



Review of Senior Cycle Education

Public Consultation

Submission to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

25 October 2019

Introduction

The Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) is the representative and advocacy body for the technological higher education sector in Ireland (institutes of technology and the emerging technological universities). THEA welcomes the opportunity to submit a written submission to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) on the review of senior cycle education. The review process to date has been exemplary in terms of its inclusiveness, its willingness to engage with a range of different perspectives (including international exemplars), and the sophistication of the methodology employed. In seeking and securing the in-depth views of senior cycle students, their parents and teachers (Phase 2), together with those of the broader stakeholder community (Phases 1 and 3), there are good grounds for optimism that the NCCA can achieve the stated objectives of the review: the generation of ‘a shared vision for senior cycle’ and ‘a strong base from which to shape a curriculum that genuinely meets the needs of all learners for years to come’.

General Observations

THEA recognises that the review of senior cycle education is particularly sensitive. The senior cycle programme, together with the terminal assessment of the Leaving Certificate examinations, have an ‘iconic’ status in Ireland, and most stakeholders acknowledge that introducing change to any aspect of either has to proceed cautiously, and assure stakeholders that any such change will do nothing to imperil educational standards, or the perceived fairness, in particular, of the terminal examinations. In this regard, it is noteworthy that even the use of the word ‘reform’ can generate fears that the envisioned change will lead inexorably to the dismantling of a tried, trusted and respected system; and THEA notes the unflinching efforts of the NCCA to assure stakeholders that any change will be evolutionary rather than revolutionary.

THEA supports NCCA’s fundamental approach in seeking to identify and define a shared notion of the purpose of senior cycle education. That purpose, when agreed, will in essence represent a vision for senior cycle, and must necessarily be forward looking, and cater for the needs of a diverse student cohort in a rapidly changing world. The described purpose, set out on page 6 of the Public Consultation document, is a good starting point. It is quite rightly focussed on the learner, and the essential role that senior cycle plays in helping students fulfil their potential, intellectually, personally, and socially. The idea of equipping students ‘for diverse and sustainable futures so that they can embrace full, active citizenship and participation in society and the economy’ is in a sense a charter for the evolutionary change that one would expect to emerge from the review. The fact that the senior cycle must equip students for diverse futures and active participation in society and the economy implies that the senior cycle itself must be designed flexibly, including in relation to the associated assessment. It cannot stand still while the world around it changes and must be responsive to changing social and economic conditions if it is to fulfil its avowed purpose.

One area that might be more clearly addressed in relation to the purpose of senior cycle is an acknowledgement that the student cohort which the senior cycle serves is itself diverse, and that the senior cycle is not only there to prepare students for externally generated 'diverse futures'. The senior cycle must serve all students as individuals, each with different and wide-ranging needs, including learning styles. The idea that there is a typical, homogenous senior cycle student must be avoided, otherwise the senior cycle programme will be designed for that imagined student and lack the flexibility that it might otherwise have. It is arguable that historically that imagined student was thought to exist and he/she would necessarily gravitate to traditional academic subjects and respond positively to traditional pedagogies. One result of this is that technical/technological and more vocationally oriented skills-based learning, together with broader approaches to pedagogy, such as problem-based learning, have struggled hitherto to establish a firm place in the senior cycle programme. It is to be hoped that a new, more expansive vision of senior cycle education will give other approaches to learning greater recognition, and allow for more continuity and better transition experiences for students moving from senior cycle education into the workplace or into tertiary education.

THEA has observed in the debate surrounding the senior cycle review that there remains a deep-seated perception amongst some stakeholders that the backwash effect of the so-called 'points race' for higher education places is the major cause of problems affecting senior cycle education. This a longstanding perception and efforts have been made jointly by second and third level stakeholders in the context of the transitions reform process to explore the issue and put in place measures to mitigate its effects. It is important, however, that the issue is not overstressed, and that it should not be used as an excuse for inaction on those emerging possibilities for evolutionary change in the senior cycle, such as teaching and learning development; the pathways, programmes and curriculum components on offer; and assessment practice. Indeed, the issue of the 'points race' needs to be contextualised generally, and particularly in the specific context of the senior cycle review. Although it is the subject of extensive media coverage annually, the reality is that the 'points race' directly affects a limited number of prestige (often restricted-entry) programmes in a limited number of prestige institutions, and that there are many pathways into third-level education that do not require the accumulation of a near perfect 'points score', on foot of exceptional performance in the Leaving Certificate exams. It is often forgotten that some 43% of students entering higher education annually enrol on programmes in technological higher education institutions. In 2017-18, the average points cut-off across all Level 8 programmes in technological higher institutions was a modest 307. For Level 6 and Level 7 programmes, which also provide for progression to Level 8, the points score required was 224. In addition to this, some 20% of all first year students enrolling on Levels 6, 7 and 8 programmes in technological higher education annually enter with a further education qualification on top of their Leaving Certificate. The prospective outcomes for all of these students, as attested to by recent research undertaken by the HEA and CSO on earlier cohorts, are very positive, with just under 90% likely to enter the workplace or undertake further study. While such statistics tell us little about the senior cycle experience of these

students, it is highly unlikely that their senior cycle experience was dominated by the quest for high points, with all of the attendant stresses that this entails for the students themselves and their families. By focusing exclusively on those senior cycle students that have ambitions to secure places on prestige programmes, or in prestige institutions, we are in danger of overlooking, and not catering for, the senior cycle experience of those students who do not. It is important that in instituting evolutionary change at senior cycle, the interests of all students are considered; and that the ambitions of a subset of the senior cycle cohort should neither hasten or prevent change where it is needed.

Knowledge, Skills and Qualities

THEA notes the affirmation that has emerged from the review process with regard to the 'central importance of disciplinary knowledge' (Public Consultation document, p. 7). While THEA would have no particular issue with this, the way that it is stated could be read as giving primacy to disciplinary knowledge over the other objectives of the curriculum such as intrapersonal and interpersonal qualities, and life skills. There might be some merit in considering and alluding to how these more generic and transversal skills can be better embedded in a discipline-focused curriculum. While this is certainly addressed within curriculum statements for particular subjects, this would not be widely known beyond the teaching profession and other education professionals, and would be worth highlighting for a more general readership at the final reporting stage of the review.

Teaching and Learning

THEA would support the broad and modern vision for teaching and learning at senior cycle set out in the Public Consultation document (pp. 7-8). The vision talks about the 'potential of digital technologies to enhance learning and improve accessibility across all disciplines'. It might be questioned whether at this juncture, in 2019, we should have moved beyond considering its potential to considering how best and how quickly it can be utilised to improve teaching and learning. The area of digital learning is one which affects all sectors of education and training and there may be some merit in establishing links between second level and third level to support CPD in this crucial area. The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in higher education has undertaken significant work in this area and would be worth consulting on this aspect of the review.

Pathways and Programmes

This is one of the most important aspects of the senior cycle review. As set out in the opening paragraph on page 9 of the Public Consultation document, the senior cycle must 'recognise and affirm all talents and abilities', and support 'all students towards reaching their potential'. This absolutely requires the provision of a wider range of learning pathways, which not only cater for different abilities and intellectual proclivities, but also a

wider range of learning styles. THEA would fully support the idea of combining the existing programmes into a single senior cycle curriculum. This would not only create greater options for students in terms of the learning pathways and subject combinations available to them, but by bringing in different aspects of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and Leaving Certificate Applied would also expand the methods of assessment and reporting arrangements for all students. If developed in a sensitive and structured way, it would also hold out the prospect of creating a senior cycle experience that gave all the students the option of pursuing a more vocationally-oriented or technical/skills-based education. In this connection work should also be undertaken with SOLAS to explore whether such a 'combined' Leaving Certificate Programme could establish better links with the Apprenticeship and Traineeship system to allow for onward progression. This — the embedding of a recognised and valued vocational/technical route at the heart of senior cycle — might, more than anything, mitigate the more corrosive effects of the so-called 'points race', as it would make it more apparent that there are many more choices and learning pathways available to senior cycle students than are generally assumed.

Curriculum Components

Although it is often controversial, the need to review the existing list of subjects must be an essential part of evolutionary change at senior cycle. There will always be a need to add new subjects as society and technology changes, and new disciplines emerge out of such changes. How one goes about deciding on what subjects should remain or be discontinued is more problematical. Obviously, there is a need to have strong and robust criteria in place so that there is an objective basis for such review, and which is not unduly influenced by political or other ideologies. International benchmarking is also critical here. In this regard, there may be another opportunity here for synergies between second level and third level (or the entire tertiary education system), particularly in relation to research about the changing pattern or otherwise of discipline formation. This is an area that affects all of education and training.

There is definite merit in the idea of developing senior cycle subjects and components in more manageable units. Indeed, this would be a necessary prerequisite to enable the integration or combining of the different Leaving Certificate programmes. More work will obviously need to be undertaken to explore the extent to which the schools themselves would have the autonomy to design programmes from a suite of components, and how much would be centrally defined. While such changes would inevitably take some time to achieve, no matter how they are pursued, such a change would be likely to succeed better and faster if there was some level of discretion left to the schools within a broader curricular framework.

Another area that might also be examined is the apparent variability in the volume of learning associated with different subjects. Could some of the larger volume subjects be broken into smaller units, with some discretion left to students to choose and complete some modules without taking on the commitment of the full subject? Mathematics and English, for example, might benefit from such an approach.

Assessment and Reporting

THEA notes the areas relating to assessment that might be developed further. Virtually all of the areas referenced in the Public Consultation document (pp. 13-14) are already in operation in higher and the broader tertiary education sector; and assessment thus presents itself as a topic where collaborative engagement across education and training might be beneficial to all parties. A greater alignment in assessment methods across the system would also ensure a more seamless transition experience for students in a lifelong learning context. THEA would be particularly supportive of the spreading out of assessments over time (across fifth and sixth years) and the introduction of arrangements that enable and enhance second chance opportunities for learners. These latter, in particular, would contribute to the lessening of pressure on senior cycle students, by removing the once-and-for-all-time high stakes nature of the current system. In general, the tone of the approach to assessment reflected in the Public Consultation document is positive, aiming, as it should, to give students opportunities to display their learning. Assessment is a critical part of the learning process. It is not about preparing students to perform an annual feat of physical and intellectual endurance during the month of June .

Reporting will naturally follow-on from any changes that are introduced to the curriculum components and assessment methods. THEA would fully support the suggestion that has emerged from the review that it should reflect the full range of learning experiences, and all the knowledge, skills and qualities gained from undertaking the senior cycle programmes. The Transition Year, LCA and Junior Cycle reporting practices would certainly, as the Public Consultation document suggests (p. 14), serve as a good basis for the discussion. THEA would also suggest looking at the Europass Portfolio of documents, including the Diploma Supplement, which may also be useful reference points in framing the discussion.