

Submission to the *National Council for Curriculum and Assessment* on the Senior Cycle Review Consultation

As Professor of Modern Irish at University College Cork I welcome the opportunity to participate in the NCCA Senior Cycle Review, and I do so by offering the following brief observations.

1. *Connectivity between second and third level*

Understandable reservations are articulated in the documentation concerning over-emphasis on progression to third level (*Interim report*, 53) and the influence of third-level entry requirements on the Senior Cycle curriculum (*Interim report*, 8, 9, 30, 34 etc.). I feel nevertheless that both progression to third level and the entry requirements that attend that progression are realities that are better acknowledged than avoided.

In addition, the natural connectivity between the two sectors is implicitly acknowledged elsewhere in the *Interim report* where the following suggestion regarding third-level courses is offered:

another way to reduce the narrowing of senior cycle to primarily serve selection for higher education purposes would be for all students who progress to higher education to complete a general year of study in third level before specialising (p. 40)

One might also consider how worthwhile it is mentioning lifelong learning in the context of the Senior Cycle (*Interim report*, 26, 28) while not acknowledging third-level opportunities as an important element in that variety of learning.

These matters aside, the fact that many Senior Cycle students choose third level as their immediate next step means that the third-level perspective should have something to contribute to this review.

2. *Second-level students presenting in the third-level sector*

Every year between 270 and 300 students register for Irish in first year in UCC. This affords us the opportunity to form a first-hand impression not just of the students' capability in Irish, but of their general ability and demeanour as learners in the humanities as they emerge from one system and enter another.

In assessing the first-year student experience cognizance is taken of two factors: the voice of the student and the voice of the teacher. The student voice tells us that the step-up to third level is a challenge for which many are ill-prepared, largely due to a curricular chasm between the two levels. The teacher voice tells us that some students are culturally illiterate, and that many are impoverished as to identity.

On the other hand, there is in most students an eagerness to learn, and in particular to attempt to bridge the curricular chasm. This is of added importance in the context of the statement under **Purpose** in the *Consultation document* (p. 9) that 'A strong desire for improved continuity from school to postschool destinations emerged'. At curricular level, despite the reservations expressed in the documentation referred to in §1 above, this suggests the advisability of giving consideration to the creation of a broad connectivity at curricular level between second and third level.

Addressing this deficiency with incoming third-level students means, in the case of Irish, embarking on survey courses to acquaint them with the rudimentary knowledge of the history and spread of Irish literature, something with which few students are familiar: a victim, it would seem of the increased emphasis on oral skills, which has proved beneficial in other areas. Reference in the **Curriculum** section of the *Interim report* (pp 40–41) to culture and literature as seemingly separate entities, in an Irish-language context, creates a false dichotomy.

Comparison with the subject of English shows that the presence of Shakespeare as an anchor-topic in the Senior Cycle curriculum at least has the effect of giving students a perspective of a time-line, however truncated, for that subject, something that does not happen in Irish. The inclusion of a package of palatable, well-presented and contextualized texts, with translations, from the 16th and 17th centuries would go some way to address this question of perspective for the subject of Irish.

Adding content to Senior Cycle Irish would also help in remedying the broader and related questions of cultural illiteracy and identity impoverishment. This is a malaise that we do not detect in the small number of students presenting from time to time to study Irish whose heritage is other than Irish, and who exhibit a confidence in their own background while embracing their studies with enthusiasm. It is surprising, therefore, that the related questions of identity and cultural literacy are not referred to in the consideration given to **Lifeskills** in the current review documentation. One can see how such a consideration might also address the question of meaning and connectivity alluded to in the *Consultation document* (p. 12).

There is agreement among all cohorts of students of the importance of the study of Irish at primary and secondary level as a cultural identifier and empowerer, however attenuated its ultimate presentation in Senior Cycle. This is where the question of *relevance* most frequently surfaces in discussion with students – not in the more nebulous area of utilitarianism – and this is where there is a general agreement among third-level students and teachers alike of the value and necessity of Irish as a *core-subject* at Senior Cycle level in the Irish educational system.

3. Empirical learning

The Department of Modern Irish in UCC has been to the forefront in piloting empirical learning within the third-level curriculum, where a semester in the second year BA degree is taught in the Gaeltacht. (This is now being developed across the third-level sector and supported by the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht as an ‘Erasmus’ arrangement for third-level students of Irish.)

In our piloting of this initiative, the value of *credit-bearing* immersive courses has been proved to us in a practical way through the results obtained by the students involved. Gaeltacht courses, as we know, are a commonplace phenomenon as a summer recreation among second-level students. With streamlining and a little imagination there is no reason why such courses could not be accommodated with the Senior Cycle **assessment** system. In many ways, such a proposal would go some way towards facilitating a more flexible approach to **Teaching and Learning**.

Also on the question of **assessments**, the comment (*Interim report*, 64) that

A challenge to achieving changes to assessment will be in balancing a desire for greater diversity of assessment methods (perceived to enhance validity) with a desire to maintain external oversight and assessment (perceived to enhance reliability).

is to be commended. For example, the extension of *research-based* or *project-based* learning across the Senior Cycle curriculum, in addition, perhaps, to generating difficulties in the area of authorship and authentication (which is often the case at third level), would require an expansion of the curriculum to include instruction on basic research methodology and ethics. Whether the curriculum could accommodate such expansion might be a question to be considered.

4. Pathways

While increasing choice is of itself a good idea, even choice requires management. Our experience at third level is that increased choice, as an end in itself, is ultimately of limited value, and that ring-fencing subject areas, for all its restrictive connotations, often turns out to be welcomed by the students. In the context of the Senior Cycle, the proliferation of pathways as a means of facilitating progression to post-secondary learning is not necessarily the beneficial idea it might appear to be.

As we have learned from our many placement initiatives, the current trend at third level is that prospective employers are now setting increased value on a liberal education – indeed, a liberal Irish education, which might once have been regarded as an impediment – as a sound and rounded foundation for progression into a diversity of areas such as industry, law and finance. There is no reason why the same principles cannot be invoked at second level.

In that regard, and on a personal note having ‘put’ my six children through second-level education, I would suggest that ‘navigate’ is the keyword in the comment on p. 53 of the *Interim report* that ‘Greater flexibility to allow students to navigate different pathways through senior cycle was seen as desirable’. Experience shows navigation at third level is difficult enough, and increasing it at second level could be a recipe for more confusion for parents and students alike.

5. I offer these few observations in a spirit of goodwill and with the highest respect for the important work being undertaken by the NCCA. I am, of course, always available for discussion or clarification of these matters.

Pádraig Ó Macháin
Professor of Modern Irish
University College Cork

31 Deireadh Fómhair 2019