



Submission to the NCCA as part of the Senior Cycle Review, prepared by Coiste Léann na Gaeilge, Litríocht na Gaeilge agus na gCultúr Ceilteach, Royal Irish Academy

[Courtesy translation]

Executive summary

This submission outlines the response of the Royal Irish Academy committee, Coiste Léann na Gaeilge, Litríocht na Gaeilge agus na gCultúr Ceilteach, to the Senior Cycle Review. The submission focusses attention in particular on the curricular model and on those aspects of the Irish curriculum that reflect Irish identity and citizenship while also promoting intercultural understanding and multilingualism. The submission addresses each of the questions raised in the consultation document, offers practical solutions and cites relevant research. Embracing the fundamental principles of equality of access and opportunity, student choice and diversity of learning experience, our key recommendations and their rationale may be summarised as follows:

Recommendation 1: A Senior Cycle model for all learning pathways that ensures that all students have access to a substantial core curriculum [English, Irish and Mathematics] *and* to a substantial range of electives from which they may choose three or four subjects. The implementation of this recommendation will:

- promote **equality** of access and opportunity through core subjects offered at levels appropriate to a spectrum of student abilities;
- offer students **choice** through a range of elective subjects;
- ensure **diversity** of learning experience;
- avoid premature and unnecessary narrowing of learning or vocational pathways;
- acknowledge the value of a shared ‘core curriculum’ and remove the negatively-toned discussion of ‘compulsory subjects’.

Recommendation 2: Language syllabus design that will ensure that the language components of the Senior Cycle curriculum [both core and elective] are developed in the context of international best practice in bilingual and multilingual societies. The implementation of this recommendation will:

- provide opportunities for all students to develop bilingual/ plurilingual **skills and competencies** at a level appropriate to their abilities;
- assist students develop an **appreciation** of the role of languages in Irish and European culture and identity;

- promote a greater **understanding** of plurilingualism by viewing the Irish language in a broad European and global multilingual context;
- promote intercultural understanding and communicative competencies;
- develop cultural literacy as a key skill and cross-curricular theme.

Recommendation 3: That in endorsing the position of Irish as a core subject, this review grasps the opportunity to foreground the educational advantages of language learning for students on the one hand, and the importance of the Irish language as part of Ireland’s cultural vision in the 21st century on the other. The implementation of this recommendation will:

- make the constitutional status of Irish as a core element of citizenship to which all children and young adults should have access more explicit and meaningful;
- foreground the cognitive, cultural, social and economic benefits of individual bilingualism/plurilingualism and societal multilingualism;
- facilitate the embedding of the concept of a Healthy Linguistic Diet and understanding of the benefits of language learning across the life cycle;
- avoid the extremely negative outcome for language learning of curricular changes implemented at Senior Cycle in the UK;
- align Irish educational practice with bilingual and multilingual European norms.

The status of Irish as a core subject in Senior Cycle is the surest mechanism of ensuring equality of access to language education for all as it ensures that transferable language-learning skills are embedded within a shared curriculum. In this area in particular, the NCCA needs to consider the long-term system and societal effects of curricular change and look beyond the Anglosphere for models of best practices in bilingual and multilingual education provision.

Recommendation 4: That the issue of curricular overload be addressed as a central issue in syllabus design in each subject area. The implementation of this recommendation will:

- ensure appropriate breadth and depth of course content across all subjects;
- facilitate the articulation of achievable learning outcomes;
- enable the development of cross-curricular skills.

Recommendation 5: That Life Skills and Health and Wellbeing modules be offered as mandatory but non-examinable components on all Senior Cycle pathways. The implementation of this recommendation will:

- ensure that all students have opportunities to explore aspects of their own personal and social experience and development without the pressure of formal assessment;
- promote students’ physical and mental health;
- increase the diversity of the Senior Cycle learning experience;
- further develop key investigative and analytic skills;
- address affective issues relevant to students’ engagement with school and community.

Recommendation 6: Introduce a more diverse range of assessment procedures and schedules, bearing in mind the impact assessment has on learner motivation and strategies. The implementation of this recommendation will:

- facilitate the management of student and teacher stress;
- allow for the assessment of a broader range of student skills;
- discourage rote learning and promote a healthier approach to academic achievement.

Introduction

Coiste Léann na Gaeilge, Litríocht na Gaeilge agus na gCultúr Ceilteach welcomes this opportunity to present its views as part of the Senior Cycle Review. As a multidisciplinary committee of the Royal Irish Academy, representing the academic areas of Irish language, literature and culture, Irish Studies, Celtic Studies, Folklore Studies, digital humanities, language pedagogy, library and information studies, and heritage and media studies, our teaching and research experience give us important insights into the key issues informing current debates about curricular reform in Ireland. The documentation published by the NCCA as part of the consultation process acknowledges the relationship between developments in Senior Cycle post-primary education and opportunities within the ever-evolving higher education and further education sectors. We believe that third-level educators are important participants in the educational continuum and that both their subject expertise and institutional perspectives make them key stakeholders in the consultation process.

Having reviewed the documentation provided, we are happy to note that the review to date acknowledges many of the educational principles that we believe should be key issues in the final decision-making process. The positive educational principles of equality of access and opportunity and diversity of learning experience should be central considerations throughout. These principles inform our support for the current structure (three core subjects + three/four elective subjects) of the various Senior Cycle Leaving Certificate pathways. A substantial core subject component helps optimise equality of access and opportunity, while a substantial elective element ensures that students' vocational, further education or higher education opportunities are not prematurely or unnecessarily limited. We believe that the key areas of concern identified in the review process to date, such as curricular overload and the stresses associated with high-stakes terminal examinations, can and should be addressed in the context of syllabus content on the one hand and assessment design and scheduling on the other.

We believe that the Review should pay greater attention to the cultural contexts and consequences of curricular reform, and consider carefully the potential local, national and international impact of any decisions made in relation to the distinctively Irish components of the Senior Cycle programme. This submission will address these issues and offer solutions to the problems identified, citing relevant research to support our positions. The structure of the submission is in the form of a response to the particular issues and questions raised in the *Senior Cycle Review: Consultation Document* (subsequently referred to as *SCRCD*), 'Main Ideas and areas for development': 1. Purpose; 2. A vision for senior cycle learners; 3. Pathways and programmes; 4. Curriculum components; 6. Assessment; 7. Reporting; and 8. Priorities and supports. As our central concern is the core status of Irish as the most distinctive component of the Irish school curriculum, our response to the section 'Curriculum components' includes an additional section (5) where we address issues related specifically to language learning, including the broader European and global context of languages in the Irish curriculum.

1. Purpose

To what extent do you agree with the purposes for senior cycle emerging from the review? We agree with all the generic principles related to the fulfilment of student potential and the emphasis on a deepening of knowledge and skills throughout the Senior Cycle. We welcome in particular the NCCA's re-articulation of the values of equality and inclusion as values 'at the heart of senior cycle' (SCRCD: 9).

Is there too much or too little emphasis on particular aspects? The relationship between academic engagement and student wellbeing needs to be analysed carefully. While we recognise the need to address issues such as curriculum overload and excessive focus on terminal examinations, we would like to see more emphasis on building of resilience – through the management rather than the removal of perceived sources of stress – as part of the purpose of Senior Cycle. This issue is addressed in greater detail, and in the context of language education, in the section on 'Curriculum components' below.

Is there anything you would like to see added to the conversation about the purposes of senior cycle education? A salient omission is the Irish context of this review. Much of the discussion in the documentation is so generic that it could be applied in any jurisdiction anywhere in the world. There needs to be a greater emphasis on those aspects of the Irish curriculum that make it distinctive, and on strategies to improve provision in those areas. The importance of cultural literacy for the development of active and informed citizenship in an Irish, European and global context needs to be part of the conversation. With reference to the Irish language in a post-Brexit context, this would include an appreciation of a shared tradition with Scottish Gaelic. We recommend that cultural literacy (an appreciation and understanding of one's own culture and of the culture of others) be seen as an integral part of the purpose of the Senior Cycle and that it be presented as a cross-curricular concept. It has particular relevance to the Irish language curriculum but extends also to an appreciation of the rich cultural and linguistic heritage of immigrant populations.

We also note that acknowledgement of the important feature of connectivity between second- and third-level education is absent from the consultation document. We would recommend that this omission be addressed also. It should be recognised and articulated that, no less than the Primary or Junior cycles, for most students the Senior Cycle is not an end in itself. It is the main pathway to further education, third-level education in many instances. At a practical level, consideration should therefore be given to the matriculation requirements of Ireland's third-level institutions. For example, over the years the largest university in the country, the National University of Ireland, has affirmed its commitment to the distinctively Irish identity of education in Ireland, by maintaining a pass in the Leaving-Certificate core-subject of Irish among their matriculation requirements, while allowing exemptions in specified cases. This in turn has been reinforced in the strategic planning of constituent colleges.

This is but one instance of continuity and connectivity between the secondary and tertiary sectors to the mutual benefit of both. We request, therefore, that the related topics of cultural

identity and of practical connectivity between secondary and tertiary education be addressed in the Senior Cycle Review.

2. A vision for senior cycle learners

2.1 Knowledge, skills and qualities

To what extent do you agree that these are the skills and qualities students should develop during senior cycle as they engage with knowledge across a range of disciplines? The generic set of skills and qualities outlined are all relevant and important. The academic skills listed, ‘higher-order thinking; critical thinking and analysis; problem solving and information processing; independent and collaborative learning; creativity and innovation; and skills in the areas of research, writing, communication, presentation and digital technologies’ (SCRCDD: 10) are important in all subject areas, and of particular application in the context of language learning.

The intrapersonal and interpersonal qualities and the life skills outlined (SCRCDD: 11) are all integral aspects of the learning experience, but differentiation should be made between qualities that should be embedded in the teaching and learning of *all* subject areas (the intrapersonal and interpersonal qualities as listed) and particular life skills (ranging from financial management to relationships and sexuality education) which would need to be addressed in specially designed non-examinable modules whose purpose would be students’ personal and social development.

The development of learner autonomy – the ability to plan and manage one’s own learning and to self-correct – should be among the learning objectives in all subject areas and be seen as a basis for lifelong learning.

Is there too much or too little emphasis on particular aspects? The question of digital literacy, important now in all subject areas, should be given greater prominence as an aspect to be embedded across the curriculum. It is of particular relevance in language teaching and learning, and could be integrated with cultural and literary content in a revised Senior Cycle Irish language programme. It is especially important in light of the huge advances in the use of digital technologies by Irish-language cultural, educational and research institutions, and the increased use of such technologies by Irish-language communities and by learners.

Cultural literacy should be presented as a cross-curricular concept, with particular relevance to the language components of the curriculum.

Is there anything you would like to see added to the conversation about the knowledge, skills and qualities students should develop throughout senior cycle? The need for core but non-examinable modules needs to be foregrounded and specific areas need to be defined. Life skills, such as those explored up to now in programmes such as Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), should be mandatory for students on all Leaving Certificate pathways. Whether such subjects should be examinable – as SPHE currently is on the Leaving

Certificate Applied programme – is questionable, however, as one would assume that learning outcomes of modules in such subjects would be long-term, behavioural and attitudinal, and, to a greater degree than in other subject areas, not amenable to time-constrained assessments with quantitative outcomes.

2.2 Teaching and learning

To what extent do you agree with the vision for teaching and learning emerging from the review? The broad vision outlined is commendable, and the emphasis on a diversity of teaching and learning approaches is particularly relevant to the teaching and learning of languages. We welcome the fact that the emerging vision for teaching and learning arising from the review to date is one ‘that should be experienced by all students at senior cycle’ (SCRCD: 11). We also welcome the affirmation that teaching and learning at Senior Cycle should be ‘appropriately challenging, enabling students to use their minds well and to be open to new and deeper learning experiences and possibilities’ (SCRCD: 12).

Is there too much or too little emphasis on particular aspects? The potential for portfolios, practical learning by making/ creating, oral communication of learning and interdisciplinary learning (SCRCD: 12) is again particularly relevant to language learning. The concepts of ‘task-based’ and ‘text-based’ learning should also be emphasised, particularly in the context of the use of digital resources as learning aids, and the development of productive and creative digital literacy skills (including audio and video recording and digital publishing) both within the (language) classroom and beyond it.

Is there anything you would like to see added to the conversation about teaching and learning in Senior Cycle? The issue of assessment is central to the conversation about teaching and learning in Senior Cycle and these issues need to be addressed together. So also does the question of continuity of purpose from Junior to Senior Cycle, and the implications of Senior Cycle learning strategies for students’ post-Leaving Certificate pathways (both educational and vocational) and for life-long learning. Specifically, the Leaving Certificate Irish oral examination, as carried out at present, is leading to rote learning rather than the development of meaningful communication skills and there is a need to explore more creative methods of developing and of assessing oral skills. The lack of an oral component in the final assessment of Irish at Junior Certificate level also needs to be addressed. We return to this issue in section 6 below.

3. Pathways and Programmes

To what extent do you agree with the proposed areas for development above? As the range of possibilities in this section is so wide and diverse, it is difficult to agree or disagree with the suggestions being made. Any decision to combine elements of the existing programmes will depend on school resources and logistics, which will be determined, in turn, by the size and

location of the school, combined with issues of gender and socio-economic profile. We believe that the principles of equality of access and opportunity on the one hand and student choice on the other will be best served by retaining the current framework of three core subjects and three/four electives. Using this structure, it may be possible to increase examinable subject options by offering choices across the various Leaving Certificate pathways. The opportunity for school clusters to pool teaching resources (both teaching staff and teaching, learning and assessment materials) could also be explored to ensure a wider range of elective subjects in smaller or some single-sex schools.

Is there too much or too little emphasis on particular aspects? The inequality of opportunity that exists at present due to the uneven provision of Transition Year as a post-Junior Certificate option, needs to be addressed. The advantages (and also the potential disadvantages) of extending Senior Cycle to three years need to be considered carefully. This issue is discussed in greater detail in section 4 below.

Is there anything you would like to see added to the conversation about pathways and programmes in senior cycle? There is a need to valorise different kinds of learning, to destigmatise vocational education pathways, while also ensuring that all learners have an opportunity to develop literacy (linguistic, cultural, digital) and numeracy skills at a level appropriate to their abilities. The issue of student motivation, and particularly student disengagement, needs to be examined closely and sensitively so that supports can be put in place to assist teachers make intellectually challenging subjects more accessible to demotivated students. The question of certification of students who decide not to sit state examinations in particular subjects also needs to be addressed. More research is needed in this area as policy should address not just the outcome, but also the underlying causes, of disengagement.

4. Curriculum components

The issue of curriculum components is intimately related to all the other aspects of this review process. In addressing the particular questions posed, we reassert our commitment to the overall structure of a broad liberal education curriculum that will:

- promote equality of access and opportunity through core subjects offered at levels appropriate to a spectrum of student abilities;
- offer students choice through a range of elective subjects;
- ensure diversity of learning experience;
- ensure sufficient subject breadth for a range of post-Leaving Certificate options.

We therefore favour retention of the model that ensures that all students have access to a substantial core curriculum [English, Irish, Mathematics] and to a substantial range of electives from which they may choose three or four subjects.

To what extent do you agree with the proposed areas of development above? The documentation provided for this review points to a general agreement that breadth of learning experience is valuable (Banks *et al.* 2018). The issue of subject choice needs to be interrogated, however, in a system where availability of resources will always be a constraining factor. Even in large urban schools where the principle of greater choice is more easily applied, open choice is rarely possible as the inevitable grouping of subjects for timetabling purposes will always limit options. Status as core subjects is vital to the long-term viability of certain subjects that are at the heart of Irish identity and citizenship. As discussed in more detail below, making languages elective in the British system resulted in the phasing out of language teaching in many schools, with schools catering for large proportions of disadvantaged students most likely to drop language options.

A clear differentiation should be made between subjects pursued to examination (core subjects + electives) and mandatory but non-examinable subjects or modules addressing life skills (such as financial management, personal and health education) or wellbeing issues (such as students' physical regimes or issues relating to online activity). The question of disciplinary integrity needs to be acknowledged and we would caution against the creation of new subjects for which specialist teaching qualifications do not as yet exist. A prudent approach would be to direct attention to developing integrated but flexible Life Skills and Health and Wellbeing programmes as mandatory but non-examinable components for all Senior Cycle students, and designing such programmes in a manner in which subject teachers could input, as appropriate.

What solutions do you envisage for addressing problems relating to curriculum overload? This issue needs to be addressed at the level of syllabus design, to ensure that appropriate depth and breadth of engagement is assured in each subject area and that students' overall workload is manageable. The concept of course credits could be drawn on to develop clear cross-curricular guidelines in relation to subject content and student workload. The retention of core curriculum elements, with clearly defined learning outcomes and assessment procedures, will optimise equality of learning opportunities, while offering programmes of study at various levels will ensure choice *within* as well as *between* subject areas.

One of the most challenging questions for the review is whether the Senior Cycle should be extended to three years. Related to this is the issue of Transition Year and whether Transition Year, as currently conceived, should be offered to all students, or whether aspects of Transition Year should be incorporated within a three-year Leaving Certificate programme. Extending Senior Cycle to three years would greatly reduce the pressure of curriculum overload while also giving students more time to engage meaningfully with the non-examinable Life Skills and Health and Wellbeing programmes. Forms of experiential learning such as work placements, Gaeltacht visits and short taster modules on a range of topics (as currently offered to students in Transition Year) could supplement students' learning and complement the skills acquired through their core and elective subjects. As Transition Year is not currently available to all students, extending Senior Cycle to three years and incorporating elements of Transition Year experience within the three-year cycle, would again optimise equality of educational opportunity system-wide. To be successful,

however, such an extension would require very substantial extra resources. Moreover, extending the cycle might not be in the interest of all students, and could result in increased levels of disengagement. Therefore, we recommend that syllabus design be used as the prime mechanism for addressing problems relating to curriculum overload.

What curriculum components, if any, do you think should be compulsory in senior cycle? We recommend that the term ‘core subjects’, with its positive emphasis on equality of access and provision for all, replace the negatively-toned discussion of ‘compulsory subjects’ in the discussion of the Senior Cycle programme.

English (covering oral communication, literacy skills (both print and digital), the appreciation and analysis of literature and culture, including Irish literature in English; English as spoken in Ireland and elsewhere); Irish (covering aural comprehension and oral communication, literacy skills (both print and digital), the appreciation and analysis of literature and culture, the linguistic landscape: sociolinguistic and ecolinguistic perspectives on Irish and other languages); Mathematics (as defined by disciplinary experts in that field).

Is there anything you would like to see added to the conversation about curriculum components in senior cycle? A much more realistic analysis of the concept of choice, a greater appreciation of the advantages of the core curriculum and a commitment to investigating and implementing models of best practice in the teaching and learning of all curriculum subjects. Where the study of Irish at Senior Cycle is concerned, it is crucial that the NCCA look closely at language education in a broad European context and be cognisant of the extremely negative outcome for language learning of curricular changes implemented in this area in the UK. These issues are teased out in greater detail in section 5 of this submission. In relation to the model of core subjects and electives, there are also important lessons to be learned from the UK experience.

The current Leaving Cycle format guarantees a breadth of educational experience while at the same time allowing for an appropriate level of subject choice. The example of the UK Senior Cycle (age 16-18) curriculum, where most students study a mere three academic subjects and there are no core subject requirements (UK Government 2018), has a much narrower focus, restricts students’ career and undergraduate options and arguably leaves them less prepared for the challenges of employment or higher education. The Leaving Certificate curriculum, in common with other curricula which maintain a core subject component alongside a substantial number of elective subjects, allows for a much more balanced educational experience which has the following key advantages:

- Students can develop the broad skills base discussed in the consultation document (*SCRC*D: 10-11);
- Students’ post-Leaving Certificate options are not unnecessarily narrowed by subject choices at age 16 that may define their career path or path of further study;
- Students are not unnecessarily channelled too early into streams which may not suit their personal interests and aptitudes in adulthood;

- Greater coherence and continuity, the ‘strong desire for improved continuity from school to post-school destinations’ that emerged in the consultation process (*SCRCD*: 9) is assured.

5. The broader European and global context of languages in the Irish curriculum

5.1 Decline of languages as school subjects in the UK and N. Ireland

The dangers of removing the status of languages as mandatory elements in school curricula is starkly evident in the decline of language teaching in UK schools since 2003, when a revised curriculum declared language study to be no longer mandatory after age 14 (Keystage 3 in the UK structure). Within 10 years of the change to the curriculum, there was a **44%** decline in students studying languages after age 14. The British Council Language Trends 2018 report again attests to ‘ongoing concern about the level of participation in language learning since the subject was removed from the compulsory curriculum...’ (Tinsley and Doležal 2018: 2). The decline was most evident in state schools, especially in schools availing of above-average take-up of free meals:

The principal finding this year concerns inequity in access to language learning at school. Schools in more disadvantaged circumstances tend to dedicate a shorter time to languages in Key Stage 3, allow pupils to drop languages after only two years and have lower participation in GCSE (Tinsley and Doležal 2018: 3).

Moreover, it was reported that ‘both state and independent schools report an increasing concentration of high and middle-attaining pupils in GCSE languages, to the exclusion of those of lower ability or with special educational needs’ (Tinsley and Doležal 2018: 3). These developments, where formal language learning opportunities become a mark of socio-economic privilege or the preserve of higher achieving pupils only, should be a salutary warning to Irish educational policy makers concerned with issues of equality and social justice within our public education system. Research reports documenting language learning trends in Britain and Northern Ireland (Dobson 2018; Jones 2018; Tinsley and Doležal 2018; British Council Northern Ireland 2019) all lead to the conclusion that core subject status is the only way to ensure equality of provision. Moreover, a 2013 British Academy report warned of a ‘vicious cycle of monolingualism’, which in turn was causing market failure in the demand and supply of skilled linguists across all sectors of the UK economy (Jocelyn Wyburd 2013). Despite ongoing concerns raised by education correspondents (see, for example: Osborne 2017; Jeffreys 2019), there is no sign that policy decisions in the UK will be revised or reversed in the light of these negative trends.

The steep decline in language learning in general in the UK has impacted dramatically on the numbers taking Irish to GCSE (the examination taken at age 16) in N. Ireland. Dr Niall Comer has charted this decline showing how numbers taking Irish to GCSE level dropped from **2820** in 2003 to **1737 in 2013**, a decline of over **38%** in that 10-year period (Comer

2013). The decline continues at A-level, with a **12%** decline in students sitting A-level Irish between 2018 and 2019 alone (Ní Thuathaláin 2019). This decline has serious implications for the subject at third level in N. Ireland, and for the long-term supply of Irish language teachers and other language professionals. Such negative system impact clearly needs to be avoided in the present Senior Cycle Review.

5.2 Post-Brexit monolingualism or European plurilingualism?

The decline in language teaching in the UK was very well-established before the 2016 Brexit referendum but it is likely that Brexit will exacerbate the trend further as the UK's economic and political integration with Europe is set to be greatly diminished. Following the same 'vicious cycle of monolingualism' would clearly be detrimental for Ireland in economic, social and cultural terms, particularly in the wake of Brexit. Sociolinguistic and expert on language policy and planning, Dr John Walsh of NUI Galway, has drawn attention to this negative trend in a recent *Irish Times* article where he warns that Ireland is prone to the pernicious effects of monolingualism observed in countries where English is dominant, most particularly the UK.

Eurobarometer surveys on language ability show Ireland near the bottom in terms of multilingual competence. In 2012, **60%** of those surveyed were unable to speak anything other than their 'mother tongue' compared with less than **20%** in countries such as the Netherlands and Sweden. Walsh also points out that Ireland is towards the bottom of the table in terms of respondents who agree 'totally' with the idea that everyone in the European Union should be able to speak at least two languages. Walsh goes on to highlight Ireland's poor record on multilingualism as addressed in various policy documents such as *Languages Connect: Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education* but argues that the dangers of monolingualism post-Brexit should be addressed by harnessing the teaching and learning of Irish to the needs of multilingualism, and the intercultural awareness and competencies associated with it.

In summary he recommends that 'teaching and learning Irish should be viewed as a springboard for building multilingualism' (2019). This is a view which we endorse unequivocally. As Ireland re-articulates its political, cultural and socio-economic relationship with Europe in the context of the UK exiting the European Union, the time is ripe for Irish language education policy to move closer to European norms. A step in this direction was signalled in the Department of Education and Science/ Council of Europe publication *Language Education Policy Profile: Ireland* (2007), a document which should be revisited in the context of this Senior Cycle review.

EU language education policy is based on the model of Mother tongue + 2, and most EU states have developed national curricula where second and third languages are valued as core elements. This is the obvious direction for Ireland also, bearing in mind that the EU Council for Cultural Co-operation's commitment to language education is articulated in the first instance in terms of intercultural understanding and communication, urging member states:

To ensure, as far as possible, that all sections of their populations have access to effective means of acquiring a knowledge of the languages of other member states (or of other communities within their own country) as well as the skills in the use of those languages that will enable them to satisfy their communicative needs and in particular:

1.1 to deal with the business of everyday life in another country, and to help foreigners staying in their own country to do so;

1.2 to exchange information and ideas with young people and adults who speak a different language and to communicate their thoughts and feelings to them;

1.3 to achieve a wider and deeper understanding of the way of life and forms of thought of other peoples and of their cultural heritage (Council of Europe 2001: 3).

Aspirations such as these are clearly relevant in the Irish context, where the Irish language can be seen as a living community language, a key to cultural literacy, and part of a broader commitment to international cultural and intercultural understanding and communication. Ireland has enacted exceptional constitutional and legislative support for Irish, which, although now a minoritised language, is the first official language of the Republic. The state therefore has a responsibility within the EU to act as a beacon within the education system for other minority and regional languages, which form a rich part of the European heritage. In fact, the status of Irish as an official language of the EU, as well as its valued position in many diasporic, diplomatic and international Irish Studies and Celtic Studies contexts, puts the Irish state in a unique position of leadership in language education policy on the European and world stages. On a pragmatic note, the EU institutions are employers of skilled linguists, and the growing demand in Europe for graduates with high-level Irish-language skills can only be met if the Irish education system continues to value the subject at Senior Cycle.

The Council of Europe differentiates between the concept of plurilingualism (which refers to the range of linguistic competencies individuals may acquire and use across different languages in the course of their lifetime) and societal multilingualism (which refers to the social phenomenon associated with the use of different languages by groups within a particular society). Though often used interchangeably, the concept of plurilingualism is a particularly useful one in the context of curriculum development, as it acknowledges that linguistic competence involves a range of skills in each of which individual learners can demonstrate different levels of achievement. For the diversity of language learning outcomes that it acknowledges, we recommend that the concept be adopted in the course of this curricular review.

5.3 Affective challenges and cognitive benefits: language learning and bilingualism/plurilingualism

As student wellbeing is a central issue in the Senior Cycle Review, the relationship between cognitive development and questions of wellbeing across the life cycle need to be addressed. The cognitive benefits of language learning and bilingualism/plurilingualism are widely recognised (Gallagher-Brett 2004) and are regularly acknowledged both by the NCCA and by the Irish Department of Education and Skills. There is a danger that policies around the issues

of student exemptions, however, have problematized language learning in our schools, especially when discourses relating to student stress and anxiety and student wellbeing are harnessed to support simplistic solutions to complex problems. The issue of learner stress and anxiety needs to be seen in a much broader educational context, and important research on this subject taken into account. The phenomena of stress and anxiety among language learners have long been identified by educational researchers, for example, as have stress and anxiety in relation to the learning of mathematics. The research, however, has focussed on developing effective pedagogies to enhance student motivation and performance by addressing these affective issues directly (Schultz and Fisher 1988; Wright et al. 2006; Sparks & Ganschow 2007; Devine et al 2018; Dewey et al. 2018). Removing the source of stress from the curriculum has never been offered as an educationally sound strategy. On the contrary, the research of internationally renowned neurologist Thomas H. Bak has established that the challenges involved in language learning actually build resilience and cognitive flexibility. The concept of a ‘Healthy Linguistic Diet’, developed by Bak in collaboration with Dina Medmedbegovic (2017a; 2017b), links the neurological processes involved in language learning and the resultant plurilingualism with the development of cognitive skills and consequent cognitive health and wellbeing throughout the life cycle. As stated by Bak:

Our Healthy Linguistic Diet (HLD) approach is based on an analogy between physical and mental health. Regular physical activity and a healthy diet are important factors in maintaining physical health. In the same way, the learning of languages and their regular use provide essential mental exercise, leading to a better brain health and an increase in ‘cognitive reserve’ resulting in a later onset of dementia and an improved cognitive outcome after a stroke (Bak 2019).

Moreover, as part of his discussion of the educational policy implications of the research findings, Bak recommends the following:

Providing a framework which supports lifelong development of bilingual competencies: All children (monolingual and bilingual/plurilingual) and adults (monolingual and bilingual/plurilingual) in schools and other educational contexts should be encouraged to develop behaviour and habits supporting lifelong development of bilingual/plurilingual competencies. These practices need to become an integral part of efforts to bring up children in the spirit of the Healthy School Initiative leading to a healthy life style (Bak 2019).

Cutting edge research such as this needs to be taken into account by policy makers and simplistic relationships between curricular choices and student health and wellbeing need to be interrogated.

5.4 Irish as a core subject in senior cycle

Taking all of the above points into consideration, the retention of Irish as a core subject in Senior Cycle is a crucial issue in this consultation. Not only is the study of Irish advantageous to pupils, who have a right as citizens to the full range of educational opportunity the system can provide, but its retention as a core subject will be an important acknowledgement of the country’s cultural vision as it prepares for an altered political and socio-economic future. In sum, the following points all need to be taken into account:

i) The constitutional status of Irish means that it is a core element of citizenship to which all children and young adults should have access. Opportunities for all students to develop competencies in the language and an appreciation of its role in Irish culture and identity should be optimised. Status as a core subject within the formal education system is the most efficient method of achieving these objectives. The cognitive, cultural, social and economic benefits of individual bilingualism/plurilingualism and societal multilingualism need to be made more explicit and incorporated within the learning objectives of the Irish language programme at Senior Cycle. We recommend that the concept of a Healthy Linguistic Diet be applied and students be made aware, through SPHE modules, of the benefits of language learning across the life cycle

ii) The pattern observed in the UK, where the decline in language learning after age 14 has disproportionately affected state schools and schools with large numbers of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, shows how access to languages, if offered as elective subjects only, can be influenced by social class. In the case of Irish, such a development would result in additional inequalities of educational and vocational opportunity, as well as impeding the development of cultural literacy across all sectors of society. The status of Irish as a core subject in Senior Cycle is the surest mechanism of ensuring equality of access to language education for all as it ensures that transferable language-learning skills are embedded within a shared curriculum. The decline of Irish as a GCSE subject in N. Ireland shows that once the requirement to study any language has been removed all languages are impacted. If Irish were no longer a core subject, the UK experience would indicate that uptake of languages in general would decrease, leading to the phasing out of language teaching and learning in many state schools, the closing of language departments in universities and a rapid reduction in the supply of language teachers and linguistic specialists such as translators, interpreters, writers, print and digital editors, journalists and broadcasters. Any reduction of bilingual/plurilingual competence would have a deleterious effect on the implementation of national language policy and would have major implications in particular for the education, public administration, culture, heritage, digital humanities and media sectors.

iii) The European and global dimensions of Irish, as a full working language of the European Union, a key element in Irish Studies and Celtic Studies internationally and an integral part of the global linguistic mosaic also needs to be considered. Students need to be made aware of this broader context, and encouraged to embrace the language for its intrinsic heritage value but also as a resource to be shared with other peoples, including in-migrants to Ireland. We urge that the NCCA grasp the opportunity offered by this Review to develop a national language education policy based on international models of best practice in multilingual settings (see Harris and Ó Duibhir 2011), and responsive to the distinctive Irish experience of bilingualism and multilingualism.

6. Assessment

To what extent do you agree with the proposed areas for development above? We strongly agree that assessment procedures need to be reviewed carefully and all the proposed areas are worthy of close attention. For language learning, the use of a language portfolio, compiled during the course of the Senior Cycle and incorporating audio and video files, samples of student writing, evidence of digital literacy and creative engagement with the language and its resources, would be highly recommended as a supplement to terminal oral and written examinations.

It is clear from the response of some of the students who participated in the focus groups that they would appreciate a greater emphasis on oral Irish language skills. The Leaving Certificate oral examination, as carried out at present, is leading to rote learning rather than meaningful communication skills and there is a need to explore more creative methods of developing and of assessing aural and oral skills. One such method, currently in use at third level, is the production by students of audio and video files where language and digital skills are combined as part of a multi-media language portfolio. The decision not to formally assess oral Irish language skills at Junior Cycle level also urgently needs to be re-visited to ensure continuity of purpose and learning focus.

Is there too much or too little emphasis on particular aspects?

Is there anything you would like to see added to the conversation about assessment in senior cycle? Based on experiences at third level, the question of timing of assessment components is extremely important, especially if one of the purposes of continuous or non-terminal assessment elements is to relieve students of the pressure of high-stake terminal examinations. The extra resources required to externally examine or moderate alternative or supplementary assessment procedures to ensure consistency, fairness and transparency would need to be addressed from the outset, however. A formal feedback system would also be desirable to ensure that students can build on their strengths and address any weaknesses identified in the assessment process.

7. Reporting

To what extent do you agree with the proposed areas for development above?

Is there too much or too little emphasis on particular aspects?

Is there anything you would like to see added to the conversation about reporting in senior cycle? Our main concern here is that there be some form of reporting of achievement, participation and progress in learning in cases where a student decides not to sit the Leaving Certificate examination in a subject. In such instances a student record could assist in re-engagement with the subject at a future date.

8. Priorities and supports

Which of the areas for development for senior cycle do you think should be prioritised in creating a timeline for developments over the coming years? Of the areas listed, the most important, in our view, is the need to consider research relating to curricular change and to consider the long-term system and societal effects of decisions made in specific subject areas.

What supports do you think are most needed to facilitate and create sustainable and meaningful evolution in senior cycle? A decision-making structure that is based on international best practice, and not limited by the monolingual approaches of the Anglophone sphere. The most important supports that could be provided are access to information about models of best practice in bilingual or multilingual states, and continuous professional development to ensure that teachers have the confidence and competence to implement them.

Is there anything further you would like to see added to the conversation about priorities and supports? Curricular change does not occur *in vacuo*, but rather interacts with many other policy areas. We would urge that any decisions in relation to the position of Irish within the Senior Cycle take into account the commitment to Irish language education articulated in the *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030*, where ‘strengthening the position of the language within our education system’ is presented as ‘a key focus’ (Government of Ireland 2010: 3). More generally, implementation of the Official Languages Act (2003) and the Gaeltacht Act (2012) depends on the existence of individuals with Irish language competence and understanding within the public bodies governed by these Acts, as well as on a general public with a knowledge and awareness of Irish as a living community language. We believe that national curricular reform should be supportive of the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht’s goal ‘To support the use of the Irish language throughout Ireland and to strengthen its use as the principal community language of the Gaeltacht’ (Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht 2018: 8), and should be particularly mindful of the system supports required to underpin current Gaeltacht education policy (Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna 2016). Increased funding for Gaeltacht-based Irish language colleges, so that they could offer scholarships to Senior Cycle students from disadvantaged and from immigrant backgrounds, would be a very positive and progressive support mechanism, as would schemes for student exchanges and Gaeltacht placements during term time.

Conclusion

Clár Éire Ildánach/ The Creative Ireland Programme (Government of Ireland 2017) lists the ‘importance of the Irish language, our cultural heritage, folklore and the uniqueness of our Gaeltacht areas’ as one of its seven key values (Government of Ireland 2017: 9). In its response to *The Creative Ireland Programme*, the Royal Irish Academy acknowledged the distinctive position of the Irish language and the need for an integrated approach to the language within Irish cultural policy:

Along with its immensely rich literary and oral traditions, the Irish language needs to be imaginatively and practically integrated throughout *Creative Ireland*, with significant historical awareness, a holistic appreciation of the contemporary Gaeltacht with its economic and infrastructure needs, input from recent and emerging scholarship, active use of new media and a commitment to cross-fertilisation. This will deepen creative citizenship and enhance critical thinking and mutual understanding for citizens, in-migrants, the Irish diaspora and that larger global community of people who wish to know about or engage with Ireland (Bourke and Negra 2019: 3-4).

This submission is based on an understanding of the crucial role of the formal education system in ensuring that future generations, both Irish and non-Irish, have the opportunity to engage creatively and meaningfully with the Irish language. We believe that the retention of Irish as a core subject in the Senior Cycle is a key element in ensuring equality of access to the language and its traditions and resources for all students within the Irish education system.

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