



NCCA

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

Report on the consultation on the draft Leaving Certificate Geography specification

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Introduction

The Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report (NCCA 2022a) was published in March 2022 following the response from the Minister for Education, Norma Foley, TD. Actions outlined in the Advisory Report include a review of existing curriculum components - subjects, modules, and programmes. In March 2022, the Minister for Education requested that NCCA undertake a series of actions to support the realisation of her vision for a redeveloped senior cycle as set out in [Equity and Excellence for All](#) (Department of Education, 2022.) One key action set out in this plan was that a schedule of senior cycle subjects and modules for redevelopment be prepared for approval by the Minister.

NCCA subsequently prepared a schedule of subjects for review, which was organised into a number of tranches. The redevelopment of Tranche 2 subjects will be completed in 2025 for introduction to schools in 2026. The redevelopment of the specification for Leaving Certificate Geography is included in Tranche 2.

The draft Leaving Certificate Geography specification was made available for national public consultation from 24 February to 25 April 2025. The aim of the consultation was to elicit a wide range of perspectives from the public and stakeholders in relation to the curriculum and assessment arrangements in the draft specification for Leaving Certificate Geography. The feedback from the consultation supported the development group to finalise the specification.

The key areas of focus within the consultation were:

- Rationale and Aims
- Key competencies
- Course structure, strands and learning outcomes, including clarity and coherence
- Additional assessment component
- Supports needed for successful enactment.

The responses to the consultation indicated a positive perspective on the specification overall. There was a strong endorsement of the approach taken regarding the interconnected structure of the specification, especially as mediated through the Unifying Strand: Applying geographical thinking and skills.

A better alignment between the learning in Junior Cycle Geography and the draft specification was identified as being positive.

The stated Rationale and Aims for the subject were affirmed as being clear and reflected in the strands of study, especially in the Unifying Strand. The alignment between the Rationale and Aims and assessment was also welcomed.

There was a strong level of approval for the inclusion of contemporary geographical topics. At the same time, the continued emphasis on familiar content in the three contextual strands was welcomed.

The main concerns articulated in consultation feedback related to manageability of teaching, learning and assessment in the context of the time available, the level of clarity in the learning outcomes and students learn about (SLA) columns, and the supports and resources needed to ensure successful enactment.

The following sections of this report will elaborate in more detail on aspects of these general findings. Section One provides an overview of the consultation process. Section Two provides insights into the feedback from the consultation, while Section Three presents key considerations and conclusions.

Section 1: Consultation Process

Consultation is a key aspect of NCCA's work, where advice is shaped by feedback from the public, schools, settings, education interests and others. The following section presents an overview of the approach employed during this consultation which is underpinned by the principles set out in NCCA's Research Strategy (2023) and provides a summary of engagement during the consultation.

Approach to consultation

The consultation for the review of Leaving Certificate Geography included multiple modes of engagement during the eight-week consultation process:

- An online survey
- Written submissions
- A public consultation event
- School visits with focus groups conducted in a cross section of schools to capture the insights from teachers, students and school leaders.

Participants self-selected to respond to the online survey, make a written submission and attend the public consultation event. In terms of the school-based focus groups, a cross-section of schools was selected from the forty schools that expressed an interest in becoming involved in Leaving Certificate Geography developments. The eight schools were selected using criteria relating to DEIS status, gender, school size and type. Visits to these schools took place between 13 March and 9 April 2025, and involved focus group meetings with students and teachers of Leaving Certificate Geography and with school leaders, as detailed in Table 1. Students aged 18 years and over consented to their participation in the focus groups, while parental consent and student assent was sought for school visit participants under the age of 18. A written record of all discussions was made during focus groups and school visits. The privacy of all contributors to the consultation has been maintained through anonymisation, except where an organisation or individual has given explicit permission to be identified as contributing to the consultation. All data from the consultation has been stored as digital files in line with NCCA's Data Protection Policy (2023). In accordance with the Open Data and Public Service Information Directive (2021) any data from this consultation will be anonymised and aggregated and made available alongside the report on the website www.ncca.ie

The online survey was provided in both English and Irish allowing each participant to select their preferred language and was distributed through MS Forms on the ncca.ie website. The survey was framed around the key areas of focus outlined in the introduction.

The public consultation event and the school visits concentrated on the same areas of focus as the online survey and provided opportunities to further explore and probe those areas through conversation. The school-based focus groups helped to gain deeper insights on the draft specification from students and teachers and to gain insights into the perspectives of school leaders.

The written submissions were guided by the same areas of focus as the online survey, school visits and focus groups, and allowed for the exploration of areas of particular of interest to organisations and interested parties.

Consultation responses

Mode of consultation	Overview of participants	Numbers
School visits	Students	51
	Teachers	26
	School Leaders	17
Online survey*	Teachers	40
	Further/Higher Education	5
	School Leader	1
	Parent/guardian	1
	Other	2
Event	Teachers	20
	School Leaders	2
	Other	4
Written submissions		10

Table 1

* A number of the 'individual' online surveys were completed on behalf of groups of teachers coming together in their Geography Departments or through professional networks.

Section 2: Feedback from the consultation

This section presents an overview of the feedback received during the consultation. The consultation focused on Rationale and Aims, Key competencies, structure, strands and learning outcomes including clarity and coherence, Additional Assessment Component, and supports needed for successful enactment. The findings can be grouped under the following headings:

- Overall impressions of the draft specification, including the rationale and aims
- Clarity and manageability of the learning set out within the draft specification, including opportunities for the development of key competencies
- Assessment/additional assessment component
- Supports for successful enactment.

The information gathered in response to the questions posed throughout the consultation has been used in the commentary on each theme in this section.

Other areas which were not directly consulted upon, but which were considered relevant to the development of Leaving Certificate Geography by those participating in the consultation, are also presented in this section of the report.

Overall impressions

The draft specification was broadly welcomed as being current, engaging and relevant. The stated Rationale and Aims for the subject were affirmed as being clear and reflected in the learning in the strands of study, especially in the Unifying Strand: Applying geographical thinking and skills. For example, some participants commented that the learning outlined in the strands reinforces the statement in the Rationale about geography being both a humanity and a science subject. The alignment between the Rationale and Aims and assessment was also welcomed. Suggestions to further strengthen the Rationale and Aims tended to come through written submissions from organisations and concentrated on a further reinforcement of concepts such as sustainability and citizenship, and the importance of local place.

Consultation participants welcomed the interconnected structure of the specification, where the learning outlined in the Unifying Strand: Applying geographical thinking and skills is integrated with the learning across the three contextual strands and additional logical connections can be made through learning across contextual strands. The graphic depicting the specification structure was viewed as particularly useful. There was a clear majority in favour of shortening the titles in contextual strands one and two, and mixed views about an appropriate title for the third contextual strand.

While identifying that the specification facilitates teaching in a non-linear manner, most teachers liked the order of the contextual strands, arguing that it makes sense to commence with the study of at least some physical geography (Strand 1). This view was reinforced by students, many of whom identified physical geography as their favourite content and stated that encountering familiar topic early gives a sense of progression and helps to settle them at the start of fifth year.

The current Leaving Certificate Geography syllabus dates from 2003. Geography teachers who took part in the consultation were coming to grips with the new senior cycle specification template. Two features of the new template generated feedback: the student learn about (SLA) column and the strand narratives. The SLA column was welcomed with a degree of caution. There is confusion amongst some teachers about the nature of the SLA column, that is, whether it indicates mandatory or optional content. Where SLA text is detailed, teachers perceive the learning outcome as being overloaded. On the other hand, where the SLA text is absent or brief, this can lead to a perception that the text is vague or lacks sufficient detail. Strand narratives were seen as a useful summary of expectations, especially with regards to strand content.

The continued emphasis on familiar geographical content in the three contextual strands was warmly welcomed by many. At the same time, there was a high level of approval for the move beyond the content in the 2003 syllabus to emphasise contemporary geographical topics, such as sustainability, climate and geopolitics. Most teachers believe that this content will be interesting for students and will help them to understand the relevance of geography in today's world. However, some teachers expressed a nervousness about the new content and articulated a need for support with capacity building and resources on these topics.

There was a consensus in favour of the integration of sustainability-related content throughout the specification. Where participants commented on the dilution of content relating to regional geography, they welcomed it. In this way, they echoed what teachers and students said during school visits for the Background Paper.

Clarity and manageability

The change from the 2003 syllabus with its optional and elective units to a specification where all students must encounter all learning outcomes generated substantial feedback. In the context where choice of topics is not an option, concerns relating to manageability were often linked to concerns about clarity. That is, participants said they wanted fewer learning outcomes, less demand within learning outcomes, together with optimal clarity and consistency of language in the expression of learning outcomes and the aligned 'students learn about' (SLA) text. Most feedback focused on the demand implications of the content in the learning outcomes and the SLA text. There was little reaction to the demand implications of the action verbs in the learning outcomes. The differing number of learning outcomes across the three contextual strands prompted commentary, with teachers querying the relationship between the number of learning outcomes, the time to be spent on each strand and the weighting of assessment, especially in the written examination.

Key competencies

The key competencies were recognised as being important for life and work and as a progression from Junior Cycle Key Skills. For some participants, the competencies justify the value of geography in the curriculum and strengthen its' identify as both an academic and applied subject. Some geography teachers expressed concern about how to integrate teaching and learning of the key competencies and/or were concerned about how these might be assessed in the written exam. Consultation feedback included calls for a stronger representation of the unique

contribution that geography can make to the key competencies, such as engagement with data, map work, and inquiries including fieldwork.

Settings

Throughout the three contextual strands in the draft specification, geographical settings are specified in an SLA bullet for relevant learning outcomes. Depending on the nature of the SLA text, settings may be the only bullet or the last bullet in a list. This represents a departure from the format of the current Leaving Certificate Geography syllabus, where national and international settings columns appear to the right of a content description column. The change in format generated confusion. In addition, while some students welcomed the idea of many settings, other participants raised manageability concerns in response to the quantity of settings referenced throughout the contextual strands. They asked for clarity about whether an appropriate and relevant setting could span learning across multiple outcomes.

Although many participants commented on the contemporary and appropriate use of the terms 'Global North' and 'Global South' in SLA settings bullets, others were concerned that teachers and students would misunderstand these as north and south of the equator rather than meaning north or south of the Brandt line. 'Least Economically Developed Countries (LEDC)' and 'Most Economically Developed Countries (MEDC)' were suggested as alternative setting terminology. Students commented on the value of learning about settings in the Global South that they previously would not have encountered in Leaving Certificate Geography, while some participants called for a lesser focus on Global South settings and/or greater emphasis on Ireland as a setting.

Unifying strand

Most consultation participants were in favour of the inclusion of a Unifying Strand. Although a few teachers expressed uncertainty about how it would apply across the contextual strands, it was generally acknowledged that the learning outlined in this strand represents the realisation of the key competencies of senior cycle and aligns with Junior Cycle Geography.

The learning outcomes in the Unifying Strand were seen as supporting good geography education, such as through map work and inquiries, including engagement with data and fieldwork. The synergy between the Unifying Strand and the Additional Assessment Component (Applied Geography Project) was evident to most participants. Some teachers expressed concerns about the accessibility of aspects of the unifying learning for all students and a few questioned how specific unifying learning outcomes would be assessed.

Strand 1: Where we live – the physical environment

Strand 1 was well received. The learning in Strand 1 was seen as a progression from Junior Cycle Geography and represents a good balance of topics. Students appreciate the physical geography content as visually engaging, relatable to their everyday physical environments and easy to understand, especially when learned with reference to real-world events and local settings. Interactive and practical approaches, such as visual media, maps, data and fieldwork were identified by students as supporting their Strand 1 related learning.

The 'surface processes' learning outcomes generated substantial feedback. While there was some welcome for studying fluvial processes in detail and the coastal and glacial processes to a lesser extent, most teachers did not agree with this approach in the draft specification. There was a sense that this approach did not align with the demand in other Strand 1 sections, where a more detailed knowledge of coastal and glacial processes would be required. Arguments for choice or equal treatment of all processes were framed by the current context where most students do their fieldwork on fluvial processes (rivers) or coastal processes. These arguments were also linked by some participants to the emphasis in the draft specification on the importance of utilising local settings, outdoor learning and fieldwork.

There was mixed reaction to a learning outcome on the consumption of natural resources, with teachers indicating either that this content was adequately addressed in Junior Cycle Geography or that the content demand was too extensive. There was also a mixed reaction to the learning outlined in the atmosphere and weather section. On balance, teachers recognised that the atmosphere and weather learning outcomes were important and linked to introductory content on weather and climate in Junior Cycle Geography. However, some teachers, especially those who do not currently teach the ocean and atmosphere unit, felt that the content was too scientific. While in general the learning outcomes on the topic of climate were welcomed, there was a clear consensus that there were too many learning outcomes in this section.

Strand 2: Where we live – the human environment

Feedback on Strand 2 stressed the valuable, contemporary nature of the topics and the link between these topics and the lived experiences of students. The potential of Strand 2 to complement learning in Leaving Certificate Business, History, and Politics and Society, and the alignment with Junior Cycle Geography, was noted. In addition, these learning outcomes were seen as building students' understanding about human-environmental interactions. Students identified urbanisation and migration as being aligned with their personal experiences, relevant and interesting, especially if taught using clear explanations, varied methodologies and concrete examples and settings.

Aspects of Strand 2 were viewed by some participants as too broad and content heavy. For this reason, some participants called for a reduction in SLA text aligned to specific learning outcomes. In addition, there was a consensus that there was an over emphasis on national policies in Strand 2, and to a lesser extent in Strand 3. This was seen as contributing to manageability concerns. Furthermore, references to policies without naming specific policies was viewed as contributing to a lack of clarity. On the other hand, it was recognised that naming policies would run the risk of dating the specification. Some teachers worried about having to keep up to date with policy changes. Others were concerned about dealing with sensitive issues such as migration.

Strand 3: How we live – the connected environment

Overall, there was a positive reaction to Strand 3. Most teachers appreciated the contemporary topics and the interdisciplinary nature of the strand, which was viewed as having potential to engender critical thinking and encourage students to become informed global citizens. Students saw the topics as connecting geography to current events while being future-orientated, as important to their own lives, with the potential to build their understanding of people and places

in Ireland and beyond. Engaging teaching methodologies such as classroom discussion and the use of visual resources were seen as vital to avoid the need for memorisation of terminology or case studies.

Some teachers were concerned about the scope and ambition of Strand 3. Where feedback of this nature was specific, it tended to relate to learning outcomes/SLA text which referenced policies or included new content. The consultation elicited feedback to the effect that the treatment of agriculture and the fishing industry in Ireland was imbalanced. As with the topic of migration in Strand 2, there were some concerns about sensitivities involved in teaching the geopolitics learning outcomes. In the same section, the focus on water as one of many possible natural resource factors contributing to geopolitical tensions was questioned.

Assessment

Additional Assessment Component (AAC) – Applied Geography Project

While most consultation participants welcomed the intention of a significant project component in Leaving Certificate Geography as progressive, meaningful and fair, they were concerned about how it would play out in practice. Positive responses included that the Applied Geography Project represented a natural progression from the Junior Cycle Geography Classroom-Based Assessments and will support something different to the current Leaving Certificate Geographical Investigation which can be formulaic. Additionally, the Applied Geography Project was recognised as facilitating the application of the skills outlined in the Unifying Strand, with scope to encourage student-led inquiry and support students who want to pursue geography-related study or work beyond senior cycle.

The main AAC-related concerns included the move away from the familiar river or coastal fieldwork and the perceived potential inequity between students and schools that may result from a single, broad AAC brief. Suggested ways of dealing with these concerns included a focus on fieldwork in the SEC brief, the issue of four briefs per annum or a single brief that stays live for two or more years. With regards to the timing of the release of the SEC brief, most teachers and school leaders favoured a release as early as possible in fifth year, with submission as late as possible in sixth year. This timing was seen as facilitating planning, allowing teachers to concentrate on the skill development required for a specific brief, and supporting schools to timetable all subject AACs.

With some exceptions, students and teachers welcomed the move from 20% to 40% weighting for the Leaving Certificate Geography project, however they emphasized that the 'ask' in the written exam should be reduced accordingly. The level of work and time required for a project and the role of the teacher in supporting completion of the project were cited as concerns by many teachers. School leaders expressed apprehension about students with attendance issues and were particularly concerned with those students who might further disengage or drop out if they perceive that they do badly in their AAC or if they fail to submit. School leaders, teachers and students are worried about misuse of AI, and about digital equity for planning, conducting, communicating and submitting AACs. They called for clear assessment guidelines and investment in digital infrastructure and maintenance. School leaders were vocal on the potentially negative impact on wellbeing for students and teachers alike when all Leaving Certificate subjects are enacted with AACs.

Written examination

Participants who commented on the written examination, stressed the need to restructure and rebalance the exam in light of the 40% for the AAC. Where possible, it was suggested that the written exam should prioritise assessment of understanding and application of skills. Students and teachers recommended more choice of questions and a shift away from essay questions which are memorised in advance of the exam. Both cohorts talked about time pressure in exams and articulated that the need for sufficient time to be given to demonstrate learning. Teachers recommended that exam papers have a consistent structure year-on-year, employ accessible language and questions that are directly linked to the learning outcomes; that they include clear marking criteria for each question and sufficient space for quality answers.

Enactment supports

Geography teachers called for timely, extensive, practical and geography-specific professional development to support enactment of the redeveloped specification. They want to be facilitated to compare the current Leaving Certificate Geography syllabus and the new specification. They said they need support on the use of geospatial technologies, and on topics that are currently optional and 'new' to them for example, weather and atmosphere, globalisation and development. They also called for support with 'new' terminology, such as, 'Global North' and 'Global South' and the key concepts in geography (U3); and, 'new' topics, such as climate (Strand 1) and geopolitics (Strand 3); and, on potentially sensitive topics, such as migration (Strand 2). The choice of relevant settings and how to teach the learning outcomes through these settings was also cited as important.

Teachers favoured professional development focused on planning and sequencing for the integration of the learning outlined in the Unifying Strand across the three contextual strands, and planning and sequencing within and between the contextual strands. They stated that time to plan should be included in Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) sessions. From a pedagogical perspective, teachers are keen to build their capacity to design and deliver inquiry-based learning, including fieldwork, and inclusive classroom approaches. They want specific capacity building on the facilitation, timing and submission of the Additional Assessment Component, particularly how to manage authenticity and AI-related risks. Finally, they want support on preparing students for the written exam.

In terms of resources and materials, teachers indicated that the following would be useful: short and long-term planning templates and sample plans, sample setting case studies, AAC guidelines, sample AAC briefs and sample completed projects, AAC marking scheme, sample exam papers with sample answers and marking schemes. Some teachers flagged the need for an online portal with geographical data and information, including maps, infographics, visual aids and useful links to support teaching and learning. They asked that these resources should be available in both English and Irish languages. School leaders and teachers requested funding to be spent at the discretion of the school on items from an approved list of Leaving Certificate Geography resources aligned to the new specification, such as Geographic Information System (GIS) software, fieldwork and other scientific equipment, colour printers to print maps and aerial photographs.

Section 3: Considerations and Conclusion

Considerations

Overall, the draft specification for Leaving Certificate Geography was well received and the consultation fulfilled its objective of initiating discussion and debate on key aspects of the design of the redeveloped subject.

The consultation feedback was considered by the development group when finalising the specification for Geography.

Issues raised for consideration in this context included:

- The emphasis on sustainability, citizenship and local place in the Rationale
- The representation of the unique contribution that geography can make to the key competencies
- The titles of the contextual strands
- The presentation of, terminology relating to, and volume of geographical settings in the specification; together with clarity around how learning outcomes can be achieved through engagement with settings
- The manageability and clarity of learning outcomes and aligned SLA text, for example, with regards to the surface processes, atmosphere and weather and climate sections in Strand 1, the references to national policies in Strand 2 and, the agriculture and fisheries, and geopolitics sections in Strand 3.

Conclusion

The consultation process was very informative. The engagement of those who participated in the consultation is acknowledged and NCCA is grateful for the feedback received. Consultation feedback indicates there are positive views on the draft Leaving Certificate Geography specification, while acknowledging that provision of professional learning, supports and resources are fundamental to successful implementation. The high level of input to the consultation is gratefully acknowledged and the generally positive response from teachers indicates a sense of optimism about the opportunity to revitalise the subject, given that it has not undergone any meaningful changes in over two decades.

References

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Appendix One: List of Contributors

The following is a list of individuals and/or organisations who responded to the consultation and wished to be listed in this report.

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