

NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT

# Developing Senior Cycle Education Report on the consultative process



Report on consultative meetings,  
seminars and submissions

September 2003

## Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Equality, access and participation	7
3. Programme requirements—what students have to do	12
4. Developing the curriculum	16
5. Assessment and certification	22
6. Options	27
7. Implementation	29
8. The senior cycle student and the culture of the school	30
9. Conclusion	32
10. Appendices	33

## 1. Introduction

Following the publication of *Developing Senior Cycle: Issues and Options*, in December 2002, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) organised a series of meetings and seminars in support of the consultative process associated with the review of senior cycle education. In addition, it established an online survey; open to all, on a number of themes highlighted in the paper. The results of the survey are presented in a separate report.

The report presented here focuses on the ideas and concerns expressed at the many meetings, briefings and seminars held throughout the country during the consultative period. It also draws on the submissions received by individuals and organisations during this time.

The consultative process was characterised by considered and reflective engagement with the issues set out in the paper. On many occasions, participants remarked on how rarely they have had an opportunity to engage in debate on the aims and purposes of education or on the underlying philosophies of education, or on teaching and learning. There was enthusiasm for considering these issues, and while the resourcing of the education system and the future resourcing of change was always on the agenda, it generally took second place to the questions of aims and purposes.

There were three types of meeting:

- briefings for organisations

- issue seminars
- bilateral meetings with the education partners.

### **Briefings for organisations**

These briefing meetings were arranged in consultation with a number of organisations (Appendix 1) and in some cases at their request. Large membership and geographical spread required that a number of briefing meetings be held for particular organisations. These events were originally envisaged as opportunities to brief the relevant agencies on the key issues. They ultimately evolved, however, into a very valuable exchange of ideas and opinions.

While the average attendance was between 30 and 40, some had as few as 3 participants and others as many as 100. In all, 34 briefing meetings took place over the period of the consultation process. The format of the meetings included a presentation by NCCA executive on the main issues and options raised by the senior cycle discussion paper, followed by questioning, general discussion and/or discussion groups on particular sets of issues. Individual organisations utilised different meeting formats as they felt appropriate. While the NCCA did not keep a formal record of these meetings, general trends in the discussions were noted. These notes inform the account presented below.

Members of the various organisations who attended these meetings were encouraged to become involved in responding through their own organisations and through the online survey. Those attending the briefings welcomed the opportunity to be so closely involved with the consultation process.

### **Issue seminars**

As part of the preparation for the discussion paper, the NCCA hosted an international seminar on post-primary senior cycle education. Among other topics, the seminar focussed on

- how education at this level has responded to perceived economic and social change in different countries

- how different governments devise and implement strategies to promote the maximum participation of young people in post-primary senior cycle
- the different approaches taken to cater for a range of student abilities and ambitions at this level
- the types of reform introduced in different countries and their relative success.

This seminar provided a valuable frame of reference for the subsequent work undertaken in setting the agenda for reviewing the senior cycle.

The proceedings of this seminar – *International Developments in Upper Secondary Education: Context, provision and issues*—have been published separately by the NCCA.

Two issue seminars were also organised by the NCCA to explore some of the key ideas presented in the senior cycle paper with guidance from experts in what is often referred to as ‘upper secondary’ education. The first seminar, *Developing Senior Cycle Education – Key Issues*, focused on key skills and the structure and organisation of the curriculum. Dr. Ann Hodgson and Dr. Ken Spours, from the Institute of Education, London, who are closely involved in the development of proposals for the reform of the A-level system in England, presented their insights. Professor John Coolahan (NUI, Maynooth) addressed the second seminar, entitled *Changing Structures in Senior Cycle Education*. Professor Coolahan placed the issue of senior cycle reform in the context of Irish education since the 1950’s and proposed the development of teaching and learning as the key to reform.

### **Bilateral meetings**

Following the conclusion of the consultation strands described above, the NCCA convened a series of bilateral meetings with various education partners. These were organised to allow organisations to bring their particular concerns and perspectives to the debate. In some cases delegates made formal written submissions which formed the basis for the discussion. In others, a semi-structured discussion was held on the key issues. Some organisations availed of the opportunity to make a written submission after the relevant bilateral discussion had taken place.

In all, 15 bilateral meetings were held in June/July 2003. Accounts of the meetings, produced in consultation with the organisations that attended, are contained in Appendix 2.

As with the briefing meetings, the degree of commitment to the consultation process demonstrated by the different organisations at these meetings is most encouraging.

### **Supporting the process**

During the consultative period, a team of NCCA staff supported the consultative process, travelled to meetings, met with organisations, provided documentation, handled media and public enquiries and analysed submissions and survey responses. It is worth noting that sustaining a consultative process on this scale—and to such a high standard—was exceptionally challenging for an organisation of the size and level of resourcing of the NCCA.

### **Structure of the report**

This report presents an account of the meetings and seminars organised during the consultative period, and also includes the ideas presented in written submissions. A broad range of concerns and suggestions was presented during the consultative process. This report attempts to account for all of these; there is no attempt to synthesise consensus. There were some ideas around which there was broad agreement, and these are presented as such. In some cases views were contradictory on a particular topic. Where comment is offered, it is by way of clarification.

The reportage and commentary in this section of the report is organised under the six main headings used in the briefing meetings:

- Equality, access and participation
- Programme requirements
- Curriculum development
- Assessment and certification
- Options

- Implementation.

An additional heading is included in the report:

- The senior cycle student and the culture of the school.

This presents a discussion that became a central theme of the consultative process as it progressed.

Issues raised under one heading may also appear under another. As with all discussion, some overlap did occur.

## **2. Equality, access and participation**

Under this heading, comment was invited on how all young people can benefit from all of the programmes available at senior cycle. A number of dominant themes emerged, all of which shared a concern for participation in senior cycle. For some contributors the focus was on staying in school to Leaving Certificate. For others, however, it was on the quality of participation rather than its duration.

### **Helping students stay in school**

Contributors believe that even though the drop out rate from the senior cycle has reduced significantly in recent years, any reform proposals must focus to a significant degree on providing means to retain students in the system. Participants suggested a number of issues that impact on students' decisions about staying in school.

- Many students no longer view second level education as a fulltime experience and the transition from school to work after senior cycle is frequently replaced by participation in work while still at school.
- The Combat Poverty Agency, parents and management bodies discussed how the cost of staying in school at senior cycle is often discouraging of continued participation and would need to be considered in any discussion of a move to a three-year senior cycle for all.

- The Combat Poverty Agency pointedly challenges what it regards as the simplistic interpretation of poor retention patterns among some populations, which conclude that the young people concerned are not ready for school and its formal structures. The Agency suggests that on many occasions the school and the education system might not be ready for the student. This issue is discussed further under the heading of school culture.

There are undoubtedly social, economic and cultural factors that have a great impact on the retention rates in senior cycle. While the education system alone cannot eliminate educational disadvantage it could, in the view of contributors, ameliorate some of its effects by providing

- more flexible part-time approaches to accessing programmes at senior cycle, with greater flexibility in the structure of the school day and the school year
- a system of mentoring support and targeted guidance for students to assist them in not only accessing the programmes but also in making choices which ensure that they are retained within the system
- recognition that the changing school/work relationship among learners should be reflected in the way senior cycle education is structured.

### **Adult and returning learners**

While many participants in the consultation made detailed comment on this topic there was general agreement that in the first instance senior cycle education must be designed to cater for the needs of adolescents for whom it is an important contributor to personal and social development. For adolescents of this age, effectively young adults, schooling serves needs beyond learning. The wide array of demands on schools may well mean that they are not in a position to satisfy comprehensively the needs of all categories of learners. It was suggested that while the structures of senior cycle programmes ought not to exclude participation by other categories of learners, a rationale and motivation for developing the senior cycle must not be based solely on a desire to accommodate such learners.



One of the criticisms made during the consultation process related to the difficulty in accessing senior cycle programmes, or obtaining recognition for previous learning, experienced by individuals who wish to re-enter the system.

Contributors commented on

- the rigidity of programme structures which require access at the beginning of a (usually two-year) cycle and completion of the cycle for certification
- the almost total reliance on the Leaving Certificate programmes as the preferred vehicles for educational and/or vocational progression, to the exclusion of other forms of qualification.

There is a desire among many of the parties to the consultation process, despite concerns that senior cycle reform must meet the needs of adolescents in the first instance, to see the needs of adult and returning learners reflected in the outcomes of the review of the senior cycle. Contributors made a number of suggestions.

- Senior cycle programmes should provide a variety of entry points to enable those people who wish to re-engage with formal education to do so with, where applicable, recognition of prior learning.
- Greater flexibility should be afforded learners to manage their own learning pathways, for example to take some Leaving Certificate (established) subjects along with some Leaving Certificate Applied modules, with the option of extending the period within which the certificate can be obtained.

Increasingly, the progression opportunities offered by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) may well provide alternative and appropriate qualification options for many learners. This will be particularly so in the context of the further development and operation of the National Framework of Qualifications.

### **Small schools**

Parents in particular drew attention to the inequalities that may arise from the inability of small (often rural) schools to offer the full range of senior cycle programmes.

While recognising that there may never be a situation in which all schools are in a position to provide all programmes, they, along with others, suggested that

- breaking courses down into smaller units might make things even more difficult for smaller schools
- increased levels of programme requirement will increase the provision difficulties in smaller schools
- creative ways should be found to give students access to as wide a programme/subject choice as possible.

This was an issue that also concerned principals and management bodies. They suggested solutions.

- There should be greater and more open co-operation between schools.
- Some schools might only offer senior cycle programmes.
- The use of online provision and greater use of ICT offer some possibilities for consideration.

The Commission on School Accommodation (2001) conducted detailed research on the position of small schools and, in reporting, made similar recommendations.

### **Participation in Transition Year**

There is universal agreement among contributors to the consultation that participation in a TY programme is beneficial to students. Comment on the programme itself and its learning outcomes will be made later.

The provision of TY in the system does however raise two significant, and frequently commented upon, issues of equality and access. Contributors believe, in the first instance, that TY may exclude the financially less well off students due to the significant costs involved in participating in the programme and the potential loss in earnings to a family through a young person staying in school for an extra year.

Secondly, those who avail of TY receive a further year of state subvention in education. But if this additional subvention is directed at those who are already advantaged, then the non-participant is doubly disadvantaged, missing out on the benefits of TY, and on the extra allocation of funds.

### **Leaving Certificate Applied**

It is clear from the consultation that while the education partners have serious misgivings about the LCE, it remains to a great extent the point of reference by which other programmes are measured. It is important to state at the outset that all contributors regard the LCA as a most valuable programme which serves students well in educational terms. Contributors observed, however, that

- students who undertake the LCA are sometimes regarded as educationally less able and a “stigma” of sorts can attach to participation in the programme
- the LCA should not be viewed as some form of compensatory education, catering for disadvantaged students, but seen for what it properly is, an alternative education pathway
- the root of this misconception lies in how the programme is promoted, not in the programme itself. It is not helpful in this regard that holders of the LCA may not be afforded the same access to the workplace and to further or higher education, as students who have successfully completed the LCE.

It is also of note that participants pointed out that the use of the term ‘established’ for the traditional Leaving Certificate further damages the profile of the LCA.

### **Other issues**

Other issues in the area of equality, access and participation included:

- *Students with special educational needs*  
The National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education (NABSME) referred to the learning and certification needs of students with special needs in senior cycle. There was also some mention of special educational needs at some of the parent meetings but it was not an area that

was widely discussed in the consultations generally. This may be reflective of the low level of integration of this age group in mainstream education.

- ***Gender***

The differences between the achievement levels of boys and girls in the Leaving Certificate examination did not feature greatly at the meetings, nor in most of the submissions. Neither was there any mention of equality in subject choices, or of encouraging take-up of traditionally gendered subjects. This was surprising given the level of public, media and academic attention to this issue.

- ***The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme***

In reviewing the equality, access and participation issues raised regarding the senior cycle and its constituent programmes, it is of interest to note the absence of substantial comment on the LCVP. This trend of minimal reference to the LCVP is replicated to a greater or lesser extent in other areas of this report.

### **3. Programme requirements: what students have to do**

In senior cycle, the level of requirement—what students have to do, varies from programme to programme. Transition Year is requirement free. The only requirement in LCE is that students must study Gaeilge. In LCVP students are required to study link modules and choose from subject groupings. The LCA is associated with a high degree of requirement while offering students some choice in the selection of modules. Discussion of this issue can be grouped under four headings: the importance of choice, TY, the influence of third level education and specialisation.

#### **The importance of choice**

The element of choice, frequently characterised as “flexibility”, is regarded by school management, teachers, parents and students, as a strength of the system. It allows a school to respond to the needs of its students through the courses it offers. Learners

can choose subjects which best reflect their aptitudes and interests. However, there are problems with the application of choice in practice.

A number of comments were made on the issue of flexibility.

- Students may be tempted to choose subjects which they regard as ‘easy’ and disregard those which may be most suited to their aptitudes in the pursuit of CAO points.
- It is not always possible for individual schools to offer the full range of programmes, subjects and modules.
- Choice can be restricted for certain students. For example, a school can operate a ‘gateway’ to some subjects in the form of a requirement for a certain grade in the Junior Certificate examination.
- Choice is also limited by school practice. For example, it is common for schools to confine choice within subject groupings. Streaming practices may also limit subject choice.

It appears that the senior cycle experience of a student may be shaped, not by considerations of breadth, balance or personal interest, but by issues of expediency, practical convenience and school tradition.

While there was much praise for the principle of choice, there was also support for some sort of ‘core’ as part of the LCE. Key skills, covered elsewhere in this report, were advocated as part of the ‘core’ set of experiences for all students. This ‘core’ would not necessarily be made up of subjects.

Among the important experiences suggested for inclusion in the core were

- work-experience
- an enterprise or vocational study

- a short course in social, personal and health education
- citizenship education
- a short course in IT.

The potential for conflict between the desire for flexibility and the need for breadth and balance of educational experience is immediately apparent.

There was support, especially from the community and voluntary sector, for an agreed curriculum framework that would specify a set of curriculum experiences for senior cycle and would allow for some of these to be provided in sites outside schools.

### **Transition Year**

There was significant discussion about TY at a number of the consultation meetings, particularly with parents, but also with other groups. Comments were focused on the absence of programme requirements. While the response to TY as a programme was generally very positive, a need to review it was identified. The main concerns expressed revolve around perceived

- significant variation in programme content and standard between schools
- lack of monitoring of and accreditation for the programmes
- minimum parental/community involvement in the development of school TY programmes.

The cost of participation in TY, a significant issue for parents, is discussed in the section on equality and access.

### **Influence of higher education**

While there is a high level of subject choice on offer in current senior cycle programmes, especially the LCE, the requirements for entry to higher education give rise to a core curriculum for most students and schools (i.e. Gaelige, English, mathematics and a modern language). Almost without exception those who commented on this phenomenon, including the representatives of the university sector, felt that at the very least the influence of this 'core curriculum' is a cause for

concern. It may act, it was suggested, to reduce the scope for schools to provide a broad senior cycle for learners.

It is difficult to identify whether the concerns were based on the nature of the curriculum in the 'core', or the style of teaching and learning perceived as necessary to get points for entry to higher education. The backwash from higher education impacts in a number of ways:

- students choosing subjects on the basis of points potential rather than out of interest
- examination subjects getting a greater emphasis from schools, teachers, students and parents than non-examinable aspects of senior cycle (including TY)
- teaching and learning focused on memorising and preparation for examination, and homework sharing a similar focus.

In general, the influence of the points system is perceived as a negative, yet any suggestions for change were premised on acceptance by the higher education sector. It is worth noting that representatives of higher education indicated that they would welcome greater engagement with second level interests on the issue of entry requirements and their impact on curriculum provision.

The number of subjects required for matriculation, or 'counted for points' came in for some comment. Some suggested that reduction from six to five would allow for more in-depth treatment of the subjects and/or a greater focus on non-examinable subjects and experiences. However, others expressed a view that the requirement for six ensures breadth, and that five would lead to an undesirable narrowing.

## **Specialisation**

It is significant that there was no support at the meetings, or in the submissions, for increasing specialisation and moving towards a more focused A level type structure whereby students would undertake in-depth study of three subjects only. This is in contrast to the 80% of student respondents to the online survey who agree that learners should have the opportunity to ‘specialise’ for future careers.

## **4. Developing the curriculum**

The senior cycle curriculum – in the form of subjects in the LCE programme – has just emerged from a period of intensive development. New syllabuses have been introduced in biology, physics, chemistry, English and home economics in recent years, and plans are underway to introduce a new syllabus in religious education in 2003 and revised syllabuses in history and geography in September 2004. The four revised technology subjects, as well as physical education, are expected to be introduced shortly, and syllabus revisions in art and economics are nearing completion.

Given the development of the LCA and the LCVP in recent times, the last few years have been characterised by considerable activity in the senior cycle curriculum. Yet in all strands of the consultative process, curriculum was the focus of considerable attention. This reflects what the discussion paper concluded about the irony of educational change, that there may have been many changes but not much has changed, especially for LCE students.

The curriculum issues, concerns and ideas presented in the course of the consultative process can be grouped under four main headings: the subjects in the LCE; the structure of the curriculum; skills in the curriculum, and the curriculum and teaching and learning. Under these headings a number of assessment issues were also presented and a strong emphasis was placed on developing curriculum and assessment together.



## **Subjects in the LCE**

At no meeting, nor in any submission, did participants advocate the removal of any subject from the extensive LCE subject list. A small number of respondents to the online survey suggested that Greek, Latin and Hebrew should not be offered. A number of suggestions were made at meetings, in submissions, and in the survey, for additional subjects; notably in civic and political education, social and personal education, physical education and information and communication technology (ICT). In the case of the latter, the emphasis was on ICT as a teaching and learning tool and on the acquisition of ICT literacy, although there was some support for a stand-alone subject in this area. Other subjects or areas of study mentioned for consideration included

- religious and moral education
- drama
- parenting
- dance
- Irish culture and heritage.

Provision for guidance, and the need for greater emphasis for guidance, was an issue for parents.

The subject about which there was the most comment was Gaeilge. Some participants endorsed its status as a compulsory subject; others suggested that it become optional. This is reflected in the almost 50/50 split in the online survey responses. Suggestions were also made that while Gaeilge should remain compulsory in senior cycle, a range of curriculum options for Gaeilge might be developed.

Subject syllabuses with too much content and taking too long to cover was an issue, as was the number of subjects taken by students. There was strong support for reducing the content in subjects to allow for a greater focus on deeper and more exploratory learning. The possibility of reducing the number of subjects required for matriculation—from six to five—was raised by some, and opposed by others.

## **The structure of the curriculum**

The issue of ‘modularising’ the curriculum was common to a number of contributions, and was discussed in the seminars and at most of the meetings. It was evident that a ‘modular’ curriculum meant different things to different organisations and individuals, and this is reflected in the range of views outlined below. What was shared was a belief that a more ‘modular’ approach might

- make the curriculum more accessible to more students
- give more students an opportunity to experience success if the curriculum were broken down into smaller sections than the current two-year subjects
- make the experience of senior cycle education more interesting and engaging for students.

A few submissions alluded to the implications of modularisation for assessment—in a modular approach, the assessment takes place on completion of the module. A modular curriculum would require the re-shaping of the current certificate examinations and would, in effect, mean the end of the concentration of examinations in the June exam period as currently experienced by Leaving Certificate students.

Support for a ‘modular’ curriculum was strongest from parents, students and the community and voluntary sector. Some of the points made in support of ‘modularisation’ included the following:

- modularisation would help adult and returning learners to get a Leaving Certificate
- a modular approach could mean that a student could take longer than two years to get the required number of modules
- it would be less stressful if assessment were spread out
- students who left school early could get a certificate based on the modules they had successfully completed
- it would facilitate a revised form of certification involving a record of achievement.

Teachers, teacher unions, principals and management organisations raised a number of concerns about modularisation:

- modularisation could make for a more fragmented curriculum at senior cycle
- educationally disadvantaged students could be further disadvantaged by modularisation unless they had access to ongoing guidance and support to navigate their way through the modules
- while stress in June might be reduced in a modularised system, in such a system it could be spread over the whole of senior cycle
- the workload for teachers, students and schools would need to be monitored carefully, particularly in the light of the experience of the LCA
- small schools would have problems providing a modularised curriculum.

It may be that some advocates of modularisation were, in fact, calling for unitisation—the breaking down of the subjects into smaller units. A feature of a modular curriculum is that each module stands alone. In a unitised approach, units fit together, one leads to another. Assessment does not necessarily have to follow on from each unit but can occur after a number of units have been completed.

### **Differentiation—Ordinary, Higher and Foundation levels in LCE subjects**

This was an issue that generated considerable comment, most of it focused on the poor quality of the curriculum experiences of students taking subjects at Ordinary level. The quality of the curriculum experiences was attributed to two sources:

- the nature of the Ordinary level syllabuses as ‘diluted’ versions of Higher level
- the quality of examination papers at Ordinary level and their focus on memorisation and lower order skills.

Some suggestions for improving the experiences of these students included

- urgent revision of Ordinary level syllabuses to make them more engaging and challenging for students

- all future syllabus revision should be focused on the course for Ordinary level students, with additional material for Higher level students
- common examination papers, with extra sections for Higher level students only.

Other suggestions for improving the experiences of ordinary level students related to teaching and learning methodologies and are included under that heading. A further observation in relation to differentiation, more generally questions whether differentiation is needed in the first place and noted the role that it plays in educational inequality.

### **Key skills in the curriculum**

The issue of skills was highlighted in the discussion paper and drew considerable attention from contributors during the consultation process. There was broad support for the identification of a set of skills that should be associated with senior cycle education. These skills are described as ‘key’ rather than ‘core’ for two reasons. Firstly, because ‘core’ carries connotations of compulsion which is not appropriate in this context, and secondly, because the skills mentioned are those that ‘unlock’ other areas or experiences. The key skills most frequently identified were

- learning to learn
- information processing
- communication
- personal effectiveness
- critical thinking
- working with others.

There was no support for a stand-alone module or course in ‘key skills’ but general support for them to be embedded in the subjects or programmes followed by students. Indeed some contributors suggested that, in part, they are already in subjects, but not given attention because they are not examined. There was concern that an embedded approach would effectively ‘bury’ key skills. To ensure that they were not lost in this way, many contributions suggested that a set of outcomes be established for each skill

and that these should be assessed as part of the Leaving Certificate. Suggestions for their assessment included

- assessment through existing assessment methods
- a portfolio containing evidence of the acquisition of key skills over senior cycle
- a record of achievement demonstrating achievement of the key skills
- a statement of attainment provided by the school.

There was considerable discussion, especially in light of the seminar that presented experiences with key skills in the curriculum in England, of the exchange value of a key skills portfolio. Of what use would it be? Would it provide points? Would it be relevant to employers? A number of suggestions were made in this regard, including

- make the key skills part of a portfolio required for the Leaving Certificate qualification and matriculation
- engage with employers/business/industry to ensure that their recruitment procedures include the portfolio, in whatever format the latter is developed.

There was also concern that, ultimately, the portfolio would just end up being something to ‘get done’ by students, rather than a genuine reflection of achievement

A number of contributions were pessimistic about key skills in the curriculum, and about any attempts to give them greater attention, especially because of a reliance on a subject-based curriculum, and a teaching body familiar with teaching ‘subjects’ rather than skills. Other contributions focused on ‘basic skills’ and commented on the level of literacy and numeracy skills of students moving into further or higher education, or into the workplace. In particular, contributions from third level noted that some ‘high points’ students had poor literacy skills. It was not proposed that these ‘basic skills’ should be added to the curriculum at senior cycle.

## **The curriculum in the classroom—teaching and learning methodologies**

There was enthusiasm for the approaches to teaching and learning used in TY, the LCVP and the LCA. There was praise for the considerable work undertaken by teachers in the application and support of active learning, project work, the use of ICT, investigative research and self-directed learning. However, there was broad agreement that many of these methods were squeezed out of LCE classrooms. Pressures of examinations led to students in such classrooms spending considerable amounts of time in note-taking, memorisation and text-book based work. It was also noted that such methods are regarded as effective examination preparation by students who aspire to high points and by their parents.

In general, the suggestions for ensuring that students and teachers were exposed to a wider and more challenging range of learning experiences can be combined into three overarching proposals from participants:

- change the examination and the classrooms will change
- create space and time in the curriculum
- provide ongoing support for teachers, and allow time for greater collaboration between teachers.

## **5. Assessment and certification**

Assessment and certification issues generated considerable debate during the different strands of the consultation process. While assessment within all senior cycle programmes came in for some degree of analysis, many participants identified assessment and certification arrangements in the LCE as the areas in greatest need of reform. If the right changes were made, it was suggested, they would ‘free up the system’ and contribute to significant improvement in the quality of experience of learners in the senior cycle. Equally, if assessment remains unchanged, it was claimed, ‘the system will stagnate’.

## **The Leaving Certificate examination**

While participants in the consultations recognised the importance of protecting public confidence in the reliability, objectivity and perceived fairness of the Leaving Certificate examination, there was widespread agreement about its limitations as an assessment instrument. In particular, participants pointed to the fact that the examination

- assesses a very narrow range of learning, mostly the ability to recall and write information
- does not adequately assess the skills and capabilities of learners
- dominates teaching and learning at senior cycle by rewarding product over process
- puts undue pressure on students to perform over a concentrated period of time at the end of senior cycle
- may damage students' self-confidence and affect their attitude to future learning.

It is recognised by many that the examination, in its present form and with current resourcing, cannot support the four purposes it must currently serve:

- to recognise and reward the general achievements of learners
- to provide a means to facilitate selection for entry to further or higher education
- to mark the end of second level schooling
- to provide the education system with important information on how the system is working.

Criticism of the Leaving Certificate examination is not new. Such observations are made annually at the time of the examination and on the publication of results and were made by The Commission on the Points System 1998. The recommendations made by the Commission were included in some of the suggestions for improvement made during the meetings and in submissions.

What is clear from this consultative process is that there is universal agreement that the examination has to change. Such change has the potential to transform the school experiences of students as well as the manner in which they are examined.

That the examination should change is agreed. How it should change is contested. A number of improvements were suggested in the consultations.

- Examine students at the end of each year of senior cycle (whether 2 or 3 years duration).
- Introduce a wider variety of assessment methods, such as projects, portfolios, interviews and oral examinations.
- Examine on different occasions over a two-year period, such as in the LCA, as well as in a terminal examination.
- Introduce some form of school-based assessment with external monitoring.

It was generally accepted that experience gained from the introduction of student tasks in LCA and the coursework portfolio in LCVP could be useful when considering new assessment elements for LCE. It was also suggested that adult learners would benefit from the flexibility offered by a wider variety of assessment methods.

The possible negative outcomes of some of the changes were also presented, often by those who proposed the changes. The concerns included the following:

- new components across a range of subjects increasing students' workload and possible over-assessment
- increased inequity in the system as students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may not have the resources or support for completion of project work
- uncertainty as to the reliability of some projects and portfolios as the student's own unaided work
- greater pressure on the school year and on teaching time if examinations were held at the end of each year of senior cycle.
- the erosion of teaching time by preparation of portfolios and projects.



While there was some divergence of views on the nature of any changes to the examination, there was general agreement on four issues in particular on how changes in the examination should be introduced:

- changes will need to be carefully planned
- changes will need to be monitored and evaluated
- professional development for teachers will be a key factor in the introduction of changes
- changes will require significant investment.

### **School-based assessment in the Leaving Certificate examinations**

Predictably, divergent views emerged in relation to the possible involvement of teachers in the assessment of their own students, whether those students were being assessed in the Leaving Certificate established examination, the Leaving Certificate Applied examination or presenting the modules of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme.

Some contributors expressed the view that teachers are best placed to assess their own students and the results of these assessments should be used for state examination purposes. In the view of these contributors teachers have perspectives on the learning process of their own students that external examiners can never access. The Leaving Certificate examination, it was suggested, assesses only the product of learning, but teachers could assess the process as well as the application of the student.

There was no suggestion that assessment for certification at senior cycle should be wholly school based, although there was a suggestion that a number of core subjects might be externally assessed, with others being assessed by teachers in schools.

Advocates of school-based assessment—including principals, management bodies, parents, teachers and students—proposed that a portion of the marks be allocated to school-based assessment. Four prerequisites for such assessment were identified:

- external monitoring to ensure fairness (for some contributors, central monitoring was required, for others monitoring could be provided through clusters of schools working together)
- payment for teachers doing the assessment
- training for teachers
- time to do the assessment.

Others—mainly teachers, but including some students—held that teachers should not, under any circumstances, be involved in the assessment of their own students in this way because

- teachers would be exposed to pressure from parents and students
- the relationship between teachers and students would be changed
- teachers would be open to accusations of unfair treatment of students.

### **Broadening the certificate**

There was strong support for including more information on the Leaving Certificate beyond the list of examination results that students currently receive. Senior cycle was seen as being more than the examinations and it was considered important to recognise and reward a greater variety of student achievement.

Participants in the consultation proposed a number of achievements that might be included in an extended certificate. These included

- additional qualifications achieved within the school
- achievement in non-examination subjects
- the Gaisce award
- participation in co-curricular activities and extra-curricular activities
- community and voluntary work
- attendance, punctuality and behaviour
- leadership roles.

If a student did not remain in school until the examination, it was suggested, then a certificate could be awarded based on information of this nature. Although the desirability of including more than examination results was generally agreed, there were some concerns expressed as to what might be added, and how. There were particular concerns expressed in respect of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities and the apparent advantages that some students and schools would have over others. Other concerns were expressed about including a statement about behaviour on the certificate.

There was strong support for a national template and guidance for these aspects of the certificate, along with training for teachers and schools. It was emphasised that employers would also need to be made aware of any new certificate and include it in selection processes. This information might also be relevant for entry to third level.

## 6. Options

In section 6 of the discussion paper, four possible ways of aligning and restructuring existing senior cycle programmes were presented. These options were not mutually exclusive and were offered as a possible guiding framework for consideration of alternative formats for senior cycle. It was made clear in the paper and during the various meetings that the list of options was not closed or definitive.

The options are presented, in summary form, in the table below.

	<b>Description</b>
<b>OPTION 1</b>	Maintain current programmes; continue to update subjects; broaden assessment and certification in line with existing proposals.
<b>OPTION 2</b>	Merge LCE with LCVP; keep TY and LCA as separate programmes.
<b>OPTION 3</b>	A three-year senior cycle combining the best of LCE LCVP and Transition Year; keep LCA separate.

<b>OPTION 4</b>	A unified, three year senior cycle programme for all students; certificated foundation year; greater emphasis on portfolio-based assessment and key skills.

It would be difficult to conclude that contributors favoured one option above the others. Some general observations can be made, however, regarding the opinions frequently expressed.

Firstly, there is general support for more flexible programmes and for combining elements of all programmes into one unified programme, as presented in Options 3 or 4. Implicit in this view is support for the provision of a three-year senior cycle, but there are strong reservations about having a compulsory three-year programme for all students. Contributors suggested that all students would benefit from the incorporation into other senior cycle programmes of experiences currently offered to TY students. Notwithstanding this, it is apparent that contributors do not favour the loss of the TY as a separate and discrete programme, as implied in Options 3 and 4.

- The opportunity of providing a certificate recognising learning at the end of the first year of a three-year cycle proved attractive to contributors, particularly in the context of the raising of the school leaving age to sixteen.
- Some teachers and managers were concerned, however, that certification after one year might lead to students leaving education earlier than they otherwise might.
- Parents were supportive of all students having access to the LCVP link modules.

Secondly, opinion on the relative merits of ‘ring-fencing’ of LCA is somewhat divided. Contributors suggested that the ‘ring-fencing’ of the programme

- is helpful and may, in the view of many, have to be maintained in the short to medium term to protect the interests of those students who benefit most from the programme

- sets up a tracked system for students that restricts students' movement between senior cycle programmes and limits access opportunities to adult and returning learners
- is of real social and personal benefit to students in that involvement with a definable group promotes a sense of identity and belonging not always evident elsewhere in the senior cycle.

Thirdly, as envisaged by the discussion paper, participants made a number of suggestions for options in addition to the four proposed.

- A two-year ordinary Leaving Certificate programme for all, followed by an extra optional Higher level year.
- Students would study a broad range of subjects in year 1, followed by a more specialist track in years 2 and 3.
- A four-year junior cycle, followed by a two-year senior cycle.

### **The raising of the school leaving age**

While the raising of the school leaving age to 16 is mentioned in the discussion paper, a number of contributors singled it out as an issue of particular significance for some schools and specified that it should be a key factor in the consideration of options for the structure of senior cycle. Students who might have left after the Junior Certificate examination are now required to stay in school until their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. This, it was suggested, has given rise to difficulties for schools.

- Schools find it difficult to provide a suitable educational experience for these students.
- The students who leave in these circumstances have just 'marked time' in senior cycle and get no recognition for the work done.
- The lack of any certification at the end of the first year of senior cycle means that there is no motivation to stay to the end of this year. Staying to this point might encourage students to remain to the end of senior cycle.

Contributions also noted that the Junior Certificate, as an award, was now out of alignment with the statutory school leaving age.

## 7. Implementation

There was much discussion of, and welcome for, the issues raised in chapter 7 of the discussion paper – *Implementing Change*. There was universal agreement that if change is to be effective and supported by all concerned it will be important that it is well-planned, incremental and adequately resourced. A further point made by a number of participants related to the need for coherent change – there were a number of comments to the effect that schools were subject to fragmented change and had little sense of an overall policy direction.

While there were many comments on implementation, they can be grouped under four main themes:

- *Commitment of resources*

There was recognition that changes—even on a limited scale—would require a significant commitment of resources. Some doubt was expressed as to the availability of resources at the level required.

- *Consensus*

Participants emphasised the need for changes to be agreed, and for ‘buy in’ from all involved.

- *Professional development for teachers*

This was a consistent message from all organisations, and from many individuals. Many suggested that current models of provision were no longer viable, and called for a revamp of the nature and system of ongoing teacher professional development

- *Research and evaluation*

There was strong support for change, but real concern that ‘too much, too soon’ might lead to difficulties. Ongoing research at every stage of the process, and evaluation of the impact of changes as they occur was strongly supported.

There is evident support for a strategic approach to change, with long and short-term goals and regular ongoing evaluation.

## **8. The senior cycle student and the culture of the school**

An issue that figured very significantly in many of the discussions in the various strands of the consultation was the issue of the changing needs of the senior cycle student and response of schools to those needs. Many contributors, including teachers, principals, parents and students, particularly emphasised the similarity of the experience of the senior cycle student to that of students in junior cycle. It was suggested that while many students have already undertaken adult responsibilities in other areas of their lives, such as work or family, their in-school experience is often very rigidly controlled by school rules and expectations. Contributors commented in particular on

- time-tabling arrangements, where the school day is fully timetabled with teacher contact time, leaving no time for independent, self-directed learning
- the lack of recognition of the adult status of students who have reached senior cycle, where many of the same restrictions apply to 18 and 19 year olds as to 12 year olds in relation to such areas as school uniform, personal dress code, and freedom of movement within school
- how the relationships between school staff and students differs little from junior to senior cycle, where these relationships are often still expected to be on an adult – child basis
- the similarity in the learning experience of students at junior and senior cycle
- the difficulties experienced by students who are trying to combine work and school.

There was considerable comment and discussion on the limited range of teaching and learning methodologies used at senior cycle. In fact, many contributors noted that there may be greater variety and better opportunities for more independent learning at junior cycle and in TY, with a reversion to a very narrow range of experiences at senior cycle. It was suggested that the cumulative effect of all of the factors mentioned is that

- some students find their experience of school at senior cycle ‘boring’
- teachers and school principals may have difficulty motivating and managing some students
- some students leave school due to lack of motivation or difficulty in managing school and work together
- learners become dependent on information being made available to them and have developed little experience in managing their own learning, except within a very narrow range of learning experiences
- higher education institutions, particularly institutes of technology, face the challenge of remotivating students, most often male students, who are disillusioned with and alienated from the learning process as a result of their Leaving Certificate experience.

## **9. Conclusion**

Many of the ideas and suggestions presented at meetings, seminars or in submissions were not new; they have been expressed many times and in many fora. Some of the issues are new; they reflect the changing circumstances for schools and the changing lives of students. A collection of ideas such as that presented here represents only the outcome of the consultation process. What cannot be captured in the report was the enthusiasm and energy brought to the process by those who participated.

Organisations representing teachers, school management bodies, parents and principals and deputy principals have a tradition of participation in NCCA



consultative processes and brought that experience to bear in ensuring that the issues were widely discussed among their members. The consultation process was greatly enhanced by the participation of a number of ‘new voices’, notably students, the community and voluntary pillar, and a network of organisations and individuals convened through the assistance of the Combat Poverty Agency.

As there were many voices, there are many messages. The challenge to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment is to draw on these messages in setting out the directions for change and development at senior cycle in a manner that continues to be inclusive, open and reflective. There are many messages, but the level of participation in the consultative process underlined one fundamental principle supported by all. Education matters.

## **10. Appendices**

### **Appendix 1**

#### **List of briefing meetings**

Briefing meetings were arranged in consultation with the following organisations:

Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools

Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (6)

Combat Poverty Agency (2)

City of Cork Vocational Education Committee

Donegal Vocational Education Committee

Institute of Guidance Counsellors

Irish Schoolheads’ Association

Irish Vocational Education Association

Joint Managerial Body

Kerry Education Convention

National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (4)

National Parents Council Post Primary (9)

Second Level Support Service

Teachers Union of Ireland (4)

Union of Secondary Students

## **Appendix 2**

### **Bilateral meetings**

Bilateral meetings were arranged in consultation with the organisations listed below:

Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools

Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland

Combat Poverty Agency

Community and Voluntary Pillar

Conference of Heads of Irish Universities

Council of Directors of Institutes of Technology

Irish Business and Employers Confederation

Irish Vocational Education Association

Joint Managerial Body

National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals

National Parents Council Post Primary

National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education

National Qualifications Authority of Ireland

National University of Ireland

Teachers Union of Ireland

Union of Secondary Students

Accounts of the meetings, produced in consultation with the organisations, are reproduced in this appendix.

## **Appendix 3**

### **List of Submissions Received**

Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools  
Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland  
Civic, Social and Political Education Support Service  
Combat Poverty Agency  
Community School, Ballyhaunis  
County Donegal Vocational Education Committee  
County Meath Vocational Education Committee  
CPA Consultation with Community and Voluntary Sector  
Crisis Pregnancy Agency  
CSPE Teachers Association  
Further Education and Training Awards Council  
Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools  
Irish Council for Science, Technology and Innovation  
Irish Insurance Federation  
Joint Managerial Body  
Junior Certificate School Programme  
KLEAR Adult Education Centre  
Leaving Certificate Applied Support Service  
Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme Support Service  
National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals  
NAPD Arts and Culture Sub-Committee  
National Educational Welfare Board  
National Parents Council Post Primary  
National Youth Council of Ireland  
North Clondalkin Community Development Project  
Poverty, the Curriculum and the Classroom Project  
Presentation Schools Committee  
Scoil Phobail Sliabh Luachra  
Second Level Support Service

Skills Initiative Unit  
Teaching English Support Service  
The Arts Council  
The Equality Authority  
Teachers Union of Ireland  
Transition Year Curriculum Support Service  
Union of Secondary Students

Mr Liam Forde  
Mr Gerry Jeffers

## **Bilateral consultation meeting**

### **Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools**

9<sup>th</sup> June 2003

#### **Introduction**

As a preface to the meeting, the ACCS thanked the NCCA for its active support in enabling the Association's thorough consultative process on the issues raised by the Consultative Paper. The outcomes of the regional meetings and other events will form the basis for the official submission, which will be made to the NCCA in the near future.

It has been the experience of the ACCS that, while there are significant levels of consensus on the issues raised by the paper, it is inevitable that strongly opposing views will also emerge. Such is the breadth of the undertaking it would not be surprising if some level of internal contradiction were apparent in the position adopted by any organisation.

#### **Equality, access and lifelong learning.**

The ACCS is strongly supportive of efforts to promote enhanced access to the formal education system. In this regard, the operation of the LCA and LCVP have been very successful and indeed lessons might well be learned by the Leaving Certificate (established) from the experience, for example, of providing alternative assessment modes for students. A number of points emerge from the operation of such programmes and the possible interchange of approaches between programmes.

- The LCA suffers from a status deficit in the context of the other senior cycle programmes and this is not beneficial to the students involved. Efforts must be made to protect the interests of these students in whatever emerges from the consultation.
- There is a perception that the LCE and LCVP might be amenable to merging and that those students who currently undertake the LCE would benefit from exposure to a well-resourced scheme of link modules.

- The LCA assessment schedule is ideally suited to the needs of many students who undertake the LCE and consideration should be given to extending relevant modes of assessment to cater for such students. The possibility of allowing some LCE students to become involved in elements of the LCA programme should be explored. It may not be necessary for the Leaving Certificate to be assessed in exactly the same manner for all students.

Notwithstanding the validity of the latter point, the ACCS is concerned that the impact of a more expansive assessment scheme at senior cycle might have a detrimental impact on the integrity of the “tuition year”. There is an excessive amount of class contact time lost through teacher involvement in officially sanctioned examination work and in-service training. The Association would not welcome any further interference in the fundamental work of the school, in the form of increased teacher absence from the classroom, necessitated by enhanced assessment procedures. It is recognised that reform of the senior cycle may involve significant change to

- the concept of the teacher’s role
- the structure of the school day and year
- the model of in-service provision.

### **Programme requirements**

Discussion of the requirement profile of senior cycle programmes must be undertaken within the context of the need to maintain the availability to the student of a high degree of subject choice. Even in the absence of an official requirement regime in the LCE, a number of factors contribute to the operation of a de facto requirement system.

- While a greater degree of programme requirement might reduce resource demands on schools, previous efforts in this regard have not proven successful.
- Not all schools would be in a position to offer the complete schedule of programme requirements. This is especially true of smaller schools.

- It is accepted that a practice has grown up of students choosing subjects, not based on their aptitudes or interests but on the basis of “perceived” points scoring potential.
- The requirement relating to the study of Irish in senior cycle should be re-examined in the context of emerging trends in post-primary education and the particular needs of some students.

### **Curriculum development**

It is the view of the Association that while existing syllabuses are extensive in terms of content they contribute insubstantially to the development of skills associated learning. It is important that future curriculum development should focus on the identification of such skills, as well as knowledge, and that both elements be represented in the assessment regime.

- Efforts must be made to eliminate the significant levels of overlap and duplication within the current senior cycle curriculum
- There is a need to bring about an expansion in the range of teaching methodologies employed, in senior cycle in particular and in post-primary education in general. While syllabus reform alone will not achieve the move towards the use of more active and student-centred methodologies, the introduction of appropriately structured syllabuses is an essential prerequisite to such change.
- The senior cycle has traditionally been a subject centred programme but the experience of LCA, LCVP and TY have begun the shift away from this position to one where the Leaving Certificate will have an overarching curricular framework which may provide a coherent educational experience to all students.
- It is important to ensure that basic and key skills appropriate to senior cycle be identified in each element of the curriculum. A significant body of basic skills may be assumed to have been already achieved in junior cycle and, consequently, need not be included in the senior cycle. However, the assistance and attention given to students with special education needs must be maintained so as to ensure that they reach a satisfactory level in basic skills.



- Any element of learning in key skills must be assessed in the same way as other elements of the curriculum.
- Consideration might be given to the introduction of a general science subject at senior cycle.
- The needs of students who typically undertake Ordinary and Foundation Level courses are frequently not met by the content, methodologies or, sometimes, progression opportunities associated with those courses.
- The advent of a modularised senior cycle, while of greatest value to second chance and returning learners, must be accompanied by comprehensive guidance so as to ensure that students maximise the potential advantages inherent in such a system.

### **Assessment, certification, qualifications.**

The ACCS supports both the expansion of the assessment modes used in the Leaving Certificate and also the extension of the certification to encompass learning, which takes place outside of the existing examination subject framework. As a general position the Association is supportive of the involvement of teachers in the assessment of their students for certification purposes but, as with all elements of Leaving Certificate procedure, this must be under a strict regime of external moderation.

- It might be desirable to award a certificate at the end of each year of senior cycle describing what the student has achieved in that year.
- There would be a concern that the certification of achievements other than performance in examinations might add an additional layer of inequity to the current system for some students.
- An attendance requirement for a course does improve the participation of some students.

## **Options**

There is no single preference emerging within the Association in terms of the options presented in the paper. There is a recognition that the LCA should be maintained, ring-fenced if necessary.

- The TY experience is by and large extremely valuable and the distinctive characteristics of the programme should be retained.
- Of the options presented, Option 3 appears to have greatest support but there is a concern that a minority of students would not complete a full three-year cycle (ref: point regarding yearly certification).
- An additional option might comprise a two year general course (with elements of specialisation) followed by a third year for those who wished to participate in a year devoted wholly to preparation for third level.

## **Bilateral consultation meeting**

### **Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland**

11 June 2003

#### **Introduction**

The ASTI delegates welcomed the opportunity to discuss the different options proposed under the review of the senior cycle programme. It was indicated that these were informal discussions and a tailored response to the four issues outlined below would be prepared and reviewed by the ASTI education committee prior to submission.

The ASTI very much welcomed the statements made in chapter 7 of the *Consultative Paper* regarding the need to adequately resource any proposed changes in senior cycle provision and the impact of such change on the work of teachers.

The consultative approach to the review of senior cycle adopted by the NCCA was appreciated by ASTI and the presentation of options was a good framework in which to begin the process.

#### **Equality, access and lifelong learning**

- The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme is meeting the needs of a significant cohort of students in preventing early school leaving and catering for students at risk and those with special educational needs.
- In discussing the poor perception held by many regarding the LCA programme, it is suggested that work needs to be done at national level to promote the programme and at school level to address negative stereotyping. The status of the LCA is a social consideration rather than an educational consideration. The LCA is a good programme.
- It is acknowledged that a modularised or unitised curriculum provision is gaining much favour internationally, but there is insufficient evidence

to indicate how successful such an approach would be in the Irish context. The current provision is working quite well and is flexible. It is believed that a modular, unitised curriculum may be too constraining. Many teachers are concerned as they are not sure what such a curriculum would look like.

- The only formal experience of modularisation in the Irish second level education system is in the LCA programme and many schools do not offer this programme. The introduction of modularisation approach may send out a message that standards are being reduced. Clear, specific definitions of modularisation need to be provided, along with a number of examples demonstrating such an approach.

### **Programme requirements**

In discussing programme requirements, the following points were made:

- Sufficient choice is currently being provided in senior cycle education.
- The NCCA was encouraged to look more concertedly on the integration of ICT into all program
- It is acknowledged that the educational experience of many students in senior cycle is overly academic and that there is a need to broaden the range of learning experiences of all students
- The ASTI believes that all students, irrespective of their programme of study, should have access to the study of Gaeilge. Detailed consideration requires to be given to the proposal that courses in Gaeilge be developed in a manner similar to physical education. Namely, that two courses be provided – one which is non-examinable and one which is included in the Certificate examinations. The concerns of teachers that, in the absence of an examination the status and the provision of Gaeilge could be so weakened that significant numbers of students would not study the language, is extremely valid and requires to be addressed.

- The importance of developing courses in PE, CSPE, SPHE at senior cycle is recognised. Mechanisms are required to ensure that all students, irrespective of their programmes of study, have access to these courses throughout their senior cycle education.
- The senior cycle curriculum should be addressed in terms of areas of experience and specific learning outcomes similar to the Junior Certificate programme.
- The ASTI underlined the implications of curriculum change for teacher workload. The changing role of the teacher in contemporary society must be addressed within any programme of reform or change in senior cycle education.

### **Curriculum development**

- The ASTI shares the concerns of the NCCA as expressed in pages 48 and 49 of the consultative paper regarding the decreasing levels of uptake of the science subjects, gendered patterns in subject selection and the poor quality of differentiation of curricula for ordinary level students.
- The ASTI representatives again emphasised the importance of integrating ICT into the curriculum as a teaching and learning tool. Students should not leave second level education without a certain level of ICT skills and competence.
- On the issue of basic and key skills, it is felt that more research needs to be undertaken. The general belief is that skills should be embedded into the curriculum and not taught or assessed separately. Skills are currently deemed to be assessed through different types of questioning on the examination papers.
- It is acknowledged that there is a change from a subject focus to a programme focus within curriculum review. While ASTI recognises the

value of placing a greater emphasis on process and skills in the curriculum, it is important to teachers that the value of subject content continues to be recognised and affirmed. A balanced approach, focused on learning outcomes, is suggested.

- The provision for ordinary level students is a concern amongst ASTI members. Failure rates are high. However, the current arrangement is very flexible, allowing students to easily transfer from the Higher to the Ordinary level course in most subjects, as the Ordinary level syllabus is generally a diluted version of the Higher level syllabus. A different approach might be adopted in which the Higher level course would be an extension of the Ordinary level course, thus retaining mobility.
- A reduction of the split between the academic and vocational as highlighted in section 3 of the *Consultative Paper* is welcomed. In today's society we have to recognise that most students are involved in some form of part-time work. Work experience should be recognised and harnessed as part of the educational experience.
- Senior cycle students are young adults and must be treated as such. Students must be encouraged and facilitated to engage in self-directed and reflective learning.
- Teachers are ready to embrace different teaching methodologies and approaches which facilitate greater levels of engagement and increase student motivation. However, new pedagogical approaches must be supported by teacher professional development and resourcing.

### **Assessment, certification, qualifications**

- Representatives felt that, in general, the range of assessment components available at senior cycle was quite broad, although they recognised that there were gaps in assessment arrangements for some subjects. It is

important to disentangle the assessment debate from the certification debate.

- ASTI supports the broadening of certification. The student's overall experience at school should be recognised, including, for example: attendance; participation in student council; involvement in extracurricular school-based activities, such as debating and sport. The certificate must focus on school based-activities.
- The finer details of this type of certification need to be discussed and teased out. It could be the responsibility of the students themselves to gather evidence of their additional achievements which would then be endorsed by the school principal.
- Regarding the status of this additional certification or record of achievement, ASTI representatives were open to the idea of it being a requirement for entry to third level, but the details require further consideration.

## **Options**

The ASTI welcomed the medium to long term view taken by the NCCA in relation to senior cycle reform and was of the view that a combination of the elements in Options 1 and 2 as presented in the *Consultative Paper* would be the most appropriate for the system in the short to medium term. This would include implementation of a full range of new and revised Leaving Certificate (established) syllabuses, the development of a new senior cycle programme incorporating the Leaving Certificate (established) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme, while retaining the ring-fencing of Transition Year and the Leaving Certificate Applied

In the long term, the ASTI is open to a more radical change of the senior cycle, but would encourage a considered approach, as part of an incremental plan, the best way forward.

The ASTI, while recognising the extent of the “change forces” in Irish education, not least the increasing pressures on the education system to play a significant role in maintaining economic competitiveness and social cohesion, would encourage a considered approach, as part of an incremental plan, as the best way forward.



**Bilateral consultation meeting**

## **Conference of Heads of Irish Universities**

15<sup>th</sup> September 2003

*Record of bilateral not yet available. Text will be appended to this document at a later stage.*

## **Bilateral consultation meeting**

### **Combat Poverty Agency**

9<sup>th</sup> June 2003

#### **Introduction**

While not usually perceived as being specialist in education, the Agency engages frequently with educational provision and values its evolving relationship with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. The education agenda of the agency has two arms: one, a curricular interest which seeks to increase awareness among learners of poverty issues and the other concerned with efforts towards addressing educational disadvantage.

#### **Equality, access and lifelong learning**

The National Anti-Poverty Strategy provides that all public policy documents must be assessed to establish any potential impact on poverty. The Strategy promotes poverty-proofing of significant policy developments. The NCCA's work on 'Developing Senior Cycle Education' should incorporate poverty-proofing approaches.

- The Agency welcomes the commitment to the equality principle in the consultative documentation, but recommends that the principles are developed into equality objectives for senior cycle education.
- The Agency is convinced of the value of community-based learning initiatives and feels that there should be an effort to increase the levels of integration between these and mainstream schooling in terms of their operation and qualifications awarded.
- The frequent, simplistic interpretation of poor retention patterns among some populations leads to the conclusion that the young people are not ready for school and its formal structures. The Agency would challenge the universal application of this view and suggests that, on many occasions the school might not be ready for the student.

- There is a need for teacher pre-service and in-service training to increase the awareness among the profession of the impact of poverty and disadvantage on the education experience of young people and to provide teachers with the skills to analyse the learning needs of disadvantaged young people.
- To counter the social/cultural deficit experienced by some students, a system of mentoring should be introduced at senior cycle to provide them with support and guidance. This would be in addition to interventions made currently by guidance councillors.
- Interventions aimed at addressing the fundamental causes of educational disadvantage should be undertaken before senior cycle, but reform at this level which is supportive of students who are educationally disadvantaged may well influence participation and retention at lower levels.
- The low status accorded to the LCA is in many instances reflective of a prejudice against the students who undertake the programme.
- Modularisation may well provide additional entry points to the Leaving Certificate but such a development will not, on its own, solve the problems of inflexibility associated with the LCE. The almost total reliance on the Leaving Certificate to provide a route for progression to further education is unhelpful and might be lessened by a greater promotion of the opportunities offered by FETAC.
- There ought to be more consideration of providing enhanced status for school-based qualifications. This would allow for greater local flexibility and responsiveness but might suffer from the absence of a unified system of recognition. In addition, greater levels of flexibility in design would place greater demands on schools.
- In terms of assisting retention in senior cycle, the loss to a family of the earning power of the young person should be considered in establishing the level of support to be given to a family experiencing disadvantage.
- Schools and teachers must review their practice and the knowledge base which it mediates so as not to discriminate against any group of learners.

## **Programme requirements**

The necessity for students to have a broad range of educational experience makes some level of requirement essential. This need for curricular coherence and the attainment of senior cycle aims must be balanced with a commitment to increased flexibility.

- Key skills should be identified, integrated and assessed. Combat Poverty recommends these skill areas as: personal skills, interpersonal skills, thinking skills, learning skills and active skills. The current structure of LCA seems a useful way of accommodating the acquisition of skills—designated mandatory areas of learning within which learners have choices.
- Work experience elements of LCA and LCVP could be carried out in community-based initiatives and workplaces.

## **Curriculum development**

- The experience of former students should be referred to in formulation of a new or revised curriculum at senior cycle.
- Social and political education, extending from CSPE at junior cycle, should form part of senior cycle.
- Portfolios of achievement and performance would ensure all students have a record of learning, even if they don't complete a senior cycle programme. It might, in fact, encourage students to stay involved when they might otherwise leave the education system.
- The extension of project work within senior cycle would be positive. As with all aspects of the system, however, care must be taken not to further disadvantage those students who do not have equal access to resources or family/social support structures.
- The operation of individual learning plans which assess the student's needs on entry to senior cycle, identifies the best learning path and evaluates her/his readiness for the examination process, would be hugely beneficial for all students but especially those from an educationally disadvantaged background.

- Best practice models from LCA, LCVP and Third Level Access Programmes offer options for broader implementation of these within senior cycle.
- The terminal examination needs to adopt more diversity to take account of learning styles and multi-sensory learning. Examination methods could include tapes, interviews, more use of IT, use of graphics etc.
- Combat Poverty strongly endorses the NCCA consultation with anti-poverty interests in senior cycle review and offers support and advice for the continuation of this dialogue on future curriculum development initiatives.

### **Options**

A three-year cycle such as described in Options 3 and 4, while undoubtedly beneficial, may have significant equality considerations, not least in terms of the cost of keeping a student in school. The income foregone costs for poor families of a learner opting to stay in school and not in a job may be a factor to be addressed in extending the senior cycle to three years. The LCA is especially valuable and its status will certainly be enhanced if a broader range of students undertake the programme.

## **Bilateral consultation meeting**

### **Community and Voluntary Pillar**

12<sup>th</sup> June 2003

#### **Introduction**

Representatives from the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) and the Irish Association of Older People (IAOP), both of which are members of the Community and Voluntary Pillar (CVP), were present at the bilateral meeting.

The Community and Voluntary Pillar is one of the four social partners and involves eight national organisations from the community and voluntary sector, including NYCI and the *Community Platform*. The *Community Platform* represents twenty six national organisations and networks, including the IAOP, working at grassroots level, representing people and communities experiencing poverty, inequality and exclusion.

Organisations establish linkages through thematic groups. Certain groupings have more involvement in particular issues than others. However, education is an important theme for most of the organisations that are members of the pillar. Members of the CVP do not always share a common view and agreement on issues is arrived at by consensus.

#### **Equality, access and lifelong learning**

While primarily concerned with the non-formal side of Irish education, the NYCI has considerable interest in the formal education sector. The organisation has a particular interest in educational disadvantage, early school leaving, lifelong learning, access to further and higher education and the links between formal and informal education.

- The NYCI believes that the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme is a very good option for students in danger of leaving school early. However, some concern was expressed about the fact that it is a two-year programme and may be too long to commit to for some students. A suggestion was made that it should be further modularised and allow for completion and recognition

of modules taken. This would also facilitate students acquiring and storing credits, which may easily be added to at later stages.

- The modularisation of FETAC courses is very much supported. However, it is felt that the LCA programme is better recognised nationally than the FETAC awards.
- Many young people will participate in training workshops because such workshops are considered more flexible and appropriate than the LCA. The school environment is not always the best place for young people; in particular, young adults who are returning to education.
- There is a need for both flexibility and support in the education system. Support structures required include childcare facilities for young parents and mentoring provision. The flexibility required must enable: the co-existence and co-recognition of work and education; space to study; a longer length of time to absorb information, and the ability to return easily to education.
- Unitisation of the curriculum is a very good mechanism in facilitating the above requirements. However, there is a danger that a person's educational experience may become too fragmented and a perception that one's educational experience is never ending. To avoid such an occurrence, much student support is required and a balance achieved between structured and unstructured provision.

Research noted by the NYCI which was carried out in areas of social disadvantage in Dublin showed that students frequently feel that

- school is not relevant
- subjects are not relevant and that they are often forced to take subjects that they do not wish to do
- teachers do not understand them, nor do they understand their families
- gratification does not come often enough or soon enough
- early school leaving is caused by a number of interrelated issues including: curriculum content and relevance; student self-esteem; economic and family matters.

At post-primary level, parents frequently feel intimidated by the number of teachers and the complexity of the curriculum. Support groups for parents are crucial in addressing the issue of early school leaving and poor attendance.

Senior citizen organisations have significant interest in lifelong learning opportunities. In general, education at this stage of one's life is primarily for pleasure and for social purposes.

### **Curriculum development**

In discussing curriculum development, the following issues arose:

- Basic and key skills should be embedded into the curriculum and not taught separately.
- NYCI representatives expressed concern that the current Junior Certificate civic, social and political education (CSPE) course lacks breadth and depth, and teachers do not feel competent to teach it. Should CSPE become a senior cycle subject, negotiation and mediation skills should be included as well as an in-depth examination of political systems. It was also suggested that a review of other senior cycle subjects that may be somewhat similar in content to CSPE (e.g. home economics, geography) should take place, to ensure that CSPE would be sufficiently different in content.
- Concern was expressed that youth workers in the non-formal sector were being invited in to schools to facilitate aspects of the Junior Certificate CSPE course without being afforded parity of esteem with teachers.
- Career guidance provision needs to be increased and improved at both the junior and senior cycles.
- ICT must be included as an integral part of the curriculum.

### **Assessment, certification, qualifications**

- To ensure their inclusion, status and currency in the curriculum, key skills must be assessed or validated. Key skills should not be assessed or validated



for the purpose of acquiring points but should be recognised in some other way.

- Changes in methods of assessment must occur slowly and be carefully monitored. Concern was expressed about students in the UK being under severe pressure due to increased levels of continuous assessment.

## **Bilateral consultation meeting**

### **Council of Directors of Institutes of Technology**

11<sup>th</sup> June 2003

#### **Introduction**

The representatives of the Council of Directors of Institutes of Technology, having recently discussed the senior cycle paper within their council, welcomed the opportunity to meet with the NCCA. The council supported the integration of all educational provision and looked forward to the prospect of enhanced dialogue with the NCCA in the future.

The Council of Directors drew particular attention to the international comparative study in *Section 4* of the senior cycle paper and strongly urged the NCCA to be courageous in the approach adopted in reviewing and reforming the senior cycle.

#### **Equality, access and lifelong learning**

- The Council of Directors strongly supports the objectives of the *Bologna Declaration* in the development of a European framework establishing a system of credits as an effective means of promoting student mobility.
- Senior cycle education should place a greater emphasis on programme outcomes than on Leaving Certificate subjects. This would facilitate mobility and progression for learners in the context of the National Qualifications framework
- There should be increased *lateral integration* within the senior cycle curriculum to take into account changing relationships between work and study. This is especially true in the area of apprenticeship education. Such integration would facilitate and provide for progression.
- Concern was expressed about the findings of research into regional variations in participation rates in higher education, conducted by Professor Patrick Clancy. In particular, rates were very low in certain areas of Dublin. A sub sector is being created in society.
- The council highlighted differing attitudes to achievement among males and females. In general, females strive for maximum achievement while males strive

for the minimum required to succeed. A decline in the number of girls taking science and technology was also a matter of concern.

- It is clear that many students are more likely to opt for particular Leaving Certificate subjects because of their perceived '*points dividend*' than for valid educational reasons.
- The word 'senior' in senior cycle has a meaning. Senior cycle students should be recognised as young adults. They are frequently treated no differently than when they first entered post-primary school. Particular difficulties may be experienced by
  - the Transition Year student, who is often treated like a young adult for one year in between junior and senior cycle
  - the unmarried mother, who takes on the responsibilities of a parent at home, yet can be treated like a child in school. It was felt that more crèche facilities should be made available in schools.
- Concern was expressed about the damaging effect that second level education may have on male students. More positive engagement and higher retention rates could be achieved if this problem was recognised and steps taken to address it. The introduction of a three-year senior cycle may exacerbate the situation, particularly if students were not awarded credit on a regular basis.
- The need for both Higher and Ordinary level courses was questioned. It was suggested that the present arrangement may simply perpetuate educational disadvantage. Modularisation of the curriculum may address this.

### **Programme requirements**

Key skills that students should acquire in the education process in

- learning to learn
- the ability to engage socially with others
- assertiveness
- the ability to be self-directing.

There are compelling reasons for making the study of science at senior cycle mandatory. The council encourages the full implementation of the recommendations made by the *Task Force on the Physical Sciences*. ICT should be an integral part of the curriculum as a teaching and learning tool. It should be embedded into the curriculum and assessed.

### **Curriculum development**

The council supported the aspirations as set out in section 4.7 of the Consultative Paper, and suggested that the greatest challenge for the future in this regard would be to successfully shift the focus from the education provider to the learner. The revised primary curriculum has moved in this direction and a similar approach should be adopted at second level.

Such a transformation has begun in the Institutes of Technology. The introduction of student-centred curricula based on problem solving, team projects and peer tutoring has effectively promoted self-directed learning among students.

- Curriculum development cannot occur without addressing the professional development needs of teachers. Concern was expressed about the perceived level of disenchantment and alienation felt by teachers. It is felt, however, that teachers would welcome the adoption of new approaches in teaching and learning.
- In association with the above, and in an effort to evaluate our education system in a comparative context, effective and empowering quality assurance mechanisms must be built in to teaching and learning.
- There is general recognition of the success of the Transition Year programme. It is particularly successful when properly planned, managed and resourced. The modular structure of the programme facilitates the development of research, analysis, synthesis, collaboration, communication and teamwork skills of students.
- There are many benefits to modularising the curriculum. The facility to construct a learning pathway by providing choice and shorter courses is very motivating for the student. Modularisation enables early diagnosis of difficulties, and so facilitates progression. The notion of *pre-requisites* and *co-requisites* can assist in avoiding fragmentation and ensuring breadth and balance.

- The possibility of a locally based curriculum, in which courses would be submitted to an awarding body for validation and accreditation was suggested. It was agreed that this was perhaps too radical a move at this time, but a combination of a national curriculum with some local developments is desirable.

### **Assessment, certification, qualifications**

The council supports both the introduction of different modes of assessment and the broadening of certification.

- Current assessment arrangements examine how well we teach rather than how well students learn.
- If a modular curriculum structure is introduced, a totally new assessment structure will need to be put in place. Achievement must be accredited at each stage of learning. Students who leave the system should be able to retain credit which they can use to build towards a qualification if they return.
- Teachers must be involved in the assessment of students.
- In the case of locally developed courses, assessment and accreditation could occur at a local level. This would give rise to an extended certificate. Certification of these courses should be awarded additional status which may be a requirement for entry into third level.
- Changing demographic trends will influence the status of the Leaving Certificate as a passport into third level.

### **Options**

In restructuring the senior cycle, the preferred option was Option 4 as presented in the consultative paper. However, a more radical change was suggested as this option is substantially derived from an existing structure.

## **Bilateral consultation meeting**

### **Irish Business and Employers' Confederation**

10<sup>th</sup> June 2003

#### **Introduction**

The strategy document published by IBEC for the period 2002-2005 identifies 8 priorities for the organisation. Among these priorities is a statement on the importance of promoting an education policy, which will contribute towards providing students with skills relevant to the future needs of business. IBEC will publish a policy document on education in the near future.

#### **Equality, access and lifelong learning**

With the advent of the National Qualifications Framework the relationship between various awards within the post-primary sector will become more defined. It is important to increase access to information among the general population regarding the programmes and qualifications offered in post-primary schools.

- A greater level of dialogue and co-operation between curriculum designers at second level and their counterparts at third level will lead to greater transfer of the skills learned in post-primary into the third level learning environment.
- The use and value of the Leaving Certificate must be maintained and in this regard the co-operation of the third level sector is essential.
- The relationship between business and the senior cycle, manifested in particular by the operation of work experience and work shadowing, is valued not only by schools and students but also by employers.
- Schools, despite the existence of alternative further education institutions, have a vital role in providing for returning and adult learners. Schools may, however, have to operate a more flexible approach to internal organisation and to the demands placed on such students

## **Assessment, certification, qualifications**

In supporting the broadening of the range of certifiable elements within the senior cycle, IBEC recognises the significant challenges that arise in the context of implementation. The same difficulty emerges when considering the assessment of key skills in the senior cycle.

- Records of achievement may have a role in recognising achievement but would have to have independent validation in order that they might establish a currency among employers. Ultimately a growing use, by employers, of such records will be the most effective vehicle for promoting their effectiveness.
- The provision of a nationally accepted pro forma might assist in the process of acceptance by employers and third level institutions of records of achievement.
- Involving the student in compiling the portfolio, which would ultimately influence the attainment of her/his ROA, would promote a greater sense of ownership in the document.

## **Programme requirements**

It is difficult to state definitively what the general business sector wants from the education system in terms of outcomes or, indeed, what areas of content are deemed essential. Some trends, however, are emerging.

- Literacy and modern language skills are seen as most desirable and to some extent there are currently shortfalls in the standards attained by school leavers in both these areas.
- The inclusion of mathematics, English and science within a compulsory strand (running right through post-primary schooling) is most desirable.

## **Curriculum development**

Transition Year, LCA and LCVP make valuable contributions to diversity within the Leaving Certificate, as does the LCE. It is clear, however, that the latter enjoys a much higher level of status among the population in general and among employers in particular.

- The unification of the qualification awarded at the end of senior cycle might reduce this apparent deficit of esteem. In this approach all students completing the programme would be awarded the Leaving Certificate but recognition would be given therein of the differing pathways followed by individual students.
- The promotion of key skills is to be welcomed. However, the challenge associated with incorporating this learning into the curriculum and practice of teaching should not be underestimated.
- The matter of assessment of key skills is fraught with contention. It may be that the assessment of a product, which has been presented as the result of completion of a task requiring use of particular key skills, would provide adequate evidence of learning.
- Increased modularisation of courses within the senior cycle has much to recommend it and, in particular, would very much ease the access routes of returning learners.
- Such a development might also, unless very carefully managed, lead to a more fragmented educational experience and in some cases militate against the acquisition of very worthwhile ‘group-centred’ key skills such as team working, problem solving and communication.



## **Bilateral consultation meeting**

### **Irish Vocational Education Association**

12<sup>th</sup> June 2003

#### **Introduction**

Representatives of the Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA) were welcomed to the NCCA. It was pointed out that the function of the bilaterals is to work in parallel with and complement the other strands of the senior cycle consultative process.

The IVEA representatives very much welcomed the opportunity of meeting with the NCCA to discuss the senior cycle review.

#### **Equality, access and lifelong learning**

The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) is seen as a very effective programme. It caters very well for students who may have difficulty with the Leaving Certificate (established).

- While it may be perceived as limiting student options, it is in fact increasing their opportunities. These students are now staying on at senior cycle level, acquiring key skills and competencies and achieving senior cycle certification, and are being provided with access routes to third level education through PLC courses.
- The LCA programme is also offered by many Youthreach programmes along with FETAC modules and qualifications.
- Small schools find it difficult to provide the LCA programme unless it is offered to the entire student cohort.
- It has excellent educational value; it enables students to monitor their own progress and it retains students who in the past would have been early school leavers. In the VEC sector, the LCA programme is not seen as compensatory education catering for disadvantaged students; it is seen as an alternative path.

- Regarding the perceived negative public perception of the LCA programme, the problem lies in how the programme is promoted, not in the programme itself.

### **Programme requirements**

- The IVEA is in favour of programme requirements, but it is important that safety nets are put in place for students. A possibility would be to have an autumn repeat option for mandatory core subjects.
- Life/social skills should form an integral part of the curriculum, should be mandatory, embedded and recognised for certification purposes.

### **Curriculum development**

- The average number of subjects students currently take for examination purposes in the Leaving Certificate (established) is seven; this should be reduced to six. This would facilitate increased provision for English and mathematics and allow for additional non-examination subjects to be added to the curriculum.
- A model of schools embracing subject specialisation was proposed by one of the IVEA representatives (though not IVEA policy). This model entailed schools in a given area providing a relatively broad educational experience but specialising in a given curricular area, e.g. science or art. More time would be given to these subjects and they would be the focus of the extra curricular activities. This model would enable a cohort of students to develop a higher level of excellence in a specialist area. Each school in a given catchment area might be responsible for a specific curricular specialism.

### **Assessment, certification, qualifications**

The IVEA would very much support the broadening of assessment, certification and qualifications.

- Substantially less emphasis should be placed on the final terminal examination.

- Teachers should be involved in the assessment of their students for certification purposes.

## **Options**

A number of options presented in section 6 of the *Consultative Paper* are very threatening to smaller schools who are not in the position to offer a variety of senior cycle programmes. Option 4, a unified senior cycle was the preferred senior cycle option.

- Option 4 presents smaller schools with the opportunity of offering programmes alongside each other. There is no wish to sustain ring-fencing.

The notion of a unified three-year senior cycle will act as a deterrent to students who wish to leave school as soon as possible. It must be an amalgamation of three years, allowing students to build up credits over three years, and enabling them to receive some qualification at whatever stage they leave. However, the concept of incorporating a certificated foundation year will promote and reinforce early school leaving. The preferred model of the three-year unified senior cycle is a 2, 1 breakdown. This model would discourage dropping out of the system after one year of senior cycle education and would facilitate the Higher level programme content being taught in the third year of the cycle.

## **Further comments**

- The LCA programme, FETAC modules and PLC courses have demonstrated to teachers that modularisation and assessment of ones own students' is possible.
- It is felt that modularisation improves the quality of teaching, as teachers are teaching towards specific objectives.
- The quality of teaching improves if teachers are involved in assessing their own students.

## **Bilateral consultation meeting**

### **Joint Managerial Body**

9<sup>th</sup> June 2003

#### **Introduction**

The JMB wishes to contribute to the process from the perspective of those who will manage whatever changed educational landscape emerges in the future. It is hoped that the extensive consultation will assist in avoiding many of the problems associated with introducing extensive reform. In developing the senior cycle it is of critical importance that the integrity and high status of the current Leaving Certificate is maintained.

#### **Assessment, certification, qualifications**

The JMB is in favour of extending the range of assessment modes used in the senior cycle but is conscious that there are a number of issues to be considered.

- While in favour of the use of continuous assessment, the JMB recognises the need to have an effective, external moderation system in place.
- Teachers must be adequately consulted and trained to implement any new system.
- LCA assessment modes have much to offer but there may be difficulties in replicating the effectiveness of the system in the much larger scale of LCE.
- The enhancement of the assessment system associated with the certification process is a priority, but this must be achieved without compromising the integrity of the teaching year. This may mean reducing course content in some areas to allow time for assessment components.
- This concern (i.e. compromising the integrity of the teaching year) also emerges in relation to any in-service training that may be required in the future. Such courses must take place outside of what is normally referred to as school time. Some of them might also include an 'action-research' component.

- Extending the range of educational experiences to be certified is desirable but ought to recognise the participation (possibly including attendance and punctuality) of students rather than focusing on achievement.

### **Curriculum development**

While development of the senior cycle is a long-term undertaking on a national scale it is recognised that consequent curriculum development in any given school must take into account the individual circumstances of that school.

- In terms of the subject range taken by students in the LCE, the current practice of most students taking six or seven subjects reflects a desirable balance of breadth and depth.
- Students who have participated in Transition Year display a greater level of maturity manifested in a more strategic approach to the selection of subjects for Leaving Certificate.
- There is a need to foster in students a capacity for independent learning and to facilitate this development in the manner in which teaching is organised.
- In-service based on local clusters in which teachers are encouraged to share effective methodologies and reflect on their practice is likely to be effective in changing teachers' practice.

### **Equality, access and lifelong learning.**

The JMB recognises that the senior cycle experiences of the student should help prepare her/him for life after school. It is not clear if the adoption of more expansive courses and methodologies would be welcomed in the context of the high-stakes progression function of the Leaving Certificate.

- A greater element of modularisation would assist in the re-integration of early school leaver and second-chance learners but carries a danger of introducing a lack of depth and the possibility of fragmentation of the educational experience.

- Modularisation would also facilitate a re-structuring of Leaving Certificate assessment and introduce the possibility of carrying out some elements in advance of the final year of the cycle.
- The entry requirements of third level colleges have a profound effect on the nature of the programme studied by most senior cycle students. Without these being reviewed it will prove difficult to broaden the range of curricular experiences of students.
- The LCA has been a great success but further development is required to encourage and facilitate progression to further education following on from LCA.

### **Implementation issues**

The success of a programme of radical change at senior cycle will depend substantially on the adequacy of the resources provided to schools in terms of

- administrative backup
- facilities
- remuneration of teachers
- modern ICT capability
- quality in-service training.

### **Options**

It is difficult at this time to express a clear preference for one option over the others. The review must take a strategic view of the alternatives and seek to bring about a cultural change in education at the upper end of the post-primary sector (and, by extension, to the sector as a whole).

- Change of this magnitude will require an extensive lead-in period, possibly as much as 6-7 years.
- The general response within the JMB to the options presented in the paper is to favour the directions suggested in Options 3 and 4.

## **Concluding comments**

The quality of the discussion paper allied to the openness of the consultative process has engendered a level of excitement within the JMB and a positive disposition towards change. The development of a long-term plan outlining the various stages associated with the reform in question would be welcomed. And in this regard the JMB would be supportive of an element of school-centred consultation at the next phase of the process.

## **Bilateral consultation meeting**

# **National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education**

11<sup>th</sup> June 2003

## **Introduction**

NABSME representatives welcomed the opportunity of meeting with the NCCA and indicated that they represent a wide range of schools and groups catering for children with special educational needs. These include: special needs schools; schools with special needs classes; schools for children with intellectual, physical and sensory disability; schools for young offenders, and for children with disturbed behaviour.

## **Equality, access and lifelong learning**

In discussing issues of equality, access and lifelong learning, the following points were made:

- There is a need to look at lifelong needs of people with special needs. Ten years ago, children with disabilities had very little to look forward to on leaving school. For most people, their social environment expands as they progress from a young child, to a teenager, to a young adult and beyond. Up until recently, the experience of people with disabilities was that their social environment contracted on leaving education. They became confined to an environment with very little social interaction. This is now changing, providing those with disabilities the opportunity to enjoy a fuller lifestyle.
- People with severe and profound disability are now entitled to education under the Education Act. In reviewing programmes it important to recognise this and plan for such entitlement.
- The NCCA has a responsibility to address the educational needs of children with disability within the formal education system.



## **Programme requirements**

Programmes are required to respond to the needs of the child. Life skills and social development need to be included in all senior cycle programmes. The development of life skills and social skills are very important for all children, but especially for children with disabilities.

## **Curriculum development**

NABMSE welcomes the recent publication by the NCCA of draft curriculum guidelines for teachers of students with general learning disabilities. Up until recently there was no national curriculum available; each school devised its own curriculum.

- It is important in so far as possible, that children with special needs follow a similar programme to mainstream students. It is essential that they do not feel different. Both the existing junior cycle and senior cycle curricula require inbuilt flexibility, modularisation and a greater emphasis on life skills.
- The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) is a modular programme. However, it must be completed within two years. Greater flexibility is required to provide access for students with mild and moderate learning disabilities. They should be allowed to complete the programme over a longer period of time. A credit system should be introduced to allow students to build up credit leading to a qualification over a longer time span, say 10 years instead of two.
- The NCCA is encouraged to incorporate some of the FETAC modules into formal education programmes. A modular curriculum is also very necessary to cater for children with autism and Aspergers Syndrome. For example, to cater for a student with a flair for mathematics.
- Programmes or courses that are developed at a local level are welcomed, as they allow for creativity and can be designed to meet the needs of the individual students. For status and recognition purposes such programmes and courses must be recognised and exist within a national framework.

- Individual education plans (IEPs) work very well for all children, in particular for children with special educational needs. However, IEPs must meet the requirements of recognised programmes and courses.
- Recognition needs to be given for the challenges faced by teachers working with children with special educational needs. Teachers need support and training. Social workers and psychologists can provide very important support for students, parents and teachers.
- Over the past five years the Department of Education and Science installed technology, art, home economics and life skills rooms in special schools and schools with special classes. However, the necessary guidance has not been provided.

### **Assessment, certification, qualifications**

It is very important that students with special educational needs are treated as much as possible in the same manner as mainstream students when it comes to assessment and certification.

- Children with disability must not be excluded from formal certification; there must be formal recognition for work done. School based certification is an insufficient way of recognising and recording up to fourteen years of work.
- A broader certification is necessary, but for status it needs to be externally validated. Formal recognition of learning is important for the self-esteem of the child and the family and in motivating and energising the school community.
- It is important to recognise the achievements of all children and not to disregard the achievements of children with severe and profound learning disabilities.

### **Further comments**

- The integration of children with special needs into mainstream education is most challenging at post-primary level.
- In proposing developments to senior cycle, the NCCA should remain conscious of the breadth of disability.

- Models of good practice which incorporate a more holistic approach should be investigated. The Leaving Certificate Applied has much to contribute in this context.

## **Bilateral consultation meeting**

### **National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals**

12<sup>th</sup> June 2003

#### **Introduction**

The NAPD representatives very much welcomed the opportunity of meeting with the NCCA to discuss the senior cycle review process and brought to the attention of the meeting the observation that the nature of the NAPD is to deal with professional matters and to provide input on educational developments.

Prior to addressing the key points of the meeting, the NAPD representatives made a number of general points.

- In considering the review of the senior cycle, it is crucial to look at the bigger picture, the philosophy of Irish education. It is important to take a more holistic approach and look at the entire education system rather than sections of it. There is a need to contextualise the primary and post-primary sector as a continuum and the senior cycle should not be reviewed in isolation from a review of the junior cycle. There appears to be no strategic or macro planning at DES level. A national debate/forum is necessary.
- There is concern about the current DES strategy of fragmentation and devolution. There are many agencies with different responsibilities, the NCCA, the State Examinations Commission (SEC), the Department of Education and Science (DES). There is a need for greater communication and coordination between these agencies. There is a need for a national overarching group responsible for all the agencies.
- The viability of change is a concern in the current climate. Change is welcome but it must be properly planned, resourced, implemented on a phased basis and continually reviewed.
- In planning for and in implementing change, educational standards must be maintained, while at the same time ensuring maximum levels of participation in the education system.

- The primary focus of the education system should be on the needs of the child as opposed to the needs of society. Morality and ethics need to be dealt with in the widest possible way. Such issues are dealt with in the *Consultative Paper*, but a national debate is necessary.
- Concern was expressed about the stranglehold of the points system on the senior cycle. Implementation of the recommendations of the Points Commission is encouraged.
- In designing the school day and programme content, cognisance must be taken of the age and level of maturity of students. Currently, in Irish schools, senior cycle students are treated the same way as junior cycle students. While they experience some level of freedom, decision-making and independent learning in Transition Year, this is withdrawn on entering a Leaving Certificate programme. Work experience must be accommodated as part of education.
- In the short term, the system cannot cope with any more change than that already planned. The system is already overloaded.

### **Equality, access and lifelong learning**

Regarding issues of equality, access and lifelong learning, the following observations were made:

- The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme is generally seen to be very effective. However, the LCA programme lacks parity of esteem due to ring-fencing. Concern was expressed about sending students down a separate track. In the short term ring-fencing needs to be maintained for practical reasons.
- There is a concern about the dropout rate and absence of routes back into the system, not just for LCA programme but also at senior cycle in general. There is a need for a modular credit system and to examine the use of Records of Achievement. In the long term a three-year senior cycle is favoured, with built in flexibility to leave and return to the education system.
- Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses are seen as serving a number of crucial purposes for students. They cater for students who wish to avail of a one to

two year course after their Leaving Certificate, and acquire a qualification and terminate their education at that stage. They provide students, who may not have achieved third level entry requirements on completion of the Leaving Certificate, with a route into third level education. PLC courses are also seen to cater for young students not yet ready for third level.

### **Programme requirements**

The current minimal requirement for the Leaving Certificate (established) is seen as a weakness of the programme. It allows any provider to offer a Leaving Certificate programme and facilitates the *modus operandi* of the grind schools. The current situation does not guarantee a broad and balanced curricular experience for Leaving Certificate students.

The NAPD encourages a move away from the minimalist approach to senior cycle programme requirements. It is felt that

- English should be a requirement for all senior cycle students
- provision for Gaelge needs to be reviewed and a variety of options offered
- Leaving Certificate subjects should be grouped into *areas of experience* similar to the Junior Certificate and certain requirements put in place to ensure breadth and balance
- religious education, physical education and CSPE should be a compulsory part of the senior cycle programme
- ICT, media studies and SPHE should be compulsory and provided in a modular format
- the number of subjects required for points purposes should be reduced from six to five. This would provide space for other subjects, thus providing a broader curriculum.
- there should be an embedded and compulsory arts/culture dimension to the curriculum
- a more holistic approach to the curriculum is necessary to cater for the spiritual, moral, ethical and aesthetic needs of the individual as well as the

more practical dimensions, focusing on the needs of the child more than the needs of society.

## **Curriculum development**

Prior to addressing specific aspects of the senior cycle programme that need to be reviewed, it is strongly recommended that the name 'Leaving Certificate' should be replaced. In the majority of cases, students do not leave education on the completion of the Leaving Certificate and the name is inconsistent with the concept of lifelong learning.

- Basic and key skills, including literacy, numeracy, analytical and decision-making skills, language development skills (especially amongst boys), must be included and embedded into the curriculum. A whole school approach needs to be adopted in addressing the development of basic and key skills. Skills need to be taught through the subjects. Subject content must be reduced and more focus placed on the development of skills and competencies. Currently, there is a significant lack of awareness amongst teachers as to what is happening in other subjects. It is essential that time is provided to allow for dialogue between teachers during the school day to facilitate curriculum planning. In the short term, there is a need to engage teachers in a whole school approach to skills development. In the medium to longer term, a debate on skills is required in the national context. Skills will need to be assessed in some way, as assessment will dictate what is taught.
- The design of Leaving Certificate Ordinary level subject syllabuses needs to be revisited. It appears in most cases that the Ordinary level syllabus is a diluted version of the Higher level. Ordinary level syllabuses should cater for the needs of all students and Higher level should contain additional material pertaining to the needs of the higher level students.
- There is a need for a different pedagogy at senior cycle than at junior cycle. In the senior cycle, we are dealing with young adults and they should be treated as such. Space should be provided in the senior cycle timetable for

independent research and self-directed learning. This is similar to a model adopted in the Scandinavian countries.

### **Assessment, certification, qualifications**

The NAPD welcomes proposals to broaden methods of assessment and certification in order to ensure greater congruence between the aims of syllabuses, the modes of assessment and a wider recognition of student achievement.

In further discussing assessment and certification, the following points were made:

- New syllabuses should not be introduced without the totality of assessment being implemented. If assessment remains unchanged, the system will stagnate.
- New syllabuses should not be introduced without proper resourcing and in-service training of teachers
- Certification must be broadened—a record of achievement should be introduced with a portfolio element. The record of achievement should only refer to school related activities, such as a record of what the student has achieved in school, a reference, curriculum vitae, attendance record and details of work experience. It should not be counted for points purposes but should be a requirement for third level entry and the world of work.

### **Options**

The review and redesign of the senior cycle must be conducted in a phased way, within a strategically planned framework. It is crucial that we do not develop an inflexible long-term vision. It would be important to monitor and review along the way, taking cognisance what is happening in society and the level of success of the different phases of implementation.

- In the short term, Option 2 as presented in the *Consultative Paper* – the merging the Leaving Certificate (established) and LCVP with the retention of



TY and the LCA as ring-fenced programmes, is the preferred option of the NAPD.

- In the medium to long term, Option 3—a three-year senior cycle with elements of Transition Year embedded in the programme—is recommended.
  
- In the long term, Option 4—a unified senior cycle, is supported in theory. However, it is crucial to build in the opportunity for students to leave after two years, particularly those who would have traditionally opted for the LCA programme. It is important to have the following basic principles enshrined:
  - students who leave after two years should receive some form of certification
  - students leaving after year 1, 2 or 3 should receive some type of certification/statement of completion which would recognise their achievements and facilitate entry back into the system
  - a Leaving Certificate type examination on completion of each of the three years is not desired
  - small schools may find it difficult to support a modular system.

## **Bilateral consultation meeting**

### **National Parents Council Post Primary**

13<sup>th</sup> June 2003

#### **Introduction**

Representatives from the National Parents Council Post Primary welcomed the opportunity to engage in dialogue with the NCCA on these important consultations. The NPCPP would be presenting a written submission compiled as an outcome of the round of NCCA/NPCPP consultative seminars.

It was clear from the consultative seminars that

- most parents are very interested in the review of the senior cycle
- many feel that the *Consultative Paper* and associated processes are somewhat complex
- many schools have either no parents' council or an inactive parents' council
- many parents are not aware of the content or purpose of current senior cycle programmes.

#### **Transition Year**

Prior to addressing the key areas for discussion, a number of concerns were raised in relation to the Transition Year (TY) programme. These included

- significant variation in programme content and programme standards throughout the country
- lack of monitoring of the TY programme
- lack of inbuilt accreditation for the programme
- minimum parental/community involvement in the development of school TY programmes; yet a high expectation that both parents and community will significantly support the programmes

- TY programme often excludes students who are financially less well off due to the significant participation costs
- generally, parents feel that this programme should not be mandatory.

### **Equality, access and lifelong learning**

The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme is generally perceived to be an excellent programme for students for whom the Leaving Certificate (established) does not suit. Students have access to Post Leaving Certificate courses and apprenticeships on completion of the LCA programme.

Generally, parents favour the modular approach of the programme and immediate assessment on completion of each module. However, parents

- do not like the ring-fencing of the programme
- are concerned about lack of recognition or perceived lack of recognition of the programme by many state agencies and third level institutions
- are concerned about the perceived stigma attached to students participating in the LCA
- would like to see a greater focus on oral communication and presentation in the programme.

Many parents believe that the school building is not utilised to its potential and the structure of the school year is limiting. They favour the concept of a summer school to cater in particular for students who are not achieving.

The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) is also seen to be an excellent programme. However, parents generally do not like the word ‘vocational’ in the title.

### **Programme requirements**

Concern was expressed at the degree to which post-primary education was dictated to by the requirements of third level and the points system. A suggestion was made that a foundation year in third level should be introduced as a preparatory year to meet the

needs of third level education. The content and management of such a course would be the responsibility of the third level sector.

On the issue of programme requirements the following points were made:

- Key skills should form an integral part of the curriculum. It is important to keep these skills general and transferable. Key skills would include literacy, numeracy, interpersonal, learning to learn, communication, decision making, ICT.
- All students should receive an ICT qualification, e.g. ECDL.
- Skills development must be embedded into the curriculum. Discrete provision would be seen as remediation.
- All senior cycle students should complete courses in CSPE, SPHE, music, physical education, art and drama, not necessarily as full subjects but as modular courses.
- Irish should be compulsory in junior cycle but not at senior cycle level, except in Gaelscoileanna.
- Parents wish students to have plenty of choice.

### **Curriculum development**

As an introductory comment, it was strongly recommended that the 'Leaving Certificate' needs to be renamed.

- Irish should not be compulsory in the senior cycle. A number of different provisions should be developed. For example, there might be a different course in Irish for students in Gaeltacht schools and non Gaeltacht schools. There could be a module in Irish for students who do not wish to take it as a Leaving Certificate examination subject.
- There needs to be a greater focus on skills and competencies attained through subjects and less focus on subject content.
- The curriculum should be developed through the eyes of the ordinary level student and added to for the higher level student.

- Points for entry into third level should be calculated on the basis of five subjects as opposed to six. This would allow space for a broader curriculum.
- Teachers should be encouraged and supported to develop and use new teaching methodologies.
- Senior cycle students are young adults and should be treated as such. Currently, students are generally treated the same in the senior cycle as they were in the junior cycle. Such treatment is not appropriate and ill prepares students for third level education. As a consequence, many students choose the wrong courses, are not able to cope with the independence bestowed on them and do not have the skills to be independent learners, confident decision makers and communicators.
- School climate and atmosphere have a huge influence on learning.
- There is a serious lack of career guidance available to second level students. There is also a huge need for personal counselling and person guidance.

### **Assessment, certification, qualifications**

Points raised by NPCPP representatives included:

- A greater emphasis should be placed on different forms of assessment.
- Assessment for learning is seen as very motivational for students.
- Key skills must be identified, tracked and assessed to guarantee that they have been addressed and attained. Skills development may be tracked through interview, profiles and portfolios.
- Students may engage in self assessment of skills. It is important that students are involved in evaluating their own learning, have a role to play in identifying and recording their skills development.
- There is currently far too much emphasis on written examinations. There should be more oral assessment
- All subjects should be assessed, including PE, SPHE etc.
- Continuous assessment is favoured by the NPCPP, but it must be externally moderated and include a built-in appeals system. Assessment

should be carried out at the end of a unit of work. State examinations should take place at the end of a programme/each year.

- Parents wish to see certification in the Leaving Certificate widened to include a record of achievement in school-based activities. Such a record of achievement should contain a personal record of a student's complete experience at school. It should not be used for points purposes, but should be a requirement for entry to third level and to the world of work. It is imperative that the record of achievement has status and currency. A framework or template needs to be developed with specific guidelines on how the record of achievement is assembled. Records of achievement must be validated.

## Options

The NPCPP indicated that a three-year unified senior cycle is the favoured option, taking the best aspects of the current programmes and augmenting and enhancing where necessary. Some degree of specialisation is favoured. However, they do not wish to see a compulsory three-year senior cycle.

They propose additional options to those presented in the *Consultative Paper*. These include

- *Option 5* – A three-year senior cycle programme. The first two years would cover Ordinary level subject content and the third year Higher level content. Students who do not wish to stay in school or pursue Higher level courses may leave after two years with a Leaving Certificate or equivalent qualification.
- *Option 6* – A three-year senior cycle. Year 1 would concentrate on core subjects such as English, Irish and mathematics and offer other subjects in a modular format as tasters. This would facilitate students in making informed decisions about subject choice and enable substantive coverage of core subjects in Year 1. Years 2 and 3 of the senior cycle would concentrate on specialist subject areas.

## **Bilateral consultation meeting**

# **National Qualifications Authority of Ireland**

30<sup>th</sup> May 2003

## **Introduction**

The NQAI welcomes the opportunity to participate in this phase of the consultation process. It has previously submitted an informal written submission and has participated in the Senior Cycle Invitational Seminars. It was acknowledged that the non-directive nature of the paper and the open nature of the consultation encourage greater involvement and expression of views.

It was pointed out that the principal tasks in the remit of the NQAI are to

- establish and maintain a national framework of qualifications
- promote and facilitate access, transfer and progression

and that the contributions to the process would be made in the context of its fulfillment of its remit.

## **Equality, access and lifelong learning**

The issues of equality of access are of particular concern to the NQAI and it has already expressed its policy direction on access, transfer and progression in the context of qualification attainment in general. As the National Qualifications Framework becomes more established and the Leaving Certificate take its place thereon, the nature of the Leaving Certificate courses and the senior cycle generally will come under closer scrutiny in terms of how learners engage with the system and how the system accommodates the needs of all parties.

- The full operation of the framework will require all qualifications (and all proposals to develop qualifications) to be reviewed in the context of policies designed to promote enhanced access, transfer and progression within the qualifications framework.

- The entry routes to third level education, put in place by colleges, ought to be reviewed. The stated minimum entry requirements for entry on to courses in third-level colleges no longer guarantee automatic access. Another schedule of requirement, the points system based on supply and demand calculations, acts as a further layer of selection. This system treats some Leaving Certificate qualifications differentially; hence the Leaving Certificate Applied has not been placed or recognised within this system. The level of flexibility allowed to institutions on this matter, while desirable in some instances, introduces a level of uncertainty, which is not helpful to the student.
- Schools must also reflect on their operation in the light of the current over-emphasis on providing the learner with the wherewithal to progress into one, relatively narrow, channel of progression. Senior cycle education ought to focus more on providing a more balanced educational experience, with less concentration on the demands of third level entry.
- The Qualifications Framework is designed to enable an individual to attain an award that would in turn allow her/him embark on a programme leading to an award at the next level. With this in mind it is desirable that an effective relationship exist between the school system (especially at post-primary level) and agencies such as FETAC. This would assist in assuring that the qualifications awarded by the various bodies would be valued equally even if they were not exactly equivalent.
- The incorporation of a credit-based structure in to senior cycle certification would possibly enable greater levels of access and transfer, within Ireland and internationally.

### **Programme requirements**

The NQAI has no particular brief, or strongly held views, on the detail of programme requirements at senior cycle, being concerned primarily with the outcomes of the programme and the consequent awarding of appropriate qualifications. The authority



would, however, advance the general contention that premature specialisation narrows the breadth of learning of the student unduly and a greater level of judicious prescription would almost certainly ensure an enhanced educational experience.

- The operation of an outcomes-based model at senior cycle might further encourage schools to broaden the curriculum experience offered to students, while it is accepted that the assessment issues related to some categories of outcomes might be challenging for the system as currently configured
- In respect of the content of senior cycle courses or, more specifically, the operational framework within which the courses are delivered, the Authority is concerned that students are encouraged (and in some instances, compelled) to favour the study of humanities rather than becoming involved in the sciences.
- The Authority is of the view that the senior cycle curriculum should contain a significantly stronger emphasis on the use of ICT.
- The influence of third-level selection processes should not be underestimated in this regard. Promoting one curricular element in particular, however well intentioned, may have a detrimental effect on the take up of other subjects in the same areas.

### **Curriculum development**

The needs of adult learners are of concern to all parties and must be considered in any re-alignment that takes place in the senior cycle. It is also clear, however, that many adult learners currently choose to become involved in studying for the Leaving Certificate for reasons of the status and/or the progression opportunity reserved for holders of the Leaving Certificate. Particular needs experienced by adult learners must not be a “driving force” in reviewing senior cycle but ought to be addressed, in the first instance, outside the process. These needs are best catered for by the continued development of the FETAC awarding structures, which are in part designed for this purpose.

- In relation to the operation of a modularised or unitised structure at senior cycle, while it is accepted that modularisation would be more suited to some areas of experience than to others, the Authority recognises the advantages in terms of enhanced flexibility afforded to students.
- The majority of post-primary students complete a programme at senior cycle once they embark on it. The advantages of such a modularised or unitised structure might accrue not only to the relatively small number of students who leave the system early and wish to return, or those who are unable to maintain a regular attendance pattern, but to all senior cycle students.
- The operation of a credit-based system rewards the attainment of outcomes predominately and does not recognize the quality or depth of learning. It is becoming the norm in a European context to promote mutual recognition of qualifications and, to some extent, credits between states, within the educational system. It may be that post-primary education is more complex and less amenable to the application of a relatively crude scheme of comparison.
- While a credit system of sorts operates within the Leaving Certificate Applied, it is not clear to what extent the relevant modes would operate effectively into the Leaving Certificate system generally.
- Associated with the operation of modularised systems generally is an increased concern relating to the issue of quality control or assurance. Within the current system this function is currently focused predominantly on the outcomes of a terminal assessment. In the absence of reliance on this all-encompassing element of the system, more rigorous, ongoing monitoring would be required to ensure the quality of the resultant awards. Such monitoring would also help to ensure coherence within the programme undertaken by the students.

## **Assessment, certification, qualifications**

In terms of the certification that takes place at the end of the senior cycle, the Authority is concerned with the lack of specificity in the award. There ought to be some differentiation between the Leaving Certificate awarded to a student who achieves a pass grade in a limited number of subjects and that given to the student who achieves the highest standard in six or seven subjects.

- The Authority views the certification of a wider range of student achievement as a desirable development, while it acknowledges the significance of the departure from traditional practice and the need for well-structured monitoring. Whatever the outcome of the review in this area, any certification proposals should be cognisant of the National Qualifications Framework.
- Any consideration of the possible options for re-configuration of the senior cycle must not be carried out in isolation from the review of the junior cycle. The structure of post-primary education should be viewed as an integrated whole. This is especially true as the end of junior cycle no longer constitutes the end of compulsory schooling for the majority of students. In this regard, the Authority would welcome some debate on the merits of restructuring post-primary education in its entirety.
- The extension of the total cycle to six years for the majority of students is to be welcomed, but with the recognition that a significant minority will wish to move out of the post-primary system at sixteen or certainly prior to completing the full six years. The challenge is to put in place programmes that satisfy the needs of the students and other interested parties while at the same time providing certification options, which recognize the educational achievements of all.
- Consideration of options might also explore the possibility of a four-year junior cycle, with a senior cycle comprising two stand-alone but connected year-long courses that might allow for the required level of access with appropriate progression pathways. This '4,1,1' model, an alternative '3,2,1' or any other re-alignment will change fundamentally the nature of the interface between post-primary education and the third-level/further

education sector. The '3, 2, 1' model, for example, might in time compete with FETAC courses as an option for some students.

### **Concluding remarks**

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland will continue to co-operate with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment in its senior cycle review endeavours and will ultimately accommodate the qualifications that are awarded in the post-primary sector. It does accept, however, that the placing of the Leaving Certificate on the National Qualifications Framework will always be challenging due to the considerable range of achievement represented in the in the Leaving Certificate award and indeed the distinctive nature of the main strands of the Leaving Certificate i.e. Leaving Certificate (established), the Leaving Certificate Applied, and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme.

## **Bilateral consultation meeting**

### **National University of Ireland**

17th June 2003

#### **Introduction**

The NUI representatives welcomed the enhanced, statutory role of the NCCA and its initiative in reviewing the senior cycle in an open and inclusive manner.

The Chancellor of the NUI, Dr Garret FitzGerald, reported that NUI's observations on some of the key issues had already been conveyed to NCCA through the NUI Paper entitled '*Leaving Certificate Reform?*' and, in particular the document entitled '*An Informal University Perspective*' which had been presented at a meeting of the NCCA Senior Cycle Committee in response to an earlier draft of the NCCA's Consultative Paper.

The NUI will co-operate constructively with this initiative, which, by addressing the Leaving Certificate in a broad context for the first time, will complement the excellent subject-level work already undertaken by the NCCA.

In its approach to this review the NUI notes and endorses the multiple role of the Leaving Certificate as a record of students' achievements at the end of second-level; as a measure used by employers when selecting staff; and (for what is now a majority of school-leavers) as a matriculation process qualifying students for third-level education.

The NUI believes that, in principle, this examination has the capacity to fulfil these three different roles, and that this review provides an opportunity to optimise this multiple process. Whilst the NUI's immediate concern is naturally with the matriculation element of this process, it is concerned that in the broad public interest this aspect of the examination should remain compatible with, and should not in any way prejudice, its two other functions. In terms of the outcomes of the senior cycle it is probable that the qualities and skills most beneficial to students entering third level

do not differ significantly from those needed by those progressing directly to the world of employment.

The NUI recognises the high regard in which this examination is held, reflecting both its objectivity and fairness and the fact that it involves the entire terminal school cohort, and it notes that despite the relatively large number of subjects taken by students in this examination, the standards that Irish students attain in this examination are seen as comparing well with the more specialised English 'A level' examination.

The University's overall interest is, of course, in the role of this examination as a test of students' overall capacity to benefit from third-level studies. However, it also has a specific interest in some subjects which may either provide a comprehensive foundation for further study of that subject at third-level, or which alternatively may test the particular aptitude of students for that subject at third-level.

Given the significant level of change brought about by the introduction of discrete programmes such as LCA, LCVP and TY, it is appropriate to examine the senior cycle in its entirety at this time. In the context of reviewing the senior cycle, the NUI is keen to involve itself in the process of review on the basis of partnership with the aim of harmonising the needs and expectations of all parties. The review, and probable subsequent change, should have strong research-based evidence to support it.

### **Equality, access and lifelong learning**

The emergence of a more utilitarian view of education, with the consequent de-emphasis on the desirability for students to enjoy the education experience, is viewed with some concern. The interests of business, while important, must not influence disproportionately the desired outcomes of senior cycle. Education may be the key to economic development but economic development should not be the driving force in education change.

## **Programme requirements**

While the absence of significant *de jure* programme requirements in the senior cycle generally is recognised, the nature and impact of the *de facto* requirements imposed by third-level should be investigated. The third-level sector needs, in consultation with interested parties, to reflect on its entry structures. The points system, though frequently criticised, is essentially a response to a supply and demand issue.

A designation of a set of core experiences or subjects will reduce potential for flexibility and may well, in some cases, lead to increased levels of early specialisation.

## **NUI'S key concerns**

The key concerns raised by NUI may be summarised under the following headings:

### ***Focus on the number of subjects taken***

- The desirability of maintaining a broad Leaving Certificate.
- The desirability, however, of reducing the pressures on students currently involved in this examination.
- The possible desirability of having several core subjects, and
- The possible desirability of more structuring of the Transition Year. A three-year senior cycle would reduce the pressure on students and possibly allow them to enjoy the educational experiences presented to them, but this must not be achieved at the cost of reducing the school's freedom to provide a course designed to meet the particular needs of its students.

Some combination of these elements might make it possible to accommodate all these requirements. An example of one such approach, but there could be many variants of this, would be to:

- make English, mathematics, a language other than the home language, and CSPE core subjects
- provide for a small number of subjects, including CSPE, to be taught in Transition Year

- arrange for students to take examinations in CSPE and in one other Leaving Certificate subject, at the end of the 5th Year, thus reducing the pressure on students, without prejudice to the maintenance of a six-subject examination.

Reforms of this kind might have some implications further down the system, e.g. in relation to the junior cycle, and even conceivably in relation to the intersection of primary and secondary.

The implications for senior cycle of making basic science a required subject for the Junior Certificate examination may need further consideration. Might there be a case for a basic science course at senior cycle also?

The NUI is concerned that while the senior cycle is essentially a broad programme, many students sacrifice engagement with the broader curriculum in the pursuit of higher grades and more predictable outcomes. It must be accepted that the third-level sector has a responsibility in restricting this narrowing effect emerging at second level.

Consideration should be given to promoting a greater emphasis on competence, skills and the affective domain of learning rather than a focus on the coverage of large amounts of content.

***Focus on reducing the content of some subjects with a view to employing recommended pedagogical approaches.***

Whilst in some subjects, such as perhaps mathematics, it may be difficult to reduce the content without prejudicing the value of the second-level work as a preparation for third-level, in others some reduction in content would be possible without loss.

The University recognises that problems can arise within the second-level system if there are different standards and different outcomes in relation to different Leaving Certificate subjects, leading to "soft" and "hard" options, and to consequent distortions in students' subject choices. It would wish to co-operate in any measures designed to avoid such distortions.



Assessment procedures need to be reviewed with a view to bringing them more into line with pedagogical approaches validated by research. Thus, the written examination could be supplemented by elements of continuous assessment, on a basis, however, that would not raise any doubts about objectivity, which is a much-prized feature of the written examination.

The NUI has a particular concern about the literacy and numeracy of some students matriculating to the University. Where students, otherwise well-qualified, are deficient in one or other of these respects, as is sometimes the case, this can pose problems. The University and the second-level sector might profitably work together with a view to examining what can be done to alleviate this problem. Further research may be needed into the scale of the problem and into the validity of the anecdotal suggestion that literacy and/or numeracy standards may have fallen over time.

Serious consideration should be given to the

- introduction of a study of a generic science discipline rather than specialisation in individual science subjects
- study of philosophy in order to promote reflectiveness among students
- status of the requirement to study Irish.

***Assessment and certification—focus on greater investment in assessment procedures.***

The NUI concurs with the rationale and aims for senior cycle identified by the NCCA. In particular, it welcomes the focus on the attainment of quality outcomes by enhancing the learning experiences of students with corresponding expansion of dominant teaching methodologies.

The current examination has a high level of perceived equity and any element of school-based assessment should be monitored most rigorously so that this not be diminished.

Given the vital role it plays, the state examination system must be more generously resourced and if the range of assessment modes employed is to be extended the integrity of the Leaving Certificate must not be jeopardised by insufficient funding.

Research might also usefully be undertaken into the factors that determine student choices of Leaving Certificate examination subjects, including the influence of university subject requirements upon these choices.

Research could also usefully be undertaken into the non-academic pressures on students that may divert them away from subjects for which they have particular aptitudes, that might maximise their personal development and thus their long-term contribution to society—towards others for which they may be less well-equipped but which may appear to them to offer better short-term prospects of secure or well-remunerated employment. The impact on students' choices of public policy pressures designed to maximise economic growth may also merit study.

***Focus on in-service training of teachers.***

Teachers must be enabled and supported in a move away from the strongly didactic tradition of instruction to more responsive and reflective modes of instruction and assessment.

***Focus on support for "Learning to Learn"***

Efforts should be made to develop more self-reliant and committed learners.

**Other comments**

In addition to forging strong co-operative links with second level, the third-level sector must seek to increase the dialogue between interests within the sector with a view to presenting a more unified position on matters of mutual concern (such as the relationship with second level).

In reflecting on the aims and purposes of education in the senior cycle, the NUI would like to see a number of core issues addressed in the review:

- The Leaving Certificate subject profile as experienced by most students, i.e. seven subjects, in a single examination, and the possibility of spreading this load to some degree over two years.
- A rationalisation of Leaving Certificate course content, in dialogue with third level.
- Consideration of how curricular space freed up by the previous developments might best be utilised.
- Reflection on the nature of learning and how this is reflected in the structure of courses and the instructional models employed in schools.
- Introduction of genuine assessment reform.
- The role of teacher education, both pre-service and in-service.
- Incorporation across all future programmes of the lessons learned as a result of the experiences in TY, LCA and LCVP.

### **Role of the National University of Ireland**

The NUI accepts fully the social obligation of improving access to the university for students from disadvantaged homes and schools, and, in view of the extent to which the roots of the problem are to be found in the primary and even pre-primary sectors, it accepts the need to work closely with these other education sectors in relation to this aspect.

In preparation for the September conference, the Senate of the NUI will consult with faculties and departments, members of which assist with the preparation of Leaving Certificate examination papers, with a view to compiling their reactions to individual subject courses, and will in due course communicate any reactions received to the NCCA.

The NUI looks forward to working constructively within the framework of the proposed forum, and is prepared to join in any follow-up activities that may be designed to bring its work to the point of implementing needed reforms.

## **Bilateral consultation meeting**

### **Teachers Union of Ireland**

23<sup>rd</sup> June 2003

#### **Introduction**

The TUI sees the current review as an opportunity to examine the structure of the senior cycle while accepting that the extent of change must be proportionate to the scope of any shortfalls, which might exist. As an overarching principle, the union concurs with the points made in section 7 of the discussion paper regarding the centrality of adequate resources to the effective delivery of educational change. It has been the unsatisfactory practice in the past not to indicate commitment to adequate resourcing when identifying the direction and scope of educational change.

#### **Equality, access and lifelong learning**

It is essential that the senior cycle offers a coherent, integrated curriculum that addresses the needs of all learners. The profile of the learner population is much more diverse than heretofore and this has to be reflected in a diversity of entry points into, and pathways through, the senior cycle.

- The specific needs of returning learners may, in the short to medium term, be effectively met by the senior cycle in school system. In the longer term it may be that a modified, modular Leaving Certificate or a route through the FETAC accredited qualification system may be more responsive to the needs of these learners. The rationale and motivation for changing the Leaving Certificate programme should not be based solely or principally on a desire to accommodate adult and returning learners.
- In the interim the Leaving Certificate, because of its existing status and position on the National Qualifications Framework, will retain its significance for adult and returning learners. It is noteworthy that many returning learners are themselves parents of senior cycle students whose motivation for undertaking a Leaving Certificate programme is to improve their understanding of their child's schoolwork.

- The union would suggest an additional “General aim for senior cycle education” (Section 4.8)  
*‘To foster understanding of, and respect for, the diverse cultures and traditions that comprise contemporary Irish society’.*
- Non-school learning sites must be subject to strict monitoring and, in particular, the qualifications of staff must be of appropriate standard.
- Modularisation has been beneficial in terms of promoting greater access and has been particularly successful in the LCA. The difference in scale and range of outcomes associated with the LCE may, however, place excessive demands on a modularised system such as that used in the LCA.

### **Programme requirements**

The desirability of a more structured and pronounced set of programme requirements is offset to some extent by a concern over the effect such would have on the ability of adult and returning learners to access the various programmes.

- The requirements imposed on the system by third level should be specific to the third-level course applied for by individual students and should not be introduced as requirements for the Leaving Certificate/senior cycle per se.
- The post-primary system should provide the opportunity for students to learn in their mother tongues as well as promoting the learning of English. It will be necessary to be sensitive to desire on the part of some ethnic minorities to promote mother-tongue learning in a community setting.
- In the event of increased concentration on the assessment of the learning process in addition to the product, it may become essential to introduce an attendance requirement so as to safeguard the integrity of the concept.

### **Curriculum development**

The consensus model of curriculum development in Ireland is valuable and should continue, as it is by definition more considered and methodical than might otherwise be the case. The changes in the nature of teaching implicit in large-scale curriculum reform require provision for extensive training and additional support for teachers.

- The short-term focus on the development of specific subject syllabuses should give way to consideration of enhancing the overall learning experience of students.
- The review of the LCE and LCVP must focus on providing a vocational balance to the increasing academic emphasis of the programmes
- The proposals for change in the senior cycle as presented must be considered in the context of the possible impact on the role of the teacher and the training needs that may arise in this regard.
- Key skills should be included as an embedded element of the senior cycle programmes.
- The use value of Ordinary level courses needs to be re-evaluated so as to reflect the learning of a great many students whose achievements are currently inadequately recognised. Ordinary level, as currently structured, serves better as a safety net for those who revert from Higher level than as a curriculum with inherent value for those who undertake Ordinary level from the outset.
- SPHE and CSPE should be regarded as compulsory curricular experiences for students prior to the end of compulsory education.

### **Assessment and certification**

The TUI favours the broadening of assessment components so as to ensure greater congruence between the aims of the syllabuses and the modes of assessment employed at senior cycle. It is recognized that any such development will, however, place serious demands on teachers, the examination system and the capacity of schools to facilitate the operation of an expanded examination schedule.

- School-based assessment that would contribute to the national certification system can only take place within the boundaries of existing union policy related to this matter, regarding time, payment, training and external moderation.
- Because of the issues of equity involved, the expansion of the range of learning to be included in the certification process should be attempted only with the greatest caution.

- The TUI does not favour the certification of involvement in extra-curricular activity for CAO/third level selection purposes. Such a development, in addition to raising equity issues, could give rise to unacceptable levels of implicit pressure on students to participate and for teachers to provide increased amounts of voluntary commitment.
- In addition, the exact method whereby any certificate of involvement would be devised, verified and subsequently used is, as yet, unclear.

## **Options**

The TUI has formed the view, from its reading of the discussion paper, that the thrust of the document is to favour the adoption of Option 4 as a radical alternative to the present system. Such a position would be consistent with previous NCCA proposals made in the 1990's, which remain unimplemented. The union is prepared to give careful consideration to this option but is currently not in possession of enough background information to enable it to comment definitively on the implications of adopting it.

- There is no support for a compulsory three-year senior cycle without the availability of a certification option for students within the cycle, which would cater for the minority who choose to leave school before completing the full cycle.
- The union would not favour Option 3 because of the potential loss to students of the Transition Year dividend.
- Option 1 offers nothing in the system's efforts to respond to the changing needs of learners and society.
- The intent behind Option 2, to combine the best aspects of LCE and LCVP is generally supported.

## **Leaving Certificate Applied**

All senior cycle programmes have experienced more or less success in providing relevant, coherent educational experiences to students. The LCA has succeeded in one of its primary objectives: it provides an attractive and valuable educational

programme to students who, in its absence, would most probably not continue in school to Leaving Certificate. It appears to have maintained significant levels of retention among a student cohort for which the Leaving Certificate (established) would not be an attractive option. The ring-fencing of the programme has been helpful generally but also presents difficulties, especially in terms of ensuring access to adult and returning learners.

These latter areas of concern could be ameliorated by considering, in respect of adult or returning learners, some reform of the LCA structure and the relationship of the LCA to significant reforms in other senior cycle programmes. This might include change to

- the requirement for sequential completion of modules
- attendance regulations
- the alignment between Ordinary level (LCE) and LCA
- increased modularisation in the LCE

There is a worry, however, that the expansion of the LCA concept into a larger population of students and schools may well diminish the very necessary resourcing currently available to participating schools. Such a development would be most regrettable. It is desirable that the benefits of LCA-type learning would be shared with a larger range of students. This should be undertaken, however, without positioning the students who would currently undertake the programme into a learning environment which does not suit them. The LCA experience should inform the Leaving Certificate (established) and LCVP but should not be assimilated into either.

### **Transition Year**

While the Transition Year has provided a valuable learning structure for many students, the TUI believes that each post-primary student should have the right to a sixth year and that a school should have discretion to offer it at a point considered appropriate in the light of the individual student's educational needs. For some students, for example, the sixth year might be more usefully employed at junior cycle to assist students in the transition from primary to post-primary school or to remediate specific deficits in regard to literacy/numeracy etc.



## **Other comments**

The TUI would have concerns with the manner in which the discussion paper

- appears to refer to schools as a homogenous grouping and doesn't recognise the differing circumstances of individual schools, especially those who deal more intensively with issues of disadvantage.
- does not present any commentary on the role of school management in shaping the environment for curricular change. Management has a central role in many aspects of the reform process and these responsibilities must be clearly identified, emphasised and acted upon.

At the request of the NCCA, the TUI will revisit a number of issues raised by the review in regard to which it has special interest and a particular perspective, based on its extensive experience and expertise. It will include the outcomes of this focused consideration in its impending submission.

## **Bilateral consultation meeting**

### **Union of Secondary Students**

6<sup>th</sup> August 2003

#### **Introduction**

The meeting followed an internal consultative process undertaken by the Union of Second-Level Students, which culminated in a day-long meeting of Union representatives. That meeting produced a series of policy positions, which formed the basis of the Union's submission to the NCCA on the development of the senior cycle. While students are positively disposed towards an agenda of radical reform for the senior cycle, the Union is anxious that the status of the Leaving Certificate is maintained.

#### **Programme requirements**

The USS has its concerns about the structure of subjects within the Leaving Certificate and the complete lack of any programme requirement in the Transition Year.

- Participation in the TY programme is believed to be advantageous to the majority. Efforts must be made to reduce variations in the quality of the programme that currently exist from school to school.
- The preferred approach would be to introduce a curriculum ensuring that all schools meet a standard level in running TY programmes.
- Completion of TY should provide a student with a certificate based on credits obtained, for achievement and active participation in the programme. Such a system will only work if the programme has a substantial level of inter-school standardisation.
- The USS believes that all students should experience a study of Irish in the senior cycle. The current provision in this regard is flawed because
  - the Ordinary level course only deals with a study of the language, neglecting cultural and historical aspects. This renders the course imbalanced and uninteresting to many students

- the syllabus for native speakers ought to reflect their different learning needs.
- The choices available to students must be broadened to allow them to choose subjects that they regard as relevant to themselves. Choice of topic within each subject should be expanded to offer additional flexibility to students.
- The current system whereby a student studies 7 subjects in the senior cycle represents a maximum workload. The possibility of providing a discretionary time allowance for students within the school day/week should be explored.

### **Curriculum development**

The development of society and the way students live outside of school appears not to be reflected in the manner in which school is structured. Change is required in the content, methodologies and learning styles which guide the manner in which schools operate.

- Greater emphasis should be placed on
  - global issues
  - active citizenship and environmental awareness
  - healthy lifestyles and personal development.
- The school should have a greater role in the formation and maintenance of the student's moral framework. This responsibility must be reflected in the curriculum.
- The senior cycle, and in particular the teaching/learning associated with it, is excessively dominated by the Leaving Certificate examination.

### **Assessment, certification, qualifications**

The USS is of the view that most students do not believe that the examination of the Leaving Certificate (established) adequately assesses the capability, knowledge and skills of students across the range of subjects.

- It is unrealistic to expect a terminal examination to comprehensively assess all the learning which may have taken place in senior cycle. The option of continuous assessment associated with a greater level of modularisation in the curriculum ought to be explored. This might allow for a student to complete a

significant percentage of her/his examination requirement at the end of each year of the cycle (be that 2 or 3 years).

- The USS is not comfortable with the concept of teachers assessing their own students for certification purposes and recognises the difficulties associated with implementing a continuous assessment regime without such a development.
- Student portfolios compiled over the duration of the senior cycle would provide an effective and fair means of recording student achievement. Such a document could reflect the student's involvement in a range of school activities, in addition to traditional subject-centred activities. Such portfolios should not be part of the formal assessment structure.

### **Options**

The Union does not have a preference for any particular option but expresses clear views on the structural characteristics it believes the senior cycle ought to possess. As a general policy it favours a three-year senior cycle, compulsory for all except for those students who choose to participate in the LCA.

- A three-year senior cycle programme should be put in place that combines the best features of the LCVP and LCE. The first year of this cycle should provide students with core skills, which would provide the foundation for work to be undertaken in years 5 and 6. This skills-oriented curriculum would provide a clear focus for the year and should be assessed, but not as part of the certification process. The academic focus should be placed on year 5 and 6 of the cycle, leaving the 4th year free from exams and study pressures.
- The year directly following the junior cycle should comprise a one-year TY programme and should be compulsory for all students (except for those students undertaking LCA).
- The Leaving Certificate Applied should be retained as a separate option. The Union is concerned about the diminished status of the programme in the context of the progression pathways into higher education available for students. Students with the LCA should be afforded opportunities equivalent to those with other Leaving Certificate awards.

## **Conclusion**

The USS welcomed the support of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment in engaging its members in discussion on the reform of the senior cycle. The Union is looking forward to further interaction with the broader education community at the September forum and, subsequently, when the policy recommendations are produced.