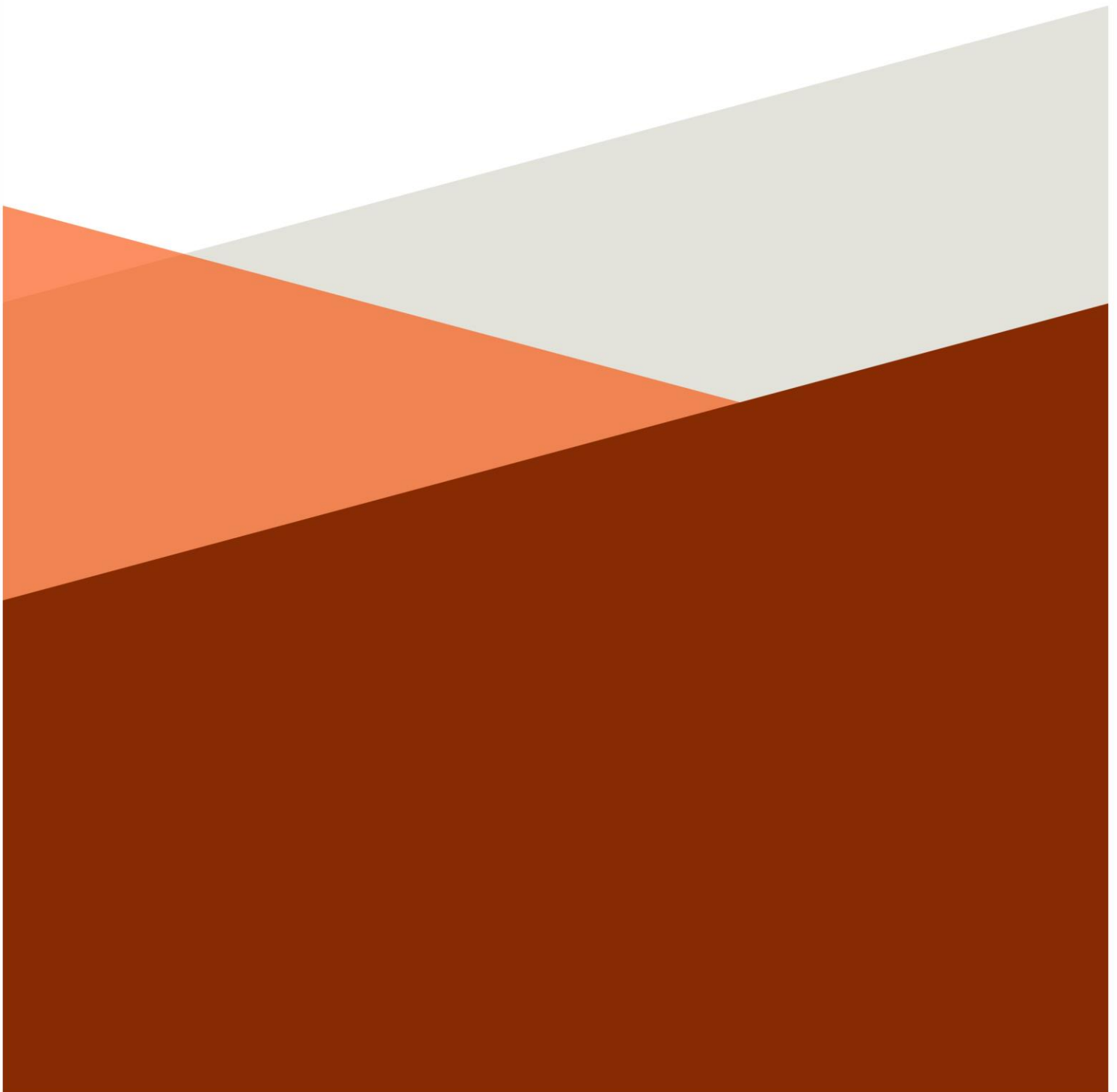




NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curacláim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Consultation Report on Draft Leaving Certificate Arabic Specification



Contents

INTRODUCTION	3
Overview	3
SECTION 1: CONSULTATION PROCESS	4
Methodological approach	4
Consultation responses:	5
SECTION 2: CONSULTATION FINDINGS	6
Pitch and Target Audience.....	6
Teaching and Learning.....	7
The role of texts	7
Language Portfolio.....	8
Learning outcomes	8
Grammar	8
Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Dialectical Arabic (DA)	9
Assessment for certification.....	10
Additional Assessment Components	10
Oral Examination.....	10
Aural Examination.....	11
Supports for successful enactment.....	11
SECTION 3: CONSIDERATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS	13
Considerations.....	13
Conclusion	13
REFERENCES	14
APPENDIX ONE: LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS	14

Introduction

Overview

The Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report (NCCA 2022a) was published in March 2022 following the response from the Minister for Education, Norma Foley, TD. Actions outlined in the Advisory Report include a review of existing curriculum components - subjects, modules, and programmes. In March 2022, the Minister for Education requested that NCCA undertake a series of actions to support the realisation of her vision for a redeveloped senior cycle as set out in [Equity and Excellence for All](#) (Department of Education, 2022). One key action set out in this plan was that a schedule of senior cycle subjects and modules for redevelopment be prepared for approval by the Minister.

NCCA subsequently prepared a schedule of subjects for review, which was organised into a number of tranches. The redevelopment of Tranche 1 subjects will be completed in 2024 for introduction to schools in 2025. The redevelopment of the specification for Leaving Certificate Arabic is included in Tranche 1.

The draft Leaving Certificate Arabic specification was made available for national public consultation from December 8th 2023 to February 23rd 2024. The aim of this consultation was to seek the open and honest views of the public in relation to the curriculum and assessment arrangements in the new draft specification for Leaving Certificate Arabic. The key areas of focus within the consultation centred on the following questions:

- Does the specification get to the heart of what we value about Leaving Certificate Arabic as a subject?
- Do the assessment components reflect the broad learning aspired to within the subject?
- What further supports are needed for successful enactment?

The responses to the consultation indicated a very positive perspective on the specification overall. The stated Rationale and Aim for Arabic was affirmed suggesting that they provide a holistic, practical and inclusive approach to language learning. The emphasis on developing students' key competencies was highlighted and the clarity on the link between key competencies and learning Arabic was highly commended. There was a strong level of approval for the addition of oral and aural examinations, which support the aims of the specification to enable students to communicate effectively and enjoy learning Arabic. Participants also welcomed the move away from prescribed texts and the strong focus on grammar of the current course. Some concerns raised during the public consultation related to the pitch and target audience of the specification, the need for further clarity on the role of the student language portfolio and that of Modern Standard Arabic and Dialectical Arabic in teaching, learning and assessment. Participants also expressed a lack of clarity on grammar and texts in teaching Arabic. The following sections of this report will elaborate in more detail on aspects of these general findings. Section One provides an overview of the consultation process. Section Two provides insights into the consultation findings while Section Three presents key considerations and conclusions.

Section 1: Consultation Process

Consultation is a key aspect of NCCA's work, where advice is shaped by feedback from the public, schools, settings, education interests and others (NCCA, 2022). The following section presents an overview of the methodological approach employed during this consultation which is underpinned by the principles set out in NCCA's Research Strategy (2019) and provides a summary of engagement during the consultation.

Methodological approach

The consultation on the draft Leaving Certificate Arabic specification included multiple modes of engagement during the eight-week consultation period:

- An online survey
- Written submissions
- Focus groups to capture insights from teachers and students
- Phone interviews.

A self-selecting sampling approach was used for the online survey, written submissions, focus group sessions and phone interviews. Focus group meetings 15 senior cycle students and 6 teachers. Students aged 18 years and over consented to their participation in the consultation while parental consent and student assent was sought for focus group participants under the age of 18. Participants who were unable to attend the focus group meetings were offered the possibility to complete a one-on-one phone interview in February 2024 instead. The questions asked during these interviews mirrored those of the focus groups.

A written record of all discussions was made during focus groups and phone interviews. Data gathered was anonymised, and all data from the consultation was stored as digital files in line with NCCA's Data Protection Policy (2023). The privacy of all participants has been maintained through anonymisation, except where an organisation has given explicit permission to be identified as contributing to the consultation.

A thematic approach was used to analyse the feedback and was framed by the guiding themes of the consultation. This helped to identify and analyse themes within the data gathered. The findings of this analysis are presented in Section Two of this report.

Consultation responses

Responses were collected across four modes of engagement. The student focus group consisted of a mix of current fifth and sixth year students studying the current Leaving Certificate Arabic Interim Syllabus outside of schools as an additional subject. These students all speak Arabic as a home or heritage language. The teacher focus group consisted of 6 teachers teaching the current Leaving Certificate Arabic Interim Syllabus outside of schools as an additional subject. All teachers speak Arabic as a native language and come from a range of countries representing variations of Arabic.

Mode of consultation	Overview of participants	Numbers
Online survey	teacher, teacher educator, third level educators/researchers	3
Written submission	Oide, Fauzia Saeed, the Arabic Language Association of Ireland	3
Teacher focus group	Teachers teaching the current LC Interim Arabic Syllabus	6
Student focus group	5 th and 6 th year students studying the current LC Interim Arabic Syllabus	15
Consultative phone interviews	teacher, third level educator/researcher	2

Table 1: Levels of engagement across the consultation

Section 2: Consultation Findings

This section presents an overview of the feedback received during the consultation. The consultation focused broadly on what is valued about Leaving Certificate Arabic as a subject, whether the assessment components reflect the broad learning aspired to within the subject and what supports are needed for successful enactment. The findings can be grouped under the following themes:

- Pitch and Target Audience
- Teaching and Learning
- The role of Modern Standard Arabic and Dialectical Arabic
- Assessment for Certification.

Other areas which were not directly consulted upon, but which were considered relevant to the development of the Arabic specification by those participating in the consultation, are also presented in this section of the report.

Pitch and Target Audience

Leaving Certificate Arabic *“is intended for students from all language backgrounds, including those from a heritage/ community/ home language background who wish to improve some or all of the skills within their communicative repertoire, as well as those who have no prior experience with the language”* (Draft specification, p. 5). All participants welcomed the pitch (A2 – B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference¹) of the redeveloped curriculum specification to support all students included in the stated target audience. However, some teachers reported a lack of clarity regarding the target audience for the draft specification, suggesting that they were unclear if it was aimed at heritage speakers or ab initio learners.

“It is not clear to me if this draft specification is aimed at Heritage Learners of Arabic whereby at least one parent is a native speaker of Arabic and that Arabic is spoken in the home.” (Survey respondent)

Teachers suggested that the draft specification is too ambitious for ab initio learners, pointing to the need for a basic level of Arabic in order to access this curriculum specification. It was seen as

¹ The [Common European Framework of Reference for Languages](#) (CEFR) was published by the Council of Europe in 2001 and updated in 2020 to provide a ‘common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe’ (Council of Europe 2001, p. 1)

desirable to offer ab initio students a preparatory course in advance of taking this Leaving Certificate Arabic specification.

Teachers also pointed to student expectations on the study of literary texts as too ambitious for a course of 180 hours.

“To engage meaningfully with literature in other jurisdictions, that would only happen after 200 – 300 hours. Maybe reword to “extracts from literature.” It would be better to instead continue to focus on “texts more generally, and these texts “can include extracts of literary texts” (Phone interview).

Teachers identified a number of learning outcomes which they considered to be too broad and therefore too challenging for a course of 180 hours and which would benefit from additional clarity and specificity.

Teaching and Learning

Participants were very positive about this element of the draft specification, in particular the integration of knowledge, skills, values and dispositions and the reference to real life interactions and practical use of Arabic in everyday situations, as reflected in the learning outcomes. The inclusion of the fact that students already have many language skills was referred to as “a noteworthy addition” (Written submission).

The role of texts

Participants welcomed the inclusion of a broad variety of texts and the broad choice that teachers and students now have regarding the texts they choose to study. When discussing the flexibility around texts, students welcomed that there is no prescribed list and agreed that it is important to have modern texts, like films included.

“The inclusion of non-literary Arabic texts is an interesting addition as this significantly broadens the pool of sources to be availed of by teachers and students. It is particularly welcome considering how young people today consume and interact with information.” (Written submission)

Some students expressed concern at the lack of resources such as textbooks which could provide a rich source of texts in the target language. Teachers agreed that they liked having a choice in the texts to study but were concerned about the additional workload this places on them and the lack of resources available to them. They expressed the need for resources, particularly oral texts² that are appropriate and engaging. Some teachers approved of teacher choice in principle but

² Oral text: A form of communication that is spoken or transmitted by word of mouth.

were unclear on what to teach. They suggested that *“When it is too open, it is too hard”* and would like further guidance on the types of texts to study.

Language Portfolio

Teachers broadly welcomed the addition of a language portfolio. It was seen as a very welcome development which supports the rationale and aims of the specification.

“Inclusion of a broad range of items in the portfolio will ensure a wide yet detailed representation of students’ language learning progress and interests, while providing opportunity for flexibility and choice.” (Written submission)

Although teachers welcomed the inclusion of a language portfolio and saw its benefits for teaching and learning, they were unclear about its role in the Additional Assessment Component (AAC). Student feedback supported this viewpoint, with the language portfolio viewed as a positive addition to learning Arabic, but with many questioning its value if it is not explicitly assessed. Students were concerned that unless it is assessed, it would be seen as additional work without sufficient reward.

“I believe that implementing a grading system for the portfolio would incentivize students to view it as an essential asset in their learning process. Drawing from my extensive experience as an educator, I’ve observed that subjects with supplementary coursework components tend to elicit more engagement from students. This approach encourages active participation and attracts students to enrol in the course, as they perceive the balanced distribution of marks between coursework and exams as fair and beneficial for their overall performance.”
(Written submission)

Some teachers and students were unclear about the purpose of the portfolio and welcomed the fact that portfolio guidelines will be published to add further clarity and direction.

Learning outcomes

General feedback on the learning outcomes of the specification was very positive, particularly the emphasis on active engagement in day-to-day scenarios and on meaningful communication. Some participants referred positively to the additional guidance provided by the “students learn about” sections and the clear link between the learning outcomes and the key competencies.

“This approach acknowledges that language learning goes beyond rote memorization of vocabulary and grammar rules; it involves practical application and interaction to co-construct meaning in real-world contexts.” (Written submission)

The explanatory text on plurilingualism and pluriculturalism was welcomed in adding clarity on these concepts and supporting a holistic approach to language learning. Some teachers suggested that further examples would help to illustrate the meaning of learning outcomes.

Grammar

Despite the very positive feedback on the learning outcomes of the draft specification, some teachers had concerns regarding the lack of specificity in addressing the grammatical competence

outlined in the learning outcomes. They referred to the current Leaving Certificate Arabic Interim Syllabus, which requires them to teach advanced grammar in order for students to do well in the examination. They welcomed the pitch of the redeveloped curriculum specification but were unclear about the level of grammar required at this pitch. They referred to the need for further guidance on grammar in the learning outcomes and/or the “students learn about” sections to add clarity.

“This reduced level of grammar is welcome but we need training to know what we need to teach and what we can ignore.” (Teacher focus group)

Teachers also expressed a lack of clarity on the action-oriented approach and its implications for teaching grammar in context. They suggested that further support materials and teacher training would be helpful in this regard.

Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Dialectical Arabic (DA)

There was a general consensus among participants that the inclusion of both MSA and DA is a positive development and highlights the practical day-to-day dynamic use of Arabic in society. Views differed on the role of MSA and DA in teaching, learning and assessment of Leaving Certificate Arabic. Teachers and students agreed that DA has an important role in everyday communication and reflects Arabic as it is used in many everyday situations. They viewed it as very important to learn to communicate effectively with speakers from different Arabic speaking communities.

“This should lead to high levels of effective communication in the classroom and prepare students to understand communication through Arabic in a range of contexts and settings.” (Written submission)

Some participants voiced concern whether the allocated time of 180 hours allowed for meaningful engagement with texts in MSA and different varieties of Arabic.

“Some of the outcomes in terms of texts are too ambitious if it is expected that they can follow songs on the one hand which are in different dialects according to where they come from and Arabic poetry which is in Modern Standard Arabic.” (Survey respondent)

Participants had differing views on how communication across variations of Arabic is mediated most effectively. Some participants highlighted the differences between the variations and supported the view that MSA is the best way to mediate between different dialects. Others highlighted the commonalities between the many variations which allowed them to communicate effectively with speakers of different dialects. All participants agreed that students could make themselves understood with some use of Dialectical Arabic.

Students were of the view that the focus in assessing their language proficiency should be on getting the message across. They expressed concern that the use of some Dialectical Arabic to support communication would be considered incorrect when replying to questions in the examination and saw this as unfair if they were able to communicate effectively. Some teachers were concerned that they would be expected to teach many different Arabic dialects and sought further clarity and reassurance that this was not expected of them. Teachers also expressed the

need for further clarity on the role of MSA and DA in teaching, learning and assessment and highlighted the need for further training and resources regarding this aspect of the curriculum.

Assessment for certification

Participants welcomed the more holistic approach to assessment which includes an oral and an aural examination. Teachers welcomed that “*all assessment components will reflect the integrated nature of the strands of the specification.*” (Draft Leaving Certificate Arabic Specification p.29) and were supportive of a multimodal and integrated approach to stimulus materials and questions.

Participants agreed that the use of MSA for stimulus materials and questions throughout the final examination and Additional Assessment Components (AAC)s is helpful and ensures equity among students.

Additional Assessment Components

Students welcomed the Additional Assessment Components and were in favour of bringing Arabic in line with other languages at senior cycle. Although teachers and students were very positive about the addition of an oral and aural examination, some did not agree with the current weighting of the assessment components. Views diverged on the percentages, although the general consensus among participants was that the oral element deserved the highest percentage for A2 – B1 level. Some participants were concerned that the expectations for the written examination at this stage of language learning is too high. When discussing the written examination, many students were concerned that they would be penalised for using DA instead of MSA as a compensation strategy and sought reassurance in this regard.

Oral Examination

All participants welcomed the addition of an oral examination with many referring to this as the most positive development of the draft curriculum specification. When discussing the oral examination, students welcomed that they could answer questions using some dialectical forms of Arabic to aid communication, suggesting that this reflects the natural way of speaking Arabic. They also welcomed that the questions would be asked in MSA to ensure equity for all students.

Teachers welcomed the oral examination, but they expressed a need for more clarity regarding the use of “some Dialectical Arabic.” Teachers had differing views on the use of DA in the oral examination. Some felt very strongly that the oral examination should reflect the real-life use of Arabic and that the use of some DA would not be a barrier to communication.

“It is not difficult for a native speaker to understand different dialects at this level. Why are we expecting the students to use mediation but we are not expecting the native speaker teachers or examiners to use mediation?” (Phone interview)

Other teachers agreed that some use of Dialectical Arabic would not pose any difficulties, but wanted to ensure that students don't think that they will be examined in Dialectical Arabic.

“We want students to speak Arabic and we want them to make themselves understood, but we don’t want them to think that they will be examined in dialect.”
(Teacher focus group)

It was suggested that, in line with the action-oriented approach, task completion should be the priority and that assessment criteria should reflect this approach. Teachers also expressed the need for professional development to ensure that they were familiar with the process, especially in relation to the use of MSA and DA.

Participants agreed that further clarity is needed on the role of the language portfolio in the oral examination to give clear guidance to teachers on the technicalities of the portfolio’s role.

“Allowing students to use plurilingualism and mediation skills, including Dialectical Arabic, to respond to questions is a positive and student-centred approach. This reflects the real-world use of the language and if this approach is readily fostered in day-to-day classroom practice the Oral examination will become less daunting for students through familiarity with regular conversation and communication.”
(Written submission)

Aural Examination

The aural examination was also seen as a very positive addition to the examination which brings Arabic in line with other Leaving Certificate language examinations. Teachers very much agreed that this would have a very positive impact on the learning experience of students but expressed the need for support and resources.

“It’s good but we need lots of examples and training for this because it is new and we want to succeed.” (Teacher focus group)

Students and teachers welcomed the use of MSA in stimulus materials and questions in the aural examination, and suggested that, although this does not reflect authentic spoken communication, this provides certainty and fairness for all students. Teachers pointed to the need for further clarity on the use of mediation skills and strategies for students’ responses.

“Consideration could be given as to how students may respond to questions asked in the Aural examination to further increase the accessibility and inclusivity of the examination.” (Written submission)

Supports for successful enactment

All participants referred to the need for substantial support for successful enactment. The main areas of support referenced throughout were professional development, teacher accreditation with the Teaching Council and the development and provision of high-quality teaching resources. They were of the view that the introduction of the redeveloped curriculum specification for Leaving Certificate Arabic will require significant upskilling for Arabic teachers in line with the action-oriented approach. Teachers were also concerned about the availability of appropriate high-quality materials and resources to support effective and engaging learning experiences.

The particular context for teaching Arabic in Ireland was highlighted in this regard, as many students study Arabic outside of their normal school timetable. As a consequence, many teachers are not currently registered with the Teaching Council. Participants expressed a need for teachers to gain accreditation in order to access professional development and support.

“Registration of teachers who can teach Arabic through the Teaching Council will be essential as participants cannot register for an Oide PLE without a Teaching Council number. “(Written submission)

Section 3: Considerations and Conclusions

Considerations

Overall, the draft specification for Leaving Certificate Arabic was very well received and the consultation fulfilled its objective of initiating discussion and debate on key aspects of the design of the redeveloped subject. The consultation yielded feedback which will be considered by the development group when finalising the specification for Leaving Certificate Arabic.

Key points for consideration in this context include the provision of:

- Further clarity on target audience of the curriculum specification.
- Further clarity on the role of Dialectical Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic in developing plurilingual and pluricultural competence.
- Further clarity on the role of mediation in teaching, learning and assessment.
- Explicit reference to the student language portfolio as part of the AAC.
- Explicit reference to mediation skills and strategies in all assessment components and provide further support in the Descriptors of Quality for the Oral and Aural Examinations.
- Further clarity on the types and role of texts and tasks in line with the action-oriented approach.
- Further supports for implementing an action-oriented approach.

It is worth noting that the feedback gathered during this public consultation highlighted the broader need for enhancing continuity and progression for students who wish to study Leaving Certificate Arabic. While this feedback is beyond the scope of the work of the development group, it is reported for future consideration.

Conclusion

The consultation process was very informative. NCCA acknowledges participants' engagement and is grateful for the open, honest, committed, experience-based and expert feedback received. Consultation feedback indicates there are very positive views on the draft specification, while acknowledging that provision of professional learning, supports and resources are fundamental to successful implementation. The positive response from teachers indicates a sense of optimism about the opportunity to revitalise learning in Leaving Certificate Arabic, given that it has not undergone any meaningful changes in several decades.

References

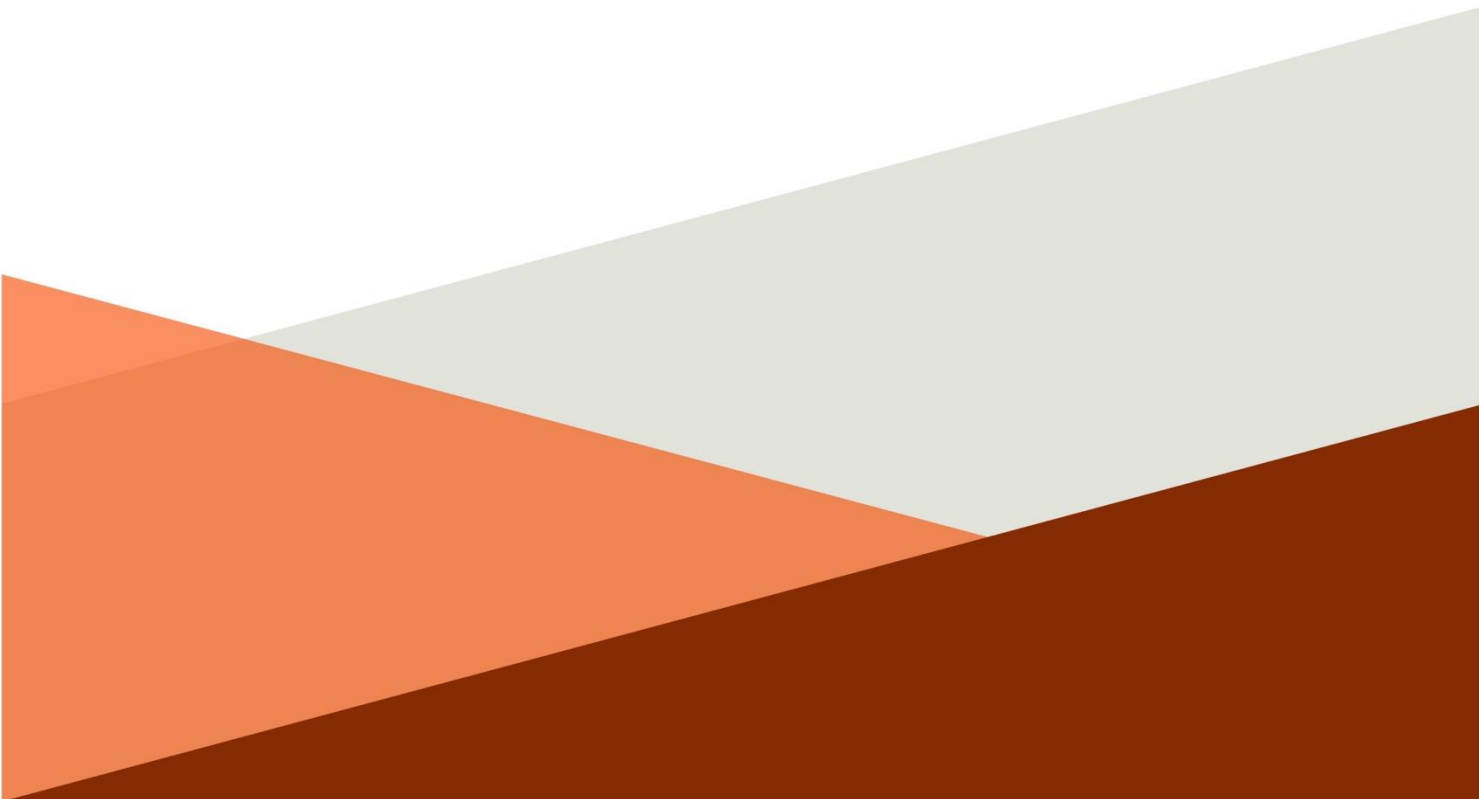
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA. (2019) *Research Strategy*, Dublin, NCCA [online] available <https://ncca.ie/en/publications-and-research/research-strategy/> [accessed 3 February 2024]

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA. (2022) *Senior Cycle Advisory Report*, Dublin, NCCA [online] available https://ncca.ie/media/5399/scr-advisory-report_en.pdf [accessed 3 February 2024]

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA. (2023) *Data Protection Policy*, Dublin, NCCA [online] available <https://ncca.ie/media/4630/ncca-data-protection-policy.pdf> [accessed 3 February 2024]

Appendix One: List of Contributors

Arabic Language Association of Ireland
Fauzia Saeed
Oide.



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curacláim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment