



# Ibec submission to the NCCA consultation on Senior Cycle Review.

November 2019

## Introduction

Ireland's education system has played a significant role in the economic and societal transformation of our country over the last four decades. As we move into more uncertain, but also exciting, times with the advent of technology, digitalisation and increasing globalisation, the education system is being called upon again to review and innovate in several fundamental ways, in order to meet the new demands coming from the workforce, enterprise and society.

Ibec welcomes the opportunity to comment on the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's Review of the Senior Cycle, which is a critical issue for the business sector. The World Economic Forum estimates that, due to advances in artificial intelligence and machine learning, the top competencies required for work success will be creativity, problem-solving and critical thinking. Therefore, these key skills have become a focus of developments at all levels of education systems around the world. Moving from a content based to a more skills-based learning model at an early stage is more likely to equip students with the 21st century skills they will require.

We need to look to the longer term and to what the future of work will mean for our economy, society, and how we live and how we will work. The concept of the archetypical worker of the is changing and becoming much hard to define. The jobs of the future, and the skills they require have not yet been imagined or invented. These are the jobs that the current cohort of senior cycle student will fill, and this trend is set to continue. The new world of work is both more exciting and less secure.

As a result, young people, and indeed adult workers, are facing into a highly uncertain and constantly changing future. A capacity and appetite for continuous learning is the attribute that will enable them all to thrive, and fulfil their potential as workers and citizens. Inculcating a desire for lifelong learning is the single greatest challenge for the education system, at all levels, but crucially at this particular juncture of secondary education as students transition to the next phase of their lives.

To address this challenge, students, teachers and the wider community of stakeholders need a classroom and curriculum geared towards developing the skills required to manage the opportunities and challenges presented by the 21st century.

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## Senior Cycle : Purpose and Vision for Senior Cycle Learners

Key skills have become a focus of development at all levels of education systems around the world. Moving from a content-based to a more skills-based learning model at an early stage is more likely to equip students with the skills in greater demand for the 21st century such as problem, critical thinking, design, innovation, communications and creativity skills. Clearly, secondary education fulfils a vital role in society that extends well beyond the that of satisfying business' needs for skills or research. However, we should not view the requirement for workplace skills and the cultivation of the intellect and values as some zero sum game. Business and educators have a shared objective of developing adaptable, well-rounded, creative, cultured and ethically-minded citizens who have an appetite for learning. Translating these shared aspirations into something more tangible is the major challenge.

The dominance of the Leaving Certificate and the so-called 'points race' poses a challenge in terms of providing an integrated education experience. There is growing recognition that this limits students' education experience by concentrating on rote learning so as to maximise points. This has the effect of having many students leaving second level without developing their ability to self-manage their learning and to become autonomous learners.

Higher order skills required by business should not be regarded to inimical to education values. They include thinking skills such as logical and analytical reasoning, problem solving and intellectual curiosity; effective communication skills, teamwork skills, and capacities to identify, access and manage knowledge and information; personal attributes such as imagination, creativity and intellectual rigour; and values such as ethical practice, persistence, integrity and tolerance.

Gardner (2008)<sup>1</sup> has explored the intellectual approaches managers and employees will need to function successfully in the 21st century, which may form a smart basis when considering the purpose and vision of a reviewed Senior Cycle:

The Disciplined Mind : students will need to be experts in at least one area.

The Synthesising Mind: as synthesisers, students will need to be able to gather together information from disparate sources and put it together in ways that work for themselves and can be communicated to other persons.

The Creating Mind: because almost anything that can be formulated by computers and machine learning, rewards will go to creators – those who have constructed a box but can think outside it.

The Respectful Mind : the world is becoming increasingly inter-connected and diverse. Accordingly, we must respect those who differ from us as well as those with whom we have similarities.

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<sup>1</sup> Five Minds for the Future, Howard Gardner, Harvard Business Press (2008)

The Ethical Mind : finally, as workers and as citizens, we need to be able to act ethically – to think beyond our own self-interest and to do what is right under the circumstances.

A senior cycle education should help the learner develop a strong relationship with, and understanding of learning. If this purpose is met at a critical time in a young person’s life, other benefits such as the provision of a solid foundation for personal development and preparation for a life time of learning will follow.

## **Senior Cycle: Knowledge, skills and qualities**

Ibec broadly agrees with the NCCA’s consultation paper that groups the skills and qualities in three categories, i.e: higher-order thinking; intrapersonal and interpersonal qualities; and life skills. These skills groups reflect the recent published Ibec’s policy papers on Entrepreneurial Education and Future Ready – Improving Graduate Employability Skills<sup>2</sup>.

From a business, perspective, the capacity to adapt quickly, teamwork, cope with ambiguity, and to continue to be curious and to learn are important factors influencing success in the workplace. These skills also significantly overlap with entrepreneurial learning. Young people who benefit from entrepreneurial learning develop latent business knowledge and essential skills including tenacity, understanding of risk, a sense of responsibility and social resilience. These are the high-level skills necessary for all commercial and social endeavours which make young people more employable and entrepreneurial.

## **Senior Cycle: Teaching and learning**

Teacher quality and professional development should be acknowledged as the most important factors influencing senior cycle review and reform.

As the international consultants, McKinsey<sup>3</sup>, have pointed out, “the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers”. The lack of incentives in the Irish system for continuous professional development (CPD) is outlined by the OECD’s Teaching and Learning International Survey 2013<sup>4</sup> . Of those teachers receiving appraisal/feedback, less than one quarter reported that it resulted in a development plan to improve their teaching.

The Department of Education’s Second Level Support Service (SLSS) also found that, “while the rhetoric of policy has adopted CPD as a core concept in the understanding of the teacher as professional, neither the term, or more importantly its meaning, have yet

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<sup>2</sup> [Smarter World Smarter Work: Future Ready - improving graduate employability skills \( July 2018\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/social-sector/our-insights/how-the-worlds-best-performing-school-systems-come-out-on-top>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/talis.htm>

achieved purchase in the working lives of teachers. The SLSS is almost invariably seen as in-service support for the implementation of mandated change.”

International evidence suggests that the empowerment of the teaching profession produces good results. Teachers should not be seen as technicians whose work is to implement strictly dictated syllabi, but rather as professionals who have the space for innovation to improve learning for all. Therefore the success of the Leaving Certificate reform process will depend on the flexibility of teachers and the allocation of adequate resources to their continuing professional development. The reform should also provide schools with more scope to customise the curriculum to respond to their local needs.

Ibec welcomes initiatives that support teachers and school leaders to engage in professional development and in particular, programmes that enable teaching professional to broaden their network and seek new perspectives from different sectors.

Professional development, school leadership management and support must be prioritised to empower schools, their staff and leadership to initiate and deliver a new senior cycle programme.

## **Senior Cycle: Pathways and programmes**

Ibec welcome the positive outlook in the NCCA consultation document that affirmed that the senior cycle should recognise “all talents and abilities, supporting all students towards fulfilling their potential”. And in particular, the support for providing a wider range of options for learning pathways at senior cycle.

As mentioned, the dominance of the leaving certificate in senior cycle has pushed the potential of new pathways to the background. Over the course of the two / three year senior cycle, there is significant opportunity to bring some Further Education courses into the senior cycle programme to showcase the breath of opportunity available. In addition, successful pathways rely on a fit-for-purpose careers guidance service to be supported, resources and delivered to support students to make informed and meaningful choices for their next stage in life.

The new Junior Cycle curriculum, if properly implemented, offers a template for the kind of change needed in an era where the ability to memorise facts and figures is less important. Even in its much-diluted version, the reformed junior cycle sets out to embrace the kind of modern teaching, learning and assessment methods which are overwhelmingly supported by educationalists. The junior cycle curriculum attempts to puts the learner at the centre of the learning process.

Under the new model, schools have greater flexibility to design programmes that are suited to the needs of their students. This includes the ability to roll out short courses in areas that have traditionally been outside the realm of the second-level curriculum. The schools can choose from specially designed pre-made courses or develop new courses - in line with agreed standards - to reflect the needs of their own communities. The opportunity to study

areas like Mandarin, coding, digital media literacy and forensic science will be exciting for students, while again underpinning the type of key skills we need to be fostering in young people.

This approach should now be extended to the senior cycle to ensure continued flexibility within the system to support students of all abilities and talent. Complemented by a high quality careers guidance service, this can ensure that second level education enables students to understand and research their potential.

In addition, the Department of Education and Skills should commission a review to capture learning from the implementation challenges faced during the Junior Cycle reform process.

## **Senior Cycle : Curriculum components**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the need for multidisciplinary learning has never been greater. Successful economies depend increasingly on the creation, communication, understanding and use of ideas and images. The capacity to communicate across this division, to invent new relationships between the science and arts, humanities and social sciences (AHSS) subject must be encouraged. The consultation document refers to curriculum components under a series of themes, as distinct to a series of subjects. This is very welcome.

The curriculum should be enhanced by increasing the emphasis on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). This has been a constant, and often misunderstood, demand from business. We are not suggesting that the arts, humanities and social science related (AHSS) subjects should be devalued. Indeed, the insights and skills imparted by the AHSS are central to the creation of new knowledge and understanding that will allow businesses to address increasingly complex societal challenges. However the focus on STEM is critical, because these are the disciplines in which employers find that the talent pool is inadequate. Rebalancing curricula in favour of STEM is not just about ensuring sufficient amount of study time on STEM issues but also involves strengthening student motivation and creating engaging learning environments and teaching methods.

A reformed senior cycle with a teaching and learning needs to be complemented by a curriculum of relevant subjects required by the global economy, particularly modern languages. The widespread use of English across the globe means that modern languages teaching is not a political priority, or indeed one that receives sufficient attention in the business community itself (beyond the growing number of, mainly multinational, companies with specific language requirements). This prevailing attitude will have grave economic, social and cultural consequences, particularly with threats posed by Brexit.. Ireland needs more of its people to speak foreign languages – for employability, for trade and the economy and for our cultural life.

Many positive curriculum developments in recent years have been hampered by lack of resources to support sufficient and timely roll-out, including the assessment of the new Computer Science programme and the practical assessment of science subjects. A reformed senior cycle must be given the appropriate financial, human and CAP EX resources to ensure high level delivery.

## Senior Cycle : Assessment and reporting

Unfortunately the Junior Cycle reform process was undermined by the proposal to remove the Junior Certificate state examination as a single assessment method. However assessment should take the focus away exclusively from an examination which encourages rote learning and be based on the professional feedback of teachers.

This will provide greater flexibility and allow students to select relevant subjects, personal to their ambitions, rather than fixate on subjects that are perceived to benefit them.

Giving good feedback rather than a mark and a “must do better” comment is the key to connecting students to their own learning and to making them more challenged and independent.

It has been suggested that standards may fall as a result of introducing school-based assessment. There is no evidence connecting external exams with maintaining or improving standards. On the contrary, we know from research and policy makers the world over that getting teachers more involved in assessment practice in classrooms and schools, and supporting them in this, is one of the main ways of improving standards

The OECD in a comprehensive review covering over 28 countries in ‘Synergies for Better Learning’ (2013)<sup>5</sup> argues that ‘placing a strong emphasis on teacher-based judgements has many advantages: it allows for competencies to be measured that are difficult to be captured in a standardised way’.

Significant concerns about the predictability of the examination itself prompted a State Examination Commission commissioned external evaluation of six subjects by the Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment in collaboration with Queens University, Belfast<sup>6</sup>. None of the examinations was found to be very problematically predictable although three (French, economics and design/graphics) were considered by the subject specialist reviewers to be quite predictable overall. While the report suggest that predictability concerns were not sustained, it commented: ‘From the data, it is clear that there is no definitive answer to whether the Irish Leaving Certificate is predictable or not.’ It also recommended that ‘Consideration should be given to placing more emphasis upon the assessment of higher order thinking skills in the examinations, in keeping with international trends in assessment.’

This may be fascinated by spacing the assessment over the senior cycle time and with a broader range of assessment forms. Trinity College Dublin, Ireland leading university, is currently equipping its teaching staff to consider new approaches to assessment and

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/synergies-for-better-learning.htm>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.examinations.ie/about-us/Predictability-Overall-Report.pdf>

provide a practical summary of over 100 different assessment methods <sup>7</sup>. Thus highlighting the variety, breath and range of assessment methods available, many of which can be adapted for

The senior cycle and Leaving Certificate certification process should use a wider variety of sources to provide evidence of learning. For example, examination results should be combined with continuous assessment by teachers, portfolios of achievement, learning journals to produce a qualification. A more regular programme of revision of syllabuses is needed for the Leaving Certificate examinations to remain current. This is important for keeping up with improvements in assessment design (such as assessing more higher order thinking skills), as well as syllabus content.

### **Senior Cycle: Priorities and supports**

Ibec welcomes the well-considered priorities set out in the consultation document. A significant priority will be to engage early with school leaders and teachers on the potential outcome of this review and the impact on their current teaching approach.

Our best teachers keep their teaching methods and practice under review. They adjust their practices according to development in teaching pedagogy. As a new curriculum embeds to the system, teachers and educators will also need opportunities to acquire and enhance their knowledge, skills and attitudes required to deliver the high level thinking skills, personal skills and life skills.

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<https://www.tcd.ie/CAPSL/assets/pdf/Academic%20Practice%20Resources/100+%20ways%20to%20assess.pdf>

## Conclusion

Ibec will continue to support the work of the NCCA to review the Senior Cycle and to engage the business community in this process.

To conclude, our key points for this consultation can be summarised as follows:

1. **Embedding higher order skills in the Leaving Certificate** : The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) should develop a new Framework for the Leaving Certificate which embeds higher order skills across all subject curricula.
2. **Extend the Junior Cycle education principles to the Leaving Certificate**: including flexibility of programme content, length and assessment, to include statements of learning and key skills
3. **Ensure appropriate resources are available** : The Department of Education and Skills should ensure that adequate resources are allocated to curriculum development and teacher development to underpin future Leaving Certificate curriculum reform.
4. **Use multiple methods of assessment** : The senior cycle certification process should use a wider variety of sources to provide evidence of learning. For example examination results should be combined with continuous assessment by teachers, portfolios of achievement, learning journals to produce a qualification.
5. **Engage early with teachers and school principals** : The success of the curriculum review and reform process will depend on the flexibility of teachers and the allocation of adequate resources to their continuing professional development. Therefore teachers should be engaged early in the process.

**END**

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