



**NCCA**

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

# Report on the early enactment of Junior Cycle Visual Art

September 2023

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## Introduction

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In line with the Framework for Junior Cycle 2015 (FWJC15) the new subject specification for Junior Cycle (JC) Visual Art was introduced in schools in September 2017. An early enactment review was scheduled to be undertaken by NCCA when the first cohort of students had completed the course. Unfortunately, it was necessary to postpone the review until the 2022-23 school year due to the disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

While the students and teachers who participated in this review had experienced the three years of the curriculum, they were not required to complete CBA 1 due to the assessment adjustments introduced to take account of the disrupted learning experienced by students during the pandemic.

This early enactment review was completed in Q1, 2023 to gather feedback and explore:

- how well the specification gets to the heart of the learning aspired to within the subject and more broadly within the Framework for Junior Cycle
- the assessment elements within the subject, as experienced by students and teachers
- how teachers are exercising their professional judgement to mediate the new specification in their schools and classrooms.

This report commences with background information that helps to contextualise the review and an overview of the consultation conducted as part of the review, followed by insights into experiences in junior cycle Visual Art. The feedback received during the review has been considered by NCCA in terms of potential implications arising for both the work of NCCA and other stakeholders in the implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle. The final section of the document sets out proposed next steps to respond to the findings arising from this early review.

## Background information

This section provides a brief overview of the JC Visual Art curriculum specification, its intended assessment arrangements, the adjustments to the assessment arrangements introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic, curricular changes to Leaving Certificate (LC) Art, and the longitudinal research study on the implementation and impact of the Framework for Junior Cycle, all of which is important contextual information when considering the feedback from the review.

### Overview of specification

The specification for JC Visual Art is designed for a minimum of 200 hours of timetabled student engagement and is organised around three interconnected strands: **Art, Craft, Design**. These strands are each further broken down using cross-cutting elements: **Critical and visual language; Drawing; Visual culture and appreciation; Art elements and design principles; and Media**. The table below provides a summary of the strands. The five, cross-cutting elements and their associated learning outcomes can be accessed [here](#).

Strand 1: Art	Strand 2: Craft	Strand 3: Design
Art, or fine art, is the expression of creative skill in a visual form. It emphasises ideas, feelings and visual qualities through imaginative and/or technical skill. Apart from the creation of artworks, fine art also encompasses the study of art through appreciation and critical discussion.	Craft is the application of a range of particular artistic skills and knowledge to produce artefacts of aesthetic worth. With an emphasis on processes and materials, the artefacts created may represent either traditional crafts or a more individual approach by the craftsperson.	Design is the process of planning, problem-solving and creating. It can be a response to a brief, a need or a situation. Emphasising the process of planning, problem-solving and completion, with drawing as a means of thinking, formal visual elements and imagery are used to communicate messages and ideas.

Table 1: The Strands of Junior Cycle Visual Art

The assessment of Visual Art comprises of two Classroom-Based Assessments: *From process to realisation* (CBA 1) and *Communicate and reflect* (CBA 2). CBA 1, assessed by the teacher, involves students taking an initial idea, developing it through their work and completing a realised<sup>1</sup> artefact through one of the strands. CBA 2, also assessed by the teacher, is connected to the final

<sup>1</sup> A realised artefact or work is one that culminates in the conscious combination of experimentation with previous ideas, media, techniques and processes.

assessment in that students experiment with ideas, media, techniques and processes during CBA 2. This helps the students in later developing and creating two realised artefacts in the final assessment. The State Examinations Commission (SEC) marks the further development work and the two realised artefacts created by students for the final assessment. One piece of realised work undertaken in either Classroom-Based Assessment 1 or 2, or the final assessment must be realised in three dimensions. There is no written examination in this subject.

## Adjustments to assessment arrangements introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic

The first cohort of students to study the JC Visual Art specification were due to complete their three years of study in June 2020. On April 29, 2020 and as part of the national response to the Covid-19 pandemic, all junior cycle examinations were cancelled. Over the next three years, alternative assessment arrangements were introduced to take account of the disrupted learning experienced by students during the pandemic.

In the case of Visual Art, this meant that CBA 1 did not have to be completed. However, students did complete CBA 2, as it is linked to the final assessment. Furthermore, the requirement for one piece of work to be realised in 3D was waived. This means that the first full range of intended assessments outlined in the Visual Art specification will not be experienced until the academic year, 2024–25 at the earliest.

## Relevant curriculum developments in senior cycle

The review and redevelopment of Leaving Certificate Art commenced when JC Visual Art was introduced in schools in 2017. The final specification was approved in 2019 with implementation scheduled for 2020 but this was delayed until September 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, in the context of considering the finding of this review, it is important to acknowledge that teachers of Visual Art experienced significant levels of curricular change in their subject during a very challenging time for the education system and society.

## Ongoing research on the implementation and impact of the Framework for Junior Cycle (FWJC15)

A longitudinal study on the implementation and impact of the FWJC15 commenced in late 2020. The four-year study, based on a nationally representative sample, is capturing the views of teachers, principals, students, parents and wider educational stakeholders on the FWJC15. As a longitudinal study, the experiences of schools will be explored over a period of four years, in order to capture the complexity, challenges and successes in enacting the FWJC15. This mixed-methods, multi-dimensional research is being carried out by a team in the University of Limerick on behalf of NCCA. To date, two interim reports have been published and the third report is due to be published in Spring 2024.

The findings of this study in conjunction with the findings of the series of early enactment reviews of subjects and short courses will be of great assistance in supporting schools' ongoing work with the FWJC15 and in informing NCCA's work in revisiting and updating the Framework, if and where

needed, to support high quality teaching, learning and assessment. Furthermore, the study will also collect important subject specific information, which will be important to consider alongside the insights from this review when JC Visual Art is scheduled for redevelopment.

## Overview of the review process

One of the key purposes of the review process is to consult with teachers, students and stakeholders on their experiences of enacting the curriculum. Consultation is a key aspect of NCCA's work, where advice is shaped by feedback from consultations with the public, schools, settings, education interests and others. The following section presents an overview of the areas explored and the methodological approach employed during this consultation which is underpinned by the principles set out in [NCCA's Research Strategy \(2023 - 2026\)](#) and provides a summary of engagement during the consultation.

### Areas explored during the review

The guiding areas and topics explored during the review are outlined in Table 2 below.

Area	Topics explored
<b>Working with the specification</b>	Course overview Working with learning outcomes Planning for learning, teaching and assessment
<b>Assessment</b>	Ongoing assessment Assessment for the Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs) Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meetings Insights into the use of examples of student work Final assessment
<b>Feedback and Reporting</b>	Ongoing reporting and using the Features of Quality
<b>Other areas of discussion</b>	Transition to senior cycle Inclusion Use of primary sources Development of key skills <i>Resources as Gaeilge</i>

Table 2: Areas and topics explored during the review

## Methodological approach

This early enactment review was conducted in conjunction with the early enactment review of Junior Cycle Modern Foreign Languages from February to March 2023 in line with a format agreed by the Council and Board for Junior Cycle for similar early enactment reviews of the junior cycle subjects in Phase 1 and 2 (English, Science and Business). Feedback was gathered in the following ways:

- school visits to capture the perspectives and experiences of Visual Art teachers and students from 2<sup>nd</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> year (12 teachers and 48 students across 5 schools for Visual Art)
- regional focus group meetings in Limerick, Galway and Dublin (22 participants)
- an online survey (93 responses)
- written submissions (7 submissions).

Parental consent and student assent were sought for school visit participants under the age of 18. Data gathered through the school visits and online survey were anonymised and transcribed, and all data from the consultation was stored as digital files in line with NCCA's Data Protection Policy (2020). 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 consultation through written submissions.

A thematic approach was used for data analysis, framed by a set of guiding themes used throughout the review. This helped identify and analyse themes within the data gathered. Quotes from participants and stakeholders are italicised throughout this report.

### School visits

The schools selected for the visits were a stratified sample of seven schools chosen from those schools who responded to an open call to participate in the review. There were 126 responses to this open call, with the breakdown of selected schools shown in Table 3 below. Two schools had to withdraw from the process at very short notice. Due to the design of the review schedule, these visits could not be rescheduled to facilitate other schools from the list of interested respondents in time. The school visits comprised two focus groups involving students from 2<sup>nd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> year, and the Visual Art teachers.

Breakdown of school type	National statistics (%)	Number of school types visited	Representative %
ETB	35%	2	28.5%
Voluntary Secondary School	50%	4	57.2%
Community/Comprehensive School	15%	1	14.3%
Small (1 – 400)	38%	1	14.3%
Medium (401 – 800)	46%	4	57.2%

Large (801+)	16%	2	28.5%
DEIS	27%	3	42.9%
Mixed	70%	4	57.2%

**Table 3: The breakdown of national school statistics compared to schools selected and visited (note: two schools had to withdraw due to unforeseen circumstances. These schools are included in the list above.)**

## Regional focus group meetings

Attendees at the regional focus groups could self-select for the event they wished to attend by signing up through the website. These events were promoted through NCCA's social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn). Invitations were also sent out to other educational stakeholders and partners. Almost all attendees at the events were Visual Art teachers, including those representing the Art Teachers' Association of Ireland. Other attendees included representatives from the National Gallery of Ireland, Chester Beatty, the National College of Art and Design and Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG).

## Survey

A survey was used to gather feedback from anyone who wished to share their experience of JC Visual Art. This was shared online via [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie), [www.curriculumonline.ie](http://www.curriculumonline.ie) and across NCCA's social media platforms. There were 93 responses to the survey and all identified as post primary Visual Art teachers, with one also choosing to identify as a parent.

## Written submissions

An open invitation for written submissions was made through [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie), which was shared directly with our education partners. Seven written submissions were received in total (Art Teachers' Association of Ireland (ATAI), COGG, Department of Education Inspectorate (DE), Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), State Examinations Commission (SEC), and 2 from Visual Art teachers).

## Feedback from the review

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This section presents an overview of the feedback received during the review. The guiding areas of discussion used throughout the review (Table 2), framed the analysis of the feedback received. The majority of the feedback is presented thematically and, where this is the case, includes perspectives and insights from a wide range of participants. As many aspects of junior cycle are experienced in an integrated way by students and teachers, some overlap across the areas of feedback will be evident below.

### Learning Outcomes

Across all four modes of engagement most respondents agreed that the course structure, in terms of the presentation of strands and elements, is appropriate, and they broadly agreed that the learning outcomes articulate what students should know, understand and be able to do across 200 hours of classroom engagement.

*Yes, they are very broad and some are used many times in a variety of projects. They contain action verbs associated with the three strands which gives clarity to the teacher on how to create the learning intentions for the students. (Teacher, online survey)*

Participants noted that the learning outcomes especially helped students to develop critical and visual language, as well as further developing their understanding of the art elements and design principles. It was highlighted that there was an overlap across the three strands of Art, Craft and Design, with the learning outcomes following a similar approach in all three strands but with a different emphasis in each, based on the focus of the strand itself. Some respondents, across all modes of engagement, felt that there were too many learning outcomes and that some of them were repetitive.

There were mixed views on the language used in the learning outcomes. Some participants expressed the view that they were too academic and the actions verbs used should be more practical- or visual-based verbs, such as design, plan, innovate, construct, develop, manipulate. There were also participants who noted that the learning outcomes were described in a way that effectively supports teachers to plan and develop schemes or units of work.

There is evidence from the review that some confusion has arisen in relation to the assessment guidelines, where reference is made to the Art elements and design principles that teachers are introduced to during Initial Teacher Education (ITE). These elements are being mistaken by some teachers to refer to the five cross-cutting Elements of the Strands in the specification.

The view was expressed that it was important that teachers know that a whole learning outcome did not need to be covered at any one time and that teachers can build up to a completed learning outcome over the course of the three years. The DE Inspectorate, in their submission, observed that, on occasion, there is a need for a clearer understanding by art teachers of the links between learning outcomes and learning intentions.

## Planning for teaching, learning, assessment and reporting

Across all modes of engagement, most responses relating to this area were very positive, with a focus on the usefulness of learning outcomes in planning for teaching, learning, assessment and reporting.

*The Learning Outcomes have pushed me a little out of my usual comfort zone. They have helped to broaden the experiences provided to students. We are now more engaged with art in our community and they have helped to make visual studies more intrinsic to teaching and learning. Students are more confident in using art related terminology and providing feedback to one another. (Teacher, online survey)*

Several respondents also noted the natural connection between using the learning outcomes to plan and how doing so enabled the connections between teaching, learning, assessment and reporting. The template developed by the JCT to support planning was lauded by many participants, although some would like a digital version that was more flexible. There was a call also for more examples of sample plans that span the three years of junior cycle. The issue of sufficient time for planning was raised widely, with respondents noting that this was an ongoing challenge.

The JCT submission acknowledged that planning using learning outcomes is most effective when engaged with collaboratively. In this context, it is noted that many teachers are often in single teacher departments, rendering such collaboration very difficult.

Students noted that during lockdown, they had experienced a range of different types of assessment, including teacher-, peer- and group-critiques, the use of rubrics, continual monitoring of progress through sketchbook work, drawing/house exams and keyword tests and CBAs. The DE Inspectorate observed that, due to the pandemic

*it may be noted that there is a reliance on previous practice that is not aligned with the new specification, specifically the absence of group work (Written submission)*

The DE Inspectorate also noted that

*there is an emphasis in many cases on promoting the development of skills and not a balanced approach to developing skills and encouraging students to develop ideas in tandem. (Written submission)*

Other responses included an acknowledgement of the positive connection to Visual Studies in LC Art. However, a few other responses also focused on certain learning outcomes being less important because some respondents did not see the connection between them and the final assessment itself; these respondents also felt there was less time to use the learning outcomes within their planning or to implement them all equally effectively.

## Assessment in Junior Cycle Visual Art

### Ongoing assessment

Students appreciated the opportunity to use a range of different media and having the time to develop their skills in using them. Developing their sketchbooks and realised work was very important to them. So too was the freedom to make their own choices around media, themes and ideas and being able to discuss this and elicit feedback from teachers. Students saw the importance of recognising their own agency in their work and valued where teachers facilitated and supported this and did not become overly directive in prescribing student actions.

The majority of the feedback from teachers about assessment was focused on the final assessment and CBAs. However, there was rich feedback on other approaches to assessment, including feedback that provided positive insights into the use of formative assessment in Visual Art classrooms. For example, it was often noted that the subject of Visual Art lends itself to feedback through comments and ongoing dialogue with students.

Students noted that they received a lot of feedback on their work over the three years of junior cycle. Students said they received a lot of formative advice and assistance from their teachers, both in written and oral form. They noted that this was a change as they had previously been used to receiving feedback through mainly summative marks, grades and percentages.

The review also offered some very positive insights into formative assessment practice relating to the use of learning intentions and success criteria.

*I have found that co-constructing learning intentions and success criteria to be very valuable. However, it is definitely not a one stop shop; I have found it necessary to revisit the learning intentions and success criteria as the students progress through the projects as they often find it difficult to realise what they are 'learning' rather than what they are 'doing'. (Teacher, online survey)*

Teachers also noted that knowing and understanding the learning intentions and the success criteria at the start of lessons was contributing to very positive outcomes for students in their learning.

The JCT in their written submission also noted that groupwork is avoided in most contexts and this was further echoed in the observations made by the DE Inspectorate. The JCT had noted concerns made by teachers around managing individual input in group situations and assessing this individual work in projects where groupwork was facilitated.

### Classroom-Based Assessments

As mentioned in the section above, there were adjustments to the assessment of Junior Cycle Visual Art from 2020 to 2023. However, as is also noted, while CBA 1 was no longer compulsory in 2<sup>nd</sup> year, most students would have experienced it as a general approach through project work. Hence, there was plenty of feedback offered on both CBAs in the review. 3D work, on the other hand, was severely restricted at the height of the pandemic and was no longer compulsory.

## CBA 1: From Process to Realisation

As outlined in the specification, students, either individually or in a group, choose one theme from a list prepared by NCCA. They then generate ideas, experiment and develop these ideas in their Visual Art sketchpad, and realise an artwork through one of the three strands.

### Feedback on CBA 1

The feedback on CBA 1 was generally very positive. Teachers noted that the CBA gave students a clear understanding of the creative process. They also observed that CBA 1 has:

- improved student engagement and ownership of their own ideas, work and time management
- helped students to focus on and understand how the elements of Visual Art combine through their work
- given students freedom in choosing their theme, approach, strand, media and mode of research to be undertaken
- provided a very helpful structure when it came to planning for their lessons.

Teachers also welcomed how CBA 1 seamlessly aligns itself with everyday teaching and learning.

*CBA 1 is more realistic, can bring [the] sketchbook with you, can carry on outside the classroom. [Students] can take their sketchbook home, this gives them a sense of ownership, they are looked after, students have a sense of pride. CBA 1 is a success. It works. (Teacher, school visit)*

The themes for CBA 1, issued annually by NCCA, were welcomed by participants as both broad and open.

*The themes, they help you open your mind to the potential of a theme. If you have experience of a theme it helps you see it from different points of view. (Student, school visit)*

It should be noted that CBA 1 is designed to run within a long window of time, normally from November to May of the following year, but the amount of time that is set aside for CBA 1 is at the discretion of the teacher/school. The ATAI commented positively on CBA 1 and noted that its flexibility was welcomed by teachers and students.

The issue of stress in relation to CBAs was raised, though it was observed that it was not so much the stress of doing CBA 1 in Visual Art that was the issue for the students, but that CBAs in general across all subjects were taking place in and around the same time in second year. Some concern was expressed also about the amount of time required to engage with CBAs in general, with teachers seeking more guidance and advice in this regard.

## CBA 2: Communicate and Reflect

As outlined in the specification, students individually choose one scenario from a list prepared by the SEC to generate ideas, experiments and other preparatory work in their Visual Art sketchpad. Students present this initial research and work through the two remaining strands not undertaken as part of the first Classroom-Based Assessment. This presentation of ideas and preparatory work is assessed by their teacher and students reflect on the feedback they receive.

It should be noted that since the specification was published, the term “scenarios” has been replaced by the more familiar term “themes.” These themes are issued by NCCA for CBA 1 in second year and the SEC, at the beginning of third year, for the connected CBA 2 and final assessment. When CBA 2 is completed, students then further develop their ideas and realise two pieces of work for the state-certified examination.

### Feedback on CBA 2

The main successes of CBA 2, identified by most respondents, were in relation to where students developed a sense of pride in their sketchbooks as well as a feeling of accomplishment. Other participants stated further that their students also experienced freedom to explore ideas and concepts and to experiment with these ideas and a range of media and approaches. As in CBA 1, students acknowledged access to and use of a wide variety of media as one of the most positive features of this CBA.

*Good to have a choice of media for the final piece ... to learn new techniques and media ... that you might not have used before. (Student, school visit)*

By enabling students to further develop their skills teachers observed that the CBA made students more motivated and more engaged. Students also took more ownership of their work and became more involved in discussions about their work and the work of others. Some saw CBA 2 as giving students the time to plan their approach for the final assessment; it allowed them to make mistakes and then decide on the direction their work should take for the final assessment. As one participant stated,

*Having had the experience of CBA 1 they are clearer on what they need to do, and may have learned from valuable mistakes. They can work more independently, they are at a stage where they have more experience with a variety of media and skills and can be more experimental by themselves. (Teacher, online survey)*

The quotation below encapsulates the perspective of many respondents:

*I love CBA 2. It's a great project which is rich in experimentation. As students can work in whichever sketchbook format they wish, the work is organic and easily flows between research and development. Students have the autonomy to work large, small, use lots of grounds and media. It is a fabulous way for the students to explore the three themes of the State exam. (Teacher, online survey)*

Some respondents commented on a sense of repetition in the work students undertake in CBA 2 and the final assessment. It was noted that this can lead to frustration for some students and especially for students who find the subject challenging, and for students with SEN.

For students, presenting their work and reflecting on the feedback they receive from their teacher and peers is an important part of the process of CBA 2 and is used to help decide on the possible directions their work in the final assessment may take. This is also used in the completion of the *Communicate and Reflect Form* at the start of the SEC issued student workbook for the final assessment. A few participants noted that some students are not eager to present on their work to their peers and that while using small groups is one way to lessen the emphasis on presenting, others are still trying to find a way to achieve the same.

### Features of Quality (FoQs)

Most respondents found the articulation of CBA 1 in the Assessment Guidelines to be generally clear and concise, and observed that the Features of Quality were useful in explaining expectations to parents and for assessment purposes. However, some teachers highlighted what they perceived as inconsistencies between the language used to describe the four level descriptors of achievement with that used in the Features of Quality.

*There seems to be misalignment between the 'Descriptors' and the 'Features of Quality'. Example: [The] 'Exceptional' [Descriptor is described as a] 'very high standard' and [the Feature of Quality aligned with it as] 'very good' do not connect.  
(Teacher, online survey)*

Based on some comments made across the range of responses, some students were also making an analogy between the CBA Descriptor awarded and the result achieved in the SEC final assessment.

It was also suggested during the review that students' expectations about the grade they can achieve in the final assessment was significantly influenced by the level of achievement that they are awarded for CBA 2.

*The Features of Quality are clear. However, there can be confusion for students who achieve "Exceptional" as an achievement at CBA 2 level, and then expect that work of the same quality will translate to a "Distinction" grade in the final exam, which is not always the case. (Teacher, online survey)*

### Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meetings

Overwhelmingly, most responses in relation to SLARs were highly positive, as these quotes indicate:

*Excellent. As a single subject teacher I have found the SLARs an excellent benchmark for assessment and a tool for discussing the Visual Arts documents and a way to communicate practical solutions to issues that arise in the classroom.  
(Teacher, online survey)*

*It's been one of my favourite aspects of JC reform. Hugely beneficial for all involved, including the students. Great to get another perspective on things. (Teacher, online survey)*

The phrases used in general, across all modes of engagement, included “supportive environment”, “very positive”, “helped develop relationships with other art teachers”, “valuable”, “helpful to a teacher who is new or unsure about the process”, “collaboration”, “heartening” and “validating to share opinions with others”, “there should be more opportunities for this type of collegial collaboration”. Nearly all the teachers from a single teacher department found linking up with other schools to be very positive.

### Examples of student work

The purpose of the examples of student work is to support teachers' professional development. They are useful to support teachers in a SLAR meeting to resolve discussions around deciding on a level of achievement for a piece of CBA work. All examples of student work that are published on [www.curriculumonline.ie](http://www.curriculumonline.ie), including the annotations and judgments made, are confirmed by a Quality Assurance group, consisting of practising teachers and representatives of NCCA, the Inspectorate, the State Examinations Commission and the Junior Cycle for Teachers support service.

Most of the teachers who participated in the review reported having used the examples of student work at some point, but many said they have used them less in the last number of years. Several participants found the examples of student work helpful, pointing to both the value of seeing how the annotations led to the on-balanced judgement and level of achievement awarded as well as the variety of disciplines explored in the examples. However, teachers would like to see more new examples of the different levels of achievement and of a wider range of approaches used in CBA 1 and CBA 2, including digital.

Across all modes of engagement, respondents observed that a number of them no longer use the examples of work and instead have developed a bank of work by their own students, which is discussed at SLAR meetings, or made available by other teachers through social media posts to help them decide on the level of achievement. The practice of sharing student work through social media was identified as a concern by some teachers because such practice does not support reference to a set of national standards across the school system.

### The Final Assessment

As noted in the specification, after Classroom-Based Assessment 2 is completed, students will significantly develop their ideas further and realise two pieces of work for the state-certified examination. These pieces of work are based on the two strands not undertaken in CBA 1 in second year. All realised works and their associated development work will be submitted for assessment by early May. This assessment has only been conducted fully once.

### Feedback on the final assessment

Respondents discussed what they saw as the main successes and challenges of the final assessment.

*Main successes would be students feeling prepared and ready for the project after a successful CBA 2. Challenges would be supporting weaker and SEN students in a common paper [sic] and sticking to primary sources and Workbook guidelines.  
(Teacher, online survey)*

Time was raised as an issue. Respondents felt that there was not enough time for students to do the final assessment and develop and create one realised artefact. This reduction from two artefacts to one, in the final assessment, was brought in through the adjustments to assessment arrangements introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic. Many of those who mentioned this point also stated that if the time remained set when the current adjustments to assessment arrangements, set in place during the pandemic, are lifted, they felt it would be almost impossible to create two separate artefacts. Respondents pointed to the fact that students were involved in other state examined projects at the same time, adding to a sense of time pressure.

Repetition was identified as another challenge for students.

*The students find the transition of finishing their CBA to starting their final assessment extremely difficult. Some students may have become slightly bored with their CBA ideas, & we are asking them to continue with them, the students also feel they are redoing some work again. (Teacher, online survey)*

The design of CBA 2 and the final assessment was seen to be very similar by some teachers. However, others pointed out that the final assessment represented a logical progression from CBA 2, and that one of the main successes was that students' work was more personal and independent.

There were mixed responses to the final assessment workbook, with most respondents pointing to the small size of the booklet (A4) as a challenge and as being restrictive. One teacher, responding through the online survey, noted that it was very hard to investigate and explore in such a small space and their students only got excited when working on their final piece. This was echoed by JCT, whose submission, based on their experience of conversations with teachers, noted that the freedom students experience during phase 1 of CBA 2 is at odds with the limitations and restrictions imposed in the final assessment. However, another teacher, responding to the survey stated they loved that their students were working in the final assessment A4 workbook and not on A2 sheets because it was more reflective of the way an artist works.

Respondents expressed some concern about a perceived difficulty in attaining high levels of achievement in the final assessment. Some noted that they were less confident in how best to advise students and that the standard being set was too high. A sense that the Merit band was too wide was conveyed, and some respondents expressed concern about the possible impact on uptake of the subject at senior cycle if a perception of excessive difficulty in terms of attainment at junior cycle was sustained. The submission from the DE Inspectorate noted that teachers seemed unsure of the connection between CBA 2 and the final examination due to changes to the assessment arrangements resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Feedback and Reporting

Most respondents agreed that the changes made to both giving feedback and reporting on assessments had been a positive experience.

*There is more connection with the learning and understanding of the bigger picture of what they are learning and how it might inform their world outside the classroom. The students carry more weight and confidence in their decision making*

*and the process. There is a lot more explained and clarity in understanding the learning by students and parents. (Teacher, online survey)*

Several respondents across all modes of engagement indicated that there is now more clarity for students around what they are learning and through the use of success criteria there is more focus applied to the feedback given. It was suggested that the use of formative feedback can now be structured by using the five cross-cutting Elements of junior cycle Visual Art in a constructive manner. Others pointed out that this method of reporting has also helped students reflect on their learning more deeply.

*We've changed the way we write and phrase reports. Not using the throw-away comments as much. They are more constructive and focused for the student. The language around them is also more focused from the spec and FoQs (Participant, regional focus group)*

As noted by the ATAI, the language of assessment has changed in reporting and there is a challenge for teachers to adjust to the new terms associated with the broader language of assessment. Teachers echoed the perspective of students that there is a need to explain descriptors to parents, but they also thought that the language of the Features of Quality is useful for giving feedback.

One of the main challenges noted by students was the perceived mismatch between the descriptors awarded for the CBAs and the grades awarded for the final assessment. There is a sense that many schools are trying to support the dual approach to assessment as advocated in the FWJC15 but still feel the need to use marks and percentages for all reporting. Part of the rationale behind this may be because, while parents and guardians may expect feedback in the form of a grade, mark or percentage, it was noted that they were becoming increasingly more aware of changes to the language of feedback. Several respondents did note the use of percentages and marks alongside the awarding of a descriptor and oral feedback and made the point that it was more time consuming. However, the following quotation reflects a perspective among many teachers:

*I welcome the move away from percentages and a tokenistic comment, which was the way things were done in my school forever. I feel that students and parents are getting far more meaningful feedback in their reports now. However you do still get some parents wanting to know A, B, C, etc. (Teacher, online survey)*

Teachers also saw the relevance of using the descriptors as feedback as it will also be important for students as they progress to senior cycle:

*The students are now much more aware of the skills that they are learning instead of just working through a process. It is sometimes hard however for them to take on the feedback that they are given and improve this as they move on. I think it is good that they are doing this at Junior Cycle level however as it forms the basis of what they need to be able to do at Senior Cycle. (Teacher, online survey)*

A few respondents also noted the use of language in the Communicate and Reflect form and in the descriptors needed to be more student friendly.

## Transition to senior cycle

Most respondents, across all modes of engagement, agreed that learning in Visual Art supports students' progression to LC Art and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) Craft and Design.

*I think that the Junior Cycle links very well into Senior cycle across a broad spectrum of subjects (if not all subjects), but particularly the link to Senior Cycle Art is now more seamless than ever. (Teacher, online survey)*

Some respondents pointed to the connection between the workbook approach and layout in the final assessment in junior cycle and the practical coursework workbook in LC Art.

It was noted by one teacher in the online survey, that students have been helped to become reflective and self-directed in their learning and in developing their ideas and opinions as well as gaining a sense of responsibility towards their own work, including improving their work ethic across the board.

## Inclusion

Some respondents noted that as more independent work and self-management is expected of students as they progress through junior cycle, this can be difficult for some students with SEN to maintain. The perceived challenge of a common examination, especially for students with English as an Additional Language (EAL) or students following L2LPs, who have an aptitude for Visual Art and so are undertaking the level 3 course in the subject, was noted.

## Use of primary sources

As defined in the Assessment Guidelines for junior cycle Visual Art, "Primary sources are sources, physical or conceptual, that are viewed in their original state and are not filtered through another person's interpretation of them" (2019, p.6).

The use of primary sources for CBAs were identified by several respondents as challenging. It was noted that in some schools, it was difficult to get students to identify appropriate primary sources related to their chosen theme and to bring them in to use in class. Teachers suggested that it fell to them to develop a bank of resources, which was time consuming, because the themes changed every year. It was suggested that the re-introduction of secondary sources, used appropriately, could make the subject vastly more interesting and enable greater creativity for these students. Some teachers did note that using the same primary sources for both CBA 2 and the final assessment can also be demotivating for students. However, the DE Inspectorate observed that primary sources were being used well as starting points in students' CBA 2 work.

Some concern was expressed that the emphasis on primary sources was serving to diminish the value of secondary sources, which it was acknowledged are used by most contemporary artists, for example, in the form of photographic references or as an aide-mémoire. There were calls by some respondents for a balance between the focus on primary and secondary sources of visual information. It was noted as an example of practice that, while teachers would bring their class to visit local areas to sketch, most of the work occurred in the classroom and these primary sources could not be brought back with them, except as photographs. On a positive note, JCT observed that

*another success [in the implementation of the specification] is the use of primary sources to support original idea generation, allowing students to form personal connections to the work they are creating” (Written submission).*

## Development of key skills

Most participants across all modes of engagement affirmed that learning in Visual Art does develop the key skills outlined in the Framework for Junior Cycle.

*Students engage in many of the key skills in the Visual Art classroom. They develop confidence through communication with teachers and peers. They learn to manage their own time and project work, they plan and develop projects from start to finish showing a number of skills throughout. (Teacher, online survey)*

Many noted that the key skills were addressed and developed through students’ practical work in the subject and that they helped with learning in other areas, as Visual Art lent itself to cross-curricular opportunities. It was noted that the structure of a Visual Art project presented definite opportunities to develop many of the key skills.

*Students are taught to think in a more structured way, to plan from concepts to experimentation to realisation, to research in a more mature and thoughtful way, to look at the world around them for inspiration, to credit other artists, and to conceptualise their ideas. (Teacher, online survey)*

The DE Inspectorate pointed towards the key skill of Managing Information and Thinking, entailing thinking creatively and critically and using digital technology, as connected to the need to focusing on the development of skills and ideas in an integrated way.

## Resources as Gaeilge

There is a desire for more resources to be made available through Irish, with some teachers pointing out that sometimes words in Irish can have more than one meaning and so they were constantly referring to the English language specification and themes for CBAs and the final assessment:

*Language and resources access is challenging in Irish. Key words also a challenge in Irish. Themes [in CBAs] can mean something different in Irish as well as they do in English. (Teacher, school visit)*

It was suggested that the development of communities of practice, to provide teachers with additional opportunities to discuss learning and teaching, and specific ways of teaching subject(s) through Irish, would be welcome.

## Early insights, recommendations and next steps

NCCA would like to acknowledge and thank the teachers, students and other stakeholders who contributed to this review. Their feedback was very insightful into how the JC Visual Art specification has been enacted and experienced.

This section of the report considers the feedback from the review to identify key insights and recommendations. In doing so, it is important to acknowledge that: curriculum change is a complex process that takes time to achieve; and neither teachers nor a single cohort of student experienced the curriculum and assessment arrangements as intended due to the disruption caused by the pandemic. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge the extraordinary effort made by Visual Art teachers to support student engagement with the new curriculum during very challenging circumstances.

The feedback is explored under two headings:

- Feedback directly related to JC Visual Art
- Feedback related to the Framework for Junior Cycle (2015).

### Feedback directly related to JC Visual Artrealised

Reflecting on the feedback collected during the review, there is evidence of successful enactment of the specification and that classroom practices and student experiences continue to evolve. The review indicated that:

- students, teachers and wider stakeholders have responded very positively to the increased emphasis on the Visual Art sketchpad
- teachers are providing greater levels of formative feedback to their students, which can be supported and further developed with additional CPD
- students are enjoying opportunities to experience different media, the freedom to explore ideas and to present their own work
- teachers, especially when they are the only Visual Art teacher in their school, are very positive about the SLAR process
- JC Visual Art supports and prepares students to progress to study Leaving Certificate Art.

There is feedback outlined in this report that will inform future curriculum development of JC Visual Art, and there are also some challenges and practical suggestions, outlined below, that can be acted upon in the short-term.

Challenges identified	Recommended response
There is a lack of clarity on the length of time to spend on CBAs	Review and update Assessment Guidelines to improve clarity

There is a need to better align the language used in the Features of Quality for the CBAs with Descriptors	Review the language used across the Features of Quality and revise to improve alignment with Descriptors
There is some confusion caused by the similarities of language between the '5 Elements of Visual Art' and the 'Art elements'	Review and update Assessment Guidelines to improve clarity
There is evidence of dissatisfaction and misunderstanding about the relationship between CBA 2 and the final assessment	Review and update Assessment Guidelines to provide further clarification on the purpose of CBA 2 in relation to the final assessment.
A wider range of examples of student work across all levels of achievement are required, but there is a lack of clarity on the purpose of the examples of student work	Work with schools and stakeholders to develop, quality assure and publish a wider range of examples of student work across all levels of achievement. Clarify the purpose of these examples in the Assessment Guidelines and on curriculumonline.ie.
There is a lack of clarity on the role of primary sources, secondary sources and in particular photography	Review references to primary sources in the Assessment Guidelines and clarify the role of primary sources, secondary sources and photography in the assessment of JC Visual Art.

**Table 4: Challenges identified during the review and recommended responses**

### Feedback related to the Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)

It is worth noting that the insights from this review that relate to the wider implementation of FWJC15 echo many of the insights that emerged from the reviews of other junior cycle subjects. In addition, these insights also resonate with some of the themes emerging from the longitudinal study on the implementation and impact of the FWJC15. However, they also offer a subject-specific perspective that provides additional information on some of the themes emerging from the study.

The insights set out below are reported for consideration by stakeholders involved in the implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle.

### **Professional time and planning**

Professional time for teachers was introduced to support schools in their enactment of the Framework for Junior Cycle. This time is valued by teachers in supporting planning for teaching, learning and assessment. More time for planning, and guidance on how to plan for teaching, learning and assessment, would be welcomed by teachers of JC Visual Art.

### **Assessment and reporting**

The broader approach to assessment in Junior Cycle although welcomed by teachers is not without challenges. There were also a number of concerns related to the volume of CBAs once the requirement to complete two CBAs per subject returns.

The shift to a common level examination has been somewhat challenging for teachers. It may be helpful to provide a clearer explanation for the rationale for moving from two levels (higher and ordinary) to a common level.

The use of different language to describe the level of achievement in CBAs and the Final Assessment was questioned, and the perceived narrowness of the Distinction band and width of the Merit band were questioned.

### **SLAR meetings**

The timetabling of SLAR meetings can be difficult, particularly for schools with only one art teacher, who would benefit from additional advice and support to organise and timetable SLAR meeting with teachers from another school(s).

### **Support for Parents/Guardians**

An information campaign for parents to support them in understanding the new assessment approaches and grading system for both CBAs and the final examination would be welcome.

## **Next Steps**

Based on the insights and recommendations presented above, and cognisant of the limitations of this early insights review, the following next steps are proposed:

- The proposed responses set out in Table 4 will be progressed and made available to schools before September 2024.
- NCCA will liaise with the support service, Oide, to clarify the changes made in advance of the publication of updated Assessment Guidelines.
- The feedback from the review will be shared with all stakeholders involved in the implementation of the FWJC15.

## References

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[Framework for Junior Cycle, 2015](#)

[Junior Cycle Visual Art specification, 2016](#)

[Junior Cycle Visual Art, Assessment Guidelines, 2019](#)

[NCCA Strategic Plan, 2022 - 2025](#)

[NCCA Research Strategy, 2023 - 2026](#)



**NCCA**

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