration must be given to how this can best be achieved.

The paper takes two ideas as a starting point. Increasingly **alternative versions of courses or programmes**, particularly for the adult and continuing education sector, could be developed embodying improved learning opportunities, access and flexibility.

Secondly, the idea of **modularising curricula** or organising the curriculum into ‘bite-sized chunks’ of learning and assessment is discussed. The pros and cons of developing the curriculum in this way will be discussed at length in a further NCCA issues paper during the consultation process.

Table 3. Some options for developing senior cycle education

Option one – the status quo

In this option, the four senior cycle programmes retain their independence and maintain their current relationships with each other. 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 within programmes and across programmes, access to programmes, and appropriate adjustments to existing arrangements. The main strength of this option is continuity of provision with built-in potential for incremental improvement.

Option two – Leaving Certificate (established) and LCVP merge

A new senior cycle programme is developed combining the best features of the Leaving Certificate (established) and the LCVP. The Transition Year and LCA 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 continuity with built-in potential for incremental improvement.

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 LCA retains its ring-fencing. Teachers and schools have often proposed this option as a practical and meaningful development of the status quo that would present schools with many creative possibilities. Potentially, it implies greater prescription in the Transition Year but it would be particularly compatible with the idea of a holistic three-year senior cycle experience. It would provide an appropriate balance between assessment for learning and assessment for certification and selection, including enhanced portfolio certification. Moreover, it would facilitate comprehensive provision for the development of key skills.

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 LCA. The option could have many configurations. One such configuration would incorporate a certificated foundation year (up to the completion of compulsory schooling) with the potential of proceeding 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 comprehensive provision for key skills. In addition, it could prove particularly amenable to modularisation.

Table 4. Schedule for the consultation process on the senior cycle paper

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.



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