



School-based review: **cycle two questions**

Questions for Parent Focus-Group Sessions

In cycle one, the questions focused on the broad purposes of this stage of education. We asked questions about the benefits and challenges of senior cycle for your children. We now want to delve into the aspects of the programmes offered in your school that we can learn from in this review of senior cycle. We also want to look further afield, explore some other ways of structuring senior cycle and draw comparisons with our own experiences.

1. This question is looking for your thoughts on the programmes currently offered at senior cycle

Facilitator notes: In our system currently, approximately 65% of students entering senior cycle take Transition Year (TY), 95% of students follow the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) programme or the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), with 5% following the Leaving Certificate Applied programme (LCA).

Research has identified aspects of TY such as the inclusion of work experience, modular learning, collaborative learning, learner-led curriculum and self-development as being very beneficial for students. In LCE, there is a broad curriculum with a wide variety of subjects, that facilitates the progression pathways of students. LCA offers a pathway into further education and employment. LCVP gives students insights into the world of enterprise and work.

Research has identified some challenges related to these programmes including a lack of student engagement and high stress levels (LCE), limited access to progression routes (LCA), an unclear identity as a distinct programme (LCVP), and a lack of structure (TY). As parents are there other challenges you can identify?

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- a. ***What, if any, are the three most positive features of the programme your child/children are following? Please provide specific examples.***
- b. ***What, if any, are the three most negative features of the programme your child/children are following? Please provide specific examples.***
- c. ***If there is a programme that is not offered within your school? do you think that there are aspects of this programme that might benefit your child/children?***

2. **This question is looking for your thoughts on how Senior Cycle should or could be structured**

Facilitator notes: In deciding how to structure Senior Cycle, there are a number of key considerations, including how long senior cycle should be

- how long senior cycle should be
- whether students complete it at varying paces or all complete it in the same length of time
- the range of curricular components students choose from (subjects, modules, units of learning work experience, life-skills)

Currently in Ireland, Senior Cycle for all students is a minimum of two years duration to complete one of the Leaving Certificate programmes (LCE, LCA, LCVP). About two thirds of students complete an optional Transition Year which means a three-year Senior Cycle for these students. This is similar to other jurisdictions, where the duration of upper secondary programmes is broadly between two and four years. Some countries allow the duration of upper secondary to expand to four years or contract to two years depending on the requirements of the student (Ontario, the Netherlands). Modular credit-based systems (Ontario, New Zealand, Queensland, Sweden) allow students to choose modules of varying specificity and intensity which enables the contraction or expansion of time taken to complete the modules.

When answering this question, please consider: the optimal duration of senior cycle, whether all students must complete it in the same amount of time or

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whether there should be flexibility in the length of senior cycle, the degree of flexibility that could be offered, and how this could be structured.

- a. ***How long should Senior Cycle be and what, if any, flexibility should there be for students to complete senior cycle at a different pace?***
 - b. ***Should students be offered a greater choice of curricular components to construct their senior cycle programme?***
 - c. ***Are there some subjects/areas/ learning experiences that should be studied by all senior cycle students? Please explain your thinking***
- 3. This question is looking for your thoughts on pathways available to students in Senior Cycle**

Facilitator notes: In discussing pathways at senior cycle, there are a number of key considerations including:

- the range of pathways available (academic, technical, vocational, professional)
- whether these pathways can be combined or are ring-fenced
- whether or not different sites of learning can be used

In considering pathways available at senior cycle, it is helpful to bear in mind the range of options open to students on completion of senior cycle, including further education, higher education, traineeships, apprenticeships, employment or some of these combined.

In many jurisdictions, there are specific pathways available for students in senior cycle such as academic, technical, vocational and professional pathways, as well as traineeships and apprenticeships. In some countries, students can take modules in different areas and combine technical, vocational and academic pathways for completion of their chosen programme. This flexibility also allows for different sites of learning to be used in addition to the base educational institution.

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Senior Cycle in Ireland has, to date, been a predominantly academic pathway with very limited vocational, technical or professional options available. The ring-fencing of the LCA and its exclusion from CAO has limited progression pathways for LCA students and resulted in a perceived lower status for the programme. The development of Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes for junior cycle students and changes in school inclusion policies also have implications for senior cycle.

- a. ***Do you think your child is following a senior cycle pathway that best suits their needs? Explain***
 - b. ***Do you think the learning experiences available to your child best suits their needs? What suggestions would you make in this respect?***
- 4. This question is looking for your thoughts on assessment in Senior Cycle**

Facilitator notes: Of the 37 subjects available in the Leaving Certificate established, 18 have an additional assessment component (project, practical or oral) completed before the terminal examination. In LCVP, students complete a portfolio worth 60% of the final grade. In LCA students accumulate credits over the course of the two-year programme through completion of modules, key assignments, tasks and interviews in addition to the final examinations.

In most of the jurisdictions researched (with the exception of France) there is an internal assessment component in the final reporting of achievement. In credit-based systems (New Zealand, Ontario, Queensland, Sweden and Ireland (LCA only)), credits are accumulated over the course of the programme. Sweden awards credits for community involvement activities, and in Finland and New Zealand credits are awarded for structured work experience or work assignments in work placement. In most jurisdictions, there is a compulsory assessment of literacy and/or numeracy.

Please consider how the curriculum and the broad learning experiences of students at senior cycle might be assessed.

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- a. ***What, if any, are the positive features of current approaches to senior cycle assessment? In your response consider the most positive features of assessment for each programme you are familiar with (TY, LCE, LCVP or LCA).***
- b. ***What, if any, are the negative features of current approaches to senior cycle assessment? In your response consider the most positive features of assessment for each programme you are familiar with (TY, LCE, LCVP or LCA).***
- c. ***Consider your answer to Question 3, would you like to see any changes to senior cycle assessment? If so, please outline the kinds of changes you would like to see, the reasons for these changes and the potential challenges in bringing about these changes.***

5. This question is looking for your thoughts on reporting

Facilitator notes: Currently, Junior Cycle students receive a profile of achievement which reports on student achievement in a number of areas and TY students receive a record of achievement. LCA students receive a composite description of the credits achieved over the two years broken down into four levels (distinction, merit, pass, fail). LCE students receive a statement of grades in their final examinations.

In other jurisdictions, students can receive a range of documents to record their achievements such as a school leaving certificate (Sweden), a secondary school diploma (Ontario), in addition to matriculation or third level entry certificates (Queensland, New Zealand). Students in Queensland who have learning difficulties can receive the Queensland Certificate of Individual Achievement that provides a summary of their skills and knowledge for employers or training providers.

- a. ***What do you think is important to be included in your child's report at the end of senior cycle?***



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6. Anything we have missed?

Please note anything we have missed in the booklet provided.

Glossary of Acronyms

LCE: The *Leaving Certificate Established* programme is a two-year **programme**, containing a range of distinct subjects. Subjects are normally studied at either Ordinary or Higher Level.

LCVP: The *Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme* is a Leaving Certificate with a strong vocational aspect. The programme consists of Leaving Certificate subjects, together with three compulsory link modules on enterprise education, preparation for work and work experience. Students must take at least 5 Leaving Certificate subjects, one of which must be Irish and a continental language or vocational language module.

LCA: The *Leaving Certificate Applied* programme is a distinct, ring-fenced two-year Leaving Certificate programme aimed at preparing students for adult and working life. The two-year programme consists of four half-year blocks called sessions. Achievements are credited in each session.

TY: The *Transition Year* programme; a one-year programme taken after Junior Cycle and before the two-year Leaving Certificate.