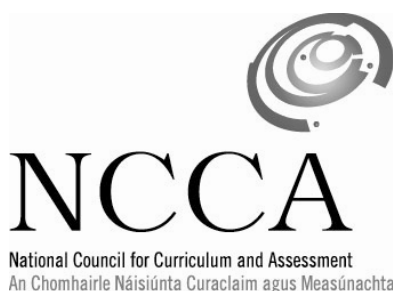


# **National Council for Curriculum and Assessment**



## **Junior Cycle Review: Interim report on the re-balancing of subject syllabuses**

**October 2004**

## **1. Introduction**

In its 1999 progress report on the review of junior cycle, the review committee expressed concern about the overloaded curriculum at junior cycle and the repetition of topics in some subjects. In response, the NCCA set out to review the content of all junior cycle subject syllabuses provided at junior cycle. The aim of this exercise would be to re-balance the curriculum so as to ensure that there was enough time to allow for the quality of engagement with students that was envisaged when the Junior Certificate was first introduced. This would be carried out carefully, to ensure that students would progress to senior cycle without difficulty and without undermining the overall structure of the curriculum or the integrity of subjects.

At the end of the process rebalanced syllabuses in all junior cycle subjects would be prepared and an overview document containing the full curriculum at junior cycle made available in a form accessible to teachers, parents and others interested in education. Parallel to this, work would continue on the revision of individual syllabuses and the review of areas of the curriculum including the technologies, languages, and the classics.

## **2. The re-balancing process**

A model template for junior cycle syllabus design was developed and approved by Council in 2002. The purpose of the template was to ensure that the rebalanced syllabuses would be written, so far as possible, to a common format. The key features of this template are presented in Appendix 1. Five subjects—**Business Studies, English, History, Home Economics, and Music**—were selected for the first phase of the rebalancing process. The course committees for these subjects were reconvened at a joint meeting in March 2003.

### **3. The brief of the re-convened committees**

The brief of the re-convened course committees was to

- apply the model template to the existing syllabus
- examine the syllabus with a view to identifying areas of possible overload and overlap
- propose specific corrections, updates, edits and report on major structural problems and/or implementation issues.
- report to the review committee on the outcome of the re-balancing process.

### **4. The work of the committees**

The original schedule envisaged a total of four meetings per committee (including the initial meeting) with this phase of the project reaching completion in December 2003. It was subsequently decided that the timeline ought to be extended and each committee offered the opportunity to meet for an extra (fifth) time. These meetings took place in early 2004. An update on progress was presented to the review committee in March 2004 and to Council in April 2004 as part of a presentation of an update on the junior cycle review.

### **5. The outcomes of the committees' work**

Each of four committees presented their syllabuses to the template and also produced the associated report arising from the work. In the case of Music, the course committee is yet to meet for the final consideration of the re-balanced syllabus and report. This meeting is scheduled to take place in early October 2004.

In general, the course committees experienced few difficulties in realigning the **Introduction**, **Aims**, and **Objectives** of the existing syllabuses to accommodate the requirements of the template. However, in writing the **Learning Outcomes**, the level of detail presented by committees varied significantly, leading to a large discrepancy

between re-balanced syllabuses in the number of learning outcomes they contained. Two of the committees presented the learning outcomes in a format different from others and from that outlined in the template. The English committee presented learning outcomes specifically related to each year of the junior cycle thereby specifying, at least to some extent, the manner in which the course should be sequenced. The Business Studies course committee included learning outcomes after each sub-section of content i.e. more frequently than envisioned in the model template.

## **6. Evaluation of the work of the course committees**

In carrying out their work committees encountered a number of challenges. Many of these arose from the fact that the re-balancing process represented a different role for the committees than that of syllabus review and revision. However, in many cases an understanding of the process developed as the work progressed. The principal challenges that emerged were

- **Different task.** Applying a template to pre-existing material and identifying the issues of substantive change constituted a different task for the committees. Previous review work involved word-by-word consideration of the syllabus with a view to making definitive changes. The re-balancing process was to produce indicative statements relating to future work directions.
- **Different procedure.** There was some misunderstanding as to the intended outcome of the re-balancing process. Some of the course committees assumed that recommended changes would automatically become part of a revised syllabus that would be brought to Council for approval. This resulted in some committee discussions becoming more detailed and contested than was necessary.
- **Time scale.** All committees commented, through the Education Officer and in the reports, that the time made available for the completion of the tasks was inadequate.

## **7. Reports and recommendations of the course committees - summary**

### **Business Studies**

The course committee reported that a major overhaul and modernisation of the syllabus is necessary in order to respond to a rapidly changing business environment.

Recommendations include:

- Content should be modified to harmonise the syllabus with the Leaving Certificate Business, Accounting and Economics syllabuses. This implies the need for significant re-balancing within the syllabus. The current 10% time allocation to Economics, for example, is seen as inadequate.
- ICT and communications should be brought into one section and ICT element should be emphasised and made more explicit—examples should be presented as to how ICT can be integrated (guidelines)
- Consideration should be given to assessing learning outcomes related to business concepts in a practical way, perhaps through ICT
- The course committee would like definitive guidance on the number of hours that should be allocated to Junior Certificate subjects including Business Studies.
- The teacher guidelines would need to be revised to clarify the changes to the syllabus, especially the alterations to content and assessment and the inclusion of learning outcomes.

### **English**

The committee in its report raises substantial issues in relation to the structure of the subject in the junior cycle and in particular to its assessment in the Junior Certificate examination. The committee also noted the need to include in the syllabus the assessment details for Foundation level which already operate in the examination system. Their inclusion is seen as non-contentious.

Recommendations include:

- the current assessment arrangements for the Junior Certificate examination, consisting of two examination papers, might not be the best way of assessing students' learning in the subject. An alternative approach (possibly including an aural and oral component) would permit a more flexible and integrated approach to assessment, based on learning outcomes.
- the list of texts should be updated
- there is a need to examine the role of 'syllabus unit' as an organising principle. While the committee is confident of the validity and viability of the approach, the reality is that many teachers do not use it in practice.
- accessibility of language and some questions of clarity in presentation and layout were felt to be beyond the scope of the present exercise. A full consideration of the syllabus would be required to address these issues
- there is a need to clarify the term 'genre' as it is used in the syllabus. Genre has distinct meanings in the contexts of teaching language and literature.
- further work is needed to assess the extent to which the examination papers address the specified learning outcomes in the original and the re-articulated syllabus
- as the study of English lays the foundation for many other subjects some overlap between English and those subjects is inevitable and desirable
- there is a need generally to clarify the relationship between the syllabus and the teacher guidelines

### **History**

The report of the History committee presents a clear picture of the changes in course content which are seen as essential. The committee also proposes the introduction of a second assessment component as envisaged in the initial plans for the examination of the subject.

Recommendations include

- the scope of study within certain topics should be confined e.g. by restricting to four (Luther, Calvin, Henry VII and Ignatius Loyola) the number of individuals whose role in the reformation must be studied
- certain sections should be renamed e.g. topic ‘From farm to factory’ changed to ‘Industrial England to rural Ireland’
- the description of topics should be altered (comprehensive detail provided in the report)
- the feasibility of introducing the second assessment component, History Research Assignment (recommended in the original Guidelines) should be investigated.
- the format and style of questioning in use in the examination at both Higher and Ordinary levels should be reviewed

### **Home Economics**

A matter of concern to this committee is the difficulty experienced by teachers of Home Economics in completing the course due to an inadequate time allocation for the subject. There is a need to consider a significant review of the time devoted to individual subjects in general.

Recommendations include

- the 240 hours recommended for teaching the subject is rarely available to teachers.  
This situation needs to be reviewed for all subjects and appropriate adjustments made
- a reduction in content is necessary in order to lessen ‘completion’ pressure on students and teachers. Less content would also make more time available for the development of skills mentioned in syllabus
- the ‘Social & Health Studies’ section of the core requires substantial review
- some sections of the syllabus (specified in report) should be re-named and the related content re-aligned

- the Textiles section should be modernised with an increased emphasis on creativity
- the syllabus refers in the course objectives to ‘evaluation’ as a skill which students should acquire and develop. The committee suggests that research should be undertaken into the capacity of students aged 13-15 to develop this skill
- there is a need to consider ways in which students with special educational needs will be facilitated to take Home Economics.

## **8. Key issues emerging from the reports of the course committees**

While the reports contain much detailed comment relating to the individual syllabuses, a number of consistent themes emerge:

- the reports suggest that there is considerable scope for some reduction of content in the subject syllabuses reviewed (including Music)
- course committees expressed concern that for a variety of reasons, the course described by the syllabus cannot be completed in the time available.
- changes to assessment are, in some cases, seen as being one way of reducing overload, for example by reducing the number of examination papers from two to one.
- a review of the examination arrangements is seen as necessary in order to ensure a greater congruence between learning outcomes and assessment.
- course committees require clarification on what categories of content are most appropriately included in the syllabus document and which are best contained in the teacher guidelines.
- committees have identified areas of the syllabuses that are in need of significant reform and indicate that the time allowed in the current process was in some cases insufficient to explore the issues related to revision fully.

## **9. Next steps**

A meeting will be convened with the education officers and chairpersons of the five course committees to review the re-balancing process and to consider how the number of learning outcomes might be harmonised across the subjects. A final meeting of each of



the course committees will then be arranged to harmonise learning outcomes and to address any outstanding issues identified in the reports. This will conclude Phase 1 of the re-balancing process.

A revised brief for course committees will be prepared in light of the evaluation of the first phase of the work. Following this, it is envisaged that committees in a further five subjects, **Gaeilge, Geography, Art Craft and Design, Environmental and Social Studies, and Mathematics** will be reconvened in Phase 2 of the re-balancing process. Running in parallel with this exercise, work will begin on the preparation of a handbook for junior cycle. It is envisaged that the first issue of this handbook, which will contain re-balanced syllabuses in the ten subjects, will be ready by January 2006.

## Appendix 1. Syllabus template for junior cycle

1. Introduction	The introduction sets out; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ The principles on which this syllabus has been prepared</li> <li>◦ Information on the nature of the subject</li> <li>◦ Statements on a differentiated syllabus</li> <li>◦ A rationale for the subject.</li> </ul>
2. Aims of the syllabus	These are broad statements of the changes that are brought about by the study of the syllabus and should broadly match the general aims / intended outcomes of the junior cycle.
3. Objectives of the syllabus	The objectives of the syllabus will focus specifically on what the syllabus is trying to achieve for students.
4. Body of the syllabus	4.A - overview table of the sections 4.B - statement of context 4.C - content 4.D- learning outcomes
5. Statement of assessment	This will describe the assessment arrangements envisaged by the syllabus. It is directly linked to the aims, objectives, developed in the context of the learning outcomes contained in the syllabus and should differentiate between levels as appropriate.
6. Statements of links	This section will outline the possible links between the syllabus and the; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Primary School Curriculum</li> <li>• other junior cycle syllabuses</li> <li>• elements of the senior cycle</li> </ul>