

Education and Training Boards Ireland Submission to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment on the Senior Cycle Review

November 2019

Introduction

Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) is the national association which collectively represents Ireland's 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and promotes their interests. The ETBs lead and manage one third of all second level schools in Ireland (270), including 47 Gaelcholáistí, providing quality second level education to over 100,000 post primary students.

ETBs are the largest provider of multidenominational post-primary level education in Ireland. ETB schools are state, co-educational, multidenominational schools underpinned by the core values of Excellence in Education, Respect, Care, Equality and Community.

Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) welcomes the opportunity to make a written submission to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment on the review of Senior Cycle Education. This ETBI submission presents views previously expressed as part of ongoing consultation with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and various stakeholders in the Education and Training Boards sector as well as contributions provided independently through the members of the network and forum groups within ETBI.

Purpose and vision

ETBI recognises the key role that senior cycle education plays in supporting students to realise their potential as learners, as individuals and as members of society in a modern, progressive and changing Ireland. In doing so, it is imperative that senior cycle provides access to relevant and high-quality learning experiences for each learner in a diverse society, regardless of background, wealth or learning ability. Critically, a love of learning, the opportunity to succeed, and the development of a desire to learn more should be nurtured throughout senior cycle.

For each student, senior cycle should offer continuity from Junior Cycle while providing a supportive bridge to the world of life, learning and employment beyond post primary education. In doing so, learning opportunities must consider a wide variety of career

pathways, emerging requirements of workplace skills and knowledge while simultaneously providing students with the information and skills to live healthy, sustainable and productive lives during, and beyond, their time at school.

ETBI recognises the strengths of our current senior cycle including the high retention of learners to completion of the cycle, strong motivation among students, perceived fairness of assessment, breadth of learning on offer and trust in our education system at home and further afield. However, we encourage the development of flexibility and choice for students in terms of the learning experiences that they are offered and receive recognition for.

We also contend that our senior cycle education is overly concerned on matriculation to higher education as a core purpose, often at the expense of vocational preparation, development of society and preparation for life. This leads to a dominant narrow pathway to perceived success, characterised by the pursuit of CAO points, student stress, high-stakes terminal examinations over a short number of weeks and the abandonment of critical knowledge and skills necessary for the workplace, vocational learning and personal wellbeing.

ETBI recommendations:

1. That senior cycle be located more clearly on a defined learning continuum that builds on Junior Cycle and that offers robust, challenging, but attainable learning pathways that can lead to planned progression of learning to further and higher education and the world of work.
2. That the current CAO points system be overhauled in conjunction with senior cycle reform. ETBI struggles to have confidence in any reform of senior cycle that doesn't address the limitations of the current CAO points-based system. We acknowledge that this is not within the direct current remit of NCCA but argue that it should be recognised as necessary in parallel with this process.
3. That the commitment to inclusion for all learners reflected in the development of Level 1 and 2 Programmes at Junior Cycle be extended to a more inclusive senior cycle education for these students. It is imperative that students of all abilities can receive recognition and reward at senior cycle.
4. That any review of senior cycle learns from the value and the best experiences of Transition Year for students. A focus on personal development, preparation for employment, volunteering and developing new learning skills can offer opportunities for a more productive senior cycle.
5. That Senior Cycle education be sufficiently agile and flexible to accommodate new areas of learning and can offer students learning opportunities that best reflect their

talents and the needs of society. ETBI recognises the value in the range of learning offered to students in senior cycle. This may include recognition for modules with defined periods of learning as well as structured subject areas.

6. Currently we offer education to students predominantly through English medium or Irish medium as a primary language of instruction. ETB schools serve gaeltacht communities, Irish language gaelcholáistí in non-Gaeltacht communities and island schools. The preservation of equality of opportunity, choice and support to schools with Gaeilge as a first language of instruction remains important to ETBI.

Pathways and Programmes

A regular reference and emphasis on ‘flexibility’ became a theme under the pathways and programmes analysis of the ETBI consultations. There is a heightened awareness that any proposed pathways should provide potential access to all students, emphasising clarity on status and suitability. Many senior cycle components and programmes currently in operation, are noted as having valuable aspects and approaches which could be retained. The Transition Year model, at its best, affords many students the opportunity to engage in a breadth of educational experiences, often marrying components of both formal and informal learning.

The merits of aspects of the Leaving Certificate Applied approach in the areas of modularisation, work experience, self-directed learning and a range of communication skills demonstrate elements which might be adapted and built upon across the senior cycle curriculum. However, the LCA approach has also highlighted the need to ensure that any alternative or aligned pathways which might emerge, should have equal status across all options.

To date, evidence that the LCA programme provides an ‘alternative’ senior cycle programme have fallen short, as this cohort of students have not had the opportunity to engage in the same level of access to pathways of progress, as their mainstream Leaving Certificate counterparts. This is partially due to the fact that the LCA Programme is aligned to a level lower than the established Leaving Certificate on the NFQ.

The suggestion of a three-year senior cycle approach also emerged in our consultations, with a number of caveats aligned to the introduction of this option. The main concern noted the potential to increase rather than reduce the current stress that exists at senior cycle. However, should this proposal be furthered, with adequate resourcing, emphasis on merging formal and non-formal learning and the potential to signpost aspects of external assessment throughout, this option merits serious consideration.

There is a need to broaden progression routes from Senior Cycle, which will involve a considerable amount of work in relation to promoting, to both parents/guardians and students, all potential options for progress. These options should include the Further Education Sector, apprenticeships as well as third level opportunities and any promotion campaign should also highlight and demonstrate the equal status and value of any routes offered.

ETBI Recommendations:

1. Plan and promote initial formal career guidance support for the Junior Cycle cohort, and their parents/guardians which outlines all potential career pathways.
2. Provide a more structured approach to career planning at senior cycle, mapping student skills with the courses/careers that best match their aptitudes. In doing so consideration will have to be given to the preparation and further CPD of guidance personnel in schools.
3. Should aligned concurrent senior cycle options be offered (separate to LP1/2 progression), it is imperative that all viable choices are presented with equal status and value regardless of the pathway of progress they propose to support. The final certification should share a common aligned language which demonstrates the transferability of outcomes.

Curriculum Components

The balance of subjects and areas of learning studied by students in senior cycle is an expression of the vision, purpose and pathways in action. The current Leaving Certificate programmes with Transition Year offer a balance that recognises the need for personal, vocational and academic development. This balance is healthy, offers a basis for a new expression of senior cycle, but needs some reform. Care must also be taken that any change to curricular components is done in a strategically planned, rather than piecemeal manner so that the supply of teachers, resources, continuous professional development and other variables are coordinated. ETBI also recognises the potential of current practices including aspects of Leaving Cert Applied, LCVP and the format of certain subjects within the Leaving Cert Established in terms of offering a richer range of learning opportunities.

An underlying position for ETBI is that the current leaving certificate does not place enough value on vocational learning and does not give full expression to preparation for a life of learning via a vocational pathway, that combines further education and training. If a greater emphasis is to be put on such a pathway, as discussed earlier in this document,

the components of the curriculum must reflect this. The creation of alternative pathways will necessitate investigation of subjects and modules that support the pathways.

ETBI also notes, with disappointment, the way some components of the current Junior Cycle that were to be initially assessed at school level were diluted to only be recognised in the form of the Assessment Task in the final award from the State Exams Commission. Such practices will not suffice at senior cycle. All components of senior cycle should carry appropriate standing within the curriculum and should be robustly assessed in an appropriate manner leading to an award that carries weight and standing.

ETBI is most aware of the challenges facing smaller schools in providing a wide and diverse curriculum. It is imperative that curriculum is planned with smaller schools in mind, rather than questioning afterwards the adjustments necessary for smaller schools. Access to teacher allocation and resources are fundamentally important for such schools and for the provision of equality of opportunity for students in our remote rural communities.

ETBI recommendations:

1. The specifications for senior cycle subjects should better reflect the need to engage in practical and vocational learning to enrich the more academic based learning practices that currently prevail in Leaving Certificate. Acquiring and applying knowledge should be supportive of each other as distinct from being in competition with each other on our curriculum. In many subject areas this balance is currently quite healthy. ETBI believes that much is to be learned from the balance that currently exists in subjects like Music, Art, and other practical subjects.
2. We encourage an exploration of more practical modules and options within subjects. Much can be learned from the experiences of traineeships, apprenticeships and further education programmes in terms of designing, teaching and assessing units of learning that have a vocational focus. We would welcome a greater reflection of this form of learning being embedded into senior cycle subjects and appropriately assessed.
3. ETBI notes an emerging dynamic space around the design and provision of short courses at Junior Cycle level. We note that combinations of short courses when carefully planned can give rich learning experiences in areas of learning otherwise left “off” the curriculum. We would welcome the development of modules at senior cycle that while less in time commitment than subjects would carry an equal proportionate weighting in terms of recognition and reward.
4. ETBI does not believe that any further subjects should be made mandatory at senior cycle level and are disappointed at the extension of mandatory subjects at Junior

Cycle. We do, however, hold that Gaeilge, Mathematics and English should remain as areas of study for senior cycle.

5. Beyond this core curriculum of three subjects, students should align subjects and modular areas of study with their chosen “pathway” and should be afforded maximum guidance and support in making choices.
6. Should new areas of learning be introduced within, or separate to, subjects ETBI recognises the need for rigorous teacher preparation and support to build such learning programmes.

Assessment and Reporting

Consultations and conversations around any educational reform will often ultimately focus on modes and methods of assessment. Assessment at Leaving Certificate level, viewed as a ‘high stakes’ examination, focuses mainly on terminal exams, in a confined period, which draws particular attention to the nature of the current approach as being particularly stressful. While ETBI supports the notion that rote learning has a place in assessment, experience to date suggests that an over-emphasis on rote learning in preparing for assessment activities, leads to a lack of balance in learning styles and favours those with a strong capacity in this area, sometimes at the expense of others with other learning strengths.

A more philosophical question presents itself in the background of the assessment discussion, relating to earlier comments aligned to the ‘purpose’ of the Leaving Certificate. Currently the internal and external focus appears to only align (somewhat inappropriately) to entry to higher education – a process that is controlled by the higher education institutions themselves. If the Leaving Certificate examination exists as a certification of knowledge, capacity and/or ability, measured at a specific point in time, does that interpretation, in part at least, impact the perception of status and stress currently associated with the process?

It may be worth exploring if the need for reform is driven only by a desire to reconfigure a system which is deemed unfit for purpose or does the challenge lay with assessment approaches and not actually with curriculum content? Many senior cycle subject specifications have undergone reform and amendment in recent years. Is there space to examine and possibly acknowledge that current and appropriate content, including methodologies and learning outcomes already exist in our senior cycle subjects?

An important part of this consultation process has been a focus on the big picture question of how we assess, exploring and discussing methods of formative and summative assessment through both traditional and contemporary approaches. However, it may be worth exploring a more focused approach concentrating on the micro

level of how we assess by looking at the nature and presentation of the specifics of assessment ‘questions’.

Rote learning concerns have long been a criticism associated with the current examination system, deemed to reward the student who can retain and repeat specific information with potentially little understanding. Evidence suggests that many current teaching methodologies and approaches in Irish classrooms do not reflect this as a preferred or often utilised approach – until the terminal examination looms large. It is a misconception to suggest that the teaching of key skills and creative engagement is non-existent in our contemporary classrooms.

While teacher cohorts can and do operate in creative teaching and learning environments, the leaving certificate examination currently does not have capacity to assess in a way that reflects these innovative and reflective approaches. Is there scope then to explore, as part of this senior cycle review, an approach to assessment and examination that does not change the broad format of the system but instead explores the detail of question framing.

Assessment that focuses on a student’s ability to ‘apply’ knowledge and skills in a range of contexts can be measured and rewarded, but in a manner that highlights critical thinking and a flexible application of that knowledge. By default, this approach has potential to encourage student autonomy, greater personal reflection and the opportunity to highlight successful creative learning environments.

One of the strengths often aligned to the current terminal approach to assessment lies with the recognition that the Leaving Certificate examination enjoys a high level of public confidence, objectivity and fairness. While acknowledging the limitations of the focused assessment, alternative proposals are not without their challenges. Greater flexibility in the timing of assessment by spreading examinations over the course of at least two years has been suggested. However, this approach needs careful exploration, notwithstanding the availability of examiners, the potential resourcing and the readjustment of course content, the potential of extending current periods of stress is also a factor.

An overarching concern aligned to assessment centres on issues around student wellbeing. The approach to addressing and attending to student wellbeing has been a focus of the revised Junior Cycle, with a compulsory requirement to attend to both formal and non-formal aspects. While the ‘stress’ of the assessment process as it currently stands is a focus of much public debate, proposals to remove all aspects of this stress are unlikely to be prove a viable alternative. Preparing students to be resilient in the face of that stress is a valuable and lifelong skill. Consequently, we would recommend a robust focus on the broad wellbeing of students in the senior cycle review, which is supported and resourced to adequate levels.

Any review process should aim to reflect all the voices it potentially impacts, in particular socially disadvantaged students and their parents/guardians who often do not have the same access and confidence to reflect their reality. Research indicates that the inclusion of aspects of assessment which encourages support and input from outside the school environment, often serves to increase the disadvantage of those students already amongst that cohort. While the DEIS scheme aims to formally recognise and support these students, statistics note the under-representation of same in further education and specifically at higher education level.

The topic of assessment and assessment approaches will always loom large in any review of an education system, particularly when that review centres around the final years of formal post primary education and its high stakes terminal exam. Regardless of innovation and input, our default runs to assessment and almost immediate consideration of how we can best prepare our students for any new approaches. To that end, assessment, measuring and reporting can often become disproportionately emphasised in the context of any review.

ETBI Recommendations

1. A review of current Leaving Certificate subject content and curricula should be undertaken to determine how contemporary teaching and learning methodologies and learning outcomes are currently reflected.
2. Explore the impact an initial change in question framing for the terminal examination might have on diluting the potential for rote learning and rewarding the learning experience of students who have engaged in creative education approaches and who can demonstrate the capacity to apply their knowledge in a variety of ways.
3. Examine the potential for module-based learning, which might reflect e.g. 90 hours of content/learning. Where a traditional higher-level subject may not be a requirement and/or of interest to a student, students could engage in an aligned 90-hour module of work to compliment modules already being undertaken.
4. Further explore the potential of a modular approach to reflect some of the best practices of the LCVP and LCA programmes. Students could look to engaging in vocational experiences, work placement, or practical achievement type tasks which would support formal engagement aligned to more traditional academic attainment.
5. The introduction of a Senior Cycle Profile of Achievement could enable the young person to demonstrate a range of skills and abilities. It is important that much wider skills and competencies are rewarded and valued in senior cycle. This should include community and voluntary work and student participation in diverse school activities.

6. Cognisance should be taken in any reform of those students likely to be left behind for reasons that are not always academic. Any reforms should not further burden, by default, an already disadvantaged cohort.
7. Assessment of students aligned to Level 1 and Level 2 of the NFQ should be included in senior cycle.
8. Upon completion of their post primary education all students should have the capacity to receive a Senior Cycle Certificate, regardless of the pathway of progress. If diverse and/or alternative options are included as part of the review, these alternatives should have capacity to be interpreted using a common system of presentation.

Process and next steps

ETBI recognises that rich dialogue with stakeholders, teachers, parents and students is a necessary investment in the process of reviewing our senior cycle curriculum. We believe that continued, intense dialogue and exploration of concepts and ideas is essential to build common understandings and trust in the process.

We note that there is a strong sense of caution in the debate and approach to senior cycle review. Indeed, there may be an element of change fatigue, or fear of the repetition of some of the more contentious issues in Junior Cycle. Many advise to progress with caution. However, it should also be noted that review/reform of senior cycle is overdue. ETBI welcomes this process and urges NCCA and the DES to balance a strategically prudent approach with the need to respond to students' learning needs with some sense of urgency.

It is imperative that the process is guided by a clear framework for completing the review and identifying a framework for reform that includes timelines, forward resource planning, ongoing collaboration with stakeholders, and strategically planned milestones.

Many ETBI schools have a strong commitment to the development of student voice and agency in our schools. We acknowledge that students must continue to have a voice in the various stages of senior cycle review. To this end, NCCA has made a strong start in their work to date.

ETBI as a representative body for the schools in the ETB sector, remains an advocate for all its students, supporting them towards becoming skilled, capable and knowledgeable individuals, with the capacity to participate fully in all aspects of society. Likewise, ETBI is committed to ongoing engagement with all stakeholders in the next stages of the senior cycle review process. We look forward to a continued cooperative approach which provides a clear direction and thorough and inclusive planning.