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Consultation Report on the Background Paper and Brief for the review of Leaving Certificate Arabic

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For noting

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1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

The *Background Paper and Brief for the Review of Leaving Certificate Arabic* was made available for public consultation from 26th January 2021 to 28th March 2021. The paper provided an overview of the historical context for Arabic in the curriculum and the subsequent experience of the language over succeeding decades before exploring the nature of recent curricular changes in languages at senior cycle level. The paper considered some international perspectives on the nature of curriculum provision for Arabic and discussed the 'framework' model for the study of modern foreign languages in the Irish curriculum. It concluded with the brief for the review that will guide the Development Group in their deliberations.

The aim of this consultation was to seek the open and honest views of the public in relation to the considerations which would guide the development of new specification for Leaving Certificate Arabic.

1.2 Consultation Process

There were three main avenues for consultation feedback: via an online survey, through written submissions and through online focus group discussions which were facilitated to support the participation of students.

The online survey grouped questions under the following broad areas for feedback:

- Reflections on the current LC Arabic syllabus
- Themes in international curriculum and assessment arrangements for Arabic
- Some recent national developments in curriculum and assessment of relevance to the development process
- Other relevant considerations.

Between February and March 2021, five online focus group sessions were conducted. Three focus group sessions were conducted with post-primary students who were Arabic speakers and who were all currently studying the language at Leaving Certificate level, and either in fifth or sixth year.

A fourth focus group session was held with a selection of Arabic speaking students from a post-primary school that participated in the earlier sessions. This group consisted of students from first year upward. All speak Arabic at home but many had not yet decided or opted not to study LC Arabic. The intention was to identify what factors informed students' decisions not to pursue the language at senior cycle.

A fifth session was held with a selection of students who were studying Arabic as part of their undergraduate studies in third level institutions.

In the course of the focus group sessions, students were asked to consider three overarching questions:

- What aspects of the curriculum and assessment arrangements for Arabic do they view as positive?
- What aspects of the curriculum and assessment arrangements for Arabic do they view as negative?
- What changes would they make to the subject to make it more attractive to students?

1.3 Survey respondents and demographics

The table below outlines the demographic breakdown of respondents.

Table 1: Breakdown of respondents

Post-primary Arabic teacher	2
Primary Arabic teacher	1
Private Arabic teacher	1
Third level student	6
Second level student	10
Parent/Guardian	5
Pre-service teacher	1
Teacher educator	2
Third level lecturer/researcher	6
Other (written submission)	1
No response ¹	7
Total	42

¹ Completed initial section only of survey.

2. Consultation Findings

This section of the report reflects on the nature of the feedback elicited from respondents and focus group participants on the background paper, which was welcomed by all of those who engaged in the consultation. There were 42 responses to the online consultation.

2.1 Reflections on current Leaving Certificate Arabic arrangements

Respondents to the survey and focus group participants were asked to consider the current provision for LC Arabic in senior cycle. Respondents highlighted the following, albeit limited, strengths which should be considered in the context of a redeveloped curriculum specification.

The value of the study of Arabic, as a home/heritage language, in developing a **deeper understanding and appreciation of the language and culture** was a prominent theme.

'It has a strong sense of educating Arabic to students and make them understand deeply the language.'

(Second level student)

The significance of the language as a means of communicating with family members and within the Arabic speaking community in Ireland and internationally was emphasised as important to retain in a redeveloped curriculum.

Application of **linguistic skills** was also highlighted by respondents as a strength of the current syllabus. One respondent noted:

'that it enables students to enhance their mother [tongue] language skills such as writing and reading and to develop their knowledge in grammar'.

(Private Arabic teacher)

The recent **adjustment to the syllabus and examination** was welcomed². Many respondents commented that the redeveloped Arabic specification should not require students to study the Qur'ān. Some students expressed the view that it was inappropriate to mention any religious text in a state curriculum and that, if they wished to learn about it, they could do so in their personal time. While others, who identified themselves as non-Muslim said that they felt at a disadvantage because of the presence of the Qur'ān and that if it were a prescribed or even an optional text, that they may still have to study it if the teacher chooses it.

Some trends were evident in more critical perspectives of the current syllabus and these will also be considered in the development process. The lack of change since the introduction of the interim syllabus in 2002 was highlighted, with many respondents **referring to the syllabus as 'outdated'**.

The narrowness of the range of prescribed texts was frequently raised by teachers, students and parents, with reference made to the fact that the current texts are all too difficult and not appropriate for the student cohort.

² In 2019 a short-term amendment was made to the LC Arabic Interim Syllabus. To maximise student choice in the examination, a section of the 2002 syllabus was amended to remove the compulsory nature of the question on the Qur'ān and provide students with the option to answer on any two of the following three areas: Qur'ān, Classical Arabic Poetry, Modern Arabic Poetry.

'[The current texts] are not suitable for second level students. Very hard to read and comprehend, overly time consuming and their language is neither accessible nor appealing to second level students like myself.'

(Second level student)

'If the syllabus focused more on using the Arabic language instead of, for example, studying outdated poetry, it would for one encourage students to engage in lessons and it would help as they progress to third level. It would also enhance their career prospects/CVs. If students find the syllabus useful to them and if they find it applicable in real life, they will be happy to study the language if they think it'll help them in their future.'

(Parent)

As eluded to above, it was suggested that it would be better if **students and teachers could choose their own texts**, as is the case in many of the other foreign language specifications. It was further suggested that allowing a wider choice of texts such as modern poetry and song lyrics would enhance the appeal, accessibility and relevance of texts for students and would also serve to support teacher professional judgement in making choices about text selection.

The **perceived difficulty level of the syllabus** was noted, with some commentary pointing to the high and challenging level of language which students are expected to attain, compared to the level expected in the study of modern languages.

'It's too hard for people who were born here or mostly lived here.'

(Second level student)

Another respondent commented in support of aligning the revised Leaving Certificate Arabic specification with other foreign language specifications at Leaving Certificate level.

'I would certainly commend and support what I understand is the current proposed direction that would essentially "pitch" a revised syllabus at a level more akin to the existing Leaving Cert French exam and I suspect [this] would undoubtedly make the possibility of the exam more appealing to non-native speakers.'

(Written submission)

Comments about **assessment arrangements and the examination paper** echo reflections on the nature of the current syllabus and specifically that the expectations of linguistic skill and overall language proficiency is too high and that the prescribed texts are out of date and written in a language that is beyond the reach of many Arabic students at that age and stage of their learning.

The level of difficulty in questions was the subject of comment with many commenting on the composition.

'Composition is marked too harshly. Even students who have used Arabic their whole life make grammar mistakes, so it's unfair that second level

students are expected to master and perfect the Arabic language, something only a few people can do'.

(Second level student)

When asked about the alignment between the Arabic specification and other languages taught at Leaving Certificate, respondents expressed strong views that this would be more appropriate than the current arrangement. With some commenting that this would make it more attractive to Arabic speakers who find the current syllabus too difficult.

'I believe this approach would help as this would help assess the individual's level, as some students would come to study Arabic believing that Arabic language is as easy as it's spoken at home however, once some students pick up Arabic in leaving cert they soon realize its difficulty and drop out'.

(Primary Arabic teacher)

The **absence of an oral or aural component** was noted as a very negative feature of the current examination arrangements with one respondent (Post-primary Arabic teacher) noting *'it ignores essential linguistic skills e.g. oral'.*

In general, there was a strong agreement that Arabic should be treated as all other Leaving Certificate curricular foreign languages and include an oral and aural assessment. When asked whether the assessment of oral competence should be done through Modern Standard Arabic (Fuṣḥā) or Dialectical Arabic (Ammiya), respondents commented that the most appropriate approach would be a blend of both. A number of students compared the use of

Modern Standard Arabic in the oral context as akin to speaking like “Shakespeare” and furthered this by saying ‘*it is not how people speak*’ in the Arabic world. A blend of both would respect the dialectical nature of oral Arabic while allowing interlocuters to mediate by switching between Modern Standard Arabic and Dialectical Arabic as appropriate. When probed about the importance of an oral examiner having the same dialect as the student, most agreed that they can successfully communicate with almost all Arabic speakers, and that they switch between Modern Standard Arabic and Dialectical Arabic as necessary.

2.2 International perspectives on Arabic in the curriculum

The background paper sets out some international perspectives on provision for Arabic in the curriculum. It draws attention to various themes that are evident in curricular provision for Arabic in various jurisdictions. These include:

- Inclusivity and pitch: Arabic is available at a lower pitch in most other jurisdictions and therefore accessible to students who are learning it as a foreign or background language
- The acquisition of key language competencies, including reading, writing and oral competence
- Skills, knowledge and attitudes that enable students to understand the cultures of Arabic speakers
- The promotion of intercultural education
- Increased autonomy and flexibility in learning and teaching.

Overall, there was general agreement that the new specification should attend to these themes in its design. There was strong agreement, as indicated earlier in this report, that increased flexibility regarding the choice of texts should be considered in the design of the new specification.

In relation to the acquisition of key competencies, it was considered appropriate that students acquire competency in reading, writing and oral language. There was also strong agreement about the importance of opportunities for students to develop oral and aural

competence to enable them to communicate effectively with family, friends and others in the Arabic speaking communities in Ireland and internationally.

2.3 National curriculum and assessment developments

The consultation invited respondents to comment on how aspects of recent developments in the curriculum at national level might be adapted in the design of a new specification for Arabic.

The **absence of a Junior Cycle Arabic specification** was commented on. Some respondents noted that it would be desirable that a junior cycle specification be made available so that students might be more adequately prepared for the demands of Leaving Certificate Arabic.

As outlined earlier, there was overwhelming support for the **inclusion of an oral and aural assessment, as well as a portfolio**. It was noted that this was a feature of all junior cycle languages (English, Irish and Modern Foreign Languages) as well as recently developed senior cycle language specifications such as Lithuanian, Polish and Portuguese and was met with unanimous approval by second level students who participated in the consultation. Many comments relating to the oral assessment noted the importance of recognising dialects within the context of same.

It was suggested by some students and teachers that a portfolio, which students would compile over two years of learning Arabic and may speak about in an oral examination, would provide an excellent opportunity for students to write or speak about their experience of studying Arabic texts including literature.

The background paper acknowledged the **framework approach to the development of Modern Foreign Languages in the curriculum**, whereby the designation of strands and learning outcomes in each specification is very closely aligned. This is the case for the Leaving Certificate Lithuanian, Polish and Portuguese specifications, while the Leaving Certificate Mandarin Chinese specification is also very similar, with some minor distinctions relating to the use of characters, for example. Learning outcomes in the specifications are organised in

two strands, one dealing with 'Communicative language competence' and the other with 'Plurilingual and pluricultural competence.' Respondents to the consultation were invited to offer views on whether, and to what extent, the new Arabic course might align with this approach. Overall, respondents agreed that this would be appropriate and would go some way to ensuring that more students would be able to learn the language. One respondent noted that a framework approach which is aligned with other languages taught at Leaving Certificate *'will make it more related to actual life and will develop a very essential aspect [sic] linguistic skill.'*

3. Conclusions

Overall, while some respondents noted positive features about the current Arabic syllabus, most strongly welcomed the redevelopment of the curriculum. Many teachers, parents and students commented on the fact that the current syllabus is out-of-date, too difficult and ignores essential communication skills including oral and listening skills, making it out of reach of many students from an Arabic community and certainly anyone interested in learning it as a second language.

The comments of many respondents, in the online feedback as well as student focus groups, can be summed up in the words of one teacher who described the current syllabus as *'inconsistent, out of context, ambiguous, extremely large, [and one which] ignores essential linguistic skills e.g. oral.'*

This report has attempted to present the range of views and perspectives raised in this consultation process on the Background Paper and Brief for the review of LC Arabic. The considered opinions offered by participants reinforce the strong welcome and enthusiasm which students, parents and teachers articulated in the consultation process for this redevelopment work. It is hoped that this report will provide direction and guidance to the development group in progressing work on the new specification for Leaving Certificate Arabic.