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Association of Community  
and Comprehensive Schools

*Cumann na Scoileanna Pobail  
agus Cuimsitheacha*

## Submission re Review of Senior Cycle

### Respondent Details:

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ACCS, the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools welcomes the opportunity to make a written submission on the senior cycle review during this consultation phase.

The identity of ACCS is contextualised as one which pioneers the delivery of an innovative model that continues to combine comprehensive, co-educational, multid denominational and accessible education for all in the community. The 96 schools in the community and comprehensive sector are fully committed to inclusion and to their unique community-led dimension which sets each apart and which is reflected in the enrolment policy and practice of each school. Consequently, community and comprehensive schools have vast experience of working with students with wide and varying abilities and skills, needs and behaviours and it is in the context of this experience that our observations are made regarding the current review of senior cycle education.

The Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS) welcomes the review of senior cycle education which is currently being carried out by the NCCA in consultation with all stakeholders.

To what purpose, senior cycle education:

While ACCS accepts the strengths evident in the current senior cycle, it absolutely supports the idea that there is much scope for further development in the area of education provision in second level if the system is to successfully meet the needs of our young people.

It recognises that the purpose of senior cycle is to enable young people to fulfil their potential and to equip them with the necessary skills to make the transition to life beyond school and to take their place in society and the economy.

Concerns/Challenges which must be addressed in the review include:

- The imbalance in focus on information acquisition rather than on building knowledge, skills and positive dispositions to long life learning which will contribute to young people's readiness for diverse and changing futures.
- The focus on high stake examinations and preparation for these, which dominates the senior cycle experience.
- The State Examination process being used as a selection mechanism for entry into higher education which places an imbalanced focus on examination performance and on maximising CAO points.
- The lack of a coherent mechanism /transition /pathway to apprenticeships and traineeships during senior cycle for the many young people for whom this is a more appropriate route in their journey of learning.
- The challenges to young peoples' wellbeing including curriculum overload, excessive focus on terminal examinations, high stress and disengagement.

The Junior Cycle experience:

The ACCS recognises that the embedding of junior cycle in schools is still ongoing in the system. This represents a significant change in approaches to pedagogy, curriculum and in approaches to assessment and reporting.

These changes at junior cycle level will impact on the education which is offered at senior cycle. While the framework approach which is eminently suited to junior cycle is not so suitable to senior cycle, clear continuity and progression from junior to senior cycle must be set out and managed carefully if senior cycle is to build successfully upon students' prior learning and experiences in junior cycle and indeed, across their entire time in education.

Without this, senior cycle education will not meet its aim in building firm foundations for making the transition to adult life and developing a capacity for life-long learning.

Pathways and programmes:

As previously stated, community and comprehensive schools have vast experience of working with young people with wide and varying abilities and skills, needs and behaviours. ACCS believes that senior cycle should provide a diverse range of real choices for different learners who wish to avail of different opportunities in adult life including in the world of work, in traineeships, in apprenticeships, in further education, and in higher education.

In this context ACCS acknowledges the enormous contribution that programmes such as the Leaving Certificate Applied, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Transition Year Programme make in meeting the diverse needs of learners across the system. It recognises the need for review of the positioning of each of these programmes in senior cycle and the re-evaluation of the design and content of each of these programmes in the light of changes at junior cycle and in the context of current societal trends and changing economic times. In reviewing each of these programmes within senior cycle, a wider dialogue regarding the value which society and employers place on programmes such as LCA needs to be facilitated.

Indeed, there is much learning to be gained from the kind of educational experience which is facilitated in these programmes. The positive effects on the engagement of the learner which is supported in the modular approach offered in LCA are certainly worth exploring as a way of enhancing engagement of learners in LCE. The value of Work Experience and engagement in Community Care programmes in TY is also one to be explored in our review of senior cycle education. The learning which happens in other places outside and beyond school has an obvious and significant value and is often one which can enhance the learners' engagement with learning which is offered in school.

In the current senior cycle, a wide variety of learners present with varying aptitudes and differing dispositions to learning. Providing alternative pathways and encouraging learners to explore such different pathways which are equally valued, and which reflect real economic and societal needs has to be a priority for consideration of this review. Expecting all learners who remain in the second level system to exit down one single pathway regardless of their aptitudes or their life chances is neither fair nor equitable.

There is merit in exploring the three-year senior cycle where learners can choose the most appropriate pathway for them over the course of the first two years. Those choosing the academic route will continue into year three in school while those choosing alternative routes will continue their learning outside of school.

ACCS supports the vision of learning as a lifelong endeavour and believes in providing safe, inclusive environments which support at-risk learners, and which provide second chance opportunities for learners who leave the system at various points. In reviewing the senior cycle, we must explore meaningful ways to promote inclusion as a reality and to make valid and accessible re-entry routes available to all learners.

Curriculum components:

Project work and practical work elements which are assessed throughout senior cycle represent their own challenges for learners and for teachers supporting learners in this process but these also mark a different kind of skill and an aptitude which is not captured in the summative written exam and these are welcome in the system. Working with, and applying one's learning is an important skill for any learner to develop and one to be pursued in senior cycle when preparing for life after school.

Attention to one's wellbeing, an enhanced provision for career guidance which supports young people in making life choices, the development of student voice to promote young people's authentic engagement in life in school are all important priorities for ACCS in reviewing senior cycle. There should be a renewed focus on learning which supports the

holistic development of the learner and which in turn promotes the resilience of young people at this stage of their lives.

#### Assessment and Reporting:

ACCS acknowledges the many strengths of the current senior cycle assessment approaches and the high value which stakeholders place on the current system of assessment. Without doubt, there is a deep confidence in this system which is regarded by many as fair and transparent and which will be challenging to unpackage and, in time, develop into a more sophisticated system.

ACCS recognises also the merits of spreading the assessment load over senior cycle and broadening the scope of assessment approaches so that learners have more opportunities to display a wider range of learning in a variety of ways. Further development of the assessment arrangements available in current senior cycle programmes such as TY, along with a greater number of pathways to accommodate learners who wish to explore apprenticeships and traineeships will reduce the pressure points on the already burdened SEC.

Reporting on achievement and reporting on potential are important elements to be considered when exploring how to make reporting more meaningful. ACCS supports a broadening of the current system, building on the practices which have been introduced in junior cycle and are currently available in TY and LCA programmes.

#### Supports:

The *evolution* approach to change is an all-important one which acknowledges the capacity of the system for change, the significant changes already being experienced at junior cycle and the absolute need for evaluation and review of the impacts of these changes across the whole system. It is important that continuity for the learner in junior cycle with all its curricular and assessment changes, is clearly supported in a revised senior cycle. Ironically the strongest argument for a shorter timeframe for change at senior cycle is because there is real evidence at school level of a disconnect between the junior cycle experience and the current senior cycle experience.

All stakeholders, including parents and the general public, will need to be engaged in a meaningful way in this evolution if it is to be sustainable and worthwhile and if the system is to retain its high value reputation.

Time and other resources for CPD will need to be carved into the system over the course of the *evolution* phase. There is much learning to be taken from the approach to CPD supports facilitated at junior cycle. The development of professional learning communities and space at school level to conduct meaningful conversations about key learning, teaching and assessment practices required to facilitate further evolution of the senior cycle must be given time and be supported adequately if real change is to be affected for our learners.

This concludes the observations of ACCS.