



NCCA

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

Report on the Early Enactment Review of Phase 5 Junior Cycle Subject Specifications

Religious Education, Classics and Jewish Studies

June 2025

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1. Introduction

In line with the Framework for Junior Cycle 2015 (FWJC15) the new subject specifications for Junior Cycle (JC) Religious Education, Classics and Jewish Studies were introduced in schools in September 2019. An early enactment review was scheduled to be undertaken by NCCA when the first cohort of students had completed the course for these subjects. Unfortunately, it was necessary to postpone the review until the 2024/25 school year due to the disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

While the students and teachers who participated in this review had experienced the three years of the curriculum, they were not required to complete two CBAs, as envisaged by the specifications, due to the assessment adjustments introduced to take account of the disrupted learning experienced by students during the pandemic.

This early enactment review commenced in Q3 2024 and was completed in Q1 2025. It aimed to gather feedback on, and explore:

- how well the specifications get to the heart of the learning aspired to within the subject and more broadly within the Framework for Junior Cycle
- the assessment elements within the subjects, as experienced by students and teachers
- how teachers are exercising their professional judgement to mediate the new specifications in their schools and classrooms.

This report commences with background information that helps to contextualise the review and an overview of the consultation conducted as part of the review, followed by insights into experiences in enacting the junior cycle subjects. The feedback received during the review has been considered by NCCA in terms of potential implications arising for both the work of NCCA and other stakeholders in the implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle. The final section of the document sets out proposed next steps to respond to the findings arising from this early enactment review.

2. Background information

This section provides a brief overview of the context for the review, noting certain considerations relating to Classics and Jewish Studies, the assessment adjustments introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic for all junior cycle subjects, relevant curriculum developments in senior cycle and the longitudinal research study on the implementation and impact of the Framework for Junior Cycle.

Certain considerations relating to Classics and Jewish Studies

Certain considerations relating to Classics and Jewish Studies need to be taken into account prior to engaging with this report.

The JC Classics specification gives students the opportunity to engage with the culture, literature, languages, art and material culture of ancient Greece and Rome in a variety of ways. The course comprises three strands, and students study two of these three strands. The first strand, Core component, is taken by all students. Alongside this, students have the option of studying either the Classical studies component (strand 2) or the Classical language component (strand 3). Each strand is designed for 100 hours of student contact time. Therefore, this means some students and teachers consulted in this review may have taken a classical language as a major part of their studies, while others may not.

It should also be noted that students taking the classical language component who have opted subsequently for a Leaving Certificate classical language have not had the same experience of learning a classical language as those students who took the Junior Certificate Ancient Greek or Latin syllabuses, and that this has been a challenge for students in terms of making the transition to senior cycle. New specifications for Ancient Greek and Latin that are designed to provide continuity and progression for students leaving junior cycle will be in place from the start of the next school year (2025/26) and are framed as *ab initio* subjects.

A further clarification is offered in the case of Jewish Studies. This subject is only taught in one school in the state, although a small number of students do also take the course and examination outside the school context. This school was visited as part of the consultation process. The feedback offered needs to be considered in this unique context.

Adjustments to assessment arrangements introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic

The first cohort of students to study the Phase 5 JC specifications were due to complete their three years of study in June 2022. On April 2020 and as part of the national response to the Covid-19 pandemic, all Junior Cycle examinations were cancelled. Over the next three years, alternative assessment arrangements were put in place to take account of the disrupted learning experienced by students during the pandemic.

In the case of Religious Education, Classics and Jewish Studies, this meant that only one CBA was required to be completed. The Assessment Task did not have to be completed. The first state examination of the Phase 5 JC specifications took place in June 2022.

In an announcement by the then Minister for Education on 17 April 2024, it was clarified that the assessment adjustments in place since 2022 in relation to the CBAs will remain for students sitting Junior Cycle examinations in 2025 and 2026.

Relevant curriculum developments in senior cycle

Redeveloped subject specifications for Leaving Certificate Classical Studies and Religious Education will both be introduced to the curriculum and in schools in 2029. Hebrew Studies will be incorporated into the redeveloped Religious Education specification, with the separate subject of Hebrew Studies being discontinued at that time.

Ongoing research on the implementation and impact of the Framework for Junior Cycle 2015 (FWJC15)

A longitudinal study on the implementation and impact of the FWJC15 commenced in late 2020. The four-year study, based on a nationally representative sample, sought to capture the views of teachers, principals, students, parents and wider educational stakeholders on the FWJC15. As a longitudinal study, the experiences of schools were explored over a period of four years, in order to capture the complexity, challenges and successes in enacting the FWJC15. This mixed methods, multi-dimensional research was carried out by a team in the University of Limerick on behalf of NCCA. To date, four interim reports have been published and the final report is due to be published in 2025. The interim reports may be viewed here: [Junior Cycle National Project | University of Limerick](#)

The findings of this study, in conjunction with the findings of the series of early enactment reviews of JC subjects and short courses, will be of great assistance in supporting schools' ongoing work with the FWJC15 and in informing NCCA's work in revisiting and updating the Framework to support high quality teaching, learning and assessment. Furthermore, the study has also collected subject specific information, which will be important to consider alongside the insights from this review when Phase 5 JC subjects are scheduled for redevelopment.

3. Overview of the review process

One of the key purposes of the review is to consult with teachers, students, school leaders and stakeholders on their experiences of enacting the curriculum. Consultation is a key aspect of NCCA's work, where advice is shaped by feedback from consultations with the public, schools, settings, education interests and others. The following section presents an overview of the areas explored and the methodological approach employed during this consultation which is underpinned by the principles set out in [NCCA's Research Strategy \(2023 – 2026\)](#) and provides a full summary of engagement during the consultation.

Areas explored during the review

The guiding areas and topics explored during the review are outlined in Table 1 below.

Area	Topics explored
Working with the specification	Achieving the aim of the specification Working with learning outcomes Planning for learning, teaching and assessment Using learning intentions and success criteria
Assessment	Assessment for the Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs) Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meetings Insights into the use of examples of student work Final assessment
Framework for Junior Cycle	Reporting on student achievement Transition to Senior Cycle Inclusion

Table 1: Areas and topics explored during the review

Methodological approach

This early enactment review was conducted from November 2024 to February 2025 in line with a format agreed by the Council and Board for Junior Cycle for similar early enactment reviews of the JC subjects in Phase 1 and 2 (English, Science and Business), Phase 3 (Visual Art and Modern

Foreign Languages), and Phase 4 (Geography, History, Home Economics, Mathematics and Music).

Feedback was gathered in the following ways:

- school visits to capture the perspectives and experiences of teachers and students from 2nd to 6th year
- an online survey
- written submissions.

Parental consent and student assent were sought for school visit participants under the age of 18. Data gathered through the school visits and online survey were anonymised and transcribed, 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 through written submissions.

A thematic approach was used for data analysis, framed by a set of guiding areas and topics used throughout the review. This helped identify and analyse themes within the data gathered.

School visits

A sample of schools was selected to participate in the consultation, drawn in the first instance from those schools that had previously responded to an open call for expressions of interest in taking part in NCCA consultation processes. Schools that participated in the RE consultation process were drawn from this list.

In the case of Classics, only one school in this list provided for Classics in their junior cycle programme. Therefore, five other schools of different school types were selected to make up a stratified sample. In the case of Jewish Studies, only one school in the state provides for Jewish Studies in their curriculum. This school was the focus of the consultation.

The school visits comprised two focus groups involving students from 2nd to 6th year, and relevant subject teacher(s). There were 6 school visits **for each subject** in the review, except for Jewish Studies.

Online survey

A survey was used to gather feedback from anyone who wished to share their experience of a Phase 5 JC subject. This was shared online via www.ncca.ie, www.curriculumonline.ie, and across NCCA's social media platforms. Table 2 sets out the responses received for each subject.

Subject	Online submissions	Teachers	Students	Management
Religious Education	17	12	53	7
Classics	3	10	45	5
Jewish Studies	0	2	8	1

Table 2: Overview of submissions received and teachers/students/school leaders consulted

Written submissions

An open invitation for written submissions was made through www.ncca.ie, which was shared directly with our education partners. The following submissions were received for each subject:

- Religious Education: Department of Education, State Examinations Commission, Oide, Chester Beatty, Brian Courtney
- Classics: Department of Education, State Examinations Commission, Oide
- Jewish Studies: State Examinations Commission, Dublin Talmud Torah Council.

4. Feedback from the review

This section presents an overview of the feedback received during the review. The guiding areas of discussion used throughout the review (Table 1), framed the analysis of the feedback received. The presentation that follows is based on consideration of the perspectives of students, teachers, school management and stakeholders across each subject, including feedback elicited from school visits, online responses and written submissions. As many aspects of junior cycle are experienced in an integrated way by students and teachers, some overlap across the areas of feedback will be evident below.

Achieving the Aims of the specifications

Aim for the subject: Subject specific observations

Religious Education

In their consultation feedback, students, teachers and stakeholders concurred that the Aim as set out in the Junior Cycle Religious Education specification is being realised and brought to life through teaching and learning. Consultation participants frequently mentioned that students are gaining 'religious literacy' and becoming more aware of and respectful towards different religious beliefs and worldviews. They also talked about students being able to discuss and reflect upon current events and moral issues, and seeing the relevance of religious themes in past and contemporary culture. The potential of the realisation of the aim of Junior Cycle Religious Education to support student wellbeing and the development of key skills was a consistent feature in consultation feedback.

Classics

Consultation feedback indicates that students, teachers and other stakeholders agreed that the Aim set out in the Junior Cycle Classics specification was being realised and that students were afforded opportunities to gain insights into varied aspects of the classical world. Consultation participants noted that the specification supported students to explore aspects of the ancient world and relate them to their own experience of the modern world. The focus on critical thinking and creativity was lauded by respondents, and it was frequently mentioned that the opportunities to develop a deeper knowledge and understanding of ancient civilisations through practical tasks enhanced both the learning and teaching experience.

Jewish Studies

In consultation feedback, students and teachers agreed that Junior Cycle Jewish Studies achieved its core Aim in fostering understanding of Judaism in all its diversity and of how it has shaped and been shaped by events over time. They also talked about how Jewish Studies develops skills of dialogue, debate and openness to different perspectives as well as skills and attitudes that are important for living in a multicultural world.

Working with Learning Outcomes

Learning Outcomes: Subject specific observations

Religious Education

There is broad agreement that the learning outcomes articulate the knowledge, skills, understanding and values that are most important to acquire within Junior Cycle Religious Education. The learning outcomes were considered to be student-centred, relevant and engaging. The way in which the learning outcomes support learning from a multi-faith perspective was highlighted as an important feature of the learning. The focus on discerning values and examining moral decision making within Strand 3 was seen as very important in today's world. Students frequently noted the relevance of the learning outcomes to their lives and enjoyed the opportunities they provide to discuss 'big questions' from different perspectives.

Some teachers observed that students find the more philosophical learning outcomes within Strand 2 challenging, as these require skills of reflection and critical thinking. Similarly, learning outcomes that ask students to 'synthesise' or apply learning across different or unfamiliar contexts can be challenging.

While some teachers were satisfied with the number of learning outcomes and their clarity, others felt that there were too many learning outcomes. This sense of 'too much' was in some instances linked to following lengthy textbooks and feeling under pressure to complete the book.

In some feedback participants suggested that further direction or guidance would be helpful for a small number of learning outcomes which they considered to be very broad. In this context, the following learning outcomes were most frequently identified: LO 1.4, where students should be able to *investigate how Christianity has contributed to Irish culture and heritage*, and LO 3.6, where students should be able to *debate a moral issue that arises in their lives and consider the influences of*

two different perspectives on the issue. SEC examiners have noted low levels of response to questions related to LO 1.4 which may indicate that this learning outcome is presenting difficulty.

On balance, the consultation feedback affirms that the learning outcomes in the Religious Education specification encapsulate important learning across the three strands; they are accessible and relevant to students and facilitate flexibility and choice when planning for teaching and learning.

Classics

The majority of respondents considered that the learning outcomes articulated the knowledge, skills, understanding and values necessary to engage with the Junior Cycle Classics specification. Teachers considered that the learning outcomes allowed students to engage with learning to a high standard, where they were supported to recognise and appreciate the distinctive nature and significance of the ancient Greek and Roman worlds. There was broad agreement that the number of learning outcomes was appropriate and that they were accessible, clear and flexible. Teachers indicated that the nature and breadth of the learning outcomes meant that they could plan a variety of pedagogical interventions to facilitate students to delve into the learning about the ancient world in meaningful and constructive ways.

Several respondents mentioned that a mini glossary of Latin and Ancient Greek words/terms would be useful, as it was noted that some students struggled to show an understanding of certain words and terms in English. Respondents expressed some concern over the number of names within Greek mythology that needed to be remembered. Students voiced this concern when they talked about the amount of 'content' they needed to remember and although they enjoyed their engagement with the myths and legends, they suggested that this feature of the specification could focus on fewer stories, which in turn could allow them more time to make up their own myths and legends.

A number of respondents stated that some of the learning outcomes were somewhat broad. For example, LO 1.6, where students should be able to *explore the motifs, themes, values, and messages of myths*, challenged some teachers in terms of how many myths they had to explore. In LO 2.7, where students should be able to *evaluate Achilles' decisions and actions in comparison with the decisions and actions of other heroes in the Iliad*, some teachers were unsure of what level of evaluation was required.

Other stakeholders in the consultation (besides teachers and students) believed that learning outcomes, for the most part, successfully articulated a broad vision for student learning. They noted that the language used was clear and accessible in terms of what students should know, understand and be able to do and that the overall aim of the specification was embodied comprehensively throughout the learning outcomes. It was also noted that the learning outcomes allowed for a range of student abilities and skills to be recognised. In this context, the focus on students engaging with written texts, visual images and physical artefacts was commended. It was suggested that a perceived move from rote learning to a more experiential process of learning has captured both the imagination of students in the way they engage with learning, and teachers in how they interpret the learning outcomes. Respondents commented that the learning outcomes were flexible and inclusive and allowed for meaningful integration of practical skills and abstract knowledge. They also took cognisance of the learning preferences of students who engaged with them.

Jewish Studies

The consultation feedback indicates that the learning outcomes in the Jewish Studies specification provides for important learning across the three strands. Teachers agreed that the three strands work well together. Students found the learning interesting and relevant and while some students engaged with less enthusiasm with Strand 3 (Sacred Texts) than with the other two strands, the teachers considered Strand 3 to be important for an understanding of Judaism.

Areas of learning which teachers and students particularly like engaging with include the Holocaust, ethical questions and aspects of Jewish life and culture.

Overall, teachers thought the learning outcomes were clear and helpful in planning for teaching and learning. They considered LO 1.1 to be very broad (whereby students should be able to *construct a timeline of key people and events/moments in the history of Judaism encompassing the founding story, the Diaspora and events up to the present day, and be able to explain the significance of the key people and events/moments chosen*). Otherwise, there was no critical feedback on the learning outcomes.

Planning for Learning, Teaching, Assessment and Reporting

Planning for learning, teaching, assessment and reporting: Subject specific observations

Religious Education

Consultation participants indicated that collaborative planning in Religious Education was happening in schools. Depending on context, planning could be formal or informal. It could be broad in scope, for example, general discussions about approaches to teaching and learning or decisions about textbooks, or it could be focused on agreeing schemes of work and school-based examinations. In some schools, teachers maintained a shared online space where they collaborated on developing and sharing resources.

Inspectors observed some good practice in subject plans, including the development of units of learning with a cross-topic approach. For most teachers, early challenges associated with planning terminology – units of learning, learning outcomes, learning intentions, success criteria - are now less of an issue. For some, this issue has been resolved by drawing on the units of learning as set out in the textbook. In other contexts, teachers have grown in confidence as they developed their own units of learning using the learning outcomes. Teachers who had the opportunity to attend JCT/Oide professional learning events expressed more comfort in planning using learning outcomes than those who had not.

It is evident that many teachers used textbooks to guide their planning and in this consultation some difficulties with this approach were noted. For example, some textbooks did not sufficiently deal with certain learning outcomes or provided a narrow interpretation of a learning outcome. It was noted that overreliance on a textbook could make the learning less relevant as examples and stories in the textbook are studied in lieu of more relevant and local examples suitable for the students' own context. It was observed by stakeholders that some teachers could benefit from professional learning support to help them see the possibilities offered by this specification and move beyond studying set examples that feature in a chosen textbook.

Opportunities to collaborate with other teachers were valued by teachers, whether that collaboration occurs with colleagues in school or in other settings.

Learning intentions and success criteria

Teachers generally recognised the usefulness of learning intentions. Success criteria were used to varying degrees when assigning pieces of work. Some teachers and their students spoke very

positively about their experience of giving and receiving formative feedback as a part of ongoing teaching, learning and assessment.

Classics

Teachers highlighted that the lack of a textbook in this subject meant that they had to consider a wide variety of approaches in the development of subject planning. Teachers focused heavily on the learning outcomes to develop schemes of work and to create resources. In schools where there was more than one Classics teacher, collaboration was considered key to the planning process. Respondents noted approvingly that the flexibility and student-centred nature of the learning outcomes meant that units of work could be tailored to the interests and strengths of students, which in turn allowed for the development of student agency and a feeling of ownership of what they were learning. Furthermore, it was noted by respondents that within the planning process, there were opportunities to support students to develop the key skills of junior cycle and transferable skills whose value extended beyond the subject. These skills included critical thinking, creativity, and working collaboratively. However it was also noted that there was a lot of learning to engage with in Strand 1 in order to achieve the learning outcomes, and that this factor could impact on the amount of time devoted to engage with Strand 2 or 3.

It was also clear from respondents that the opportunity to collaborate was limited as many schools had one teacher departments. The Classical Association of Ireland – Teachers (CAI-T) and Oide were mentioned as a very significant source of support by many of these teachers, who found the resources developed by these bodies to be hugely beneficial to their planning.

Learning Intentions and success criteria

Teachers and other stakeholders in this consultation stated that the learning outcomes provided a robust and stable framework for establishing clear learning intentions for classroom activities. In focusing on skills and concepts rather than solely content, teachers suggested that they could encourage students to engage more meaningfully with the subject. Several teachers also mentioned that their students co-designed some of the tasks as well as having inputs into the success criteria for these tasks.

In the context of planning, teachers noted that they would like to have more of a voice in the design of professional development provided by Oide, given the small cohort of teachers for the subject. Teachers suggest that aligning proposed professional learning with their specific needs would enhance both the learning and teaching experiences of students and teachers alike.

In terms of those students studying a classical language in Strand 3, it was observed by teachers that students enjoy translating English into Latin, and that they get a sense of achievement from doing that. It was further noted that the act of composing basic sentences imbued students with confidence and supported their awareness of such grammatical features as sentence structure, sub clauses, and case endings, for example, which in turn was invaluable in supporting their appreciation of other languages as well.

Students also noted that they generally enjoyed translation, and that while it may be challenging, there was much scope to learn from mistakes and that it was therefore progressive. While students noted that grammar might not be attractive to some, learning about such features as grammar rules and punctuation could be carried over into the study of other modern languages. It was observed that the study of Latin helped with understanding Irish dative and genitive cases. However, students did note that a vocabulary list or glossary would be an important additional support and would give added clarity and confidence.

Jewish Studies

Planning

Opportunities for teachers of Jewish Studies to collaborate with other teachers are limited due to the small number of students engaging in Jewish Studies, although collaboration is certainly evident in the practice of teachers consulted in this review. However, teachers of Jewish Studies have developed a bank of resources over the years and draw upon their experience of planning for teaching and learning in other subjects.

Key Skills

The key skills of junior cycle were raised by teachers and students in the consultation. Students and teachers alike mentioned that the course stimulates lots of discussion, through which students learn how to have open debate and consider different perspectives. They also develop skills associated with expressing opinions and clarifying their beliefs. Students also felt they developed public speaking skills by presenting their CBAs and other class projects.

Assessment

This section of the report considers feedback elicited from respondents in relation to assessment. It considers assessment in relation to four aspects:

- Ongoing Assessment
- Classroom-Based Assessments
- Assessment guidelines, examples of student work and Subject Learning Assessment and Review meetings (SLARs)
- Final examination arrangements.

These aspects are informed by the dual approach to assessment in junior cycle, designed to support student learning over the three years of junior cycle and to measure achievement at the end of those three years. This dual approach is intended to reduce the focus on the final examination and to increase the prominence given to Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs) and formative assessment. This change of emphasis arises from an acknowledgement that students learn best when teachers provide feedback that helps students to understand how their learning can be improved as outlined in the Framework for Junior Cycle 2015.

It is noted that on 22 April 2025, Minister McEntee announced changes to Junior Cycle grade bands. It was announced that there will be the same number of grade bands as before, but with the top four grade descriptors (Distinction, Higher Merit, Merit, and Achieved) being evenly distributed in bands of fifteen percentage points. This decision was taken after the current review was undertaken, so feedback described in the section that follows should be noted in that context.

Classroom-Based Assessment: Subject specific observations

Religious Education

End of topic tests remain a common form of classroom assessment. While some teachers said they leaned heavily on past examination questions for classroom assessment, particularly in 3rd year, there was also evidence of more varied formative assessment practices in some schools. In some instances, teachers spoke about the use of Apps to support classroom assessment activities.

CBAs –general feedback

Across the consultation, both CBA1 and CBA2 were commended as being highly engaging and supporting meaningful learning. The main benefits of the Religious Education CBAs that were mentioned included providing choice and flexibility; enabling self-directed learning linked to topics of interest; and supporting the development of a range of key skills.

CBA1 – A person of commitment

Many students and teachers alike said they ‘loved’ CBA1. Students frequently said that compared to CBAs in other subjects, this was their favourite. They said they liked the choice it offered and its scope for creativity. They noted that this creativity was evident in the wide range of people that students chose as the focus for CBA1. In addition to developing skills typically associated with CBAs (such as research and presentation skills), some students also noted that researching their chosen person helped them develop empathy, as through their research they grew in understanding of the life experiences, actions and decisions of another person, and appreciated more deeply the complex factors that affected people’s choices and actions.

CBA2 – The human search for meaning

Most teachers who contributed to the consultation had not engaged with CBA2 (due to the changed assessment arrangements following the Covid-19 pandemic). Interestingly, some teachers had chosen to do this second CBA as they saw its potential for meaningful learning and student engagement. They particularly liked its scope for creativity and cross curricular links (with Art and History, for example).

Assessment Guidelines, samples of work and SLARs

In consultation meetings teachers said they found the Assessment Guidelines and examples of student work on www.curriculumonline.ie very useful. However, over time they had become less reliant on these annotated examples as they had built up their own bank of examples, which they anonymised and shared with their students to illustrate standard and inspire ideas. Teachers also reported that they found the SLAR meetings very positive opportunities for professional collaboration and helpful in gaining a shared understanding of the Features of Quality associated with CBAs, and of standards generally.

One point of critical feedback, expressed by teachers, related to a perceived lack of recognition of the students’ efforts when the work was not awarded a percentage mark in the final result. That said, some teachers identified benefits to students not being awarded a percentage as they saw this as helping to reduce pressure. Students in focus group meetings were less concerned about gaining a percentage mark, as for them, engaging in enjoyable projects and having choice and ownership of their learning was the most important reward.

Written examination

Teachers generally reported that the Junior Cycle Religious Education examination paper has improved over the years, with good use of visual prompts and a mix of types of questions to allow

both access and challenge for students from a range of abilities.

Generally, the written examination was considered to be accessible and fair. Depending on context, some teachers and students thought that examination questions could be overly demanding while in other contexts they questioned whether the questions were sufficiently demanding. Students and teachers sometimes spoke about the language of the examination questions being somewhat vague, with a resultant lack of certainty about what exactly a question was asking, and what level of detail was needed when answering. They suggested that having the marks on the paper for each question would be a helpful clue as to how much time each question required. Interestingly, there was a sense that the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA) was not perceived as particularly meaningful to students.

Classics

A noteworthy feature of the consultation on assessment was the increased emphasis on formative assessment practices evident in the pedagogical approaches of teachers. Teachers suggested that the CBA in second year provided an appropriate benchmark for reporting on student progress to parents / guardians. Teachers mentioned the positive impact of formative feedback when engaging their students. This was confirmed by students who said that although they would like to receive a grade for their work, the formative feedback was useful to them in finding ways to improve their work.

CBAs – General Feedback

Respondents to this consultation noted that CBAs were enjoyable. Students especially found the CBA to be useful in assisting them in developing their skills of research, enquiry and presentation. Variety and flexibility in themes that could be chosen were key factors in why the CBAs were considered popular. Teachers commented that the CBAs were instrumental in students understanding different aspects of the course. Teachers and students noted that they would like to be able to focus on one CBA but would equally like to have the option of choosing one from the two that are available.

CBA 1 – Storytelling using myth

Students and teachers alike said they really enjoyed engaging in this CBA. The flexibility to explore and develop a topic which interested the students was a key factor in why it was so popular. The breadth of topics to choose from gave students freedom to explore a variety of important skills within the CBA presentation. Students mentioned how they were allowed to use their creative skills to explore an appropriate theme for their CBA and noted that this gave them freedom to

present a report that they were very proud of. Some stakeholders also noted that the opportunities afforded to students in terms of being creative through writing, performing, visualising and adapting myths, assisted them in developing skills that were transferable to other subject areas, with the result that they had the potential to become more reflective and active as learners.

CBA2 – Rome, centre of an empire

Most teachers who contributed to the consultation had not engaged with CBA2 (due to the changed assessment arrangements). Some teachers, however, chose to do this second CBA as they saw its potential for meaningful learning and student engagement. They mentioned that it supported and enhanced learning in other areas of the specification and expressed satisfaction with it.

CBA 3 – Language Portfolio

The language strand CBA requires students to present three different types of text from those that they have developed in their language portfolio over the three years of the course and present these for assessment. The changed assessment arrangements meant that the CBA was not engaged with by students in a formal sense, but the practice of maintaining a portfolio was viewed as an important feature of effective language learning, and was considered an appropriate feature of the specification. The CBA itself was also viewed as appropriate by respondents.

Assessment Guidelines, Samples of Work and SLARS

In consultation meetings teachers said they found the Assessment Guidelines and sample CBAs on www.curriculumonline.ie very useful. However they suggested that more recent and broader examples of student work need to be published. The Features of Quality were seen by many respondents as challenging. However, it was mentioned on several occasions that the CBA booklet developed by the CAI-T was a brilliant resource for teachers. Teachers believed that the Assessment Guidelines allowed for flexibility in approach to the CBA and students really benefitted from this as they could experiment with a variety of approaches to pursue their ideas. However, teachers also said that the review and reflection piece was challenging and that students often struggled to engage fully and meaningfully in this process. Furthermore the “yet to meet expectations” level, they believed, could be interpreted as allowing students to do the CBA again, and as such the terminology in this respect may have caused some confusion. Some also commented that the descriptors defining the differences between each level could be clearer.

In terms of Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meetings, the consensus was that teachers were happy to engage with them. They were eager to see other examples of student work and suggested that this collaborative practice benefited their teaching practices.

Written Examination

Stakeholder respondents in this consultation observed that the written examination effectively tested student knowledge and understanding of all three strands, and was strongly aligned to the learning outcomes of the specification. It was noted that in the written examination, students were given the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to engage with stimuli such as primary classical sources, artefacts and narratives in meaningful ways. Many respondents noted approvingly that the questions were structured in a way which allowed students to apply their knowledge logically rather than guessing at what was required.

Some students and teachers, however, noted concerns regarding the written examination. They mentioned that the lack of a recognisable template for the examination paper each year, including in regard to the number of questions being asked, could have a detrimental effect on students' time management in the examination setting. It was also noted that the lack of marks on the examination paper was problematic as students relied on clarity around allocation of marks to have a sense of how detailed answers needed to be. The lack of choice of questions was also commented on, as was the language used, which some considered to be challenging for a common level course. Teachers remarked that some students struggled to interpret the language used while others found the language too simple.

Several respondents noted that, while there were many opportunities to engage creatively and imaginatively with learning outcomes, opportunities were not so evident in the format of the written examination. While teachers said that the course was accessible to students, some maintained that there was a tension between the broad and flexible learning outcomes of the specification and the specificity of the written exam. Both teachers and students also commented on the difficulty in achieving a 'distinction' grade and believed that the lack of this grade for many high achieving students impacted on their subject choices going forward into senior cycle.

Jewish Studies

Assessment

A range of methods for ongoing classroom assessment are used, including quizzes, homework and class tests. A five minute start of class check-in on prior learning is also used.

CBA 1: Living a Jewish Life today

Teachers and students really like this CBA. In particular, students enjoyed being able to focus on an aspect of Jewish family life and customs which is of interest to them and they appreciated the choice and scope provided by this CBA. Teachers sometimes noted an attitude of 'why bother' among students when there was not a mark awarded, and it was considered that there should be a mark allocation for the CBA.

Assessment Guidelines, samples of work and SLARs

Teachers said they found the Assessment Guidelines very clear and helpful. Due to the small number of students engaging in Jewish Studies there are no examples of student work available on www.curriculumonline.ie. However, teachers said they looked at other subject CBAs online for guidance regarding standard, and found this useful.

Written examination

Generally, the written examination was considered to be accessible and manageable by both teachers and students. In fact it was generally felt to be comparatively easy. The teachers felt that the examination questions could provide greater challenge by asking more questions that require higher order thinking skills. In addition, the teachers said they were unsure what level of detail is needed in answering questions and would like the marks to be on the exam paper. The SEC has observed that the small number of candidates who have entered for the Junior Cycle Jewish Studies final examination over the last three years have engaged well with the aims of the specification.

Framework for Junior Cycle, Inclusion and Transition to Senior Cycle

Reporting on student achievement

Reporting on student achievement: Subject specific observations

RE

Most teachers indicated that the main reporting change is in the integration of the language of the Junior Cycle Framework into school reports to parents/guardians. It was also noted that formative feedback to students was supported by the CBA as a form of assessment.

Classics

Most teachers indicated that the main reporting change was in the integration of the language of the Framework for Junior Cycle into school reports to parents/guardians. Although initially parents struggled to understand this new approach, teachers noted that at this stage parents and students were relatively comfortable with language being used as indicated in their interactions with parents/guardians during parent/teacher meetings.

Teachers highlighted the use of formative feedback practices when engaging in the assessment of CBAs – they remarked that the approach was beneficial in developing students' skills in other areas of the specification.

Jewish Studies

Teachers of Jewish Studies did not express any concerns on reporting, and were satisfied with the arrangements in place in their context.

Supporting the transition to senior cycle

Supporting the transition to senior cycle: Subject specific observations

RE

In general, Junior Cycle Religious Education is seen as providing a solid foundation for Leaving Certificate Religious Education. The development of research skills (primarily gained through engagement in the CBAs) and the ability to think critically and discuss questions from multiple perspectives were noted as key attributes of the Junior Cycle Religious Education classroom and equally relevant for Leaving Certificate Religious Education. In schools where Leaving Certificate Religious Education is offered as a subject option, teachers report that the take-up is very good. Some teachers expressed concerns about the transition to Leaving Certificate Religious Education where extended writing skills are required, and recommended that opportunities to engage students in extended writing should be explored by teachers in junior cycle.

Classics

Teachers generally agreed that the Junior Cycle Classics course provided a good foundation for transition to the senior cycle Classical Studies course. They indicated that the junior cycle course built a good base knowledge (for example, through the alignment of content, recurring themes and skills) for the senior cycle course and that there was continuity in the material being learned. They also mentioned that professional learning allowed them to link the two courses and this was useful in planning material that had active links between the two. However, teachers also commented on

the volume of work required at senior cycle and this, they believed, came as a shock to many students who viewed JC Classics as a creative and interactive course where they could express themselves relatively freely. Students indicated that this was not the case at senior cycle level as the amount of work to get through was substantial. Students often expressed disappointment in this respect.

However, students also noted that the transition from junior cycle to senior cycle in the study of classical languages was a challenge. It was acknowledged that new specifications for Leaving Certificate Ancient Greek and Latin due to be introduced to schools in 2025/26 would allow for a smoother transition, given that the new subjects were designed to be studied *ab initio*. However, for those cohorts who had to move from a 100 hour experience of a language into a full Leaving Certificate syllabus, it was noted that this was a difficult and challenging experience.

Jewish Studies

This theme was not relevant to the students and teachers of Jewish Studies, as there is no Leaving Certificate Jewish Studies course or equivalent course to which students can progress from junior cycle.

Inclusion

Inclusion: Subject specific observations

Religious Education

Within consultation meetings, participating teachers frequently commented upon the inclusive nature of the Religious Education specification. They pointed to its inclusivity in facilitating a multi-faith approach to Religious Education and enabling students of 'all faiths and none' to fully engage in learning about different beliefs and world views. They felt the current course was more inclusive of different religious and non-religious perspectives than the previous Junior Cycle Religious Education syllabus. Examiners have reported that candidates are able to demonstrate a knowledge and understanding of not just one religion, but of the five major world religions and non-religious world-views as required by the specification.

Teachers also affirmed that the course was accessible to students with a range of student abilities, including students engaging with Level 2 Learning Programmes (L2LPs).

Aspects of the examination were mentioned as enabling accessibility (such as the use of short answer questions, picture prompts and other visual stimuli) while on some occasions teachers thought the language of some questions was challenging for some students. Questions which were more abstract or philosophical were thought to be more difficult for these students.

Overall – and notwithstanding the above points – teachers generally were satisfied that the Religious Education specification and assessment arrangements take account of the entire continuum of ability and experience.

Classics

Teachers commented on the fact that certain elements of the specification required creative and collaborative practices (see for example LO 2.15). This gave students, who found the depth of content challenging, a way of engaging more deeply with the subject. According to teachers this encouraged students to explore different ways of understanding this content, which in turn fostered a sense of inclusivity that permeated their experiences of the specification overall.

Teachers also noted that because they did not have a textbook, they took the learning preferences, abilities and strengths of students into account when creating class content and resources. They were also conscious of the level of student engagement with the subject in the classroom and because they had created the content, they noted that they could adjust the pace of this classroom provision in accordance with student capacity to engage with the desired learning.

Jewish Studies

Teachers and students affirmed that Jewish Studies provided for the continuum of abilities and interests within the classroom. They attributed this to a well-designed course that was engaging and relevant with not too many learning outcomes. They also agreed that the assessment arrangements (including both CBAs and examination) allowed students to succeed where they made some effort.

5. Insights, recommendations and next steps

NCCA would like to acknowledge and thank the teachers, students and other stakeholders who contributed to this review. Their feedback was very insightful into how the Phase 5 subjects specification have been enacted and experienced.

This section of the report considers the feedback from the review to identify key insights and recommendations. In doing so, it is important to acknowledge that curriculum change is a complex process that takes time to achieve and neither teachers nor a single cohort of students experienced the curriculum and assessment arrangements as intended due to the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge the extraordinary effort made by teachers of the Phase 5 subjects to support engagement with new curriculum arrangements in very challenging circumstances.

Insights

The following insights are drawn from consideration of the various issues raised in the course of this report. They seek to synthesise the overarching findings and are intended to inform recommendations that follow. These insights are categorised in relation to the Framework, firstly; and then in relation to the three Phase 5 subjects.

Feedback related to the Framework for Junior Cycle

- It is evident that collaborative planning has become more embedded in the culture of schools, with the SLAR process a significant driver of this developing culture. Teachers generally welcome the SLAR process as a valuable opportunity for professional conversations with colleagues.
- Formative assessment practices are evident in classroom practice.
- In the context of planning, while it is acknowledged that textbooks continue to play a role in teacher planning and pedagogy, it is noted that there are no textbooks for the Junior Cycle Classics specification, nor for Jewish Studies. Teachers of these subjects develop teaching and assessment approaches using other resources and are managing very well to do this.
- There is a view that the lack of marks for the CBA in term of overall final assessment is impacting on the status given to CBAs and the perception of CBAs held by students and parents.

- The experience of the final assessment varies somewhat across the subjects explored in this review. However, it is evident that there is some frustration around the perceived excessive width of grading bands, and the perceived excessive difficulty in students attaining Distinctions. There remain some concerns about the Common Level. There are calls for greater transparency in the designation of marks for questions on the examination paper.

Feedback related to the enactment of the Religious Education, Classics and Jewish Studies

- There is a consensus across all three subjects that the Aim set out for each subject is apt, and encapsulates the desired learning for students at the age and stage of Junior Cycle.
- The specification design in terms of strands and learning outcomes is viewed as appropriate across all three subjects, with a general consensus that the essential learning for each subject is captured within the outcomes set out.
- It is evident that teachers of the subjects are invoking the language of learning and teaching, and this is evident in discussions about learning intentions, success criteria, formative assessment and the CBA experience.
- Teachers generally view their CPD experience positively, and welcome such opportunities, and note also the support of subject teacher associations.
- There remains a need for new and varied examples of student work to be developed in Classics to continue to support teacher professional judgements and assessment knowledge.
- The experience of Classroom-Based Assessments is viewed as positive, with students pointing in particular to the opportunities provided for the pursuit of areas of personal interest and fulfilment.
- While understanding of learning outcomes has certainly become more refined, tensions still exist in relation to what is perceived as excessive vagueness or lack of clarity in relation to some learning outcomes across the subjects, with teachers seeking more guidance or specificity in some instances, particularly in the context of preparing students for the final examination.
- There is some frustration that CBAs are not recognised in terms of the final overall grade for the subject.

Recommendations

It is evident from the feedback in the review that many of the issues raised extend beyond the domain of the specific subjects and relate more broadly to implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle. This was also evident in previous early enactment subject reviews, most recently in the Phase 3 and Phase 4 reviews. While the remit of the review does not include proposing actions relating to the implementation of the Framework, the following table identifies the most pertinent of these issues.

Issues relating to the Implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle

Some actions relating to the broader implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle may be taken through focused engagement with relevant stakeholders and partners, informed by feedback elicited in the review, and following on similar feedback elicited in previous early enactment reviews conducted by NCCA. The following four areas for actions are identified.

Professional time and planning, timetabling and resources

Professional time for teachers was introduced to support schools in their enactment of the Framework for Junior Cycle. This time is valued by teachers and school management. More time and guidance for planning, timetabling and access to appropriate resources would be welcomed by all teachers and school management.

Assessment and Reporting

The broader approach to assessment in junior cycle, although generally welcomed by teachers, still has challenges in terms of enactment. The shift to Common Level examination papers has been challenging for teachers. More guidance and support in this context would be appreciated. Equally, some concerns remain around the nature of the grading system and grade bands in the current assessment of Junior Cycle subjects. The narrowness of the Distinction band was raised as a concern. As with other subjects, there was feedback on the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement, which suggests that there is still a need for more urgency around the earlier issuing of the JCPA, and for more communication to explain its relevance to students and parents.

CBAs and SLAR Meetings

The role and importance of CBAs in the context of the dual assessment approach needs to be highlighted for students and parents. Support and guidance for the ongoing facilitation of SLAR meetings would also be appreciated, especially for one teacher subject departments that exist in some schools for subjects like Classics.

Exploring the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle: A longitudinal study

The dissemination of findings, and the formulation of actions to support the recommendations that ensue from the University of Limerick-led longitudinal study on the implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle in schools, should be communicated to teachers, students and parents.

Recommendations relating to the ongoing enactment of Religious Education, Classics and Jewish Studies

The review finds that the essence of each specification, in terms of its design in strands and learning outcomes, and designation of CBAs, is such that significant revisions or amendments that would necessitate the convening of a development group are not required.

It is proposed that some practical actions could be undertaken across the three subjects to address the more pertinent and prominent issues raised. Suggestions regarding a small number of learning outcomes that could benefit from clarification, might be addressed through the provision of guidance from Oide, supported by NCCA. Such guidance would not only provide clarity on the scope of the learning outcome, but also prompt thinking about diverse ways that teachers could meaningfully engage with the relevant learning outcome.

In addition, some amendments as required to Assessment Guidelines for subjects, including the development of glossaries of terms (in Classics) and possible refinement of Features of Quality (in Classics) might be addressed, as well as the further development of examples of student work.

It is proposed that, subject to approval, the changes proposed by the Executive for each subject, as set out below, would be an appropriate response to the issues raised in the review.

Recommendations

In the case of Religious Education, NCCA will:

Collaborate with Oide to devise means to support teacher professional development in these areas:

- Interrogating and interpreting certain learning outcomes identified in the review as requiring further elucidation or clarification

- Identifying ways to foster philosophical thinking skills, to support students' capacity to synthesise and apply concepts across different contexts, and to enhance students' ability to engage in reflection
- Extending teacher capacity to plan using the specification and a diverse range of resources
- Broadening approaches to classroom assessment and encouraging formative assessment practices.

Update and publish further annotated examples of student work.

In the case of Classics, NCCA will:

Collaborate with Oide to devise means to support teacher professional development in these areas:

- Interrogating and interpreting certain learning outcomes identified in the review as requiring further elucidation or clarification
- Developing a mini glossary of terms in both Ancient Greek and Latin
- Focusing on learning intentions and success criteria to support teaching and learning, and to assist in interpreting learning outcomes through targeted CPD.
- Addressing how updates to the Assessment Guidelines may address issues raised in the review.

Update and publish further annotated examples of student work.

In the case of Jewish Studies, it is not proposed to take any further actions at this time.

Students would like past papers published on www.examinations.ie

6. Next Steps

It is proposed that, subject to Council approval, the recommendations be pursued as appropriate.

It is hoped that the review process, the report that emerged from it, and the recommendations arising, continue to support students, teachers and school management in realising the aims for the subjects and in implementing the Framework effectively.



NCCA

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