



Submission to the NCCA on Senior Cycle Review

The DAI welcomes this much needed review into Senior Cycle. Change should focus on increasing self-sufficiency, encouraging independent learning and thinking, flexible approaches to assessment, active learning, project work, and technology being integrated into all aspects of the senior cycle as it is in society and the workplace. The mental health and wellbeing of our students should be of paramount concern throughout this change process and in the new system that is developed.

We feel that there needs to be a greater focus on students with additional needs (diagnosed or undiagnosed). If we get it right for them, we get it right for everyone.

We should aim to create a school environment where students have good opportunity to self-advocate and where they are listened to in a meaningful way throughout their education.

The following topics represent the views of our members and all those affected by Dyslexia, a Specific Learning Difficulty, that affects 1 in 10 students in our school system:

Flexible Approach to Teaching

It is our particular concern that students with additional learning needs are fully enabled to participate in all aspects of their chosen curriculum subjects, through meaningful differentiation of teaching and assessment. We need to have a strong focus on inclusion of neuro-diverse learners. The principles of universal design for learning (and assessment) should underpin all elements of the senior cycle.

The use of assistive technology (in both teaching and assessment), and the potential for online classes is greatly welcomed by the DAI. A student's right to access the curriculum, including all their textbooks in alternative formats (e.g. e-books, pdf, daisy format etc.), must be enshrined and be in one easy to access central location.

Assistive Technology

The use of assistive technology and potential for students to take online classes is greatly welcomed by DAI. Young people with Dyslexia should be allowed to use assistive technology in their day to day school lives and be guaranteed that this technology is available to them when it comes to State exams including continuous assessment. Students need certainty at an early point (i.e. first year), around what technology they can use in exams, otherwise they are discouraged to use technology for fear that they won't have access to in State exams – currently students only find out a few months before their exams if they have access to assistive technology in their exams.

More funding needs to be available for individual students who have significant need for assistive technology to access the curriculum and funding to develop the general technology infrastructure

within schools e.g. power sockets, Wi-Fi, charging docks. We need strong directives to positively enable students to bring and use their own technology devices to school.

Flexible Approach to Assessment and Reasonable Accommodations

A key principle of disability accommodation is the need to be flexible and adaptable to individuals differing needs. The DAI has expressed concern around the current lack of options when it comes to State exams for young people. We feel that young people should have an option in how they are assessed. We need to move away from a one size fits all approach for exams. Students should be given the opportunity to choose between, for example, written examinations, power point presentations, or audio/visual presentations etc. This would not only allow young people to best display their knowledge on particular subjects but will also allow them to develop vital skills for further education and the workplace. In particular, for students with Dyslexia where their difficulties are exacerbated under timed pressure, it is important that the emphasis and weighting of the final exam is minimized.

In addition, a move away from terminal exams to more continual assessment means that young people can be assessed in a fairer way and not just on their performance on one exam on one day. While some terminal exams may remain, the majority of marks should be given to project work and continuous assessment, which reflect conditions in the real world.

The DAI feel that the suggestion of the introduction of two State exams at the end of 5th and 6th year, would be a major step back for students. This would effectively double the amount of stress and there is no benefit for all students. The anxiety and mental health impact of the current exam situation is well known, and we see no rationale for potentially doubling this. It also does not allow time for reflection, development of critical thinking and deeper analysis of subjects which is an agreed goal of the senior cycle.

Supporting students with additional needs within the classroom with access to reasonable accommodations is critical so that it is embedded throughout all of the senior cycle and not just in exams. The normal accommodations used on a day to day basis should be accepted and available to students for examinations, whether that be formal or informal assessment, continuous assessment, project work or timed exams. Supports and accommodations should be provided on a needs basis, verified by the teachers who are working on a daily basis with the student. Additional third party or school-based testing should not be needed to verify the obvious needs that teachers have identified and see on a day to day basis.

Subject Choice

Students should have access to the widest range of subjects possible when it comes to subject choice. It is important that those subjects are not dependent on the socio-economic area, patron body, or gendered nature of a school, or the pressure to take on certain subjects at higher level because of bonus points. Having functional literacy and functional numeracy (with pass/fail competency grading) would free up time and allow some students to reduce the curriculum load; this will have particular benefit for student who have additional needs. A student with dyslexia who has an aptitude for science could be allowed to do as many maths and science-based subjects as possible, and could be allowed to do literacy at a functional proficiency (rather than an English literature exam). This is also more favorable for the universities who will be able to select students with strong aptitude in specific areas.

Where students have additional needs, they should be supported to pursue subjects that are of interest to them and in line with their aptitude. Full subjects and shorter courses provide the potential for students to maximize their points in full subjects in line with their likely progression routes, and to potentially fulfil certain compulsory requirements via shorter school-based courses.

All subjects should be viewed and respected equally. The historic perception of certain subjects perceived to be of higher standard while others are seen to be 'easier', is not always bounded in reality. With this in mind, the aim should be to have more equal respect for all subjects and the choices students make in relation to subjects which they have an aptitude for.

The arbitrary decision to award bonus points to selected subjects can be counterproductive to students who do not have an aptitude for that subject, and can cause huge stress and anxiety for that student, pressuring them to do a subject at a particular level. Where bonus points could be used constructively, is if they are linked with giving weighting to certain subjects which are connected to a college course. For example, getting bonus points for a science-related subject if one is applying for a science-related course.

In relation to the challenges of providing a wide range of subjects and modules, brave decisions in student best interests may need to be made in e.g. co-location and mergers.

Teacher Training

Continual Professional Development for teachers will be critical. At the moment teacher is not adequate or fit for purpose in the modern education system in relation to teaching students with dyslexia or other neuro-diverse conditions. DAI is calling for a mandatory module on neuro-diversity for all teachers, including universal design, identification of dyslexia, and best practice in classroom support.

Teachers can and should be trained to formally identify dyslexia, moving away from the medical model. Educational Psychologists should only be needed for complex cases and are not necessary for assessment/identification of Dyslexia. This moves us away from the inequitable medical model and builds capacity within the system and our teachers. DAI feel that having their Dyslexia identified and named is very important to students' mental health, enabling them to understand their individual learning abilities, link with others and self-advocate. The UNCRPD acknowledges the right to have your disability identified and named to enable you to fully understand your needs and to be able to link with others with similar needs.

Everything needs to be underpinned with a belief that all students, with the correct support, can succeed. The research consistently shows how the expectations of teachers are strongly linked to outcomes for students. High expectations, proper recognition, appropriate accommodation will enable success for all learners

Career Guidance and Progression Routes

Continuous career guidance is essential from first year to support good decision making around subjects for Junior and Senior Cycle. From Transition Year, quality career guidance should focus on exploring the full range of post second level options for students (higher education, further education, apprenticeships, etc). It is important that the full implications of each of the different pathways is mapped out and taken into consideration by the student prior to making a decision about a pathway

that is going to have an impact on available progression routes. Students need a realistic expectation of the day to day coursework so that they do not arrive into college unprepared for the reality of the course they have chosen.

While LCA is a very good decision for some people, it does limit choices and makes it more difficult to go onto Higher Education. This is another argument for removing the 'ring fencing', and giving all students an equal opportunity to progress to the widest range of post-second-level options possible.

Access to Transition Year should not be linked to perceived academic ability. The holistic benefits for all students of Transition Year should be noted, and therefore, all students should have an equal opportunity of participating in Transition Year, if they so choose. The holistic benefits of Transition year should be protected; it should not be sacrificed to create a three-year senior cycle.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

The mental health of young people should be paramount within our education system. The level of stress that young people face in the run up to State examinations is not acceptable and goes against the [Department of Education & Skill's Wellbeing Policy Statement](#). Dyslexic children often experience this anxiety more acutely as terminal exams and restrictive methods of assessments can pose a real challenge to them. In light of this, all decisions made by the Department of Education around exams should take into consideration the wellbeing and mental health of all young people as a priority. Students must be fully included from the onset in decision making which impacts upon them.

There is too much emphasis on achievements in academic subjects, and not on the student's whole contribution to school life and personal development. The system needs to take a holistic approach to students and find ways to value and reward contributions, e.g. volunteering, student council, extra-curricular activities, and sports. This helps us to invest in students to enable them to become active and informed citizens who participate in society and the economy as they learn and make the transition to life beyond school.

Conclusion

We congratulate the NCCA on the extensive consultation and engagement of all stakeholders. However, it is important to note that some stakeholders have significantly more power in the system and this process than others. In light of this, student's needs and voices should be paramount in this process, especially those are disadvantages for a variety of reasons. These, after all, will be the individuals who will be most impacted by the changes to the senior cycle.

Vested interests who do not want to see change should not be given priority over the voices and needs of students, and we welcome in particular that the NCCA has given students the opportunity to voice their opinions throughout this process.

Now is the time for bravery – to listen to the overwhelming voices calling for change to our senior cycle. This is a once in a generation opportunity to make real and meaningful changes, modernising our system, and enabling our young people to be truly ready to lead and shape the world.