

# NCCA SENIOR CYCLE REVIEW SUBMISSION



# INTRODUCTION

The Irish Second-Level Students' Union has carried out consultations with over 300 students in seven different regions around the country in order to gauge the student perspective in relation to the current senior cycle.

We also launched an online survey in which we gathered 750 responses from students.

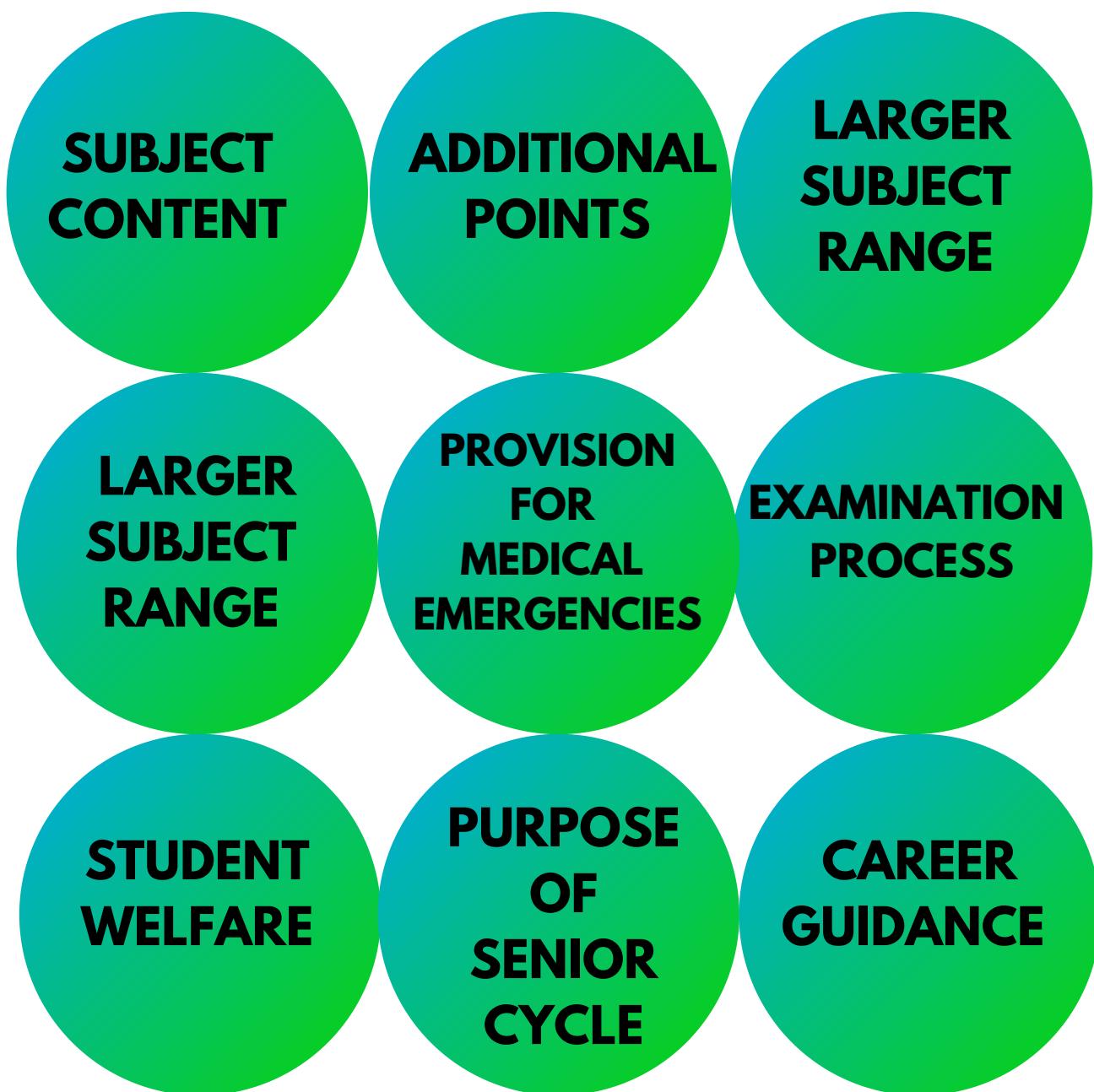
Within this submission we have examined the key opinions and demands of students.

The Irish Second-Level Students' Union would also like to thank the NCCA for carrying out this much needed research into the reform of the current senior cycle reform and we wholeheartedly support this initiative into the future cycles of this reform process and encourage continued consultation with the student body.



# CONTENT OF THIS SUBMISSION

Following our consultations with students the following are the key issues that arose from students responses which we will look at in this submission



# SUBJECT CONTENT

Through our consultations, many students expressed an interest in studying less subjects in more detail rather than more subjects in less detail.

In the current system students study seven subjects on average, with some studying eight or nine, although only six are counted at the end of the Leaving Certificate.

85.3% of students responded 'To study more subjects less in depth' rather than 'To study less subjects more in depth' when given the option. Students felt that the pressure of studying seven subjects held them back from performing at their best, as they could not devote enough time to each subject.

The option to study less subjects more in depth would allow students to delve fully into the subjects they were interested in and therefore enhance their performance and ease the pressure. Students who have a higher aptitude for certain subjects would be in a position to focus on these rather than the current system and the fact that students who have less of a natural ability for certain subjects are still attempting to perform well in them, which places unnecessary and unfair pressure on these students. If subjects could be studied more in depth, this would allow students to engage more with the subjects themselves and embrace a 'learning to learn' mentality.



# ADDITIONAL POINTS

Following our survey, 64% of students felt that 25 extra points should not just be available for Maths in the Leaving Certificate.

During our consultations with students, it became very apparent that students who had a higher numerical aptitude felt that the twenty-five extra points were fair.

However, those students who had a higher aptitude in the area of arts and humanities felt that this extra 25 points was unfair. In 2019 just over a third of students sat the higher level maths paper which supports students claims and the results of our survey.



"It's totally unequal. It signifies that the state thinks maths is more important than any other subject, which is absurd. It means that students are pressured into spending a ridiculous amount of time on maths while neglecting all other subjects."

"Shows systemic bias for STEM while ignoring languages shortage which is suffering jobs"



# ADDITIONAL POINTS

"Not everyone's good at maths, you should get it for a subject you excel in"

""It encourages people to do higher level maths for the wrong reasons"

"I think while it's good that it was added to Maths, there are other subjects that are just as intensive, time consuming and important"

""It's a difficult subject that is more applicable to most professions than subjects like English or Irish. The extra incentive is necessary."

"I believe it takes dedication, time and hard work to keep on higher level maths alongside all the other subjects I believe it's a just system in which people are awarded for their hard work and resilience"

"It had encouraged me to stay in higher level maths but as an effect I have dropped to ordinary level Irish"

# PROVISION FOR MEDICAL EMERGENCIES



The exceptional cases of a family bereavement and emergency medical treatment must be considered when the timeline of the examinations is being thought about.

We have heard too many stories of people sitting their Leaving Certificate exams hours after undergoing surgery or soon after losing a close family relative, and are forced to sit their exam either at that time, or wait a year and repeat the Leaving Certificate.

Students are forced to repeat if they are unable to sit the exams, and may be forced to learn an entirely new syllabus in a condensed space of time. These circumstances are entirely out of their control, and the lack of provisions in place for these are unacceptable. While we have seen the pilot scheme in 2019 to allow for those who have had a family bereavement to sit the exam in July, this policy should be extended to those who have to undergo emergency medical procedures.

The horrifying yet not uncommon case of Amy Richards, a student who was forced to sit her Leaving Certificate Exams just 4 hours after emergency appendix surgery highlights the need for a provision to allow students undergoing medical emergencies at the time of their state examinations to defer their exams until July and sit them with students who have deferred them due to a close family bereavement. This is a provision which students supported wholeheartedly when we launched our petition for the creation of a new provision for medical emergencies at this years Zeminar. The Irish Second Level Students Union continues its call for the Minister, SEC and NCCA to support the creation of such a provision.

# LARGER SUBJECT RANGE

Subject choice in Senior Cycle is a recurring issue for students, with students citing the availability of certain subjects, the mandatory nature of others and the lack of certain areas of learning such as the arts as issues with the current curriculum.

According to students, one of the most pressing issues regarding Senior Cycle reform is the need for an updated Leaving Certificate with a wider and more up-to-date choice of subjects.

Students noted they would prefer similar subjects such as the more modern and applicable subjects to the Junior Cycle Programme like computer science, wellbeing etc.

Students would be able to study subjects which they have a genuine interest in rather than simply just picking from the subjects being offered currently even if you have no interest or ability in that area.

One other concern raised by students was the lottery of availability to certain subjects. If a subject is on the Senior Cycle curriculum then all students should have the option to study the subject within their secondary school. This is currently not the case with students having to be taught subjects outside of school time and at their own cost this problem is acutely felt by those attending Gaelscoileanna as there is a lack of Irish speaking teachers in many subject areas.



# EXAMINATION PROCESS

When surveyed, students commented on the issue of how subjects are examined. Students felt as though they are sitting a memory test and not actually being examined on how much knowledge or understanding they have of the subject but instead it's a case of how much information one can regurgitate.

In our survey 69.4% of students answered negatively to the question, 'Do you think the Leaving Certificate equips you to think critically?' This clearly illustrates the demand from students to move to a system where knowledge is being examined, where students are given the chance to understand a topic and not just to rote-learn information.

Similarly, when asked if 'The Leaving Certificate fairly assesses my skill set' 65.7% of students disagreed, this shows a huge amount of frustration among students who feel their talents and aptitudes are not being nourished.



# STUDENT WELFARE

From our consultations with students, it is abundantly clear that the Leaving Certificate has an intensely negative effect on the mental health and wellbeing of students.

The incredible pressure placed on them for an extended period of time at such a young age has a significant impact on their emotional wellbeing, with the majority finding it incredibly difficult to cope with the pressure to perform well and achieve high points. With such a quantitative assessment students feel as though they are defined by a number and that the points they achieve is the total of their worth.

The following are samples of comments made in our survey on Senior Cycle reform.

"Many people I know are suffering from mental health issues, including me, due to the stress and overwhelming nature of the senior cycle and there is no gradual increase in difficulty we are thrown into the deep whether it be from 3rd year or transition year and expected to be consistent and hard working."

""The LC damages your mental health in so many ways, Too much stress, only people with good memory skills are rewarded."

"The leaving cert is extremely damaging to the mental health of students country wide"

The Leaving Cert is hell and I wanted to die when I didn't get the results I wanted. Tell the Minister for Education to stop hurting its students with this mess. Please."

# STUDENT WELFARE

"The government need to realise the stress we are put under and it is not having a good impact on our mental health. Me personally it is leading me to be depressed and getting overwhelmed about what I am going to do in life because this backwards old school system is telling me that I'm not smart enough for the courses I want."

"The LC has overall ruined my life. I'm currently repeating and I've had to go on medication for my mental health due to the stress of points."

"As adults, you're all responsible for us. Take our mental health seriously."

"Students are losing hope. Having made it into college I am now able to look back on my friends who are currently in 6th year and can see that they are miserable. The system makes students feel like less than a number, it restricts creativity and is emotionally damaging to some."

"My year, having only been in fifth year 5 months, are really struggling to come in to school everyday. I've never been a person who didn't enjoy school and although I was tired it was still nice, but this year people are crying constantly and are struggling so much with mental health."

It is clear that the points race and emphasis on singular exams as a marker of someone's educational progression and achievement is the most prominent factor in the diminishing mental and emotional wellbeing of students.

# LEAVING CERT APPLIED

Just 49.9% of the students surveyed noted that the Leaving Cert Applied course was available in their school.

This means that more than half of these students were not offered this course or this method of learning. Many students who would like to do the LCA program in their school are not offered this course and therefore face the enormous pressure of facing the leaving certificate or in other cases leaving the senior cycle education system completely.

For those students who do have the option of doing Leaving Cert Applied they are not offered great progression pathways afterwards. Students graduating from this program are unable to progress to the same level of education as their peers studying the Leaving Cert Established.

As a result this is a deterrent to students who would be more suited to the Leaving Cert Applied model.



# CAREER GUIDANCE

One of the most important parts of the Senior Cycle is the career guidance offered to students. This allows students to investigate their future pathways whether it be further education, apprenticeships or third level.

There is also a total lack of promotion and encouragement within the school community for students to progress to alternative paths in education, the focus is placed heavily on third level institutions.

Students wishing to enroll in further education must do it in their own limited free time, whereas many students are brought to third level colleges and universities open days by their schools.

The fact that 68.7% of respondents weren't satisfied with the quality of career guidance they received in Senior Cycle means that more than half of students felt ill informed about their options when it comes to life after the LC. This is an unsettling thought that more than half the young people in our colleges, further education or work are not happy with the quality of guidance they received.

We also see how 91.3% of respondents felt more importance needs to be placed on career guidance showing that students are willing and seeking engagement but they are not being given fair opportunities to do so in the school community.



# PURPOSE OF SENIOR CYCLE

The Leaving Certificate is branded as “a two-year programme that aims to provide learners with a broad, balanced education while also offering them a chance to specialise towards particular higher education and career options”.

In our survey we asked students if they felt the Leaving Certificate prepared them for the world of work.

Just 17% of students agreed with this statement. The purpose of the senior cycle is to facilitate lifelong learning and it is clear from student consultation that this is not currently being achieved.

As it stands, students are put under immense pressure for two years and forced to choose career paths in high pressure situations. The fact that many feel ill prepared for the world of work after this is a clear sign that the Leaving Certificate is not fulfilling its purpose and is fundamentally failing students.



# CONCLUSION

Throughout our consultations a variety of key issues have become visible to us, as outlined in this document.

The Senior Cycle should be fulfilling the needs of students and the purpose of education in all facets. Fundamentally, we need to look at student needs and the goals of the education system to produce well rounded, engaged and informed citizens whose natural abilities are enhanced and interests are fed and satisfied.

Students are not happy within the current Senior Cycle system, and are well aware of the flaws within it, but also of its ability to be improved and changed to better suit the needs of all stakeholders.

The ISSU hopes that the current Senior Cycle review will lead to the conclusive change that students deserve.

