

ECO-UNESCO

*Ireland's Environmental Education
and Youth Organisation*



Submission to National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

On 'Reform of the Senior Cycle'



By

Elaine Nevin

Director

ECO-UNESCO

9 Burgh Quay

Dublin 2

t: 00 353 1 6625491

Email: director@ecounesco.ie

Web: www.ecounesco.ie

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Introduction

ECO-UNESCO welcomes the review of senior cycle education. ECO-UNESCO actively works in the second level education system and in particular in the Senior Cycle through our work in Transition through our programmes including our Young Environmentalist Awards and our ESD in Schools programme – Learning2Change.

We have been actively engaged in the Department of Education and Skills Advisory group on ESD and has worked with stakeholders such as the Department of Education and Skills, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment in previous years.

This submission is based on ECO-UNESCO's role as a leader in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), environmental education and environmental youth work in Ireland since 1986, its role as an international partner of UNESCO for the implementation of the Global Action Programme on ESD (GAP). As a member of IDEA, the submission also supports IDEAs Senior Cycle submission to the NCCA.

About ECO-UNESCO

ECO-UNESCO is one of Ireland's leading environmental education and youth organisations focused on empowering young people and protecting the environment. It is a leader in the field of Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland and in promoting environmental awareness, youth development and youth led environmental action.

ECO-UNESCO works with over 10,000 young people annually through a range of environmental youth, education and training programmes. Through the provision of a wide range of environmental programmes, services and resources, ECO-UNESCO develops and channels the passion that young people feel about the environment into positive and creative actions to protect the natural world.

ECO-UNESCO is recognised by UNESCO as leaders in the field of ESD and is one of UNESCO's international Key strategic partners for their Global Action Programme under their Key Priority Action 4 – Empowering and Mobilising young people. Founded in 1986, ECO-UNESCO promotes the protection of the environment, raises environmental awareness, understanding and knowledge of the environment among young people, encourages the personal development of young people through practical environmental projects and activities, advocates for environmental education and education for sustainable development and promotes the ideals of UNESCO.

ECO-UNESCO is a QQI-Accredited training centre and runs a range of accredited and non-accredited training courses open to anyone with an interest in Sustainable Development including: teachers, youth workers, community and business leaders, and the public and private sector.

ECO-UNESCO is an SDG Champion announced by the Department of Communication, Climate Action and the Environment in September 2019, with an emphasis on SDG Goals 4 Education, 13 Climate Action, 14 Life on Land and 15 Life under water

ECO-UNESCOs Environmental Education and Youth programmes include:

- **Young Environmentalist Awards Programme:** this is an All-Island of Ireland annual programme that recognises and rewards the work of young people who raise environmental awareness and make a positive contribution in their community. Groups of young people, aged between 10 and 18, design and implement their own environmental projects that raise awareness of environmental issues including Climate Change, sustainability, pollution, and biodiversity. This programme runs in Secondary Schools in Ireland.
- **Youth for Sustainable Development:** this programme aims to engage young people in sustainable development at a local and global level. The programme inspires, challenges and motivates young people to act locally to promote sustainable development, dealing with issues related to Climate Change. Young people explore the knowledge and values of Education for Sustainable Development so they can become Global Youth Leaders for Sustainable Development. The action projects that are carried out by young people are entered into the Young Environmentalist Awards Programme
- **ECO-Choices –** ECO-UNESCO runs ECO-Choices – a drugs prevention programme for at risk young people and carries out a range of trainings and workshops around Ireland.
- **Green upskilling and Training:** ECO-UNESCO offers a range of QQI-Accredited and non-accredited training courses in areas related to sustainable development, ecology and the environment, vegetable growing and gardening, community development among others.



The Role Of Education

ECO-UNESCO promotes an approach to ESD/ EE which encompasses; **Education For, About and In the Environment.** ‘For’ – providing the necessary knowledge, skills and values to help people make choices in favour of sustainable development; ‘about’ – providing adequate knowledge of systems and natural ecosystems and an understanding of interconnectedness and interdependencies and ‘in’ providing opportunity for people to experience nature and develop a sensitivity towards the natural environment.

We believe young people are one of the most important stakeholders, yet sometimes lack the influence to make their choices known. For this reason, ECO-UNESCO acts to empower young people to take action through a variety of methods, including training, peer education, action plans and youth conferences

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and environmental education (EE) are critically important to our understanding of the causes and effects of Climate Change and to upskilling and empowering people to identify positive solutions and to act at a personal level as well as more broadly in communities, regionally, nationally and internationally. The Sustainable Development Goals are providing an international framework to all countries; Goal 13 Climate Action is one of the 17 Goals. Education as Goal 4 is seen as a key enabler for the implementation of the goals at a local level.

Internationally UNESCO has been rolling out the Global Action Programme (GAP) and ECO-UNESCO supports the objectives and 5 priority actions of the UNESCO Global Action programme on Education for Sustainable Development as a follow-up to the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development which has outlined that the overall goal is to “generate and scale –up in all levels and areas of education and learning in order to accelerate progress towards sustainable development.” (<http://en.unesco.org/gap/priority-action-areas>)

This is developed further in two objectives;

2. to reorient education and learning so that everyone has the opportunity to acquire the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that empower them to contribute to sustainable development.
3. to strengthen education and learning in all agendas, programmes and activities that promote sustainable development.

Five priority action areas identified are;

1. Policy support- integrating ESD into national policies in education and sustainable development.
2. Whole-institution approach - promote whole institution approaches to ESD at all levels and in all settings.
3. Educators- strengthen the capacity of educators, trainers and other change agents to become learning facilitators for ESD.
4. Youth- support youth in their role as change agents for sustainable development.
5. Local communities- accelerate the search for sustainable development solutions at the local level through ESD.

ECO-UNESCO believes that the review be linked to existing government policy and initiatives, broader international policies that the Irish Government has committed to as well as any relevant research carried out, such as:

- The National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development (Department of Education and Skills, 2014-2020);

- Climate Action Plan (2019)
- The Junior Cycle Framework (Department of Education and Skills, 2015);
- Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015)
- National Youth Strategy
- Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures
- Irish Aid Development Education Strategy 2017-2023
- Sustainable Development Goals National Implementation Plan 2018 -2020, and the successor plan which will be developed in 2020
- Research: UNESCO Empathy, Social Values, and Civic Behaviour among early adolescents in Ireland 2019

Senior Cycle Review

Purpose of Senior Cycle

ECO-UNESCO agrees with the overarching purpose for senior cycle in that it works to help every young person fulfill their potential; that every young person is empowered to deepen their knowledge, skills and qualities throughout senior cycle, that is equips them for sustainable futures and that they actively participate in society.

We support the skills and qualities of senior cycle in that it develops critical thinking in young people, problem solving, interpersonal skills and resilience, empathy, teamwork and preparedness for the world of work. I also agree that it is broader and should provide a holistic educational experience for the young person.

ECO-UNESCO aims to advance Environmental Education and ESD in Ireland and to help young people develop the core competencies which allow them to actively engage with the world and help to make it a more just and sustainable place. It is a form of civic learning that involves students' active participation to address global issues of a social, political, economic, or environmental nature (UNESCO).

The UN's Global Education First Initiative notes, "It is not enough for education to produce individuals who can read, write and count. Education must fully assume its central role in helping people to forge more just, peaceful, tolerant and inclusive societies."

Sustainable Development Goal 4.7 aims to ensure that by 2030 *'all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development'*. Ireland has committed, along with all UN member states, to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, and therefore has made an international commitment to deliver SDG 4.7.

ECO-UNESCO believes that

1. Whilst the focus on certain aspects e.g. digital literacy and health and well-being are important, an awareness of and an understanding of the natural environment, the interconnectedness of systems in the natural world and between humans and their environment should be strengthened. There should be an increased emphasis on education for sustainable development, environmental education, eco-literacy and in developing knowledge, skills and competencies for a changing world.

It believes Senior Cycle should

2. Allow young people to reach their full potential and prepare them for life by offering an inclusive experience with various pathways for learners
3. Develop a critical action component to put learning into practice in our everyday lives.
4. Prepare learners for a connected, interdependent and changing world, and for every learner to have the knowledge, skills and competencies to actively engage

5. Build a transformative agenda to challenge the structural causes of environmental degradation, poverty and inequality.
6. Develop balanced, rounded members of society who are able to benefit from lifelong learning and self-development, and who take a democratic, responsible and active role at a local, national, global level.
7. Develop participative and learner-centered approaches to teaching, which value the acquisition of skills and knowledge above getting the 'right' answer.
8. Adequately prepare learners for their post-senior cycle destinations, including apprenticeship training, college, community living, university, or the workplace.
9. build on previous educational cycles/phases, Junior Cycle in particular, building on key skills and statements of learning as set out in the Framework for Junior Cycle
10. Senior Cycle will be a vehicle for environment social justice
11. Support learners for sustained employment and to meet the needs of a growing and rapidly changing world of work

A vision for senior cycle learners: Knowledge, skills and qualities:

Whilst the focus on certain aspects e.g. digital literacy and health and well-being are important, an awareness of and an understanding of the natural environment, the interconnectedness of systems in the natural world and between humans and their environment needs to be strengthened. There should be an increased emphasis on education for sustainable development, environmental education, eco-literacy and in developing knowledge, skills and competencies for a changing world. ECO-UNESCO proposes to systems thinking as a core skill for senior cycle.

Education for Sustainable Development and the necessarily knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to allow and empowers learners to live more sustainably should underpin any experience at senior cycle. This will allow learners to take informed decisions and responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society, for present and future generations, while respecting cultural diversity.

Environmental and eco-system awareness and understanding should be included in the life skills listed in the third bullet point. Global Citizenship should also be included. These will equip young people for an increasingly interconnected, interdependent world.

ECO-UNESCO agrees that higher order thinking and critical thinking. should be developed at senior cycle. In particular, critical thinking is a fundamental pillar of Education for Sustainable Development and Environmental Education. ECO-UNESCO also recognises the importance of qualities such as resilience, empathy, responsibility, creativity and teamwork as important at senior cycle.

As an environmental education and youth organisation ECO-UNESCO emphasises the importance providing opportunity to develop values and attitudes such as. Empathy as well as the development of Intrapersonal and interpersonal qualities.

ECO-UNESCO would recommend that education for sustainable development, environmental education, eco-literacy, systems-thinking and their values are core to the Senior Cycle.

Curriculum Components

ECO-UNESCO is supportive of existing subjects being kept, however, would propose that content should be reviewed and changed where relevant.

ECO-UNESCO strongly proposes that the earth sciences, natural systems, ecosystems, biodiversity and climate change be a core part of the curriculum.

ECO-UNESCO agrees that learners should have a breath of curriculum experiences to choose from and believes that this breath of experience should be offered through all of senior cycle, including in Transition Year. Engagement with civil society is a crucial aspect as it enables learners to learn through action, to engage with local and other communities, and to build learning into the heart of every community in Ireland.

ECO-UNESCO would support the inclusion of experiential and outdoor education as a core part of any Senior cycle allowing learners to get a practical hands-on experience of the outdoor world and to encourage the outdoor classroom.

ECO-UNESCO suggests interdisciplinary topics including sustainable development, global citizenship and wellbeing be reflected in all curriculum areas/modules where applicable which would build on key statements of learning at junior Cycle such as sustainability as included in Science and Geography at junior cycle. This will allow for progression for learners from junior cycle to senior cycle.

A key Recommendation 7 (p.15) of the National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland, 2014- 2020 requires:

Recommendation 7 - The DES and NCCA should ensure that ESD principles are integrated into all relevant primary and post primary curriculum areas as the curriculum is reviewed, where this is appropriate. This includes the primary school curriculum, the new specifications for the Junior Cycle Student Award, and the senior cycle curriculum.

Equality and access to education at Senior Cycle -creating various pathways for success

Pathways and programmes

ECO-UNESCO is supportive of the need for senior cycle to recognise and affirm all talents and abilities, supporting all students towards fulfilling their potential and that there should not be over-emphasis on a single pathway, the Leaving Certificate Established as this can contribute to areas such as technical, vocational, creative and professional learning being under-developed. Curricular areas that comprise academic qualifications (Leaving Certificate)-subjects should remain as options for learners with the possibility of choosing from a menu of vocational options, such as those currently on offer in LCA and LCVP.

The availability of a range of pathways, tailored to learner needs and their aspirations for the future, should be central to senior cycle.

In relation to Transition Year, ECO-UNESCO strongly recommends that this remains part of senior cycle. Transition year provides space and opportunity for young people to develop confidence, new skills, make new friends, have new experiences in a non-competitive space. It provides a vital step in the transition between junior cycle and senior cycle and from our experience working in Transition year in wide variety of secondary schools across Ireland, we have identified the real

benefits where learners develop confidence and self-esteem; where they can experiment with new interests which can help them to develop self-awareness and their understanding better pathways to fulfilling future choices. ECO-UNESCO runs a wide range of programmes focused on action projects which develops team building skills, citizenship. ECO-UNESCO would recommend that community and environmental action projects are incorporated in all Transition year. TY This type of experience could also be available throughout the senior cycle.

Further options in the areas of technical, vocational, creative and professional learning should be offered for learners throughout senior cycle and skills related to sustainable development need to be included within these in particular.

Assessment and Reporting

ECO-UNESCO agrees that further development is necessary and that existing assessment arrangements experienced in LCA, LCVP, T Y and LCE need to be reviewed.

ECO-UNESCO agrees that the possibility of utilising project-based work, portfolios, interviews, task completion and accumulation of credits in aspects of senior cycle assessment should be considered. In particular, the 'action' elements of learning should be enabled and encouraged through revised assessment arrangements.

We recommend that assessment and reporting should be more inclusive and diverse and should incorporate broader reporting arrangements reflective of learning experiences, talents and abilities.

Priorities and supports

1. **Other: Placing environmental education, education for sustainable development, eco-literacy, systems thinking, empathy at the heart of the revised senior cycle**
2. Development of knowledge, skills and qualities identified in the review
3. Development of flexible pathway through senior cycle
4. Inclusion of broader curriculum components such as life skills and lifelong learning
5. Exploration of provision of options in areas of technical, vocational, professional and creative learning
6. Removal of ring-fencing
7. Exploration of broader reporting
8. Exploration of curriculum components

How important are the following supports to facilitate a future senior cycle?

- Development of schools as Professional Learning Communities: Very important
- Time for collaboration and development: Very important
- Long-term planning for change (systemic, leadership, local): Very important
- Appropriate CPD: Very important
- Continuous monitoring and evaluation of change: Very important
- Develop additional career guidance supports for students: Very important
- Create supports for schools and Principals to manage change: Very important

Appendix - Young Environmentalist Awards Programme

Young Environmentalist Awards (YEA) is an all-Ireland environmental awards scheme aimed at recognising and rewarding the work of young people who carry out local action projects in environmental protection and conservation. The programme promotes youth led environmental action in a range of topics including Biodiversity, Climate Change, Energy, Waste, Water, ECO-Enterprise among others.

It encourages young people to protect environment whilst also promoting confidence building, critical thinking, and active citizenship. It promotes the global perspective. It reaches over 4000 young people annually directly with potential to reach thousands of others through indirect contact with others locally with strong update from post primary secondary schools across Ireland.

