



NCCA

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

Report on the review of the Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes

February 2023

Contents

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT	2
3. THE REVIEW PROCESS	6
School visits.....	6
Surveys.....	7
Written Submissions.....	7
4. FEEDBACK FROM THE REVIEW: EMERGING THEMES	9
Criteria and process schools use to identify students for Level 1 Learning Programmes and Level 2 Learning Programmes.....	9
How well the Guidelines for Teachers support and enable teachers to realise the vision for each programme in their classroom	11
Other feedback arising in the review	15
Perspectives and experiences on the transition from junior cycle to senior cycle	18
5. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE NCCA AND NEXT STEPS	20
6. CONCLUSION	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
APPENDIX A: LIST OF ORGANISATIONS/SCHOOLS WHO MADE WRITTEN SUBMISSIONS.....	24
REFERENCES.....	25

1. Introduction

As part of the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle (DE, 2015), Level 2 Learning Programmes (L2LPs) and Level 1 Learning Programmes (L1LPs) were introduced at junior cycle in 2015 and 2018 respectively. However, students following these learning programmes have no equivalent programmes at senior cycle. This is currently being addressed following the announcement by the Minister for Education on 29th March 2022 on the redevelopment of senior cycle.

Arising from the [Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report](#) (NCCA, 2022), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has been requested by the Minister to develop follow-on modules at senior cycle for students currently studying Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes (L1LPs and L2LPs) in junior cycle. The development of follow-on modules is a significant milestone in ensuring all students have access to, can participate in and benefit from an appropriate curriculum in senior cycle.

In September and October 2022, the NCCA conducted a review of both programmes to gather feedback to evaluate:

- the experiences of the teaching, learning and assessment within the L1LPs and L2LPs.
- how the review findings can support curriculum and assessment development work at senior cycle.

This report captures feedback from teachers, parents, school leaders, students and wider stakeholders on the introduction and enactment of the *Level 1 Learning Programmes: Guidelines for Teachers* and the *Level 2 Learning Programmes: Guidelines for Teachers*. Section 2 of this paper offers a brief summary of the background and context for the introduction of L1LPs and L2LPs. Section 3 outlines the approach that was adopted to conduct the review, after which the feedback from the review and the emerging themes are reported in Section 4. Section 5 draws on the previous sections and identifies the implications arising from the review for curriculum and assessment development work at senior cycle.

2. Background and Context

Under the terms of the Education Act, the NCCA has the responsibility of advising the Minister for Education on curriculum and assessment for students with special educational needs (SEN). In 2002, the NCCA developed and published *Draft Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities*. Following a consultation process, feedback flagged a gap in curriculum, assessment and certification provision at junior cycle for students within the low mild to moderate range of general learning disabilities (GLD). The consultation process also led to the Guidelines being updated and published in 2007 as a suite of *Post-primary Mild General Learning Disabilities Guidelines* (NCCA 2007) in several subject areas. Some post-primary aged students enrolled in special schools, had their learning supported through the *Primary Moderate General Learning Disabilities Guidelines* (NCCA 2007), or in some cases the *Primary Severe and Profound General Learning Disabilities Guidelines* (NCCA 2007). However, even with the employment of sophisticated approaches to differentiation in teaching and learning, the outcomes of the curriculum remained unachievable for a small group of students. The introduction of L2LPs in 2015 aimed to make the curriculum more accessible to students with general learning disabilities in the lower mild to higher moderate range.

Level 2 Learning Programmes

[Level 2 Learning Programmes: Guidelines for Teachers](#) were introduced as part of the Framework for Junior Cycle (2015) and replaced the *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities*. L2LPs were designed to meet the learning needs of students in the low mild to high moderate range of ability as it was recognised that these students may not be able to access some or all the subjects and short courses on offer at junior cycle that are aligned with Level 3 of the National Framework for Qualifications (NFQ). These students may be attending a mainstream school, special class or a special school.

The L2LPs were developed in consultation with parents, carers and professionals working in the field of education and special education. The students in this group are small in number (one or two in a mainstream school), and all should have Individual Education Plans (IEPs). Students undertaking the L2LPs benefit from the focus on development and learning in such areas as, elementary literacy and numeracy, language and communication, mobility and leisure skills, motor co-ordination and social and personal development (NCCA, 2015). The L2LPs are designed around five Priority Learning Units (PLUs) rather than traditional academic subjects. There are several elements in each unit and every element has different learning outcomes for students to experience and achieve (ibid). The five PLUs include:

- Communicating and Literacy
- Numeracy
- Personal Care
- Preparation for Work
- Living in the Community.

The PLUs can be taught separate to or integrated into mainstream subject teaching. Two short courses are also taught as part of the programme. These can be NCCA developed short courses or school developed short courses. The NCCA Level 2 Short Courses include:

- Caring for Animals
- CSI Exploring Forensic Science
- Enterprise in Animation.

The L2LPs are assessed on an ongoing basis in school and reported on as part of the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA) and are broadly aligned with Level 2 of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

Level 1 Learning Programmes

The availability of L2LPs was a very welcome development, but it also highlighted the fact that there was still a small cohort of students for whom the appropriate certification and associated learning were unattainable. These were students who have an identified learning disabilities in the range of low moderate to severe and profound. It is for this group that Level 1 Learning Programmes (L1LPs) were developed and placed the learning for students undertaking L1LPs in the context of the Junior Cycle Framework (DE, 2015). Like the approach for developing the L2LPs, the L1LPs were developed in consultation with parents, carers and professionals working in the field of education and special education. This development also, for the first time, ensured that learning for this small cohort of students would be recognised and reported on in the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement.

The [*Level 1 Learning Programmes: Guidelines for Teachers*](#) (NCCA) were published in 2018. Students taking L1LPs are likely to be at an early stage of cognitive development, and some students may have an identification of a learning disability which falls in the range of low moderate to severe and profound from an educational or clinical psychologist. The majority of students with this degree of learning disability are in special schools, or special classes in mainstream post-primary schools (NCCA, 2018). These students often have complex and multiple cognitive and functioning needs (ibid). This group of learners may experience difficulty understanding the world around them and their place in it and may also find expressive and receptive communication challenging. These students all have their own Individual Education Plan (IEP), and their learning tends to be targeted at an early developmental level. The L1LPs are made up of six Priority Learning Units (PLUs) which explicitly identify and develop the key areas of learning needed to prepare the students for their future lives. Each PLU is broken into different elements with each element having different learning outcomes for students to experience and achieve. The six PLUs are:

- Communication, Language and Literacy
- Personal Care and Wellbeing
- Being part of a community
- Numeracy
- The Arts
- Physical Education.

The PLUs can be taught separate to or can be integrated into mainstream subject teaching. Two short courses are also taught as part of the programme. These can be NCCA developed short courses or school developed short courses. The NCCA Level 1 Short Courses include:

- Around the World in Eighty Days
- Food Glorious Food
- Keep Well, Looking Good, Feeling Great.

For some students undertaking L1LPs or L2LPs, they may continue to focus on some aspects of PLUs and short courses into senior cycle to consolidate or progress their learning. Many schools provide their own school-developed programmes for this cohort of students at senior cycle. Post-school options include adult day services, which are HSE funded programmes to provide day care activities, supported employment, and voluntary work programmes for people with high support needs.

Other developments in special education provision relevant to the review

The Department of Education (DE) set out a Continuum of Support Framework (NEPS, 2007) to assist schools in identifying and responding to students' needs. This framework recognises that special educational needs occur along a continuum, ranging from mild to severe, and from transient to long-term, and that students require different levels of support depending on their identified level of need. Using the Continuum of Support Framework, schools can gather and analyse data, identify students' needs, as well as plan and review individual student progress. The framework emphasises the importance of looking at a student's needs in context, ensuring that supports and interventions are incremental, moving from class-based to more intensive and individualised support, and that they are informed by careful monitoring of progress.

In September 2017, the DE introduced the Special Education Teacher (SET) Allocation Model (DE, 2017) in all mainstream schools. The SET Allocation Model is designed to provide a single allocation of teaching resources to mainstream primary and post-primary schools. This has culminated in the removal of the requirement for students to be diagnosed to access supports. Resources are now automatically allocated to schools based on a school's profile and schools have more autonomy and flexibility regarding how resources are distributed (NCSE, 2017). Identification of need is central to the SET Allocation Model.

The Assessment of Need (AON) process is a statutory process under the Disability Act (2005) whereby the Health Service Executive (HSE) reports on the health needs and the education needs of a child/young person. All children/young people born on or after 1 June 2002, who are suspected of having a disability, are eligible to apply to the HSE for an Assessment of Need (AON). If the HSE Assessment Officer forms the opinion that a child or young person requires an assessment of education needs as part of the HSE AON process, they will contact the NCSE. The NCSE is required to assist the HSE in organising an assessment of a child's or young person's education needs as part of this process. The NCSE is responsible for nominating a person with the appropriate expertise to carry out the assessment of education needs when requested by the HSE. The educational component of the AON process refers only to assessment of education needs as identified in the school as part of their planning and support for their students. The Report of Education Needs for the purpose of AON is informed by school-based information. The Report provides information to the HSE on how the child/young person is learning in school and where the school has identified additional educational needs. While schools are being asked to complete the education section, the Assessment of Need is a HSE process and HSE are responsible for the overall report issued to parents/guardians. The DE is committed to monitoring

how the AON process is working in schools and will formally review the process at the end of the school year in 2023; this is with a view to ensuring that any additional guidance, support or resources are put in place at the earliest possible opportunity.

The DE are currently undertaking a review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004. The purpose of the review is to ensure that legislation on education for students with special educational and additional needs is up to date, fully operational, and reflective of the lived experience of students and families. The timing of the review and legislative updates, may have implications for the development and enactment of follow-on modules at senior cycle.

3. The Review Process

Consultation is a key aspect of NCCA’s work where advice is shaped by feedback from schools, education partners, wider stakeholders and the general public. This section presents an overview of the approach employed during this review. Although consultation, unlike research, has a policy and practice rather than a theoretical focus, the approach outlined in this section, is underpinned by the principles set out in NCCA’s Research Strategy (2019) and provides a summary of engagement during the review.

The review was designed to explore the following areas to gain insights into how the programmes are being enacted in schools.

Table 1: Areas explored in the review.

1.	The criteria and process schools use to identify students whose needs would be better served by the Level 1 Learning Programmes and or Level 2 Learning Programmes
2.	How well the Guidelines for Teachers support and enable teachers to realise the vision for each programme in their classroom including: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Priority Learning Units• Short Courses• Assessment and reporting
3.	Perspectives and experiences on the transition from junior cycle to senior cycle for this group of students.

In order to gather a wide range of perspectives to explore the areas identified above, a mixed method approach was employed during the review and included:

- school visits (9 in total)
- written submissions.
- an online survey for each programme.

School visits

The purpose of the school visits was to capture and report the perspectives and experiences of senior management, L1 and L2 Learning Programme co-ordinators/Special Educational Needs (SEN)/Special Education Teacher (SET) co-ordinators, teachers, students, and parents.

An invitation was sent out to all schools in May 2022 to submit an Expression of Interest to participate in the review. The schools selected to participate in the review were drawn from the forty-four Expressions of Interest received, containing a representative proportion of different school sizes, mainstream and special schools, single-sex and co-educational, and rural and urban. The schools which formed part of the sample were those supporting students following:

- The Level 2 Learning Programme in mainstream classes in mainstream schools
- The Level 1 or Level 2 Learning Programmes in special classes in mainstream schools
- The Level 1 Learning Programme or Level 2 Learning Programme in special schools.

School review visits were conducted in a total of 9 individual school settings during the month of October 2022. The visits involved carrying out focus groups with all stakeholders including students in the 9 schools. This helped to identify and analyse themes within the data gathered.

Student voice was an integral aspect of this review. However, approaches and questions had to be tailored to the circumstances and setting of the students. Ahead of the review visits, two preparatory visits were undertaken to work with teachers on the best approaches. Many students had communication difficulties, some students were non-verbal and required the use of choice boards, visual clues and in some cases, interpreters. The focus groups required the support of the class teacher and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs). Feedback was drawn from fifty-six students across the nine settings. It is important to acknowledge that the voice of students has also been heard through the advocacy of their parents/guardians and teachers.

Parental consent and student assent was sought for school visit participants under the age of 18. Data gathered at face-to-face focus groups was anonymised and transcribed, while the storing associated digital files was in line with NCCA's Data Protection Policy (2020).

Surveys

An online survey for each Learning Programme was published from October 3rd until October 28th, 2022. The breakdown of online survey respondents is set out in Table 2.

Table 1 Participants in the Level 1 and Level 2 online surveys

Participants	Level 1 Survey	Level 2 Survey
Mainstream Teachers	2	7
Mainstream SET Teachers	2	13
Special School Teachers	2	3
L1/L2LPs Co-ordinator	1	10
Mainstream Principal/DP	1	1
Special School Principal/DP	0	2
Others	0	3
Total	8	39

Written Submissions

Written submissions were received from 5 educational stakeholders (see Appendix A) and a written submission template was available online during the review period (3rd October – 28th

October). The privacy of all participants has been maintained through anonymisation, except where an organisation has given explicit permission to be identified as contributing to the review.

A thematic approach was used for data analysis framed by the areas for exploration set out in Table 1 (see p.6). This helped to identify and analyse themes within the data gathered. The findings of this analysis are presented in the next section of this report.

4. Feedback from the Review: Emerging Themes

This section presents an overview of the feedback received during the review with many of the emerging themes relating directly to the areas set out in Table 1 (p.6). Other areas which were not directly consulted upon, but which were considered relevant to the review of L1LPs and the L2LPs by those participating in the review, are also presented in this section of the report.

The review generated a good level of interest and engagement from schools and settings which are supporting students following the L1LPs and L2LPs. In general, the findings of this review echoed findings from the [review of senior cycle \(2017 - 2020\)](#) (NCCA, 2022) which indicated that the introduction of the L1LPs and the L2LPs in junior cycle was viewed as a very positive step towards greater inclusion. Teachers, principals, parents, and stakeholders overwhelmingly welcomed the introduction of the programmes as it enabled students with specific SEN to have equitable access to an inclusive and appropriate curriculum and with that learning being recognised in the JCPA, thereby ensuring parity for all students.

Criteria and process schools use to identify students for Level 1 Learning Programmes and Level 2 Learning Programmes

Students who engage with the L1LPs and the L2LPs will usually have an assessment provided by an educational psychologist or other professional depending on the complexity of students' individual needs. The decision to enrol a student in either programme is typically informed and supported by psychoeducational reports and robust identification procedures used by the school. The assessment of an individual student's needs includes consideration of the student's cognitive ability and standardised assessments, teacher and parent observations and monitoring of targeted intervention provided by the school, and the support of a professional also, where available.

Feedback from the review indicated that, by and large, there are no major difficulties applying the criteria and process in special schools and special classes as students attending them generally have psychological reports, which contain the relevant educational information and recommendations. Many of the students in special schools will follow the L1LPs although some students will follow the L2LPs as appropriate.

However, the review indicates a need for further supports for mainstream schools to ensure that they have a clear understanding of the criteria and process used to identify students. Students in mainstream schools will usually be following the L2LPs in mixed ability classes or in special classes. Feedback illustrates a need for a greater understanding of the use of assessment and screening for identification of need and to improve teaching and learning outcomes. Feedback also indicated a need for greater understanding of evidence based targeted interventions. In general, there was evidence that psychological assessments, as well as teacher observation and parental input, were used to determine if a student's learning needs would be best served by the L2LPs or, in some cases, a blend of curricular components from L2LPs and Level 3. Overall, feedback from the school visits, surveys and written submissions highlighted a need for more clarity and support in this regard.

The Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) submission outlined concerns in relation to understanding terms associated with general learning disabilities and how schools gather evidence of students who do not have a formal diagnosis.

Schools require guidance as to how to gather evidence of general learning difficulties outside of a formal diagnosis. For some students, it can be very difficult to determine true cognitive ability as a result of other additional needs, i.e., Autism, sensory needs, physical disabilities (JCT Written submission)

While the Department of Education (DE) Inspectorate submission highlighted that the L1LPs and L2LPs are designed to target the learning needs of a particular group of students, the submission also highlighted the importance of using targeted supports and interventions for students to achieve at Level 3 where appropriate.

If the students' learning abilities do not fall within the range of low mild to severe and profound categories of ability, these students should not be following a L1L2 learning programme. In cases where students have been incorrectly included with the programme, they should receive support through focused and targeted interventions to achieve at Level 3 (DE Inspectorate written submission)

The review also highlights a need for more support for the implementation of the SET Allocation Model and the Continuum of Support in some mainstream schools. The Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) submission outlined that schools believe they do not have autonomy when identifying students' needs for accessing a L1LPs or a L2LPs.

The criteria used to identify students are problematic...schools feel like they don't have any input into the decision or freedom to use their judgement regarding which students it might suit (TUI written submission)

The findings of the review indicate that, in the absence of a formal diagnosis, some schools are struggling to understand the process and criteria for identifying students whose needs would be better served by accessing Level 2 in particular.

Delivering in Mainstream. Exclusivity of those who qualify. We are trusted to approve Irish exemptions and SNA access. Why can't we also be trusted to identify who needs L2? (Mainstream SET L2 survey)

Insights from the review indicated that in some cases, students experience Level 3 in mainstream schools often for as much as one year before it is decided, after consultation with parents, that the student would be better served by a L2LP and or blended approach of a mix of L2LPs and Level 3 junior cycle components. All mainstream schools visited as part of the review encouraged an inclusive approach whereby, they facilitated students in accessing mainstream classes to engage in Level 3 whilst still following the L2LPs.

How well the Guidelines for Teachers support and enable teachers to realise the vision for each programme in their classroom

All 8 respondents to the L1LP survey agreed/strongly agreed with the statement that they were familiar with the L1LPs Guidelines for Teachers, and it was evident during the school visits that teachers were familiar with the Guidelines and reasonably confident in how they could be used to guide and plan for teaching and learning. Insights from the review signal that the criteria and process for identifying the target group of students, as set out in the L1LP Guidelines for Teachers are clear to teachers, school leaders and stakeholders more generally.

While 35 out of 39 respondents to the L2LP survey agreed/strongly agreed with the statement that they were very familiar with the L2LPs Guidelines for Teachers, some respondents were concerned with what they perceived to be an inconsistency in how schools were identifying the needs of students and indicated that the *Level 2 Learning Programmes: Guidelines for Teachers* could be clearer in this regard.

The guidelines on exactly which students the Level 2s are appropriate for could be made clearer (Mainstream SET, Level 2 survey)

Priority Learning Units (PLUs)

In general, feedback indicated that the learning outcomes in the Level 1 Guidelines for Teachers and Level 2 Guidelines for Teachers do articulate what the students needed to know, be able to do and value at the end of the three-year process.

The learning outcomes are good for our students. There is a structure which the students and teachers like (Deputy principal, special school)

Furthermore, feedback indicated that PLUs for both the L1LPs and L2LPs target those skills identified as relevant and important for students to develop at this age and stage. It was noted that the PLUs provided an opportunity to develop cross curricular activities within the L1LPs and L2LPs and, to some degree, with Level 3 subjects and short courses. Respondents outlined the flexibility in providing aspects of L1LPs and L2LPs for some students, rather than confining students to just one programme, as a very positive feature of provision.

The strength of the PLUs is that learning outcomes can be incorporated across all subject areas in schools, thereby providing a broad and balanced curriculum experience for students. This is key in promoting purposeful inclusion of students following the programmes and enabling them to learn with their peers across and within mainstream subject lessons (DE Inspectorate written submission)

Within the L1 Guidelines for Teachers, the flexibility provided by the broad learning outcomes across the PLUs was welcomed. The broad nature of the learning outcomes enabled teachers to personalise the learning for their students who often have complex needs. Thus, the flexibility to tailor the curriculum around the individual needs of the students was frequently commented on by teachers. However, it was acknowledged that the level of autonomy afforded by the learning outcomes meant that more time was required for planning, collaborating and personalisation of the learning.

Some students communicate with their eyes, and this is a challenge in terms of interpreting outcomes, so the broadness of the L1LP really helps in this respect.
(Teacher, Special school)

Within the L2 Guidelines for Teachers, the PLUs of *Communicating and literacy*, *Numeracy*, *Personal Care* and *Living in the Community* were broadly welcomed and described as being relevant and meaningful for students following the L2LPs. However, the review suggests a need to reappraise two Level 2 PLUs, *Preparing for Work* and, to a lesser extent, *Living in the Community*. Many respondents suggested that *Preparing for Work* was better suited to senior cycle students. While respondents liked the *Living in the Community* PLU, some special school respondents felt that certain elements of this PLU, like *Using local facilities*, were less relevant for the age and stage of their students. Other respondents felt that parts of *Living in the Community* could be updated, and the learning progressed into senior cycle.

Preparing for work PLU, at the moment they are way too young, this needs to be done when they are 16+ (Teacher, Special class)

There is also evidence of a misunderstanding that the *Numeracy* PLU for L2 is a replacement for the subject of Maths at Level 3, particularly for those students who find the subject challenging. In this context, it was reiterated that clearer guidance was needed in the *Level 2 Learning Programmes: Guidelines for Teachers* on the target group of students best suited to this programme.

Teachers in mainstream schools did outline significant challenges on the integration of some of the learning outcomes in the Level 2 PLUs in mainstream, mixed ability classes. A total of 24 out of 39 respondents to the L2LP survey disagreed/strongly disagreed with the statement: *Learning outcomes can be easily included into mainstream subject classes (post-primary)*. Feedback indicated that more support for mainstream teachers to understand the connections between L2LPs PLUs and Level 3 junior cycle subjects would be welcomed and this would help subject teachers implement the L2LPs in mainstream classrooms. It was suggested that more guidance could also be provided to teachers to support differentiated teaching and learning, and approaches to ongoing assessment, for students following the L2LPs in the mainstream classroom.

In terms of L2 's in mainstream the PLUs are more difficult to translate for them – you cannot teach the whole course in the classroom so students need to be withdrawn – so some areas cannot be taught in mainstream.... Staff have had to transform themselves in terms of SEN and it has taken a lot of effort. (Mainstream, L1/L2LPs co-ordinator)

Supporting differentiated learning was not just a concern in mainstream schools. Feedback highlighted the significant degree of work needed to incorporate learning outcomes in mixed ability classes in special schools and special classes.

There is such a wide difference in ability between L1 and L2...so differentiating between students can be very difficult...Mixed ability is a challenge. I have some students who can give you a piece of work...some students cannot progress and need constant 1-to-1 help. (Mainstream SET co-ordinator with special classes)

The majority of the schools visited outlined the value and opportunity in engaging with learning outcomes outside of the classroom. They commented on how important the community in which they were situated supported and encouraged their students to engage in a variety of activities and work experiences. For example, one special school outlined how many learning outcomes their students engage with when visiting the local swimming pool.

Learning outcomes outside the classroom are important – outside activities are crucial to the teaching (Teacher, Special class)

During the review process, while not referencing particular PLUs, students accessing the L2LPs highlighted what they liked about school (friends, swimming, activities, the cinema, cooking, computers, teachers and woodwork) and what they disliked about school (Mondays and maths). Students had some awareness of the Level 2 Programme and were able to outline for example, that the L2LPs were different to Level 3 at junior cycle. Some students were able to comment on the suitability of tasks, peer interactions and their progress as learners.

I was proud because I wasn't too good at anything in primary school and then I got to do everything in this school (Student, Special class)

Some of the work is hard because I find it hard to remember things. But I only have to do my best (Student, Special Class)

Short Courses

The flexibility provided by the L1LPs short courses and the L2LPs short courses was welcomed. Insights from the review highlight the opportunity for the development of life skills for students and the consolidation of their learning as a strength of both the L1LPs and L2LPs short courses.

The short courses are really important, they supplement the PLUs they bring out learning in them, from theory to practice. (Teacher, Special class)

Evidence indicates that most special schools have engaged with and offered NCCA developed short courses for Level 1 and Level 2. Some schools modified the NCCA developed short courses to meet the individual needs of their students. During the review many examples were given where a Level 1 or Level 2 short course was adapted to suit the individual student's interest, for example, where *Caring for Animals* was adapted to focus on the student's experience of farming. One mainstream school visited offered a modified version of two Level 3 short courses (Digital Literacy and Coding) successfully to a student accessing L2LPs. In this case, they were primarily motivated by the student's interests and strengths. Another school integrated the L2 short course *CSI Forensic Science* into their Level 3 science class to support and encourage students accessing the L2LPs to participate in the mainstream science class.

Feedback indicated that schools would welcome the development of further short courses at L1 and L2, where a particular need or interest may be identified. Areas suggested included cooking, banking, and health and fitness. Some feedback indicated that the provision of wellbeing short courses, particularly at L2, would be welcomed as they could link in with Level 3 SPHE, CSPE and

PE. They would also welcome more resources to develop, design and plan their own short courses.

Planning and collaborating

A challenge highlighted by the review was making time for planning for learning and collaborating with colleagues on the L1LPs. All special schools operate under primary school status and have full contact hours. This means that opportunities for teachers to plan collaboratively happen mainly before or after school hours and or during Croke Park hours. Furthermore, feedback indicated that their status as primary schools resulted in many special schools having no subject specific teachers and appropriate facilities for post-primary teaching and learning in practical subjects, such as Home Economics and Woodwork. Consequently, some schools found it more difficult to address certain learning outcomes, for example, those relating to the preparation of food.

Planning for the L2LPs was also challenging, according to feedback from teachers who indicated that finding the time to plan and collaborate with colleagues was difficult, particularly where the student is accessing L2 PLUs in mainstream mixed-ability classes.

Further challenges in terms of planning for learning included a lack of relevant age-appropriate material that could be easily accessed from either textbooks or a central repository.

Assessment and reporting

The assessment of the learning in the L1LPs and the L2LPs is classroom-based. Students assemble evidence of their learning in a portfolio, which is submitted to their teachers and the students' work is assessed and reported on. The JCPA documents the achievement of the student in PLUs and short courses, as reported by the school. There was a consensus amongst respondents that ongoing assessment was the most relevant evaluation process for students following the L1LPs or the L2LPs. Teachers and parents strongly agreed that ongoing assessment facilitated opportunities for '*catching students being good*', and that this approach to assessment was the most meaningful and equitable assessment process for students engaging in L1LPs and L2LPs. Parents overwhelmingly agreed with ongoing assessment and the use of the student portfolio approach to assessment.

With continuous assessment our children can succeed, it should be for all students the pressure is off and that is really important, my child would never be able to sit an exam, so this is crucial. (Parent, Special school)

The main challenge raised in terms of assessment was gathering evidence of learning, with schools indicating that different methods have been employed, such as digital and hard-copy records, with varying degrees of success. Feedback indicated that teachers struggled to compile evidence other than written work and most of the schools relied on the hard-copy portfolio as the main source of evidence for assessment.

In terms of evidence of learning we tried digital portfolios but that didn't really work for us. We didn't have time for all the recordings and everything – trying to do 12 recordings at a time was too much especially as some of the classes had 3 levels in them – it was like we needed a full-time videographer. So, we do paper portfolios –

these are much more accessible – the students are very proud of their portfolios – it clearly indicates progress to them. However, the students do find the gathering of information for their portfolios very challenging and there is a lot of teacher input in this regard. (Deputy principal, Special school)

Overall, feedback indicated that it was at the discretion of the teacher to monitor, review and evaluate progress through engagement with the learning outcomes and the ongoing assessment process. The JCT in their written submission, highlighted some challenges for teachers in making professional judgements, particularly when defining the difference between students doing tasks and learning from these tasks:

.. teachers can struggle in exercising professional judgement, particularly in assessment of student learning, taking account of the continuum of ability and experience of students, aligning success criteria to intended learning, providing appropriate feedback (JCT written submission)

In terms of reporting, the opportunity for students to engage with a meaningful curriculum in an inclusive manner and receive recognition for their work and achievement in the same manner as all their peers in junior cycle, via the JCPA, was highlighted as significant by all stakeholders, teachers, principals, and parents. All parents interviewed as part of the review visits felt strongly that their children should be able to complete the junior cycle and receive certification in the form of a JCPA alongside their peers and regardless of what level (Level 1, 2 or 3) of the curriculum is followed.

My daughter will get her cert and it will mean something to her, a sense of achievement and she will be proud. It also, means a lot to our family. It will be a huge honour for us when she achieves it. (Parent, Special school)

It's important that JCPA certificates are issued at the same time as JC results. By them not coming out at the same time, it diminishes their achievements in their eyes. (Deputy Principal, Special school)

In the course of the review, students themselves offered some insights into gaining the JCPA and the levels of happiness associated with achievement in junior cycle and progression into senior cycle. In general, students engaged in L2LPs indicated that they were happy and proud to receive a JCPA. Some students accessing L2LPs were also able to express what they would like to learn before they leave school and what they would do once they finish the junior cycle, for example, progress into TY.

Other feedback arising in the review.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

Feedback indicated that teachers would like more Continuous Professional Development (CPD) to support the implementation of the L1LPs and the L2LPs in different settings. This would assist in

addressing the challenges they found with planning the programme in their school and collaborating with colleagues. Some mainstream teachers explained how they can struggle to engage students accessing L2LPs appropriately, mentioning that they often 'underestimated the students' or '...(felt) I am making it up as I go along'.

Schools reported a mixed experience of roll out ...Training that was provided for Level 2 mainly focussed on special classes and not on SEN students in mainstream classes. (TUI written submission)

Many participants specified that a model of community of practice and/or cluster sessions would be useful for teachers to discuss and share examples of practice and experience in terms of implementing the different elements of the programmes. Teachers, regardless of their school setting, identified a need to work with other teachers to build capacity and confidence.

Teachers also highlighted the time needed to collaborate with colleagues to design a programme. The DE, in their submission, outlined that time should be given to embed L1LPs and L2LPs in schools. The DE highlighted a need for further opportunities for teachers to avail of CPD in inclusive practices at whole school and individual teacher levels and the provision of further examples of good practice to help build capacity and confidence.

School status

As mentioned, special schools have primary status and feedback indicated that this can be challenging when planning for teaching and learning and implementing the post primary curriculum. Many special schools have no subject specific teachers and consequently find it more difficult to address some of the learning outcomes in their classrooms.

Concerns around the inconsistency of language across the primary and post-primary curriculum were also noted. One special school visited was concerned that the L1LPs and L2LPs would be inspected as a primary school initiative, which in turn would leave the school open to criticism.

We are not clear about the rules – like can it be done (L1/L2 Learning Programme) over a 4-year period – can we skip a year with a student? Also, we are a little concerned about Inspections – we are inspected through the primary lens and yet a lot of what we do is secondary. We are nervous that we will get a bad report if we don't use the language of the primary curriculum - we don't know what to do here. (Teacher, Special school)

All the special schools visited felt that they needed a specific status for schools which are providing both primary and post-primary curricula. The challenges of implementing a post-primary curriculum in a primary school setting were commented on by teachers.

In terms of learning outcomes, they are appropriate but is challenged with the Primary Curriculum. The language is different for both programmes [the primary curriculum and the L1LPs], and we have to find the links between the two. It would be better at second level just to focus on the L1 Learning Programme. (Teacher, Special school)

Resources and supports.

Concern was expressed about a lack of resources in terms of space and funding. Many of the special schools outlined a need for appropriate facilities for post-primary teaching and learning in practical subjects. Much of the feedback indicated the need to secure more specialist SEN teachers and SNAs.

Perspectives and experiences on the transition from junior cycle to senior cycle

Feedback overwhelmingly highlighted an urgent need for curricular provision in senior cycle for students currently following the L1LPs and L2LPs.

There is a gap between junior cycle and senior cycle and there is no real specific progression so we do QQI, but our students should be able to access the senior cycle. There needs to be recognition of their achievements. There needs to be programmes like personal care, personal decision making etc. And there should be resources for these age-appropriate programmes. Academic ability plateaus at about 16 so the senior cycle LP's need to take this into account. Also cost needs to be taken into account when designing these programmes. (L1/L2LPs co-ordinator, Special school)

The lack of specific pathways at senior cycle for these students is evidenced across the feedback gathered which indicates the variety of options offered to students as they progress into senior cycle. The options provided include but are not limited to:

- QQI modules
- Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA)
- Leaving Certificate Established (LCE)
- School-developed programmes
- ASDAN courses¹

Many schools had no established programme at senior cycle. In this case, schools extended elements of the L1LPs and L2LPs into senior cycle.

Parents were universal in their opinion that a senior cycle curriculum was crucial for their children's education and wellbeing. They felt that a curriculum in senior cycle should contain modules that supported their children in the world of work as well as giving them skills to navigate their own personal lives. They also stated that their number one priority was for their children to be happy and so any modules developed at senior cycle had to consider the interests of their children. This meant that the senior cycle had to be flexible enough to incorporate a high degree of individualism.

¹ ASDAN is a UK based educational charity and awarding organisation providing courses, accredited curriculum programmes and regulated qualifications to engage young people aged 11 to 25 years in greatest need, to include academic, social and emotional needs, as well as needs associated with physical, sensory, language and communication difficulties.

All schools agreed that in terms of senior cycle provision it needed to be a programme that offered life skills, independence, and a pathway into the adult world. There was also consensus amongst the wider stakeholders involved in the review that the senior cycle programme should focus on preparing students for independent living, meaningful employment, and social functioning. They agreed that there should be less focus on academic achievement and more on developing skills that would assist in a variety of real-world scenarios.

*When it comes to the senior cycle you have to really understand what students are like – most students won't be able to access academically more than L2 so the senior cycle learning programme will have to look at other aspects of learning that are more age appropriate...They have specific vulnerabilities so need help there.
(Deputy principal, Special school)*

Feedback also reflected the importance of transitions after senior cycle and into adult life for this cohort of students. Several respondents referred to the transition to adult services. The Health Service Executive (HSE) provides and funds a range of services for adults with disabilities. These services include basic health services as well as rehabilitation, income maintenance, community care and residential care respite, home care and day care. Many students following L1LPs transition to adult services.

The senior cycle for students engaging with L1/L2LP must support a smooth transition beyond school. Student transition to a variety of contexts including HSE day care, supported employment, PLCs, college etc. It is important that stakeholders from a wide variety of contexts are involved with the design of the senior cycle. (Deputy principal, Special school)

Most students, however, were unsure of the next step in their school lives and beyond. When asked about the transition phase, students accessing L2LPs seemed confident that the school would look after them. Many students accessing L2LPs commented on their ambitions in the next phase, talking about, '...learning more life skills...' or 'get a driving licence.' Several students talked about relying on themselves more and securing full time employment and several students from farming backgrounds wanted to work in that industry.

5. Implications for the NCCA and next steps

This section outlines the implications arising from the review of the L1LPs and L2LPs. In general, the introduction of the L1LPs and L2LPs was very much welcomed across the system, with parents, teachers, school leaders and wider stakeholders reinforcing how each programme enabled all students to access, participate in and benefit from an appropriate curriculum. However, the findings noted areas for improvement to ensure the successful enactment of the LPs. In general, these findings point to a need for greater supports for schools in terms of how to identify students whose needs would be better served by accessing each programme, access to more resources and materials and further CPD.

Updating the Level 1 Learning Programmes: Guidelines for Teachers and Level 2 Learning Programmes: Guidelines for Teachers

Overall, the feedback suggests a need to update the Guidelines for Teachers for each programme. A review of the language and terminology would be helpful along with updating useful links to other resources or external sources of information, such as the SET Allocation Model. Ensuring that the target group for the L1LP is more clearly communicated in the guidelines would be of benefit.

In order to align amendments across both sets of Guidelines, there is a need to update the *Level 2 Learning Programmes: Guidelines for Teachers* as outlined above. The review indicates a substantial need for greater clarity and understanding of the criteria and process used to identify students whose needs would be better served by accessing the L2LPs. The *Level 2 Learning Programmes: Guidelines for Teachers* must clearly communicate the target groups for the programmes to support teachers in identifying students for the programme.

The findings signalled a need to reappraise the Level 2 *Preparing for Work* PLU in the Guidelines for Teachers, and to a lesser extent, aspects of *Living in the Community* PLU, which some respondents considered more appropriate to senior cycle. As work is beginning on the development of follow-on modules for students following the L1LPs and L2LPs in senior cycle, it is opportune to consider these PLUs in the context of this work.

Clearer guidance will need to be provided in the Level 2 Guidelines for Teachers in relation to the target group for the *Numeracy* PLU.

Short Courses

The review also highlights a desire for the development of new short courses where a specific need has been identified and more supports for teachers to develop their own short courses. To this end, the NCCA has already developed a new Level 2 History short course due to be published in Spring 2023.

Generating examples of work and practice

It is recognised that teachers need more support in integrating the Level 2 learning outcomes into mainstream classes. Teachers working with the L1LPs also indicated a need for more support in planning teaching and learning. To address this, work will continue in gathering and publishing

examples of practice from different settings to support teachers with planning for teaching and learning, and ongoing assessment. These will be made available on curriculumonline.ie.

Working with stakeholders

The NCCA will continue to work closely with all stakeholders to ensure that the criteria and process used to identify students whose needs would be better served by accessing a learning programme, are communicated clearly.

Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement

Findings were conclusive that students should receive recognition of their learning and achievement in the form of a JCPA at the same time and occasion, and alongside their peers, regardless of what level (Level 1, 2 or 3) of the curriculum is followed. The JCAP is released many months after junior cycle students receive the provisional results of their state examinations, which is celebrated in schools in September. Many participants expressed the view that not to do so, diminishes the value of the student's achievement and is also a barrier to inclusion.

Pathways into senior cycle and beyond

Currently, there are no equivalent pathways for students following the L1LPs and L2LPs as they move into senior cycle. The review highlighted that many students who have completed the L2LPs are placed in LCA as schools perceive that they have no other options; undertake QQI or other modules; follow school-developed programmes; or continue to address some of the elements in the L1LPs and L2LPs into senior cycle. Work has begun on the development of follow-on modules for students following the L1LPs and L2LPs. This work will also address transitions after school, ensuring all students are adequately supported at this age and stage. This is a significant milestone in providing an appropriate curriculum for all students in senior cycle.

Continuing Professional Development

The desire for the provision of further Continuing Professional Development was a consistent message in the review. The importance of teacher professional development as the key enabler when it comes to successful implementation of the L1LPs and L2LPs was recognised. Further CPD in implementing each programme as well as in inclusive teaching practices more generally was sought. NCCA will continue to work closely with CPD providers to support teachers' professional development.

6. Conclusion

The review of the L1LPs and the L2LPs generated rich discussion and lead to useful and thoughtful feedback from multiple perspectives. The wide range of the responses demonstrated significant engagement with the L1/L2 Learning Programmes. The thoughtful and considered opinions and suggestions offered indicate the extent to which there is considerable interest in, and support for the refinement and further development of the L1LPs and L2LPs and the development of follow-on pathways for this cohort of students into senior cycle.

The Council would like to thank all those who welcomed NCCA staff into their school, who participated in focus groups, completed the online surveys, or made a written submission. Furthermore, NCCA is grateful to the school leaders who facilitated teachers in participating in the focus group events and to all those who supported student participation in the consultation.

Appendix A: List of organisations/schools who made written submissions

Written submissions were received from the following contributors:

- Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT)
- Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI)
- St Michael's Holy Angels Special School, Chapelizod ,Dublin
- Marino Community Special School, Bray, Co. Wicklow
- Department of Education (DE) Inspectorate

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