



**NCCA**

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta  
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta  
National Council for  
Curriculum and Assessment

# Consultation Report on the draft curriculum specifications for Leaving Certificate Classical Languages: Ancient Greek and Latin

February 2022

# Contents

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INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 Overview.....	1
1.2 Consultation Process.....	1
CONSULTATION FEEDBACK.....	4
2.1 Learning a classical language .....	4
2.2 Access .....	5
2.3 Rationale and Aim .....	6
2.4 Course Structure: Strands and Learning Outcomes .....	6
2.5 Written examination arrangements.....	8
2.6 Second Assessment Component .....	9
CONSIDERATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS .....	11
3.1 Considerations .....	11
3.2 Conclusion .....	12

# Introduction

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## 1.1 Overview

The Leaving Certificate Classical Languages specifications were made available for national public consultation from 19<sup>th</sup> October to 18<sup>th</sup> January 2022. The aim of this consultation was to seek the open and honest views of the public in relation to the curriculum and assessment arrangements in the new draft specifications for Leaving Certificate Ancient Greek and Latin.

The responses to the consultation indicated a very positive perspective on the specifications overall. There was a strong endorsement of the approach taken, whereby aspects of the framework approach used for the design of modern languages were adapted, while provision was made for the distinctive nature and purpose of learning classical languages. The stated Rationale and Aim for each subject were affirmed, while the framing of the level of the specifications to allow access to all students was welcomed. There was a strong level of approval for the strand designations and articulation of learning outcomes. The assessment arrangements were welcomed broadly, with provision for a second assessment component seen as a positive and welcome feature. Some concerns about the level of specificity in the framing of certain learning outcomes were expressed, while some respondents expressed a desire to see more detail about proposed assessment arrangements, particularly in relation to question types in the written examination.

The following sections of this report will elaborate in more detail on aspects of these general findings.

## 1.2 Consultation Process

The consultation process consisted of the following elements: an online survey, written submissions and focus group discussions which were organised to facilitate the participation of students and third level experts.

The online survey grouped questions under the following broad areas for feedback:

- Learning a classical language
- Student access to the specifications (nature of prior learning required)

- Course structure, including strand designation and learning outcomes
- Assessment arrangements, including the written examination and second assessment component.

A focus group session was conducted with a selection of 11 students from different schools on Monday, 17<sup>th</sup> January 2022. The participants were students of either Latin or Ancient Greek, drawn from third year, Transition Year, fifth year and sixth year. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 restrictions, the session was held virtually.

The focus group session with students invited participants to consider the following aspects of the specifications:

- Rationale, aim and objectives
- What is meant by plurilingual and pluricultural competences and why they are important
- Course overview: integrated nature of learning language, literature and culture
- Strands and learning outcomes
- Looking from a critical perspective at problematic aspects of the ancient world as well as achievements and positive aspects
- Assessment: written examination and second component.

A separate virtual focus group session was held on Tuesday, 18<sup>th</sup> January 2022 with six third-level academics from universities in Ireland and the UK with specific expertise in classical language teaching. This entailed a wide-ranging discussion where participants were asked to share observations on the specifications and make suggestions for editing or amendment.

Two written submissions were received from third level academics, one from a current university lecturer and one from a retired professor. The Classics Association of Ireland- Teachers (CAI-T), the classical languages teacher subject association, sent in a detailed written submission based on questions posed in the online survey.

Table 1 below outlines the demographic breakdown of respondents to the online survey:

Post primary Ancient Greek teacher	1
Post-primary Latin Teacher	2
Third level student	1
Post-primary student	7

Post-primary principal	1
Teacher educator	1
Third level educator/ researcher	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>

**Table 1: Demographic breakdown of respondents to the online survey**

Two points of note require emphasis here:

1. It is noteworthy that approximately half of the respondents were current post-primary students, which is a positive reflection of their interest in the subjects, and welcome evidence of 'Student Voice' in the consultation process.
2. The number of teacher respondents to the online survey should be considered in the context of a separate, detailed submission from the subject teacher association (CAI-T). This submission was informed by the views of 10 practising language teachers, as confirmed by the chairperson of the association who signed the report on members' behalf. Together with the number of teacher respondents to the online survey, the consultation findings reflect the views of approximately 90% of practising teachers of Latin and Ancient Greek.

## Consultation feedback

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### 2.1 Learning a classical language

The Ancient Greek and Latin draft specifications, in common with other modern languages specifications, feature a section called *Language learning and education*. This sets out the importance of language learning in a globalised multilingual and multicultural society and the positive effects and benefits that accrue for students, including the skills, knowledge, understanding, and values gained from language learning experiences.

Unlike the modern language specifications, the two classical language specifications also feature a section entitled *Learning a classical language*. This is intended to provide the context for the distinctive nature and purpose of learning classical languages and for the design of the classical languages specifications. It acknowledges that cognisance is taken of the framework approach for foreign language specifications but also recognises the different emphasis in learning a classical language, where the primary goal is that learners become effective readers of texts written in that ancient language.

Respondents to the survey and focus group members were asked to consider the appropriateness of this section of the specifications. The section received a high level of endorsement as an appropriate articulation of the distinctive nature of learning a classical language and why it is important- over 86% of respondents to the online survey agreed or strongly agreed that the section is appropriate.

The CAI-T submission, representing practising classical language teachers, observed that *this is [a] very appropriate statement for the new Classical Languages specifications. Particularly that it emphasises the importance of Classical Languages in the context of other languages.*

One of the participants in the third level focus group noted that aligning with the foreign languages framework would help to challenge the widely-held presumption that Latin and Ancient Greek are more difficult than modern languages.

A student noted in the online survey that:

*Studying Classical Languages has really helped my comprehension of texts in other languages and areas. They have improved my critical thinking skills and my overall ability to analyse essays, arguments, and literature among a variety of other works. This has been of great assistance in most other subjects I study.*

A student from the post-primary focus group noted that he was attracted to the study of Latin as it was *logical, methodical, with rules to follow – it has so much relevance to other languages.* A

different student in this group observed the benefits accorded to Latin students who study science or medicine, where aspects of the language are frequently invoked.

A third student stated that he had *dropped French and picked up Latin. There is an element of conciseness and clarity, especially with the grammar rules.* However, he also observed that there needed to be a *balance between language and culture* and stressed the importance of *combining them* when commenting on the structure of the course as a whole.

## 2.2 Access

The section *Learning a classical language* also considers what prior learning students need to access the specifications.

The relevant section in the specification acknowledges that like learners of modern foreign languages, Leaving Certificate classical languages learners bring their own unique language repertoires and experiences to learning a classical language. It is recognised that learners may have varying levels of classical language skills and plurilingual and pluricultural competence, arising from their prior learning. The Leaving Certificate Classical Languages specifications are intended for learners from all language backgrounds. This includes learners who have some previous experience with the language – for example, through the Classical Language strand in Junior Cycle Classics – and learners who have no prior experience with the language. In common with other Leaving Certificate subjects, assessment is available at both Higher and Ordinary levels to all learners.

In the online survey, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement about the appropriateness of the section of the specification dealing with the level of prior learning students needed. The approach set out was met with high levels of approval. 80% of online respondents agreed that it is the correct approach.

This echoes feedback elicited in the consultation on the background paper and brief for the development of these specifications, which warned that the viability of Latin and Ancient Greek in the curriculum was in jeopardy if the new specifications were not made available to a larger cohort of potential students and schools. The third level focus group welcomed the fact that students would be able to access the specifications without necessarily having prior exposure to the languages. It was noted that students taking these specifications without a background in classical languages would be 16 or 17 years old, and would probably have a background in studying Irish, English and maybe another language, which in itself is a helpful foundation to take up the languages. The CAI-T submission noted: *It is also important that it emphasises that a classical*

language will be highly relevant to learners' lives and that this specification should meet ALL learners' needs.

## 2.3 Rationale and Aim

In keeping with the strong levels of approval for the previous section, the Rationale and Aim set out for the study of each language were viewed by consultation respondents as apt. The survey respondents indicated very high levels of endorsement with a series of statements drawn from the Rationale and Aim.

It is noted that the statement which has the highest level of neutral responses or disagreement is that which asks if the draft specifications invites learners to make connections with other subjects in the curriculum, but when the responses to this statement are analysed, the level of agreement is still higher than neutral or opposing views. A university professor emeritus noted in a written submission that there were two aspects of the study of the languages that might be incorporated in the Rationale:

*I applaud your new specifications for Greek and Latin. It is high time there was new thinking... there are two things I missed about the value of Greek and Latin (they apply more widely as well, of course). First, ambiguity. Learning to live with, and negotiate, ambiguity is one of the great strengths of the Humanities. [...] Science has its ambiguities as well, of course, but they manifest themselves differently. Second, story-telling. Again, it lies at the heart of the Humanities and, in my opinion, represents one of the great skills that Humanities students learn.*

It should be noted that story-telling is a central element of Junior Cycle Classics, and also receives attention in Leaving Certificate Classical Studies.

## 2.4 Course Structure: Strands and Learning Outcomes

Respondents and participants in the various aspects of the consultation were asked to consider the appropriateness of Strand 1: *Classical Language*, where learning outcomes are arranged in relation to two elements: *Understanding Latin/Ancient Greek texts* and *Developing language awareness and analytical skills*. It was clarified that the focus in this strand is on developing students' ability to explore and enjoy texts in Latin or Ancient Greek, and also to develop their general plurilingual skills. The level of agreement that the strand arrangements were appropriate was high in terms of agreement that the draft specifications support learners to acquire the skills

and competences to read authentic texts; discuss possible interpretations and translations with classmates; and access the resources that will enable them to become effective and independent language learners. However, there were lower levels of agreement that the draft specifications would support learners in pronouncing words and sentences accurately receiving the lowest level of agreement.

Similarly high levels of agreement and approval were registered for the conception of Strand 2: *Literature in Context*. Here the governing elements are *Latin/Ancient Greek literature* and *Roman/Greek culture through Latin/Greek texts*. The focus here is on understanding and appreciating Latin or Greek texts within their socio-historical, cultural and literary contexts. There is also an emphasis on understanding aspects of Greek or Roman culture through the study of texts, exploring such contextual disciplines as history, politics, architecture, art, philosophy and religion.

A participant in the third level focus group, who welcomed the specifications as *lucid and incredibly clear*, expressed a liking for the space allowed for developing students' cultural awareness and also the safe space the specifications provide to address difficult or sensitive issues that are relevant beyond the ancient world. An online respondent noted that:

*one of the great strengths of classical languages and literature is that they really support our comprehension of other studies and topics. It's really interesting to see how the language evolves and shifts as time passes and cultures change, and this allows us to deepen our understanding of the world as it is today. Therefore, I think all of the outcomes listed above would definitely bolster the learning experience of classical language students.*

Opportunities for critical reflection on problematic aspects of the world of Ancient Greece and Rome were welcomed, including perspectives on the experiences of minorities, women, slaves and subjugated peoples, and the possibility of exploring concepts such as power, gender and class, among others. The student focus group noted that such opportunities for discussion were also raised by teachers of the current syllabi, but welcomed the explicit designation of these themes as areas of potential learning and assessment. The potential for such teaching and learning opportunities to support critical thinking was not lost on students, with one noting:

*I would rather be shown the different perspectives when discussing social issues, not be told what the perspectives were. I want to be able to develop a nuanced interrogation, rather than being told what is good or bad.*

Some questions were raised about the definitions or parameters of certain words used in learning outcomes. For instance, the meaning of the word *simple* was queried in the CAI-T submission and in the student focus group in the context of Learning Outcome 1.3, whereby students should be

able to *Pronounce Latin/Ancient Greek words, phrases and simple sentences accurately enough to be understood, with appropriate intonation and rhythm* and again Learning Outcome 2.5, requiring students to *Explore vocabulary and grammatical rules by completing and transforming phrases and simple sentences*. Similarly, it was suggested that the term *idiomatic* in Learning Outcome 1.6., where students should be able to: *Create accurate and idiomatic translations of Ancient Greek sentences and passages of limited complexity* required further clarification.

## 2.5 Written examination arrangements

The arrangements set out for assessment were broadly welcomed. This welcome extended to both the written examination and the second assessment component, *Text in Context*. In both cases, however, a desire for even more specificity was expressed, particularly in the teachers' CAI-T submission. For instance, more detail in relation to the precise nature of question types proposed for Section B of the written paper was sought, in line with what was broadly regarded as an appropriate level of detail in relation to Section A, at least in the CAI-T submission.

The proposed designation of a 'Capstone' text to facilitate the assessment of learning outcomes in the terminal examination was welcomed. It was noted that anchoring the learning outcomes in a text of significant literary importance was an appropriate model. The CAI-T submission likewise welcomed the concept of a Capstone text but considered that it would be appropriate to specify this text and other suitable texts in the specification documents themselves.

It was noted by a member of the third level focus group that great care was needed in choosing such a text to ensure the appropriate marrying of the linguistic and the contextual or paralinguistic objectives of the specifications. It was further noted that viewing the ancient world through the prism of a text offers a particular view of that world which needs to be broadened by consideration of other texts. A similar point was made by a student from the post primary focus group, who observed:

*At present the history element is taught in a similar manner to LC History. Could there be a danger of missing out on some of the nuances, if only studying a limited number of texts, by adopting this new approach?*

However, it was acknowledged that the specifications make provision for this awareness.

CAI-T members expressed broad satisfaction with the suggestions made for the written paper, but indicated a need for more specific guidance on certain aspects, as suggested here:

*We are very happy with the division of marks on the paper and its relationship and balance to the Text in Context. In terms of Section A, we feel a lot of clarity is given about the importance*

*and relevance of the Capstone text ... it would help for both Sections A. and B. – but especially B. – if some clarity was given as to what is the "range" of the types of question implied.*

## 2.6 Second Assessment Component

There was a very positive reception for the second assessment component for the new specifications. It was noted that this was a feature of assessment in many other subjects and that it was good to see the new specifications align with them. The online survey revealed that almost 80% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that this section of the draft specifications sets out appropriate and satisfactory arrangements for the second assessment component.

The student focus group echoed these thoughts, although some concern was expressed about numerous subjects having submission dates for such components at the same time of the year, which might be a cause of stress.

The third level group was particularly enthusiastic about this feature, both in terms of a second assessment component *per se* and the precise nature of the component, where the study of language would be integral to the exploration of a broader cultural context. One participant in this group noted that the feature is:

*creative, active, much needed. It also allows for reflection on students' own learning, while supporting their lifelong learning and understanding how they learn.*

This group also felt that the proposed weighting of 20% of the overall mark was low and noted that at third level, there was a clear shift in the direction of continuous assessment and away from high stakes examinations. However, it was acknowledged that the arrangements for Ancient Greek and Latin needed to be in alignment with those for other Leaving Certificate subjects of a similar type.

An online respondent said:

*I think the 'Text in Context' assessment would be a really good addition to the Classical Languages Leaving Cert courses since it would allow students to approach the subjects in their own individual way. This would enrich their learning since it gives them the space to understand their own relationship with the subject as they study it, and to understand how it connects to other areas they may be interested in. It may also help them to understand why Classics are still important nowadays.*

Overall, the introduction of the second assessment component was noted in the consultation as a very positive and welcome feature, with great potential to allow students to be innovative and to meaningfully pursue genuine areas of research interest.

## Considerations and conclusions

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### 3.1 Considerations

Overall, the draft specifications for Leaving Certificate Latin and Ancient Greek were very well received and the consultation fulfilled its objective of initiating discussion and debate on key aspects of the design of the new courses.

The consultation did yield some feedback which requires attention from the development group. Issues raised in this context included:

- Some concerns about a perceived vagueness or lack of clarity in a small number of learning outcomes
- Some concern about a perceived lack of detailed specificity regarding aspects of standards in grammar and vocabulary
- Lack of specification of named texts considered possible *Capstone texts* for examination purposes
- A desire for greater detail about examination arrangements
- A need for some further refinement of the purpose underpinning the designation of the two strands, highlighting the role, for instance, of stories and story-telling; and further emphasis of the essential place of Ancient Greek and Latin in the humanities
- A need to highlight, in a positive manner, the integrative nature of language, literature and culture that is fundamental to the design of the specifications, and that represent a significant change from the previous syllabi and associated examination arrangements.

It is noted that some of these are issues that may be more appropriately attended to in future developments aimed at supporting the implementation of the specifications, including CPD provision and support, and in communications from the State Examinations Commission at the opportune time. It is further noted that some broader issues and actions were identified as necessary to support the successful implementation of the new specifications and to safeguard the future of the languages in the curriculum, relating for instance to teacher training and teacher supply.

Overall, it is heartening to see the extent of teacher support for the new specifications. The following comments by three teachers in the online survey reflect this perspective, and interestingly, one is from a teacher in a school that does not currently offer the subjects but hopes to do so in the new context that these specifications create:

1. *This new specification is the opportunity that the classical languages have needed to bring their importance culturally and academically into the 21st century and allow a new cohort of students to potentially have the opportunity to study the Classical languages with a suitable modern specification which reflects the work done with other subjects in the senior cycle over the past 10 years.*
2. *This is an impressive new approach to the languages at Senior Cycle that has the potential to increase student numbers. Looking at it from the perspective of a school wishing to take on the languages for the first time with a new teacher, some clarity on what exactly the students need to have covered in terms of grammar would be helpful and presumably reassuring to the students themselves. Well done to all involved!*
3. *The new Classical Languages specifications are a most welcome and exciting development. The inclusion of a capstone text is very reassuring. Some clarity is needed as to the parameters of language acquisition that learners are expected to attain. It will be vital that additional resources such as sample papers are made available as soon as the specifications get final approval, so that they can be taught effectively.*

Feedback elicited from students and third level experts, as noted throughout this report, echoes the positive sentiments expressed by teachers. As was the case with student contributions to the consultation on the background paper and brief for the development of the new specifications, the thoughtfulness and depth of student reflections and observations was commendable, and their passion for the subjects and concern for their future viability very evident. The insights offered provide further evidence of the value of engaging with the views of young people on their experience of learning, teaching and assessment. It should be noted that student responses accounted for half of the total number of respondents to the online survey, a further indication of the level of student interest in the languages.

## 3.2 Conclusion

The consultation process was very informative and beneficial. The engagement of those who participated in the consultation is acknowledged and NCCA is grateful for the open, honest, committed, experience-based and expert feedback received. Consultation feedback indicates there are very positive views on the draft specifications, while acknowledging that provision of CPD, supports and resources are fundamental to successful implementation. The high level of teacher input to the consultation is gratefully acknowledged and the positive response from teachers indicates a sense of optimism about the opportunity to revitalise the subjects, given that they have not undergone any meaningful changes in several decades.

It is acknowledged that there remain some challenges to the revitalisation of Ancient Greek and Latin in the curriculum. The small number of teachers and schools that currently facilitate the subjects is noted. If more schools are to take on the subjects and the number of students afforded the opportunity to experience them is to be increased, the issue of teacher qualifications requires consideration. However, the reconfiguration and modernisation of the subjects and the opportunity for students to take the subjects without prior classical language knowledge provides some reasons to be hopeful about their future status.

On a similar note, and to conclude this report, a reflection by a practising university lecturer in Latin is offered as a summation of the positive feeling that exists around the potential of these new specifications:

*What excites me about the new specification is that it brings Latin ... into line with a whole host of other modern languages offered at Junior and Senior Cycle. Gone is the simplistic and complacent idea that Latin was and is the language of (the glories of) the Roman empire, which has always tended to mean a quite narrow world of military affairs, high politics, and high literature. In its place is a much more holistic and humble conception of a language whose uniqueness is rooted in the creativity and imagination which all languages share. The traditional, 'classical' elements of Latin remain valued, but are seen in a new light, directed towards students' 'lifelong journey as plurilinguists' and animated by the 'beauty of language and the joys of reading and discussing texts'.*



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