



**NCCA**

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta  
Cúraclaim agus Measúnachta  
National Council for  
Curriculum and Assessment

# Report on the Early Enactment Review of Phase 4 Junior Cycle Subject Specifications:

## Geography, History, Home Economics, Mathematics and Music

September 2024

# Contents

---

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>1. INTRODUCTION</b> .....  | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION</b> .....  | <b>2</b>  |
| Adjustments to assessment arrangement introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic .....                     | 2         |
| Relevant curriculum developments in senior cycle .....  | 2         |
| Ongoing research on the implementation and impact of the Framework for Junior Cycle 2015 (FWJC15) ..... | 2         |
| <b>3. OVERVIEW OF THE REVIEW PROCESS</b> .....  | <b>4</b>  |
| Areas explored during the review .....  | 4         |
| Methodological approach.....  | 4         |
| School visits.....  | 5         |
| Online survey .....   | 5         |
| Written submissions .....   | 6         |
| <b>4. FEEDBACK FROM THE REVIEW</b> .....  | <b>7</b>  |
| Achieving the Aims of the specifications .....  | 7         |
| Working with Learning Outcomes.....   | 9         |
| Planning for Learning, Teaching, Assessment and Reporting.....  | 13        |
| Assessment.....   | 17        |
| Ongoing Assessment.....   | 17        |
| Classroom-Based Assessments.....  | 17        |
| SLAR Process.....   | 21        |
| Examples of Student Work.....   | 21        |
| Practical Examination.....  | 22        |
| Final Assessment .....  | 23        |
| Framework for Junior Cycle, Inclusion and Transition to Senior Cycle.....                               | 25        |
| Supporting the transition to senior cycle .....   | 25        |
| Reporting on student achievement .....  | 27        |
| Inclusion .....   | 28        |
| <b>5. INSIGHTS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS</b> .....  | <b>28</b> |
| Insights.....   | 29        |

Recommendations .....31

6. NEXT STEPS.....34



## 1. Introduction

---

In line with the Framework for Junior Cycle 2015 (FWJC15) the new subject specifications for Junior Cycle (JC) Music, History, Geography, Mathematics and Home Economics were introduced in schools in September 2018. An early enactment review was scheduled to be undertaken by NCCA when the first cohort of students had completed the course for these subjects. Unfortunately, it was necessary to postpone the review until the 2023-24 school year due to the disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

While the students and teachers who participated in this review had experienced the three years of the curriculum, they were not required to complete two CBAs, as envisaged by the specifications, due to the assessment adjustments introduced to take account of the disrupted learning experienced by students during the pandemic.

This early enactment review was completed in Q1-Q2, 2024 to gather feedback and explore:

- how well the specifications get to the heart of the learning aspired to within the subject and more broadly within the Framework for Junior Cycle.
- the assessment elements within the subjects, as experienced by students and teachers.
- how teachers are exercising their professional judgement to mediate the new specifications in their schools and classrooms.

This report commences with background information that helps to contextualise the review and an overview of the consultation conducted as part of the review, followed by insights into experiences in enacting the junior cycle subjects. The feedback received during the review has been considered by NCCA in terms of potential implications arising for both the work of NCCA and for other stakeholders in the implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle. The final section of the document sets out proposed next steps to respond to the findings arising from this early enactment review.

## 2. Background information

---

This section provides a brief overview the assessment adjustments introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic, relevant curriculum developments in senior cycle and the longitudinal research study on the implementation and impact of the Framework for Junior Cycle, all of which is important contextual information when considering the review findings presented later in the report.

### Adjustments to assessment arrangement introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic

The first cohort of students to study the Phase 4 JC specifications were due to complete their three years of study in June 2021. On April 2020 and as part of the national response to the COVID-19 pandemic, all Junior Cycle examinations were cancelled. Over the next three years, alternative assessment arrangements were put in place to take account of the disrupted learning experienced by students during the pandemic.

In the case of History, Geography and Mathematics, this meant that only one CBA (either CBA1 or CBA2) was required to be completed. The Assessment Task did not have to be completed. In the case of Music and Home Economics, this meant that CBA1 did not have to be completed. Students were required to complete CBA2, as it was linked to the final assessment in these two subjects. The first state examination of the Phase 4 junior cycle specifications took place in June 2022.

In an announcement by the Minister for Education on 17 April 2024, it was clarified that the assessment adjustments in place since 2022 in relation to the Classroom-Based Assessment will remain for students sitting Junior Cycle in 2025 and 2026. This means that the first full range of intended assessments outlined in the specifications will not be experienced until the academic year 2026-2027 at the earliest.

### Relevant curriculum developments in senior cycle

The review and redevelopment of Leaving Certificate Geography is currently under way, with a new specification to be introduced in schools in September 2026. The redevelopment of History, Music, Mathematics and Home Economics is due to commence in late 2024, with implementation from September 2027.

### Ongoing research on the implementation and impact of the Framework for Junior Cycle 2015 (FWJC15)

A longitudinal study on the implementation and impact of the FWJC15 commenced in late 2020. The four-year study, based on a nationally representative sample, is capturing the views of teachers, principals, students, parents and wider educational stakeholders on the FWJC15. As a longitudinal study, the experiences of schools will be explored over a period of four years, in order to capture the complexity, challenges and successes in enacting the FWJC15. This mixed methods, multi-dimensional research is being carried out by a team in the University of Limerick on behalf of NCCA. To date, three interim reports have been published and the final report is due to be published in late 2024.

The findings of this study in conjunction with the findings of the series of early enactment reviews of subjects and short courses will be of great assistance in supporting schools' ongoing work with the FWJC15 and in informing NCCA's work in revisiting and updating the Framework to support high quality teaching, learning and assessment. Furthermore, the study will also collect important subject specific information, which will be important to consider alongside the insights from this review when Phase 4 JC subjects are scheduled for redevelopment.

### 3. Overview of the review process

One of the key purposes of the review process is to consult with teachers, students and stakeholders on their experiences of enacting the curriculum. Consultation is a key aspect of NCCA's work, where advice is shaped by feedback from consultations with the public, schools, settings, education interests and others. The following section presents an overview of the areas explored and the methodological approach employed during this consultation which is underpinned by the principles set out in [NCCA's Research Strategy \(2023 – 2026\)](#) and provides a full summary of engagement during the consultation.

#### Areas explored during the review

The guiding areas and topics explored during the review are outlined in Table 1 below.

| Area   | Topics explored  |
|--|--|
| Working with the specification   | Achieving the aim of the specification<br>Working with learning outcomes<br>Planning for learning, teaching and assessment   |
| Assessment   | Assessment for the Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs)<br>Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meetings<br>Insights into the use of examples of student work<br>Final Assessment |
| Junior Cycle Framework,<br>Inclusion and Transition to<br>Senior Cycle | Transition to senior cycle<br>Inclusion<br>Development of key skills   |

**Table 1: Areas and topics explored during the review**

#### Methodological approach

This early enactment review was conducted from November 2023 to February 2024 in line with a format agreed by the Council and Board for Junior Cycle for similar early enactment reviews of the junior cycle subjects in Phase 1 and 2 (English, Science and Business) and Phase 3 (Visual Art and Modern Foreign Languages). Feedback was gathered in the following ways:

- school visits to capture the perspectives and experiences of teachers and students from 2nd to 6th year
- an online survey
- written submissions.

Parental/guardian consent and student assent were sought for school visit participants under the age of 18. Feedback gathered through the school visits and online survey were anonymised and transcribed, and all feedback from the consultation was stored as digital files in line with NCCA's

Data Protection Policy (2023). The privacy of all participants has been maintained through anonymisation, except where an organisation has given explicit permission to be identified as contributing to the consultation through written submissions.

A thematic approach was used for analysis, framed by a set of guiding themes used throughout the review. This helped identify and analyse themes within the feedback gathered.

### School visits

A stratified sample of 16 schools was selected from the 49 schools that responded to an open call to participate in the review. The expression of interest form allowed schools to select more than one subject when applying. In many cases, this allowed for the review of two subjects during the school visit. The breakdown of the 16 selected schools is shown in Table 2 below. The school visits comprised two focus groups involving students from 2nd to 6th year, and relevant subject teacher(s). There were 6 school visits for each subject in the review.

| Breakdown of schools           | National % | Number of schools visited | % schools visited |
|--------------------------------|------------|---------------------------|-------------------|
| <b><u>School type</u></b>      |            |                           |                   |
| Education and Training Board   | 29%        | 5                         | 31%               |
| Community/Comprehensive School | 21%        | 2                         | 13%               |
| Voluntary Secondary School     | 51%        | 9                         | 56%               |
| <b><u>School size</u></b>      |            |                           |                   |
| Small (under 350)              | 27%        | 3                         | 19%               |
| Medium (350-699)               | 41%        | 7                         | 44%               |
| Large (over 700)               | 32%        | 6                         | 38%               |
| <b><u>Gender</u></b>           |            |                           |                   |
| All-female                     | 17%        | 3                         | 19%               |
| All-male                       | 13%        | 3                         | 19%               |
| Co-educational                 | 70%        | 10                        | 63%               |
| <b><u>DEIS status</u></b>      |            |                           |                   |
| DEIS                           | 32%        | 4                         | 25%               |
| <b><u>Irish medium</u></b>     |            |                           |                   |
| Irish medium                   | 7%         | -                         |                   |

**Table 2: Comparison of national percentages with schools visited**

### Online survey

A survey was used to gather feedback from anyone who wished to share their experience of a Phase 4 JC subject. This was shared online via [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie), [www.curriculumonline.ie](http://www.curriculumonline.ie), and across NCCA's social media platforms. Table 3 that follows sets out the responses received for each subject.



| Subject        | Online submissions | Teachers | Students | Management |
|----------------|--------------------|----------|----------|------------|
| Geography      | 54                 | 24       | 48       | 11         |
| History        | 93                 | 26       | 36       | 11         |
| Home Economics | 53                 | 15       | 38       | 10         |
| Mathematics    | 37                 | 23       | 42       | 10         |
| Music          | 36                 | 10       | 46       | 09         |

**Table 3: Breakdown of respondents to the review for each subject**

### Written submissions

An open invitation for written submissions was made through [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie), and shared directly with the education partners. The following written submissions were received for each subject.

- **Geography:** 4 written submissions received (DE inspectorate, SEC, OIDE, individual)
- **History:** 5 written submissions received (DE inspectorate, SEC, OIDE, History Teachers' Association of Ireland, individual teacher)
- **Home Economics:** 4 written submissions received (DE inspectorate, OIDE, SEC and Dr Kathryn McSweeney, St Angela's College)
- **Mathematics:** 5 written submissions received (DE inspectorate, SEC, OIDE, Irish Mathematics Teachers' Association, school subject department)
- **Music:** 4 written submissions received (DE inspectorate, SEC, OIDE, a music teacher)

## 4. Feedback from the review

This section presents an overview of the feedback received during the review. The guiding areas of discussion used throughout the review (Table 1), framed the analysis of the feedback received. The majority of the feedback is presented thematically and, where this is the case, includes perspectives and insights from respondents involved in the consultation. The presentation of what follows is based on consideration of the perspectives of students, teachers, school management and stakeholders across all five subjects, including feedback elicited from school visits, online responses and written submissions. As many aspects of junior cycle are experienced in an integrated way by students and teachers, some overlap across the areas of feedback will be evident below.

### Achieving the Aims of the specifications

Across all five subjects, participants in the review broadly expressed approval of the Aim set out for each subject, and agreed that the Aim for each specification articulated effectively what the subjects should set out to achieve for young people. Moreover, it is evident from consideration of feedback that certain features of the Aim for a given subject in the review are also present in the Aim set out for other subjects. The potential to support wellbeing of students, the strengthening of local autonomy, whereby schools can make decisions about curriculum, and relevance to students' lives, were the main features identified across all subjects in this regard.

While the Aim for the subjects does receive general affirmation and endorsement from respondents as apt and appropriate, challenges relating to how well the Aim can be realised were raised by respondents as well. A common theme was the perceived breadth of the subjects, and the design of some learning outcomes, which is expanded upon in further detail below. The impact of the Covid 19 pandemic is identified across subjects as having had a detrimental effect on student learning, and hindering efforts to realise the subject Aims. Another factor which has also been raised in previous review cycles is that of time, specifically the challenge of engaging meaningfully with the Aim of the subjects within the parameters of 200 hours (Mathematics differs from the other subjects in this review as it is designed for a minimum of 240 hours' classroom engagement). Some respondents across all subjects raise local timetabling issues as a related factor, with some divergence of opinion among respondents about the experience of one hour classes. Other localised concerns were raised which did resonate across all subjects, including equity in relation to financial and other resources and supports (for example, digital and other equipment, suitable rooms), and class sizes.

#### Aim for the subject: Subject specific observations

##### Geography

Geography respondents noted that the Aim for that subject provided a stimulus to engage the curiosity of students. The Aim was welcomed for its emphasis on supporting the development of the 'young geographer', and feedback noted that the Aim of the Geography specification supports opportunities to facilitate a relevant and interesting learning experience for young people. The potential of the Aim to enhance student wellbeing and to provide for local autonomy was also noted approvingly. It was considered that the design of some learning outcomes posed a challenge in terms of realising the Aim, with more clarity required in some instances.

## History

Many respondents to the History review considered that the Aim of that specification empowered students and teachers, through the breadth and scope of the course, to develop meaningful learning experiences based on the context of the students' own lives and localities.

As indicated for Geography above, History teachers also referred to the challenge of working with some learning outcomes in support of the Aim, specifically those considered to be open to multiple interpretations. In the History context, there was concern about which historical phenomena (events, processes, issues, personalities) should be the focus of learning outcomes. These challenges are considered in more detail in the next section.

## Home Economics

The potential to support *student wellbeing* was a consistent feature of the consultation feedback elicited from respondents in Home Economics.

Teachers and stakeholders who participated in the Home Economics review emphasised that the Aim of the specification supports teacher autonomy to make teaching and learning relevant to students, the school and the local context; and to engage an integrated and incremental approach to learning where theory and practice are combined, and contemporary, real life issues are addressed.

Similarly, teachers of Home Economics noted that the Aim for the subject, with its emphasis on sustainability, food and health literacy skills, and creative design and textiles, captures the relevance of learning for students.

## Mathematics

The concept of *relevance* emerges from feedback as a positive feature of the Aim for the subject. The focus on problem solving and on contexts that allow students to make connections with other subjects and to see the relevance of mathematics in their lives is noted approvingly by teachers. The concept of 'transferable life skills' was noted approvingly in feedback from Mathematics teachers.

While the schools visited were largely timetabled for more than the minimum 240 hours recommended in the specification, some teachers reported that a perceived lack of time was a factor inhibiting the use of student centred methodologies that allow for collaborative work by students. This was viewed as having a negative impact on the realisation of the specification Aim, particularly in relation to developing strategic competence, adaptive reasoning and a productive disposition.

It is noted that many teachers in the review process cited an increase in student anxiety issues post-Covid as a factor in students not attaining, or struggling to attain, the conceptual understanding required for engagement with the learning set out in the specification, and in the Aim. In this context, reduced opportunities for such students to engage in collaborative classwork, deemed an important aspect of learning envisaged in the subject, are highlighted.

## Music

In the case of Music, teachers referred to the centrality of student-centred pedagogy and frequently referred to opportunities offered by the specification to contribute to the development of the whole student. Outcomes such as enabling self-expression, fostering high self-esteem, and supporting development of the imagination, were referred to often, by both teachers and students, in speaking about the opportunities offered by the Aim of the specification.

Music teachers reported that students were not afraid to take risks and explore, in a variety of ways, composition and music-making. The emphasis on creativity and self-expression in the specification was commended by respondents. Teachers noted that many students chose to perform compositions which they had created themselves in examination contexts.

In relation to challenges in enacting the Aim, participants reported that music literacy and critical analysis skills may not have been developed to the greatest extent possible. In feedback received, this was attributed, in part, to the absence of prescribed material, formerly a significant feature of the Junior Certificate Music syllabus, and the analysis of this material. In many cases, where music literacy was reported as challenging, teachers simultaneously reflected that the newness of the specification, as well as the introduction of digital music-making technologies had led to a reduced emphasis on music literacy in their teaching and learning. In their feedback, students reported that music theory and musical literacy were the most difficult and challenging aspects of the specification but there was an understanding of the necessity to develop this knowledge in order to advance other areas of their learning.

A singular negative consequence of the pandemic was raised in the context of the Music review, where restrictions placed on singing and the playing of wind and brass instruments to reduce the risk of infection and maintain social distancing were identified as a hindrance to realising the Aim for the subject.

**Table 4: Aim for the subject: Subject specific observations**

## Working with Learning Outcomes

Learning for students across all five subject specifications is set out in the form of learning outcomes, which articulate the knowledge, understanding, skills and values which students should be able to demonstrate after three years of learning. Throughout the review, the nature of learning outcomes provided a focus for discussion and comment across all five subjects, with the opportunities and challenges of working with learning outcomes raised.

It should be noted that in general, it was considered that, across all five subjects, the learning outcomes did articulate the knowledge, skills, understanding and values most important for students to acquire. In this context, the *flexibility* of learning outcomes was acknowledged as enabling teachers to design appropriate learning experiences. It was acknowledged that teachers had far more enhanced autonomy than was the case in teaching their subjects under the Junior Certificate. Many teachers commented favourably on the scope for such autonomy or freedom to design learning experiences for students, guided by the learning outcomes. Feedback indicated that many teachers considered the learning outcomes approach had invigorated or brought new life to subjects, allowing for teachers to invoke contemporary or 'up to date' contexts, thus enhancing the relevance of the learning experience for students. Teachers noted that learning outcomes required them to reflect on their own teaching and learning practices, and to explore how to engage and support student voice in the classroom. Thus, the professional development or professional

identity aspect of teachers' roles was noted. Student feedback also noted how *relevance* was valued by them and how they found learning more meaningful when they could relate it to their own lives. In this context, teachers noted how learning outcomes and the design of Junior Cycle more broadly also recognised and supported student autonomy and provided students with opportunities to explore their own interests.

However, it is equally evident that a tension exists in relation to the nature of learning outcomes, in that those characteristics that are lauded by some teachers are perceived to have less positive effects by other teachers. Where some teachers see flexibility and openness as providing opportunity, others perceive the learning outcomes approach as lacking specificity and creating uncertainty. Some feedback refers to teacher concern about the extent of coverage required when engaging with learning outcomes, and issues around breadth and 'depth of treatment' are raised.

In some instances, the number of learning outcomes in a specification was raised, with some respondents of the view that the volume of a course was expanded by the number of learning outcomes associated with it. In this context, the notion of cross-linear learning outcomes that related to and complemented each other across strands of learning required further clarification. The selection of wording used in learning outcomes was raised as a concern in the review. There was a view that in some instances, the wording of learning outcomes was framed as overly academic or obtuse, and that more clarity and simplicity was required.

Table 5 summarises the main subject specific issues raised in relation to learning outcomes.

| Learning Outcomes: Subject specific observations  |
|---|
| <p><b>Geography</b></p> <p>Respondents expressed broad and general agreement that the learning outcomes articulate what is perceived to be key geographical learning for the age and stage of junior cycle. The focus on geographical skills and the local environment was viewed positively. Students expressed enthusiasm for working on the practical side of the subject, such as exploring maps and pictures. There was some concern about a perceived vagueness in some learning outcomes, which was expressed also in the context of terminal examination requirements. It was considered that further clarification or specificity in relation to some learning outcomes would support teachers to acquire clearer understanding of what was required and more confidence in their approach.</p>  |
| <p><b>History</b></p> <p>Many teachers welcomed the breadth and variety of topics that learning outcomes allowed to be explored. There was a welcome for the increased emphasis on local history, as well as for the emphasis on the discipline of history.</p> <p>However, breadth was also raised as a concern. Teachers reported that they felt constrained by time and by the number of learning outcomes in such a way that deep exploration of topics was not possible, and time constraints allowed only for broad or, in some cases, cursory treatment. More clarity and specificity was sought in some learning outcomes. It was considered by some that the nature of the subject, which investigates the significance of historical personalities, events, issues, themes and processes, needed more elaboration, in some instances, than could be offered by flexible</p> |

open-ended learning outcomes. Teachers expressed some uncertainty about how much historical knowledge was required in some learning outcomes. In this context, LO 2.5 was cited as an example, where students should be able to: *Identify the causes, course and consequences of the Northern Ireland Troubles and their impact on North-South and Anglo-Irish relations*. It was suggested that guidance on indicative material to be covered in these learning outcomes would help to address this concern.

These concerns were also framed in the context of the terminal examination, which it was noted did not allow for student choice and necessitated a wide coverage of historical content.

### Home Economics

Respondents broadly agreed that the learning outcomes articulate the knowledge, skills, understanding and values that are most important to acquire. The learning outcomes were considered to be student-centric and supportive of creative planning for integrated learning across strands, balancing knowledge and skills development, with cognisance of the 'real world', especially school and local context.

A sizeable number of teachers expressed appreciation of Strand 3 learning outcomes and/or the importance of learning outcomes linked to sustainability across the three strands. Many teachers and students commonly cited links between Home Economics learning outcomes and other subjects, such as Business, Visual Art and Science, as a strength.

The main critical feedback related to the openness of learning outcomes, and a belief that there are too many learning outcomes for a 200-hour course. Where teachers raised specific concerns about learning outcomes, they related to the following:

1. to clarify content (for example, respondents asked for an explanation of the term 'common foods' in LO 1.7)
2. to broaden teaching, learning and assessment (for example, LO 2.9 where the suggestion was made to broaden the exploration of influences on the management of personal, family and household resources beyond technology)
3. to eliminate a limitation (for example, the reference to 'machine sewing' in LO 3.1 was viewed by some respondents as not reflecting the reality where sewing machines are used for demonstration purposes only, or the action verb 'appreciate' was viewed as presenting evaluation difficulties in LO 3.5).

A basis in nutrition was frequently suggested as a necessary foundation for Leaving Certificate Home Economics. Some teachers lamented the move away from childcare in the old Home Economics Junior Certificate course. Sustainability was considered important enough by some to merit its own strand.

Some respondents place great importance on the integration of skills in learning outcomes, at times arguing that this should be more pronounced (for example, entrepreneurial, innovative, design thinking, creativity skills), while others perceive an imbalance in favour of skills in the learning outcomes. The role of culture in cooking, and food commodities, were both suggested as appropriate areas of focus in learning.

### Mathematics

Respondents were broadly satisfied with the suite of learning outcomes. Notably, students spoke about enjoying working collaboratively with their peers and specifically on problems that they felt were relevant to their lives. It was reported that they learn mathematics best if they can relate to mathematical concepts in some way.

Some feedback was received about learning outcomes perceived to be not relevant to students at this stage of their learning. Abstract geometry and constructions were noted in this context. The Algebra requirement at Ordinary level was considered too challenging by some.

## Music

There was general agreement that the learning outcomes did articulate the learning required of students at this level. Many teachers welcomed the freedom and autonomy offered by the specification to explore and experiment with new listening material, to compose in new and exciting formats, and to perform on a variety of instruments and voices. Feedback pointed to opportunities to invigorate student voice in the classroom.

It was widely acknowledged that the specification reflected more contemporary changes to music and approaches to generating music, enhancing the subject's relevance for students. Teachers referred to the music industry, playlists and processing effects, for example, as areas which provided a better experience for music students and made more connections with their real-life experience of music. Students also valued the relevance of their learning and reported how they enjoyed learning about how aspects of the music which they studied related to their own lives.

There were some concerns about perceived vagueness or ambiguity. Many participants advocated for more clarity in relation to harmonic, melodic and rhythmic requirements and vocabulary. Concern was expressed about possible ambiguity in wording which may be causing confusion in relation to intended learning in a small number of learning outcomes. These learning outcomes use terms such as '*structure*', '*suitable*' and '*symbolic representation*', which some respondents considered to be open to more than one interpretation. One example provided was learning outcome 1.1, where students should be able to: *indicate chords that are suitable to provide support to a single melody line*. It was suggested that the word '*suitable*' could be interpreted by some as simply implying chords that '*fit*' the notes, whereas for others it implies chords that fit and are part of a good progression. It was suggested that clarification was also needed in relation to the harmonic vocabulary to be expected at this level. There were suggestions in the feedback that examples or samples provided in some learning outcomes had the potential to narrow the breadth of learning for students. Suggestion to address this included removing the examples altogether, or editing the learning outcomes to include a broader range of learning, or providing additional clarity to the learning outcomes.

Further feedback indicated that some musical concepts were difficult to distinguish aurally, both in the classroom and in assessment. It was suggested that these concepts be reviewed so as to be made more distinguishable for students. There was feedback calling for more consideration of the role of female composers throughout the specification. Although there is no explicit content in the specification in this regard, it was noted by some respondents that students should engage with and listen to the music of female composers, with some relevant guidance. There was also significant feedback in relation to the lack of explicit reference to Irish traditional music. While teachers were aware that the flexibility of some learning outcomes allowed for engagement in this style of music,

many teachers reported that learning related to Irish traditional music needed to be made more explicit.

**Table 5: Learning Outcomes: Subject specific observations**

## Planning for Learning, Teaching, Assessment and Reporting

This section of the report considers feedback elicited from respondents in relation to the experience of planning for the enactment of the specifications in the classroom. Again, common areas of experience will first be discussed, before looking at feedback specific to the different subjects under review.

As mentioned previously, learning outcomes across the subjects were broadly considered to capture the essential learning required of students at this level, and learning outcomes were the basis for planning learning and teaching experiences in the classroom. There was a sense across all subjects that the course structure for each subject, comprising strands with associated learning outcomes, supported planning, with the focus on non-linear learning outcomes allowing for the design of an integrated learning experience for students, who see for themselves the interconnectedness of their experience of each subject. There was also a sense across subjects that while planning when the specifications were first introduced to the classroom was challenging and time consuming, these initial challenges have lessened over time as teachers have become more accustomed to the requirements of the specifications and the intended learning set out in learning outcomes. Teachers of each subject reported a greater degree of familiarity and comfort with the discourse around planning which was new when the specifications were first introduced. This relates, for example, to engaging with such terms as learning outcomes, units of learning, learning intentions and success criteria. Respondents cited the support of continuous professional development provided by JCT as a factor in this growing understanding.

A further key point of feedback was the growth of a culture of collaborative planning among teachers in schools, and this was evident in feedback from all subject reviews. There was also evidence in the review that many teachers were engaging in reflective practice when planning, amending their plans each year based on consideration of what had worked well in previous plans. Where collaborative planning was possible and practised, there was general agreement that using learning outcomes encouraged more meaningful and stimulating conversations about student learning in the classroom.

The use of textbooks emerged as a point of feedback across all subjects. It was noted that in some instances, textbooks were a valuable planning support, especially when used in conjunction with other resources and planning tools. Many teachers reported feeling confident using textbooks as their primary planning tool, and adapting, adjusting and supplementing task design to suit students' needs. It was noted in the review that where teachers had less confidence in their capacity to identify the essence of learning envisaged in learning outcomes, there was more reliance on textbooks to provide guidance. The DE inspectorate commented on the use of textbooks across subjects, observing the desirability of teachers using them judiciously and in conjunction with other relevant learning and teaching methodologies and resources.

In considering challenges to planning, the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on students, and on schooling, was raised by respondents across the review, with the attendant consequences for



student learning highlighted. Challenges in terms of attendance at school due to the pandemic clearly affected the capacity of many students to meaningfully engage with learning.

Some of the concerns expressed already in this report about the open-ended nature of learning outcomes were again raised in the context of planning. While the utilisation of action verbs at the start of each learning outcome was viewed as positive in pointing teachers towards active engagement with learning, for many this did not clarify in sufficient detail what the learner should be able to do once they had achieved the learning outcome.

Throughout the review there were some positive references to the use, and usefulness, of learning intentions and success criteria. In many of these cases, this was attributed to a school culture where learning intentions and success criteria were part of the fabric of learning and teaching in the school, and where students were accustomed to working with and in some cases co-constructing learning intentions and success criteria in other subjects and classrooms. Other teachers reported that students struggled with co-creating success criteria and in these cases, the teachers provided such criteria to the students. There appeared to be two reasons for this: firstly, teachers were unsure of the key learning in the learning outcome and therefore struggled with the design of learning intentions, tasks and success criteria and; secondly, the process of co-creating success criteria was viewed as too time consuming.

For many, the terminal examination was identified as the key inhibitor to professional autonomy offered by the specifications. In some instances, teachers were not convinced of the value of success criteria at all and viewed the state examinations as the only assessment which mattered. A lack of time for creative decision-making and reduced class time or reduced frequency of engagement with students were also identified as barriers to successful enactment.

The Music, Geography, History and Home Economics specifications are designed for a minimum of 200 hours of student engagement/class contact, with a minimum of 240 hours allotted to Mathematics. There were a number of different approaches to timetabling reported, the most common being a mixture of one-hour and forty or forty-five minute classes. There were different perspectives on these approaches, with some teachers across subjects suggesting that the value of prolonged engagement in one hour classes could be somewhat negated by the consequent lack of opportunities to reinforce learning where subjects are timetabled on a daily basis in shorter classes.

Each of the subjects except for Mathematics is examined at Common Level at Junior Cycle. Mathematics is examined at Ordinary and Higher levels. In the case of the Common Level, teachers expressed mixed views. Some teachers argued that this arrangement does not challenge some students enough, while others welcomed the move to Common Level, which they saw as being more inclusive of all students.

While professional time for teacher planning (40 mins per week) is provided by the Department of Education (DE), many teachers suggested that more time is needed.

Table 6 provides an overview of some subject specific feedback in relation to planning.

Planning for learning, teaching, assessment and reporting: Subject specific observations

## Geography

There was a strong sense in this subject that early planning challenges upon the introduction of the specification had ameliorated over time. However, the broad nature of some learning outcomes was suggested to be an ongoing challenge in planning, and the need was expressed for more clarity and accessibility to be provided in some instances. However, the provision for local autonomy in providing context was welcomed. It was noted that effective teacher and department planning was vital for the support of students to access geoliteracy terminology.

With reference to planning, concern was raised about the perceived lack of distinct parameters of specificity in the articulation of some learning outcomes. This issue relates in part to the nature of learning outcomes as a concept, which by their design are intended to allow for interpretation to suit different contexts, or to be flexible. However, feedback indicates that respondents in some cases perceived some learning outcomes to be too broad or vague, rendering more difficult the realisation of the Aim of the subject.

## History

The designation of Strand One 'The nature of history' as an integrative strand focused on the acquisition of key disciplinary skills relating to the practice of the historian was endorsed and considered by many to be vital to the successful enactment of the specification. The flexibility that allowed for engagement with such historical skills as critical thinking, research and analysis, was commended. There was a sense that more guidance on what is required in certain learning outcomes would be welcome. Some respondents were of the view that the focus on 'big picture' understanding was quite dominant, evident in learning outcomes that sought awareness of impacts or results of historical phenomena, with less focus on exploring historical events, processes, issues and personalities in detail.

Many teachers indicated that they used textbooks to design schemes of work, expressing the view that textbooks represented approaches to aligning learning outcomes with topics of learning, thus rendering it unnecessary for teachers to 'reinvent the wheel' in this regard. More widely, some submissions to the History review observed that textbooks in the subject sometimes framed learning outcomes in terms of discrete units of content and noted the need to align this approach with the focus on skills acquisition and development that is central to the specification. It was suggested in these cases that some form of guidance in terms of how learning outcomes could be interpreted would be welcome and would provide reassurance to students and teachers.

## Home Economics

Feedback on planning extended into come constructive feedback on the shape of the specification. There was generally strong approval for Strand One learning outcomes, considered to be the most attractive to students. Students themselves expressed their enjoyment of practical cookery classes and active learning generally. Many Home Economics teachers were concerned about the impact of one-hour classes. Where schools have moved to one-hour classes, teachers reported employing mitigation strategies including getting students to share the work of food preparation in advance or to carry out cooking evaluations at home afterwards. However, teachers stressed the importance of being with students to supervise and support the preparation or evaluation work. Some teachers commented that one-hour classes are impacting on due diligence in terms of health and safety and on specific skill development around hygiene because students do not have time to clean up after themselves.

It was evident that many teachers use textbooks as a planning support, although there was some commentary from teachers around the varied manner in which textbooks treated some of the learning outcomes or employed a topic-based rather than integrated approach. Some concerns were expressed about the nature of alignment between some textbook chapters and specific learning outcomes.

## Mathematics

Collaborative planning was valued and supported in all schools visited and participants indicated that collaborative planning with learning outcomes was happening. Teacher confidence in knowing that they *have covered all examinable content* was still a primary concern for when it comes to planning.

Whilst teachers valued an investigative task-based approach that integrated learning from across the strands, it was reported that these tasks can be challenging and time-consuming. There was a sense that the quality of textbooks had improved with the introduction of the specification, with many textbooks now providing integrated units of learning based on learning outcomes from across the strands. Teachers generally recognised the usefulness of learning intentions and indicated that they found it easier to design these than success criteria. Success criteria were used less frequently and mostly in relation to work on CBAs.

A key piece of feedback emerging from the consultation is the reportedly inadequate level of readiness among many first-year students to engage with the subject upon entering post primary education. In this context, teachers point to such concerns as students presenting with poor problem-solving skills, poor number sense and limited ability to work with fractions, decimals and percentages and a lack of pre-mathematical skills that are typically developed through engaging with everyday life (e.g., using such expressions as ‘a quarter of an hour’ when talking about time, engaging with probability through playing cards). Many teachers viewed this with concern and reported that it affects how well students can engage with the specification.

Mathematics teachers specifically noted that the pandemic has had a significant impact on learning, with many noting that constraints on collaborative working necessitated by responses to the pandemic at classroom level made it difficult for students to attain the conceptual understanding necessary for engagement with the learning set out in the specification.

## Music

Opportunities to collaborate with other teachers were valued by teachers in supporting the enactment of the Music specification. Notably, many teachers who worked in single-teacher departments reported how much they appreciated the chance to engage with colleagues in other settings.

Music teachers observed that learning outcomes provided a structured framework for planning, with the potential to create engaging learning experiences and appropriate Units of Learning for students. It was reported that the use of the language of Junior Cycle is increasingly evident in classrooms and in subject planning documentation. CPD supports, particularly in the area of planning and digital planning, were considered helpful in this regard. There was feedback indicating that many teachers were planning in an integrated way, linking learning outcomes across the strands and elements. Many teachers stated that even though they had obtained textbooks, they were also

using materials, resources, and activities which they had designed themselves. However, textbooks were identified as a key resource to guide planning.

To support effective planning, there was broad welcome that the prescribed material of the previous Junior Certificate Music syllabus had been removed but some feedback called for more clarity and direction or suggestions of what should or could be studied.

**Table 6: Planning for learning, teaching, assessment and reporting: Subject specific observations**

## Assessment

This section of the report considers feedback elicited from respondents in relation to assessment. It considers assessment in relation to three aspects:

- Ongoing Assessment
- Classroom-Based Assessments
- Final examination arrangements.

These aspects are informed by the dual approach to assessment in Junior Cycle, designed to support student learning over the three years of learning and to measure achievement at the end of those three years. This dual approach is intended to reduce the focus on the final examination and to increase the prominence given to Classroom-Based Assessments (CBA) and formative assessment. This change of emphasis arises from an acknowledgement that students learn best when teachers provide feedback that helps students to understand how their learning can be improved as outlined in the Framework for Junior Cycle 2015.

### Ongoing Assessment

There was a commonly expressed view by teachers and students that the provision of feedback (written and oral) was a strong feature of classroom practice, and teachers broadly indicated that they had a more conscious and informed focus on formative feedback since the introduction of the specifications. Moreover, it was indicated that the capacity of teachers to offer feedback has improved. Class tests were identified as the most common form of classroom assessment. Questioning, class activities, classroom observation, worksheets and homework exercises were also identified as common forms of classroom assessment. Students reported receiving feedback regularly, identifying where they were successful in their learning and highlighting opportunities for improvement. This feedback was both written and oral.

### Classroom-Based Assessments

The experience of Classroom-Based Assessments received much attention from respondents to the review across all subjects. Much of the commentary elicited related across all five subjects, indicating both positive and negative perspectives.

Overall, when giving generic feedback on CBAs, teachers commented on the value of CBAs for skills development and the opportunities that they afford for teamwork, for reflection and evaluation, and to students of all abilities to succeed. Some teachers and stakeholders specifically referenced CBAs as the main driver of key skills. Students were positive about their experience of working with CBAs, and the sense of freedom they experienced in working on areas of personal interest.

Teacher respondents recognised that in some schools the reluctance to replace house exams with CBAs has led to over-assessment, which was perceived to be negatively impacting on student wellbeing and contributing to a lack of status for CBAs. The most common critical feedback on CBAs from consultation respondents related to grading by descriptor rather than percentage, a negative perception of descriptor titles, the limited number of descriptors and difficulties in supporting students to achieve in relation to specific descriptors, especially those relating to reflection or written work.

Some students referred to the scheduling of CBAs in their school as a cause of stress, due to the reality of having to deal with multiple CBAs across different subjects at the same time. The timing of the CBA presented challenges for some teachers, especially those involved with practical examinations. They considered that CBA completion and assessment, prior to the practical examination, was reducing and removing focus from the practical performance at a critical time for students.

For some students, CBAs felt like a distinct and separate task to ongoing learning in the classroom. As a result CBAs were viewed by some as unnecessary or a distraction from learning rather than an integral part of it.

Many students expressed dissatisfaction with the grading and reporting structure for CBAs. Students and teachers advocated strongly for the CBAs to contribute in a more substantial way to their overall junior cycle grade. On a related note, some students, who had completed junior cycle and were now in senior cycle, were still unaware of descriptors which had been awarded for their CBAs because they had not received their Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement.

Concerns were raised about challenges in completing CBAs in relation to time to develop research and digital skills and access to digital devices. The challenges of AI and plagiarism were also referenced by some teachers in their feedback.

Table 7 provides an overview of some subject specific feedback in relation to CBAs.

| Classroom Based Assessment: Subject specific observations  |
|--|
| <b>Geography</b>   |
| <p>Due to the Covid -19 arrangements to address disruptions to learning, only CBA 1 'Geography in the news' had been experienced by students. Feedback in relation to the CBA experience was largely positive. Students spoke positively about having the freedom to choose topics of interest to them and expressed enjoyment about presenting their work to their class. It was of interest that the students that chose a topic themselves spoke more positively about the experience than those students who may have had topics suggested to them by their teachers.</p> <p>Teachers reported that they experienced time pressures facilitating learning in the specification learning outcomes and the CBA, while many students commented that the CBA experience was like 'a nice break' from the 'normal' learning experience. The review suggests that the CBA was not seen as part of the learning journey but as somewhat of a supplement to learning. It was viewed as a positive experience but discontent was expressed in relation to its worth in terms of overall</p> |

assessment. Teachers and school leaders reported higher stress levels and student anxiety around CBA windows.

### History

The majority of teachers agreed that research and analytical skills could be developed through CBA1. They believed students benefitted from engagement with their local communities, libraries and archives when researching their particular topics and that was the strength of CBA1. The majority of teachers who engaged with the consultation process had not engaged with CBA2 due to the adjustments to the assessment arrangements. Some teachers suggested that CBA2 would be more beneficial for students as it had a much closer connection to the Leaving Certificate research study (second assessment component). It was suggested that students should choose which CBA they would most like to engage in, but across the survey it was clear that the lack of marks for the final terminal grade was problematic. Most teachers believed that the Assessment Task should be discontinued and that one CBA should be engaged in with a value of 10% being contributed to the final grade.

The review indicated a need for clearer language in Features of Quality set out for the CBAs. It was considered that distinguishing between 'a highly developed sense of historical consciousness' and a 'strong sense of historical consciousness' was problematic and that clarification was required. Students in focus groups reported that they enjoyed working on CBA1, especially if their chosen theme had some meaningful relationship with their own family or locality.

### Home Economics

Some teachers noted that their attitude to CBA1 had changed over time as the positive impact on students' transferrable skill development (planning, time management, editing, textile skills), inclusion, wellbeing and enjoyment levels became apparent. The value of giving choice within CBA1 to students was recognised by teachers and students alike. Some teachers commented favourably on the link between CBA1 and resource management and sustainability, and the integration of reflection and feedback in CBA1. Others identified a link between CBA1 and the Leaving Certificate Home Economics elective on Textiles, Fashion and Design. Most students highlighted the importance of the creative process in CBA1 and frequently referred to the relaxing and therapeutic aspect to the production of their textile work. Both teachers and students appreciate the sense of achievement associated with developing a final product.

In terms of inclusion, some teachers and students commented that not everybody liked textile work and raised concerns about CBA1 for those with dexterity or fine motor skill challenges, and others who may need specialised equipment. The requirement to produce written evidence in CBA1 (and the imbalance in the Features of Quality where two of the three descriptors are focused on written evidence) was viewed as exclusionary by some teachers and stakeholders who suggested that the format of evidence should be optional.

CBA2 was seen as more valuable than CBA1 by some, because it is linked to the practical examination that is worth 50% of marks, and because it provides a skills-based foundation for the Leaving Certificate Home Economics journal. The decrease in the quantity of briefs to three was also viewed favourably.

Consultation respondents, including students, who emphasised challenges associated with CBA2 tended to focus on the briefs. Criticisms were that they were viewed as too technical, too difficult given the age/stage of Junior Cycle, not aligned to the realities of one-hour classes, and limiting of choice.

Students identified that some briefs required more work than others and they saw this as unfair. They also said they would rather be cooking than writing about cooking.

Teachers identified that some students found the research and feedback aspects of CBA2 challenging. Related to this was a request for more detailed support in the Assessment Guidelines on the scope of research required for CBA2. A further challenge identified by teachers related to the timing of availability of the briefs. These participants argued that after briefs are issued, cooking practice was narrowed to the range of dishes relevant to briefs and in preparation for the practical exam, thereby affecting the students' overall experience of cooking.

### Mathematics

Students and school management spoke more favourably than teachers about the value of CBAs in supporting learning in mathematics. There was a very strong view that one CBA was sufficient. There was some feedback which indicated that the statistical investigation focus in CBA2 could be viewed as more accessible to students in second year while similarly, third year might be seen as a more appropriate setting for the mathematical investigation which is the focus of CBA1, which was considered to be more cognitively challenging. However, the nature and focus of the CBAs was generally viewed approvingly.

### Music

Throughout the review, where teachers had been engaging with CBA1, they reported it as being a highlight of the new specification, although this CBA was not compulsory under revised arrangements introduced due to the pandemic. Teacher feedback referred to experimenting with new learning through CBA1, facilitating the development of both student voice and identity. Students reported high levels of enjoyment in the freedom of composition. There was evidence that CBA1 had supported students to acquire and develop many of the key skills of junior cycle. Many respondents referred in their feedback on CBA1, to the Student Reflection which must be included with each of the two compositions chosen for assessment purposes. Feedback pointed to the need for an openness to different formats of reflection including audio/oral, and to address a misconception that the current reflection template provided in the Assessment Guidelines was mandatory, and as such, devoid of student autonomy and choice.

There was broad agreement that CBA2 was accessible to all students and offered learning opportunities such as; a more in-depth knowledge of their pieces; the addition of depth and confidence to their performance; and a reduced likelihood of students requesting to change their performance pieces before the examination. Students who had completed both CBAs reported finding CBA2 more manageable than CBA1. Some teachers also referred to a perceived disparity between CBA1 and CBA2, questioning the musicality of CBA2 and suggesting that CBA2 was 'text heavy'. Teachers did not report any difficulty in awarding the descriptors to the CBAs. This was attributed, by some, to the fact that a similar format is followed in the assessment of students for practical examinations with the SEC, which many teachers had engaged with. Further feedback relating to CBA 2 is offered later in this report in relation to the Practical Examination.



**Table 7: Classroom Based Assessment: Subject specific observations**

## SLAR Process

There was a broad level of endorsement for the experience of SLAR meetings. Teachers identified the opportunity to see a variety of student work and develop a better understanding of the Features of Quality as positives associated with the SLAR process. They referred to the usefulness of the process for generating ideas and exemplars for future CBAs. The most frequently mentioned benefit was the professional collaboration enabled by SLARs. This was seen as especially important for sole subject teachers who managed to participate in SLAR processes with colleagues in other schools, notably in Music and Home Economics.

Teachers who are positively disposed to SLARs spoke about using Assessment Guidelines as a valuable support in the SLAR process. They also identified the usefulness of the examples of student work on [www.curriculumonline.ie](http://www.curriculumonline.ie) for enabling a shared understanding of the Features of Quality, especially in their first experience of SLARs, when they were less confident about judging student work. Some teachers talked about explaining SLAR meeting to their students, a practice they claimed can have the effect of convincing students of the value of their CBA work. It is evident from the feedback that in many schools, the SLAR process has become more manageable and more effective with practice.

During school visits, when teachers talked about SLAR related challenges, they tended to focus on scheduling of SLAR meetings, which appear to often happen in a teacher's own time. Some teachers perceived that SLAR meetings took too much time, referred to a heavy workload associated with SLARs, or complained that facilitation always falls on the same person.

However, SLAR meetings were viewed by almost all teachers as a positive experience. There was widespread acknowledgement of the professional learning benefits of sharing ideas and learning, and of how the meeting provided a sense of security, or 'safety-net' for teachers when reporting back to parents and students. Challenges to engaging effectively in the SLAR included lack of time, challenges in finding teachers from Irish speaking schools to engage with, and the dangers of allowing personal bias to impinge on making judgements.

## Examples of Student Work

Many teachers across all subjects mentioned the value of NCCA-published examples of student work on [www.curriculumonline.ie](http://www.curriculumonline.ie). It was considered that the examples were extremely important and beneficial, and supported teachers to show the potential and variety of possibilities for students. In all feedback, teachers were strongly of the view that such exemplars of standard were important, and in some cases needed to be updated and refreshed. A desire to see varied examples of standard presented in different formats was expressed. It was noted that there was a request for a widening of the breadth of examples available, particularly examples reflecting the *In Line with Expectations* descriptor, but also other descriptors. There was also feedback seeking the inclusion of more Irish examples of student work, where possible.



## Practical Examination

In the case of Music and Home Economics, examination arrangements differ from other Phase 4 subjects in one key respect; namely, provision for a practical examination. Therefore, this section highlights some feedback received into the experience of practical examinations in these two subjects.

### Home Economics

Most teachers, stakeholders and students were positive about the practical examination. Teachers believed a practical cookery exam to be essential in terms of skills development, including related to creativity and evaluation. They saw the benefit of the exam in giving students confidence and a sense of achievement, especially important for those who might otherwise struggle. The weighting of 50% was deemed fair by most respondents, although some students argued for 70%. Teachers claimed that parents find 50% reassuring, especially if their child finds more content focused learning challenging.

Many teachers and stakeholders appreciated the link between CBA2 and the practical examination. They reasoned that this gave students time and space to do valuable research linked to the practical. Some students struggled to differentiate between CBA2 and the practical exam. The length of time between CBA2 completion and the practical exam was identified as problematic in this regard. Some respondents also made the case for an element of the practical examination to be linked to CBA1.

Where respondents gave critical feedback specific to the practical exam, the focus was on the financial cost to students and misalignment between 1-hour classes and the longer 1.5-hour exam. Teachers were critical of the short notice for the exam and the requirement for 12 students to work together and share equipment during the exam, viewing this as impacting negatively on student choice.

### Music

There was broad welcome from teachers and students for the Practical Examination. The broad parameters of the examination were viewed as inclusive, allowing students to take more ownership of their performance. There was unanimous welcome for the opportunity for students to perform their own compositions as part of their practical examination.

The requirement for the Practical Examination included in the Assessment and Reporting section of the specification was viewed as clear and providing sufficient detail for students and teachers.

Sight-reading rhythm was referenced as particularly positive by both students and teachers. It also appeared that many teachers were attempting the improvisation option with their students. This was attributed to the explicit reference to improvisation in some learning outcomes.

While many teachers stated that they believed the award of 30% of the final marks to be adequate, there were some who felt that this should be increased to 40% or 50% and that this would align more strongly with Leaving Certificate Music. Residual challenges of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic were reported in the feedback. This manifested itself in feedback relating to a noticeable reduction of engagement in group music-making activities and performances.

While the impact of revised assessment arrangements was noted throughout the feedback there were two key aspects to it. Firstly, during and after COVID-19, teachers reported a noticeable reduction in group music-making and group participation in practical examinations. Secondly, the reduction in the number of pieces which were required for the practical examination, from three to two, has had a backwash effect on the completion of CBA2. CBA2: the Programme Note, was reported to have become more of a project to be completed two weeks before the final examination and less of a developmental skill built over time.

## Final Assessment

This section of the report deals with experience of the final examination. While each subject examination paper is structured differently, an overview of feedback elicited that is common to each subject is set out below, before looking at subject specific feedback.

Both students and teachers stated that they would welcome if the marks allocated for each question could be indicated on the written examination paper. This would help students to apportion their time and effort more effectively.

The broad range and relevance of questions in the written examination for subjects was viewed as positive and teachers welcomed being able to clearly identify learning from the specification in the questions. Teachers recognised the structure of questions moving from basic to more challenging and appreciated that questions were designed so all students can potentially attempt and feel a measure of success in all sections. There was also acknowledgement that the examinations are designed to assess skill rather than traditional 'content'.

As mentioned earlier, the Common Level of the examination paper in all subjects except for Mathematics was raised as a concern. It was noted by some respondents that the Common level was not challenging enough for some students and too challenging for others. In the case of History and Geography, where literacy levels were raised as a related issue, this was considered most pertinent. Issues around accessibility and inclusion were raised in this context also.

Table 8 provides an overview of some subject specific feedback in relation to Final Assessment.

### Final Assessment: Subject specific observations

#### Geography

It was notable that many respondents' opinions on learning outcomes were directly related to the examination. They reported that they were confident at the classroom level with the learning outcomes; however, some expressed much less confidence about how students were prepared for the final examination. Teachers commented that ensuring students achieve success in the examination was a key priority and expressed some disillusionment with a perceived lack of coherence between the specification and the examination as experienced to date. This was also coupled with feedback relating to students studying at a common level and the wide achievement bands (specifically the 'merit' and 'higher merit' bands). Both Geography teachers and students expressed strong views on the width of the bands and the negative impact this had on student morale and motivation. In some instances respondents cited the achievement bands as negatively impacting upon students' personal perceptions of their own ability.

## History

Many teacher respondents expressed concerns in relation to the terminal examination. A majority of teachers reported that having no marks on the paper disadvantaged many students, who did not know how much depth to go into when addressing questions. This was equally reflected in comments made in school-based student focus groups, where respondents reported that without having an idea of the value of the questions, they found it difficult to know the level of response required. Many such students who had taken the exam observed that they did not get the timing right on their exam papers.

Due to the fact that the history examination paper is at Common Level, many respondents in the survey felt that the language used in the paper was problematic. For some students, the questions were viewed as basic and too easily accessible, while other students were considered to be disadvantaged by the language register of questions.

## Home Economics

Teachers who commented positively on the written examination focused on the integrated nature of the exam questions, the emphasis on sustainability and on the fact that the lack of predictability means that it is no longer sufficient to 'teach to the test'. However, of the Home Economics assessment components, the written examination elicited the most critical consultation feedback. Students commented on the excessive levels of study required and questioned whether this was worth the 50% allocated to the written exam. They did not like to study content that does not come up in the examination, viewing this as a waste of time. Some teachers reported that they lacked confidence in their ability to support students to prepare for the written examination, and attributed this to what they perceived as somewhat of a mismatch between the intention of the specification, which focuses on skills and process, and the more product orientated examination.

Feedback from some stakeholders and teachers indicated that the language register in examination questions was often too difficult. Questions that were reported as being too broad resulted in some students writing broad answers when specific responses were required; meanwhile, it was reported that some other students found it difficult to decipher the action verbs in questions.

This type of feedback was usually linked to a critique of the move from Higher and Ordinary to Common Level. The paper was also critiqued for lack of choice. Some students and teachers believed the paper to be too long and noted that this put students under time pressure in the context of the one-hour written examination. In the absence of marks indicated on the paper, the fact that the formatting of the paper does not provide clues about importance of questions in different sections elicited much critical commentary.

Teachers identified being under subject-specific time pressures (preparing classrooms, health and safety audits), which impacts negatively on the time to prepare for SLAR meetings.

## Mathematics

There were mixed views reported in discussions related to the written assessment. Students and most teachers spoken to were happy with the fact that there was one written examination paper. Most of the concerns voiced by students about the written paper were in relation to the amount of space available for answers. They held a clear perception that the bigger the space, the more detailed was

the answer required. It was suggested that this caused some uncertainty for students. Some teachers felt that the wording of some questions were unnecessarily complicated, with many students sharing this view.

Some teachers were less enthusiastic about the move to a single examination paper and called for a return of the two written papers and the Foundation level examination. The rationale provided was that they did not think it was possible to assess all the learning in one paper and that some students were not catered for by an Ordinary level examination.

### Music

The wide breadth of learning reflected in the final examination papers issued by the SEC to date, was seen as reinforcing the non-linear approach to engaging with the specification and promoting the integrated nature of learning across the three strands.

In their feedback, teachers identified some overlap in learning assessed, but stated that there was no predictability in the paper. While there some anxiety about this lack of predictability, teachers stated that as more examinations take place, they will inevitably become more comfortable with the new format.

The language used in the written examination was identified as a concern by some teachers. Feedback indicated that students may not be reading the questions carefully enough, or more often, with some not having sufficient literacy skills to interpret questions. Some teachers stated that some students were not being challenged sufficiently by the written paper. Feedback indicated that some teachers were focused on preparation of students for examination questions rather than viewing the examination as an assessment of all learning from across the three years of junior cycle.

**Table 8: Final Assessment: Subject specific observations**

## Framework for Junior Cycle, Inclusion and Transition to Senior Cycle

### Supporting the transition to senior cycle

There was evidence in the feedback received that many respondents had concerns about a perceived gap that students would have to bridge between Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle across subjects. These concerns are outlined for each subject in the following table.

#### Supporting the transition to senior cycle: Subject specific observations

##### Geography

It was noted that where students enjoyed features of the specification, their enthusiasm for the subject in general was heightened and they were more motivated to pursue it in senior cycle. Opportunities for students to pursue areas of interest were lauded in this regard. Teachers, however, reported concerns about the lack of opportunities for students to engage in extended writing. These concerns were reported in relation to the resultant perceived lack of preparedness for the demands of Leaving Certificate Geography. Teachers expressed concern that the lack of such opportunities for extended writing affected the development of students'

|                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
|                       | critical thinking skills, seen to be connected with the act of writing and as a result is impacting the number of students pursuing the subject into Senior Cycle.  |
| <b>History</b>        | The breadth of the specification was raised in the context of the transition to senior cycle. Some teachers reported that the broad survey approach to investigating historical personalities, events, processes and issues in Junior Cycle differed from the in-depth and detailed analysis required of students in Leaving Certificate History, and that students found the greater rigour in this context at senior cycle a challenge. On a related note, some feedback pointed to concerns about the level of preparedness students had for the demands of extended writing at Leaving Certificate level. It was considered that there were less opportunities for extended writing in the new specification than there had been under the Junior Certificate. It was further noted that extended writing supported the acquisition and development of critical thinking and the bespoke disciplinary skills associated with History.   |
| <b>Home Economics</b> | Some teachers suggested that in revising Leaving Certificate Home Economics, the emphasis on practical cookery, sustainability and wellbeing should be continued from Junior Cycle. In the meantime, the role that Transition Year Home Economics modules can play in bridging Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate Home Economics were stressed. It was also suggested that a separate skills and practical-focused Home Economics module or course be developed for students who may not wish to take Home Economics as a full Leaving Certificate subject.   |
| <b>Mathematics</b>    | <p>Concern was expressed about a perceived gulf between the Junior Cycle experience of Mathematics and the demands of Leaving Certificate Mathematics. It was notable that students currently in 5<sup>th</sup> year commented on the significant change of pace they experienced at Leaving Certificate, observing that missing lessons for any reason, including due to other school activities, was very problematic in terms of keeping up with class progress.</p> <p>There were different views in relation to how best to bridge the gap that was perceived by many to exist between junior cycle and senior cycle mathematics. Many teachers spoke about the need to review senior cycle mathematics so that it would align better with junior cycle mathematics, and noted the opportunity that exists to do so in the near future in the context of the Senior Cycle Redevelopment process. Others considered the most appropriate response to closing this gap to be in relation to changes in junior cycle mathematics, so that the specification aligns more closely to the current senior cycle course.</p> |
| <b>Music</b>          | The emphasis on personal creativity and innovation, being communicative and collaborative through music, understanding of how music is created,   |

and awareness of music at all levels of the community in a historical and modern-day context, were seen to support students in their transition from junior to senior cycle. Engagement in group music-making activities through creating, exploring, performing and appraising music from a wide range of both native and international cultures was viewed as assisting students to meet the challenges of senior cycle and of life beyond school. The development of aural skills and skills in the area of composition were two areas where teachers had observed improvements in senior cycle. Teachers attributed this improvement directly to the learning in the junior cycle specification.

The challenge relating to musical literacy and critical skills mentioned earlier in this report was also reported in feedback relating to transitioning to senior cycle. Many teachers and students reported a gap between junior and senior cycle and the need to remediate skills such as score reading, musical literacy and musical analysis.

The learning in senior cycle was viewed by some participants as not being as relevant to students, in their real lives, as the specification at junior cycle. While learning was viewed as more musical and enjoyable at junior cycle, it was the clearly defined parameters for study at senior cycle which were seen as attractive incentives for students electing to study the subject. In some responses from teachers, teaching and learning behaviours, such as using formulae for composing, were reported as making many of the skills attained at junior cycle near obsolete in senior cycle.

## Reporting on student achievement

When asked for examples of how schools report on progress, some students referred to parent-teacher meetings and end of year reports. These typically included the percentage mark achieved in house examinations and some feedback, but it was reported that some students were not enthusiastic about the feedback, noting that the same formulaic or generic feedback was often given to all students.

Stakeholders and teachers across subjects referred to an increased emphasis on formative feedback in class, with an interesting link made between feedback by teachers to students and the emphasis on evaluation and feedback in the CBAs. Most teachers indicated that the main reporting change was in the integration of the language of the Framework for Junior Cycle into school reports to parents/guardians. This was acknowledged as providing a fuller picture of progress and in keeping with the emphasis on wellbeing in Junior Cycle. It was reported in the consultation that this type of reporting has become easier with practice and time.

Although some teachers talked about the value of the inclusion of CBA achievements in school reports and in the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA), most identified that the focus is still very much on the examination results from the State Examinations Commission (SEC). School management, teachers and students all agreed that the timing of the release of the JCPA, usually when students are well into Transition or 5<sup>th</sup> Year, is too late and served only to undervalue the

JCPA. They all stated a preference for the release of the JCPA to coincide with the earlier issue of SEC examination results.

It was evident during the review that both teachers and students across all subjects were dissatisfied with the grading bands, particularly in relation to the Merit and Higher Merit grade bands. Feedback from both teachers and students indicated that this dissatisfaction emanated from the width of the bands and the lack of clarity this width provided in relation to individual student achievement.

Some teachers expressed concern at the low number of Distinctions awarded to their students in the final result, which was in part, attributed to the lack of predictability in the structure of the examination. This also led teachers to question the level required to achieve Distinction at Junior Cycle when compared to Junior Certificate.

## Inclusion

The review indicated that teachers are engaging with students who are following Level 2 Learning Programmes (L2LPs) in mainstream classrooms. For those who were successful in integrating students taking the L2LPs in their classroom, this integration was viewed as not only supportive of the individual student, but supportive of all learners and the wider school community. There were indications from teachers that the number of students taking the L2LPs was increasing over time. This was reported as presenting challenges for teachers in terms of planning quality and inclusive learning experiences for all students in their classroom.

Where teachers discussed working with students who are accessing Level 2 Learning Programmes in their classrooms, there was a mixed response about their capacity to plan effectively. Several teachers indicated that while synergies between subject specifications and Level 2 Priority Learning Units (PLUs) were possible across some topics, they were not evident in others. Teachers who employ Universal Design for Learning principles in their planning commented on the value of this approach in supporting all students' learning, as well as facilitating a thematic approach, for bringing in real life examples and increasing student engagement generally. The key role of SNAs in enabling students' full participation, and of team-teaching approaches in supporting students to access their learning in Level 2 Learning Programmes, was acknowledged. Planning learning experiences that support students from a variety of language backgrounds, and the challenge of achieving this, was a key consideration raised in the feedback across all subjects.

## 5. Insights, recommendations and next steps

---



NCCA would like to acknowledge and thank the teachers, students and other stakeholders who contributed to this review. Their feedback was very useful in supporting insights into how the Phase 4 subjects specification have been enacted and experienced.

This section of the report considers how feedback from the review supports the identification of key insights and recommendations. In doing so, it is important to acknowledge that curriculum change is a complex process that takes time to achieve and neither teachers nor a single cohort of students experienced the curriculum and assessment arrangements as intended due to the disruption caused by the Covid 19 pandemic. Furthermore it is important to acknowledge the extraordinary effort made by teachers of the Phase 4 subjects to support engagement with new curriculum and assessment arrangements in very challenging circumstances.

## Insights

The following insights are drawn from consideration of the various issues raised in the course of this report. They seek to synthesise the feedback and are intended to inform recommendations that follow. These insights are categorised in relation to the Framework, firstly; and then in relation to the Phase 4 subject specifications.

### Feedback related to the Framework for Junior Cycle

- Aspirations underpinning the Framework for Junior Cycle in relation to supporting schools to design programmes that meet the needs of learners in their specific contexts, and allowing for enhanced local autonomy and flexibility, are recognised by teachers and school leaders. The recognition and encouragement of teacher professional judgements in designing courses and engaging with assessment as set out in the Framework are also acknowledged by teachers and school management. Awareness of how these aspirations are a basis for the design of subject specifications is evident in feedback offered in the review.
- There was a consensus that the enactment of each of the subjects was supporting students to acquire and develop the key skills of junior cycle, and these skills were viewed as appropriate and important.
- It is evident that the culture of collaborative planning underpinning Junior Cycle has become more embedded in schools, with the SLAR process a significant aspect of this developing culture. Teachers generally welcome the SLAR process as a valuable opportunity for professional conversations with colleagues. Teacher thinking and practice relating to assessment has become more extended and enhanced, with formative assessment practices becoming more embedded in classrooms.
- In the context of planning, it is notable that textbooks continue to play a significant role in teacher planning and pedagogy, and are viewed as an important resource by teachers on how to interpret and plan for teaching and learning using learning outcomes. DE inspectorate commentary on the desirability of integrating textbook use with other relevant pedagogical approaches and resources is noted in this context.



- Some concerns are evident around aspects of the broader implementation of the Framework, including resources, time, timetabling, inclusion, and the transition to senior cycle.
- There is a view that delays in issuing the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement is negatively impacting on the status given to CBAs and the perception of CBAs held by students and parents.
- The experience of the final assessment varies somewhat across subjects. However, in all cases, there is some frustration around the perceived excessive width of grading bands, and the perceived excessive difficulty in students attaining Distinctions. There remain some concerns about the Common Level. There are calls for greater transparency in the designation of marks for questions on the examination paper.

### Feedback related to the enactment of the Phase 4 subjects

- There is a consensus across all five subjects that the Aim set out for each subject is apt, and encapsulates the desired learning for students at the age and stage of Junior Cycle.
- The specification design in terms of strands and learning outcomes is viewed as appropriate across all five subjects, with a general consensus that the essential learning for each subject is captured within the outcomes set out.
- It is evident that teachers of the Phase 4 subjects have developed greater familiarity and awareness of the pedagogical approaches underpinning the learning outcomes approach, and that initial uncertainty has eased over time. This greater level of acquaintance extends to the language of learning and teaching, including such terminology as learning intentions, success criteria, and invoking opportunities for promoting and facilitating student voice.
- It is evident that the experience of final examinations for Phase 4 subjects is further supporting the enactment of the specifications in school, and furthering teacher and student understanding.
- Teachers generally view their CPD experience positively, and welcome such opportunities. There is a desire for new and varied examples of student work to be developed across all subjects to continue to support teacher professional judgements and assessment knowledge.
- The experience of Classroom Based Assessments is viewed as largely positive, with students pointing in particular to the opportunities provided for pursuit of areas of personal interest and fulfilment. However, there is a strong view that one CBA is sufficient for each subject.
- While understanding of learning outcomes has certainly become more refined, tensions still exist in relation to what is perceived as excessive vagueness or lack of clarity in relation to some learning outcomes across the subjects, with teachers seeking more guidance or specificity in some instances, particularly in the context of preparing students for the final examination.

- In this context, there is also some concern over the amount of learning outcomes to be explored in the classroom over the time allotted for subjects, with the amount of outcomes often viewed as equating to more content to be covered.
- There is frustration that in most cases, CBAs are not recognised in terms of the final overall grade for the subject. (It is noted that this is not the same for all subjects.)
- There is also a sense among some teachers and students that CBAs take up class time in a manner that does not support learning towards the final examination. This feeling is compounded by stress that students feel when they are working on several CBAs across different subjects at the same time. There is a sense that the final examination still exerts great influence on teacher and student perspectives, and indeed on parents' views also.

Overall, there is a general sense from the feedback that the stage of implementation of the Phase 4 subjects reflects a greater confidence and assuredness in how students and teachers are engaging with the specifications and with the Framework, and an incrementally more refined understanding is evident among teachers as the phases of subjects have gone through their first examination cycles. However some further work could be undertaken to continue to support teachers in the enactment, as set out in recommendations below.

## Recommendations

It is evident from the feedback to the review that many of the issues raised extend beyond the domain of the specific subject, and relate more broadly to implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle. This was also evident in the early enactment review of Phase 1-3 subjects. While the remit of the review does not include proposing actions relating to the implementation of the Framework, the following table identifies the most pertinent of these issues

### Issues relating to the Implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle

Some actions relating to the broader implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle may be taken through focused engagement with relevant stakeholders and partners, informed by feedback elicited in the review. The following four areas for actions are identified.

#### Professional time and planning, timetabling and resources

Professional time for teachers was introduced to support schools in their enactment of the Framework for Junior Cycle. This time is valued by teachers and school management. More time and guidance for planning, timetabling and access to appropriate resources would be welcomed by all teachers and school management.

#### Assessment and Reporting

The broader approach to assessment in junior cycle, although generally welcomed by teachers, still has challenges in terms of enactment.

The shift to Common Level examination papers has been challenging for teachers. More guidance and support in this context would be appreciated.

Equally, some concerns remain around the nature of the grading system and grade bands that currently obtain in the assessment of junior Cycle subjects. The narrowness of the Distinction band was raised as a concern.

Feedback on the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement suggests that there is still a need for more urgency around the earlier issuing of the JCPA, and for more communication to explain its relevance to students and parents.

### **CBA and SLAR Meetings**

The role and importance of CBAs in the context of the dual assessment approach needs to be highlighted for teachers, students and parents. Support and guidance for the ongoing facilitation of SLAR meetings would also be appreciated, especially for one-teacher subject departments that exist in some schools for some subjects, including Music and Home Economics, especially, in the context of this review.

### **University of Limerick research: 'Exploring the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle: A longitudinal study'**

Findings emerging from the University of Limerick-led longitudinal study on the implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle should be communicated to teachers, students and parents.

## **Recommendations relating to the ongoing enactment of each Phase 4 Subject**

Feedback from the review across all five subjects has identified issues that are common across all subjects. The review finds that the essence of each specification, in terms of its design in strands and learning outcomes, and designation of CBAs, is such that significant revisions or amendments that would necessitate the convening of a development group are not required.

However, it is proposed that some practical actions could be undertaken across all five subjects, to address the more pertinent and prominent issues raised.

The following table sets out the subject specific actions that are recommended in response to the feedback received in the review.

| <b>Recommendations</b>   |
|--|
| <b>NCCA will, for all five subjects,:</b><br>Engage with colleagues in OIDE around issues raised in the review, including planning with learning outcomes and assessment, to enhance teacher understanding |
| Consider the development of additional supports to offer clarity where required on some learning outcomes  |
| Develop a glossary of key terms that require further elucidation   |

Update and publish annotated exemplars of student work reflecting different levels of achievement, including exemplars in the medium of Irish

Provide more clarity around synergies/linkages between Level 2 Learning Programmes and Level 3 specifications to ensure meaningful inclusion of students (to include, specifically, the Level 2 short course in History)

Explore how updates to the Assessment Guidelines for each subject may address issues raised in the review

Revisit the wording of Features of Quality for CBAS in subject Assessment Guidelines, (to include a focus on providing enhanced clarification of the term 'historical consciousness' in History, and the term 'compelling' in Music)

**Table 10: Recommendations for action for each subject**

## 6. Next Steps

---

Based on the insights and recommendations presented above, the following next steps are proposed:

- The proposed responses set out in Table 10 will be progressed and made available to schools before September 2025.
- NCCA will liaise with the support service, Oide, to clarify the changes made in advance of the publication of any updated Assessment Guidelines or support material
- The feedback from the review will be shared with all stakeholders involved in the implementation of the FWJC15.

It is hoped that the review process, the report that emerged from it, and the recommendations arising, continue to support students, teachers and school management in realising the Aims for the subjects, and implementing the Framework for Junior Cycle effectively.



**NCCA**

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta  
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta  
National Council for  
Curriculum and Assessment