

## **SUBMISSION ON SENIOR CYCLE REVIEW**

**1<sup>st</sup> November 2019**

Traditionally, children and young people who have intellectual disabilities have pursued very different educational pathways compared to their non-disabled peers. Assumptions about ability based on deficit models dominated educational programmes aimed at this cohort of children and young people. These children and young people were not expected to progress through the educational system to senior cycle, and as a result, appropriate curricula and accreditation were not considered as a necessity for this cohort. Until comparatively recently special schools and mainstream schools operated in parallel with little overlap or interchange between these educational systems. Curricula deemed appropriate for this cohort were often characterised by a narrow focus on the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills combined with an emphasis on life skills. These young people were often excluded from vast bodies of subject knowledge which was deemed to be too difficult or too challenging. These young people were expected to make a seamless transition to adult day services upon leaving school, so guidance services remained relatively underdeveloped.

The increased emphasis on educational inclusion from the 1990's onwards supported by enabling legislation has challenged educational thinking and practice regarding children and young people who have intellectual disabilities. Increased numbers of this student cohort were enrolled in mainstream schools and gradually schools began to adapt to this new reality. There is some evidence that parents chose special schools for post-primary education for their intellectually disabled children. Recent research has indicated that young people who have intellectual disabilities can achieve success in Junior Cycle assessment (Rose et al., 2015). However, this research also highlighted the lack of educational provision within senior cycle for these young people with schools often developing non-accredited programmes of learning in the absence of nationally accredited programmes. In some schools the LCA programme was deemed appropriate for this student cohort, however, LCA is not available in every school and more pertinently research has shown the ring-fenced nature of the LCA can result in a stigma being attached to the programme (Banks et al., 2014).

Recent developments in curricula design and accreditation at Junior Cycle offers much encouragement in establishing a more inclusive curriculum and assessment regime that attempts to meet the needs of all learners. Anecdotal evidence indicates that the introduction of the Level 2 programme in Junior Cycle has had a positive impact on the inclusion of students with disabilities although this has not yet been measured.

The Senior Cycle Review reinforces the key principle that Senior Cycle curricula, assessment and accreditation must be designed to meaningfully include all students, including those who have serious difficulties in learning. This is evident in the commentary on the purpose of Senior Cycle education with a renewed emphasis on participation and lifelong learning. Young people who have intellectual disabilities have the same ambitions for their future lives as their non-disabled peers. They want to achieve an independent adulthood, meaningful employment and contribute to their community and to society. To date, these ambitions have often been frustrated and denied as limited educational choices has often led to poorly designed pathways to postschool educational and employment environments. This Senior Cycle review offers a unique opportunity to address these shortcomings and establish a Senior Cycle education that recognises and affirms the learning ability of all students, whatever learning difficulties they experience.

We suggest that focusing on the following critical areas will enable us to achieve the ambition of a Senior Cycle for All:

1. Purpose: engaging with eight key principles outlined and the implications for all aspects of Senior Cycle curricula, assessment and accreditation;
2. Teaching and Learning: reinforcing the key elements of teaching and learning experienced by students such as empowering all students to learn, addressing all learning needs, contributing to students' personal development, maturity and responsibility for their own learning;
3. Pathways and programmes: emphasising the need to develop follow on learning for students completing Junior Cycle at levels 1 and 2 within Senior Cycle that has significant accreditation attached. Students who have intellectual disabilities should be enabled through their study and accreditation to access a range of meaningful

options within postschool environments. Career guidance would need to be significantly enhanced to support these students in making decisions about what pathway combinations might best suit their needs and future plans.

#### References:

Banks, J., Byrne, D., McCoy, S. and Smyth, E. (2014). 'Bottom of the class? The leaving certificate applied programme and track placement in the Republic of Ireland', *Irish Educational Studies*, 33, (4), 367-381.

Rose, R., Shevlin, M., Winter, E. and O'Raw, P. (2015). *Project IRIS – Inclusive Research in Irish Schools A longitudinal study of the experiences of and outcomes for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in Irish Schools*. National Council for Special Education (NCSE). Trim, Co. Meath.

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