



Classics Background Paper: Consultation Report

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1. Introduction

In total there were 47 responses to the online consultation, and these were supported by two written submissions (See Appendix for list of organisations). Fifty-seven percent of those who responded to the online consultation were classics teachers (a combination of classical studies and classical languages teachers), while nineteen percent of responses came from parents/guardians. The remaining twenty-four percent were made up of principals and deputy principals, teacher educators and retired teachers.

The following report is based on an analysis of the views on the background paper expressed in the online survey and in the written submissions.

The consultation focused on the following areas:

- experiences of the Junior Certificate syllabus and examination
- implications from insights into teaching, learning and assessment in international curricula
- options for course structure and content
- assessment in junior cycle classics.

2. Feedback themes

Following an analysis of the online survey and the views expressed in the written submissions, the data was coded and the following themes emerged:

- experiences of the Junior Certificate
- public perception and awareness of the subject
- pedagogical approaches and opportunities
- assessment options and suggestions.

These four themes will be explored further in the following sections, and selected quotations from respondents are used, where appropriate, to illustrate and clarify the views being expressed.

2.1 Experiences of Junior Certificate

The Junior Certificate syllabus is a three-year programme that is divided between a one-year foundational course (this material is not examined as part of the junior certificate examination), followed by a two-year Junior Certificate programme. For the Junior Certificate course, there are ten topics available for students to study, split evenly between the Greek and the Roman worlds. Students must choose five topics from this list, a minimum of two from each civilisation. The consultation shows a very positive attitude from all respondents to the content of the current Junior Certificate course and the opportunities it offers students. Ninety-three percent of respondents expressed the view that the current course allows students the opportunity to gain a broad understanding of Greek and Roman civilisations.

There were mixed views on the notion of the Junior Certificate offering teachers and students sufficient flexibility in determining subject content. Fifty-five percent agreed with this statement, while 45% disagreed. This is an interesting contradiction and might point to the fact that while there is a choice as to what topics of study you might undertake, there is limited content choice within those topics. This might also indicate a divergence between the flexibility that is offered within the parameters of the syllabus and the practice of teachers teaching the same material each year.

The responses to the survey showed strong agreement (77%) that the junior certificate course allows students develop an understanding of their own world and society through engaging with the ancient languages and civilisations. The research undertaken for the background paper highlighted this as an aspect that should be maintained in the new specification. Seventy-five percent agreed that students are offered scope for personal expression and opinion, while 88% of respondents felt that learning in Classics classrooms favours a collaborative and active environment.

When asked if the existing syllabus offers students the opportunity to explore areas of interest to them, this generated a mixed response, (similar to the response above), where 55% agreed and 45% disagreed. Again, this divide will need to be borne in mind as teachers and students will be offered flexibility in considering content and deciding pedagogical approaches.

The question that generated the least ambiguous response, and echoing the views of teachers and students that were consulted as part of the preparation for the background paper, was on the public perception of what classics is all about. One hundred percent of respondents felt that there is a lack of awareness as to the nature of this subject. This is something that will need to be considered in the writing of the rationale and the aim for the specification, and considered in the wider context of how to support the promotion of Classics in schools.

In broad terms, there is strong support for the content of the course, and connected to this, the experience that students receive through engaging with this subject.

The views expressed in this overview were expanded on in the subsequent sections of the survey. This report will next explore this issue of the public perception of the subject and some ideas on addressing this as offered through the consultation.

2.2 Public perception and awareness of classics

As stated above, the online consultation and earlier conversations with students and teachers highlighted the mismatch between what the public perception is of the subject and what is experienced in classrooms. The responses from the survey offered some insights into how this could be rectified and these solutions will also feature in the next section of this report on pedagogical approaches and opportunities (section 3).

One respondent felt that

The course should primarily give students an understanding of why the classical civilisations should be studied. If the relevance cannot be shown, and the value, the numbers taking the course will continue to decline (Principal/Deputy Principal).

This notion of the relevance of the subject to the modern student and their society is threaded through the online comments. The main thrust of the comments highlight that the purpose of engaging with and studying this subject needs stronger foregrounding.

The civilisations and the languages are seen as

...fascinating and rich in content....lessons of the past have to be presented to the minds of the present (Principal/Deputy Principal).

The specification should push teachers and learners to draw links between then (antiquity) and now (modernity) so that the Classical world is relevant to their lives and this aspect of the course should be assessed in the exam (Teacher).

Another quote from a Classics teacher highlights the concern that this subject is seen as difficult, and an 'elitist' and 'upper-class' subject due to its 'popularity in private schools'.

Whereas in reality, Classics is incredibly diverse, it is one of the few subjects where I can confidently say there is something for everyone. It could easily be the sexiest, most violent subject out there with some of the most gripping literature and interesting philosophical concepts....we really need to seize this opportunity to sell it to kids and reinvigorate it (Teacher).

Another comment reflects that the course should offer an introductory entry to the subject, and at this level, should move away from the expectation that students engage with unedited primary sources. The aim, according to an online respondent, should be an introductory, overall understanding and engagement of the topic, not university level primary source mastery.

As is clear from these statements, and threaded through the consultation, is the concern around falling numbers and how this might be as a result of a misunderstanding of this subject. These comments show that the rationale and the aim are very important in this context, and they need to address these concerns by stating clearly the benefits that can be accrued through the study of Classics. It is clear from those who teach it, and from talking to the students who study it, that this subject is exciting, engaging, challenging and multi-disciplinary, and this message needs stronger emphasis.

2.3 Pedagogical approaches and opportunities

The background paper offered some insights into teaching, learning and assessment in other countries, and also considered some relevant Irish research. In light of the observations from other

jurisdictions, the consultation sought views of respondents on the pedagogical approaches that the classics specification could promote.

When asked on whether students should be offered the opportunity to engage in a detailed study of a topic of their choosing, 86% favoured this option. This has clear implications for an aspect of the Classroom-Based Assessments. The questionnaire posed the question on whether students should be given the opportunity to engage in thinking about Classics and their own environment, and there was overwhelming support for this at 91%. Respondents also favoured having material and visual culture elements as compulsory within the new specification as 80% were in favour of this approach.

The possibility of group work being a compulsory part of the assessment was posed in the survey, and this met with a mixed response. The majority of respondents supported the notion of students engaging in group work activities, but 60% of respondents were not supportive of a compulsory group assessment element. This is an interesting tension between the desire to incorporate collaborative learning experiences, but not for assessment purposes, and is something that the Classroom-Based Assessment could help resolve.

While I strongly agree that they should have many opportunities to engage in group work, the assessment of same, as part of the evaluation of their work and of their understanding of the course, may discriminate against them (Private Teacher).

Ninety-seven percent of respondents agreed that inquiry-based learning has a place in the classics specification, while 92% were in favour of students engaging in some cross-curricular work.

I would say the specification should examine the role of this subject in developing students' critical thinking skills (Teacher).

Learner-led learning, non-didactic approach, group work is what is needed (Parent/Guardian).

Cross-curricular work, especially with history, geography, literature, religion, law, sociology, art and games (athletics, javelin, tug of war, fencing etc.) are natural alliances (Retired Latin Teacher).

There were a few comments on the hope that the new specification should be as inclusive as possible.

This quote from a teacher sums this up:

There is an urgent need to make a new specification that considers and includes all students of all abilities. The current syllabus provides a versatile curriculum, but the final assessment is limited in scope for true differentiation (Teacher).

Also on the theme of inclusion:

The panel must keep the weakest student in the class in mind. She may well enjoy Classics and should not be punished for not being as good a writer as everyone else (Teacher).

This quote is related to the assessment mode that is currently employed in the assessment of Classics, namely an assessment that is all completed via a written exam. Other approaches to assessment expressed in the consultation will be explored in the next section.

2.4 Assessment in Junior Cycle Classics

The background paper consultation offered respondents the opportunity to elaborate on their views on assessment of Junior Cycle Classics. In relation to assessment, and specifically the two Classroom-Based Assessments, the findings give some indication on how assessment should be framed and offer the development group some stimulus for their deliberations.

I feel like Classics, as a subject that is already misunderstood, should do something different and more exciting in order to stand out and attract more students. Some sort of multimedia activity or portfolio would help bring Classics into the modern age. Or else, some sort of practical, archaeological and architectural activity would be excellent. Students could complete a report afterwards and include photos of their work or architectural sketches (Teacher).

Regarding the written exam, there were some criticisms of the current exam structure which

demands minute, factual knowledge which doesn't necessarily show a student's overall appreciation of the topic (Principal/Deputy Principal).

This comment reflects the student contribution to the background paper, when they expressed their dissatisfaction with the level of detail that is expected on particular aspects of the course in the examination.

Reflecting the current dominance of a written assessment mode for Classics, there was some support for an oral component to be included as part of the assessment as

an oral component to the exam would be helpful especially for SEN students (Teacher).

There is also support for the 'inclusion of at least one serious project for each year' (Retired Latin Teacher).

When asked to consider and rank in order what would be important for the specification to consider, the following three statements emerged as being important for the online respondents:

- the notion that storytelling and narrative should be central to the design of the specification

- that the specification should encourage student engagement, wellbeing and inclusion
- the specification should allow for and cater for the development of students' collaborative and communication skills

These priorities and all the comments above will help point the way for the development group as they debate and deliberate on the new Junior Cycle Classics specification, and deliberate the assessment options for Classroom-Based Assessments and the final assessment.

3. Implications for the Brief for Junior Cycle Classics

The brief for the development group (contained in section 8 of the background paper) indicated the areas that the development group needs to address in the design of the new classics specification. Feedback from the consultation supports the brief as presented in the background paper, but the following findings are particularly significant and will need careful deliberation by the development group.

- The rationale will be very important in giving a clear picture as to the possibilities and opportunities that engaging with classics as a subject can offer. The consultation clearly expresses the belief that the public perception of this subject is not aligned to the reality of how Classics is and can be experienced in classrooms.
- There is a need to ensure that the Classics specification is accessible and challenging for all and that the new specification is inclusive of all students.
- Cross-curricular activities that foster inquiry-based approaches and collaborative environments need to be a central tenet of this specification.
- Comments on the assessment of Classics, highlighted the need for modes of assessment that are varied, that could be collaborative and that could involve practical or oral components. These are suggestions that should be borne in mind by the development group.
- This consultation cements the ideas expressed in the background paper that teachers and students are very happy with the experiences offered in the junior certificate course, and are in favour of retaining much of the current content.

4. Appendix

Written Submissions

Classical Association of Ireland – Teachers (CAI-T)

Department of Education and Skills (DES)

