

Senior Cycle Short Courses

Report on the
Consultation

April
2012

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1. Introduction

In 2005, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment presented proposals for the future development of senior cycle education in Ireland. Arising from these proposals and from the response of the Minister for Education and Science to them, the process of reviewing and developing subjects and sample short courses was put in place. The Minister identified Enterprise as one desirable short course and following some consultation and discussion with education partners it was decided that a draft short course in Psychology would also be prepared to illustrate two different sample courses. The development of the two draft short courses, Enterprise and Psychology, was overseen by the NCCA Short Course Committee and they were made available for consultation in April 2011.

As short courses are completely new curriculum components, these two sample courses were developed to illustrate what short courses might look like, how they differ from full subjects and how they might be assessed. In this respect we were interested in people's views on short courses generally, as well as their views on Enterprise and Psychology in particular.

It will be noted that the response rate to short courses in the consultation is considerably lower than that for other subjects, such as the science subjects and physical education. This can be explained by the fact that, as new components, Enterprise and Psychology don't already have a body of teachers, or teacher associations, to comment on them. However, the responses received offer good insights into the potential of short courses to contribute to a more flexible and relevant curriculum at senior cycle.

1.1 Consultation process

The consultation on short courses was conducted between April and December 2011. An important tool in the consultation was the website available at www.ncca.ie/seniorcycle which received 63 online questionnaire responses. Sixteen of the respondents gave their views on short courses generally, 23 gave their views on Enterprise and 24 gave their views on Psychology. Most of the responses came from

post-primary teachers or principals while the next largest group of respondents were third level teachers and students. In addition to the online consultation, a small number of focused meetings were held with interested parties, including meetings with third level lecturers and researchers in psychology, members of the CEN (Citizenship Education Network), the Royal Irish Academy Committee for Philosophy and a meeting with a group of teachers and principals from five schools. Some of these meetings allowed for closer engagement with the subject-specific details of the short courses, while others gave us insights into potential areas for further development of short courses. The meeting with teachers and principals allowed us to have a discussion about how short courses might work in a school's senior cycle curriculum. Finally, nine written submissions were received from groups and individuals (see Appendix 1).

2. Key ideas emerging from the consultation

Some common threads emerged from the written submissions and meetings held. While welcoming the idea of short courses and recognising the unique opportunity afforded by short courses *to do something different*, four elements were consistently identified as being critical to the successful development of these new curriculum components. These were the need for practical and ‘real-life’ learning methodologies, the importance of developing students’ skills (particularly those of critical thinking and research/presentation skills), the need for greater flexibility and creativity in relation to assessment, and the importance of ensuring that short courses are taught by suitably trained teachers. These points are discussed in more detail in the following pages.

2.1 General comments on short courses

Curriculum choice

There was a broad welcome for the idea of short courses with most respondents holding the view that short courses allowed greater curriculum choice, opened up new areas of learning and interest to both teachers and students, and could help students to refine their future career or college choices. Many welcomed the emphasis on key skills within the draft short courses as well as the opportunities for project-based work and practical real-world learning. Comments along these lines included

I think the content would be useful for informing students more realistically for choices after school (Online response).

Short courses have the potential to add more variety to the existing offer at senior cycle and to allow curriculum planning to be more flexible and based on relevant needs of students (IDEA submission).

The ASTI/TUI submission raised a concern that *short courses were intended to introduce flexibility, choice and opportunity for all students and not promote elitism and greater inequity*. They question the capacity of a typical school to introduce new curriculum options within existing resources.

Timetabling of short courses was not raised as a particular concern although the ASTI/TUI submission suggested that strong guidance with regard to timetabling approaches would be necessary. One Deputy Principal said *timetabling might be difficult but not impossible*.

Teaching and learning

Teachers felt that they would like teaching short courses and that they would promote student engagement in learning. Some expressed a fear that short courses will not go far enough in promoting more innovative teaching and assessment methods and thereby would be a *missed opportunity* to do things differently.

There is a danger to make the short courses just mini versions of regular curricula with teach-to-the-test format and delivery. Important would be a design that incorporates the practical application in real-world settings or including activities that take students out of the classroom (Online response).

We would also maintain that the opportunity presented by short courses to introduce genuinely new areas should not be lost by developing courses that address perceived shortcomings of already existing courses (IDEA submission).

An issue which frequently surfaced in meetings and written submissions surrounded the qualifications needed to teach these courses and there was strong agreement that only properly qualified teachers should teach short courses.

If appropriately qualified teachers are not employed to teach these courses then I worry for the respect shown towards short courses and the sustainability of these courses (Online submission).

One submission recommended that the implementation plan for short courses should include reference to teacher qualifications and provide both initial teacher education and continuing professional development ‘*since these are new, and as yet, largely unknown curricular entities within the system*’ (CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit and Trocaire joint submission). The ASTI/TUI submission also raised a question about

the appropriate qualifications to teach the draft short courses *and endorse the idea of current teachers obtaining additional qualifications...contingent on this being voluntary.*

Assessment

When it came to assessment, teachers were keen to avoid rote learning for predictable examinations and hoped that short courses could introduce more varied approaches to assessment which would allow students to demonstrate their skills as well as their knowledge. A number of respondents pointed out the need for creative approaches to assessment

It is an unfortunate reality that the classroom delivery of short courses will be closely determined by the assessment methodologies outlined in each syllabus. There is a need for creative assessment approaches and for these to be exemplified as a means of informing and strengthening the more innovative teaching/learning approaches advocated in short course documentation (CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit and Trocaire joint submission).

Some submissions, including the ASTI/TUI submission suggested that the idea of a second assessment component merits further consideration and if one component remains then the rationale for a single component needs to be clearer.

Teachers thought that having assessment at the end of one year's learning would reduce the pressure on students. However they also expressed a concern that this could lead to a repeat culture if students were unhappy with their result at the end of fifth year.

The ASTI/TUI submission raised a further concern in regard to differentiation and expressed the belief that a common course might present difficulties for teachers.

Future short courses

A range of possible areas for the future development of short courses were suggested including Development Studies, Philosophy, Anthropology, Environmental Science (with a focus on sustainability), Human Rights Education, Film, Drama and Theatre, Information and Communications Technology, and Languages.

2.2 Draft Short Course in Psychology

The draft short course in Psychology prompted a very positive response. Overall, respondents liked the course and felt it would be of interest to students. Many commented on the relevance of the topics to young people and the fact that *there is an appetite and interest in mental health*. Respondents felt the course would engage all students and would be of particular value to those considering further studies in psychology. The emphasis on research was particularly welcomed as was the focus on developing critical thinking skills. The potential for cross curricular learning was seen as a strength of the draft course (with possible links to biology, mathematics (statistics), history, English/media studies, and IT).

Some questioned whether the scope and breadth of content was overambitious for a short course geared to the developmental stage of learners in senior cycle.

We raise this breadth of coverage as both a strength and a potential threat to the success of the course. The PSI suggests that at this level of study, learners do not necessarily need to cover all the major areas that an undergraduate degree in psychology covers. Rather, it may be of benefit to tailor the course and its content to that which is most relevant to their lives as young people, so that the material is accessible and the applications of psychological theory and knowledge can be demonstrated (The Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) submission).

Some teachers also felt that there was a lack of clarity in what the course was asking students and teachers to do. It was suggested that further work in refining some of the learning outcomes or exemplifying them might be helpful in providing greater clarity.

There was some discussion of the sequencing of content and whether the theory and ethics of research should be taught as a separate unit or possibly integrated into actual case studies which would involve undertaking research. The majority favoured integrating the theory of research across the different units rather than setting it out as a separate unit as *this would make research live for the students* and it could also help

redress the issue of content overload. One teacher wrote

From my experience of teaching Psychology to mixed ability students in the British senior cycle, teaching ethics and research methods as part of unit one strikes me as potentially problematic. Students find these concepts much easier to grasp when they have already interacted with them by conducting their own small scale studies and learning about the findings of studies before facing them as learning outcomes in themselves (Online response).

A number of suggestions on additional content and on changes to learning outcomes were also offered. There was strong agreement that it is important to include topics that are of interest and relevance to students. For instance, topics and theories that would be of particular interest or relevance to learners, suggested by the PSI, were Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences and the Five Factor Theory of Personality (McCrae and Costa). It was also suggested that the focus should not be on learning about theorists (e.g. Piaget) but rather on understanding theories and models. For instance, students would learn about different theories of personality or theories of development rather than focusing on the people behind the theories. The ASTI/TUI submission suggested some further topics that merit consideration for inclusion such as the effect addictive substances can have on psychological behaviour, group social psychology, group cohesion, peer pressure and sleep and its effects on behaviour.

The meeting with third level psychology lecturers gave rise to the suggestion that the area of positive psychology merits greater emphasis within the course. In this context, they suggested that the factors affecting wellbeing and mental health (such as resilience and self-esteem) should be included. One online submission expressed a desire to see a stronger emphasis on the psychology of consumerism while another written submission expressed a concern about the unbalanced focus on Western concepts within the syllabus as exemplified in unit 2. It was suggested that including *non-Western psychologists would broaden the horizon of learners and allow them to critically question their own perceptions and would a globally more balanced view on psychology (IDEA submission).*

On assessment, many respondents said that assessment should enable the students to demonstrate learning and skills, especially critical thinking skills, and they would like to see options other than a written paper explored. The TUI and ASTI concurred that *given the nature of the course a research project and presentation skills were viewed as having strong potential as a second component of assessment*. Many felt that the presentation of a project or a piece of research was the *best fit for purpose* when it came to the assessment of this short course. However, it was agreed that students would require clear guidelines and boundaries in relation to research and project work. Some also favoured the idea of students receiving a case study in advance of the exam so that they could consider its contents before the exam and then answer examination questions requiring them to apply the theories they had learned and the research skills they had gained.

Finally, the qualifications of the teachers who would teach the proposed short course was raised as a concern. *Completing a few modules of psychology as part of teacher training is not sufficient to fully understand the nature and scientific approach of psychology. Teachers should have a psychology degree in addition to their teaching qualification* (Online response).

2.3 Draft Short Course in Enterprise

The draft short course in Enterprise was broadly commended as *relevant, interesting and timely*. It was also judged to be *well structured and provides a well-judged balance between academic study and practical, supervised but self-directed learning activity* (County and City Enterprise Boards (CCEBs) submission).

Some submissions welcomed the broad concept of enterprise that underpins the course, which states that *people can be enterprising in relation to their personal decision making, their social communities, their public life as citizens, the environment and business*. One submission noted that it was clear from the draft course that enterprise education is viewed as *more than how to run a business* (Caroline McHale, PDST). Another submission suggested that this broad definition of enterprise needs to be communicated very clearly to students and teachers (IDEA submission). In contrast, the CCEB submission contends that *care needs to be taken with 'fashions' in enterprise promotion...e.g. youth enterprise, women's enterprise, agribusiness, IT, etc.* (County and City Enterprise Boards (CCEBs) submission).

Again, the emphasis on developing key skills was generally welcomed as was the emphasis on practical and self-directed learning. This is reflected in the following submission

We believe that the proposed Enterprise course can make an extremely valuable contribution to developing the skills of our young people, not only within its own right as a subject of study, but also across other disciplines in promoting skills such as greater self-directed learning and critical thinking. The draft Short Course as currently proposed represents a very holistic approach to teaching the concept of Enterprise, and the desired learning outcomes largely reflect the types of skills required in the modern workplace (FORFAS, the National Competitiveness Council and the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs joint submission).

However one submission expressed the view that the course *is extremely academic and is aimed exclusively at the very high achievers* (Junior Achievement Ireland).

While some submissions welcomed the fact that the short course in Enterprise *includes the best bits of the current Leaving Certificate Business course and LCVP* (teacher's comment) others were anxious that this course is *not just a mini-version or extension of the current Business course* (IDEA submission). The ASTI/TUI submission suggested that the relationship between this proposed new short course in Enterprise and the current LCVP needs to be clarified. It also highlighted the extent of overlap with the senior cycle business syllabus as *unnecessary and unhelpful*. In addition this submission questioned whether the enterprise course as framed implies that students would need to have studied business in the junior cycle. *This is seen as potentially unfair and exclusionary*.

In meetings and submissions it was also suggested that some updating of the draft course is now needed to reflect the current economic climate as well as the globalised world in which all enterprise takes place. One submission also suggested that students should explore the wider factors that affect people's capacity to be enterprising such as social exclusion, global inequalities, gender and access to credit.

Unit one does not attempt to conceptualise enterprise within the context of our globalised economy and therefore presents enterprise and business almost as something that happens on a level playing field (IDEA submission).

The joint submission on behalf of FORFAS, the National Competitiveness Council and the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs also suggested that *the course content could have more of an international dimension*. They argue *that export led growth will be the principle driver of Ireland's economy over the coming decades*. *It is important, therefore, that the education system embeds skills essential to the internationalisation of enterprise*. This submission also noted that *references to innovation are quite lacking in the proposed course*. *Innovation has become a pervasive concept in the modern business environment and vocabulary and could perhaps be given greater profile within the course*.

The County and City Enterprise Board's submission suggested that the Student Enterprise Award which is currently run as an extra-curricular activity within schools

should now be utilised as part of the action learning in Unit 4 of the proposed short course.

Finally, the consultation revealed some disappointment with the current assessment proposal and there was strong agreement that *assessment should be more practical than theoretical (Online comment)*. Some questioned why the student's report on the enterprise activity is not part of the final assessment. Others felt strongly that the *ability to speak in public or even in small groups and the ability to explain or verbalise an opinion or a process are vital for any community worker or self employed business person*. (Online comment) Therefore they argued that demonstrating presentation skills should form an important part of the assessment of this short course.

I welcome the idea of a presentation. Perhaps this could be included in the assessment (PDST submission).

The proposed assessment is too much like the Business exam that's already there. We have to get away from written papers. Unless assessment changes this short course won't work. Why bother visiting an enterprise, writing up a report and doing a presentation on it if it doesn't count for anything in the final assessment? (Teacher's comment)

The use of a case study within the exam was welcomed as a move in the right direction as it allows students to apply their understanding, skills and experience. The County and City Enterprise Boards submission suggested that credit needs to be given directly for the output of this practical work. *Until this is done, students and teachers will not devote sufficient energies to this aspect of the learning process (CCEBs submission).*

3. Conclusion

To sum up, the consultation has shown that there is support for the introduction of short courses. They are seen as providing an opportunity to do something different within senior cycle both in terms of expanding curriculum choice and in expanding assessment possibilities. In addition, respondents welcome the emphasis within short courses on the practical application of knowledge and on research and project work. Many respondents also affirmed the emphasis on key skills within the draft courses.

The draft short courses in Psychology and Enterprise are regarded as timely and relevant to students' interests and needs. Overall, the content of both courses was affirmed albeit with some constructive and specific suggestions on ways in which both might be improved. There is also a need for some updating to reflect changed local and global contexts.

The main concern related to assessment and a desire to see a move away from a traditional examination paper in order to facilitate greater demonstration of students' skills and less emphasis on rote learning. A further concern that surfaced in the consultation was the need for suitably trained teachers to teach the courses and, aligned with that, a desire to see provision for professional development at both pre-service and in-service level in support of their introduction.

The NCCA has, at the request of the Department of Education and Skills (DES), extended the work on the idea of senior cycle short courses by generating and consulting on two examples, in the areas of Enterprise and Psychology. Further to the consultation, these draft short courses will now be revised and refined on the basis of feedback and later in 2012 will be presented to Council for approval and issued to the DES. A factor in the ultimate decision on whether to introduce short courses as a new curriculum component at senior cycle will be the advent and introduction of the new *Framework for Junior Cycle*, which includes short courses as junior cycle curriculum components for the first time.

Appendix 1: Submissions received

1. Short Course Submissions
CDVEC CDU and Trocaire (Joint Submission)
IDEA (Irish Development Education Association)
ASTI/TUI Joint submission
Online Survey responses (16)
2. Psychology Submissions
The Psychology Society of Ireland (PSI)
Online survey responses (24)
3. Enterprise Submissions
Jeannie Harrington, Business Studies Teachers Association of Ireland (BSTAI)
Caroline McHale, Professional Development Support Team (PDST)
The Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE)
Della Clancy, Junior Achievement Ireland
FORFAS, the National Competitiveness Council, the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (Joint Submission)
County and City Enterprise Boards (CCEBs)
Online survey responses (23)

