NCCA

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

Report on the consultation on the draft Leaving Certificate English specification

June 2025

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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 English is included in Tranche 2.

The draft Leaving Certificate English specification was made available for national public consultation from March 3 to May 2 2025. The aim of the consultation was to elicit a wide range of perspectives from the public and a wide range of stakeholders in relation to the curriculum and assessment arrangements in the draft specification for Leaving Certificate English. The feedback from the consultation supports 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 components
- Supports needed for successful enactment.

The responses to the consultation indicated a very positive view of the specification overall. Many found the non-linear organisation of the strands as similar to the approach taken to the current syllabus. This familiar approach was welcomed.

There was a strong endorsement of the approach taken regarding the foregrounding of oracy in the specification. This was seen to positively contribute to continuity and progression from the primary and junior cycle frameworks and was seen as adding to the positive development of communication skills needed for life beyond school.

The stated Rationale and Aim for the subject was affirmed as capturing what was central to the subject area and what it is we want our students to be able to know, do and understand through their study of English at Senior Cycle.

There was widespread approval of the breadth, depth and diversity of textual engagement envisioned in the specification. Many welcomed the opportunity to recognise the diverse cultural experiences in their classrooms through teacher and student agency in text selection and choice. There was some disappointment that further innovation had not extended to the approach to the study of poetry and it was an opportunity lost to include more diverse and contemporary poets and poetry.

There was a strong level of approval for the inclusion of an oral assessment component and, for the inclusion of time and space to develop creative writing skills.

There were some concerns about how the oral assessment component would be implemented and the negative impact of AI on the authenticity of the submitted creative writing task.

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 on 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 English included multiple modes of engagement during the eight-week consultation process:

- An online survey
- Written submissions
- Two public consultation events
- 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/or attend the public consultation events. In terms of the school-based focus groups, a cross-section of schools was selected from the 55 schools that expressed an interest in becoming involved in Leaving Certificate English developments. The eight schools were selected using criteria relating to DEIS status, gender, school size and type. Visits to these schools took place between March 26 and April 10 2025 and involved focus group meetings with students, with teachers of Leaving Certificate English 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 distributed through MS Forms on the ncca.ie website. The survey was framed around the key areas of focus outlined in the introduction. Given the implementation considerations arising from an oral assessment in English, specific additional questions were added to the online survey to gauge the systemic implications of this component, including asking respondents their willingness to assess this component for the State Examinations Commission (SEC) and of preferred timings for this component.

The public consultation events 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 interest to organisations and interested parties.

Consultation responses

The online survey opened on March 3 and closed on May 2 at 5.00pm. In that time it gathered 254 responses from a wide range of stakeholders detailed below. The numbers of teachers, students and school leaders involved in the school focus groups are also outlined in Table 1. There were two consultation events. The first took place in Athlone on March 25 along with two other subjects in Tranche 2. The second event was solely for consultation on the English specification. It was held on April 30 in Dublin. Both events had participants who registered as teachers, parents, third level lecturers and students. Full details of the participants involved in the various modes of consultation are outlined in Table 1.

Mode of consultation	Overview of participants	Numbers
Online Survey	Teacher: 198 Second level student: 26 Parent/Guardian: 14 Teacher educator: 4 Speech and Language therapist: 4 Teacher and parent: 2 Further/ Higher Education Student: 2 PME student: 2 Post-primary principal/deputy principal: 2	254
School Visits	Teachers: 39 School leadership: 15 Students: 61	115
Consultation Events	Athlone: 32 Dublin: 74	106
Online Submissions	Organisations: 9 Individuals: 6	15

Table 1: Level of engagement across the consultation

Section 2: Feedback from the consultation

This section presents an overview of the feedback received during the consultation. The consultation focused on the rationale, aims and key competencies; the course structure, strands and learning outcomes; the additional assessment components; and the supports for enactment. The findings can be grouped under the following headings/themes:

- Overall impression of the specification, rationale, aims, key competencies, strands and learning outcomes
- Additional Assessment Component (AAC) - Oral Examination
- AAC - Creative Writing Task
- 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 English by those participating in the consultation, are also presented in this section of the report.

Impression of the specification, rationale, aims, key competencies, strands and learning outcomes.

The overall feedback from the consultation on the rationale, aims and structure was very positive. There was agreement that the Rationale and Aims capture the purpose and nature of Leaving Certificate English. There was considerable support for the inclusion of critical literacy, creativity and the focus on communication skills. Some respondents would have liked to have seen a greater emphasis on the development of empathy, personal response and more focus on critical textual analysis. A small number of written submissions argued for the removal of critical literacy as an aim.

In the feedback on the structure and strands, there was a very positive view expressed of the familiarity in the way the course is structured. Respondents commented that the non-linear nature of the course is similar to the way the current syllabus is taught and welcomed this approach. The number and numbering of learning outcomes was very positively received. Respondents felt that the Learning Outcomes capture the learning that students should experience in the classroom and that the Students Learn About column provides a level of specificity that would aid planning. There was some commentary on the use of the word 'etc.' in the Students Learn About column. Many welcomed its use as it would allow a degree of freedom for teachers to adapt planning and utilise agency in response to their students' needs. It also reflects the use of the word in traditional marking schemes to allow for other or novel approaches to texts to be equally valid. There was some concern expressed that the use of 'etc.' could become punitive in the final written examination where specific tasks not in the specification

could be demanded of students. There was some concern expressed on the inclusion of the words "available digital technology" in the Students Learn About column in Strand 2: Creating, and whether this would allow or even encourage the use of AI technology in the classroom.

There was a small number of respondents who commented on the references used in the glossary of the draft specification. While these references were included to provide clarity and research support for the approaches recommended in the specification, some commented that the inclusion of references to Universal Design for Learning (UDL) could date the specification into the future and the inclusion of the references to the philosophical underpinnings of critical literacy were dated and possibly could be seen as political.

AAC - Oral Examination

The inclusion of an oral examination as an additional assessment component generated the most discussion across the modes of the consultation, which, given its departure from traditional assessment modes in this subject, was understandable. The vast majority of respondents welcomed the inclusion of an oral component and the positive influence this would have on the focus on oracy in the classroom. Many spoke of the continuity with Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) 1 in Junior Cycle English and the focus on oracy in the Primary Curriculum Framework as well as the positive impact on communicative competence that would have far reaching effects for students as they enter further or higher education, third level, the world of work, and the broader impact on their lives as agentic individuals in their life beyond school. While many commented that they already included many discursive pedagogies in their classrooms, the inclusion of an oral examination as an assessment component would give this work legitimacy and status as part of the summative assessment of the subject. They also welcomed the title "Oral Examination" as they felt that they knew what was entailed in an oral and it was a term that students, their parents and the system are familiar with.

There were concerns raised around the enactment of this component and the timing of the oral examination generated the most discussion. The proposal to conduct this assessment at the end of fifth year was welcomed by some who felt that, while this would result in a different understanding of comparative study and the level of development in answers would be different to the current cohort assessed at the end of a two year course, it could lend a significant focus to fifth year work and result in a more sustained engagement of the students. Others felt that the end of fifth year was too early to assess the comparative study as these skills are usually developed later in the course. Some requested that the oral assessment be moved into sixth year, possibly aligning it with the other oral examinations for languages in Easter of sixth year. Some suggested June of fifth year as the most appropriate timing as schools would not be impacted by the numbers of examiners needed to carry out the assessment and students would have the full year to complete their studies in this area. In discussion on the possibility of holding the examination in Easter of fifth year, many felt that this would limit the time available to develop the necessary comparative skills. Others mentioned the midterm in October of sixth year as a possible assessment window, but there were concerns over student wellbeing when the Easter break was already restricted due to oral examinations in other language subjects. Over 60% of the respondents in the online survey and over 90% of those involved in the focus groups or consultation events responded that they would examine this component for the SEC and would

welcome it as an opportunity to engage in very practical professional learning. Many teachers commented that while they had never marked the written examination, the oral represented a different style of examination that they would be more interested in assessing.

There was significant discussion on the style of questioning to be utilised in this examination. Many focused on the importance of an authentic two-way conversation and the need to avoid rote-learned answers. Some were wary of the influence that accent, dialect or idiomatic language use could have on the marks awarded and requested clear guidance and rubrics to be made available as soon as possible. The suitability of the comparative as a focus for the conversation was also discussed. Some felt that the comparative question in the current examination structure has become unwieldly and poorly managed by students and that an authentic conversation with an examiner could allow students to evidence their insights more effectively. Others felt that the comparative would not lend itself to an oral component due to its complex nature and that poetry or the single text might provide more scope for examination in this mode. There was significant concern for the reasonable accommodations to be applied for this component. While students with dyslexia and other additional learning needs expressed their preference for an oral examination over a written component, there were extensive concerns expressed for students with anxiety, speech impediments or processing needs and calls for these students to be accommodated fairly by the examination structure. Concern was also expressed for the students for whom English was not their first language who might be negatively impacted by this mode of assessment. However, it was noted that the development of oral language skills often precedes the development of written language skills and students with English as an Additional Language (EAL) may actually benefit from an oral assessment in English.

Creative Writing Task

The proposed Creative Writing Task raised the most concerns across all modes of the consultation. While the ambition of the AAC, to provide time and space for the development of creative writing skills, was viewed as laudable, the growing influence of AI technology was seen to negate the positive aspects of the task. Most respondents raised concerns for the ability of teachers and the system to authenticate student work and the difficulties in ensuring equity in this aspect of the assessment. Many called for a fundamental reorganisation of this section of the specification to ensure fairness and equity for students and ensuring a valid and reliable means of assessment. In the school-based focus groups where these issues could be further explored, many suggested the introduction of a controlled environment for the final write up of the task. This would allow time and space for the development of ideas in response to a brief and recognise the importance of an initial drafting process to allow for the development of creative skills but would in some way ensure that the final piece was the authentic work of the student. Many suggested controlled environments such as those experienced by students undertaking the Art assessment as a possible solution. While some also argued that this could lead to rote learning and memorisation of an essay to be rewritten in the controlled environment, they also argued that it was the only solution that would ensure some validity in the assessment at this time due to the ongoing and growing threats offered by AI. Some who had experience of coursework submitted in other subject areas felt that the ongoing development of work could be managed in the classroom. Others argued for a more processed-based assessment, where the drafts and

reflection moments captured as part of the drafting process were valued as much as, if not more than, the final product.

Other commentary on this AAC included concern that the title 'Creative Writing Task' gave the impression that only the writing of short stories would be valued and that other forms of writing, such as discursive essays and speeches, appeared to be excluded or less valued.

Supports for successful enactment

The first aspect of the draft specification that caused concern and calls for further supports was the statement that this course was designed to be completed in a minimum of 180 hours. The respondents offered various examples of English provision in schools which ranged from 210 to 260 hours across the two years of study at senior cycle. The respondents expressed concern that 180 was a reduction of the hours currently allocated. To support implementation and enactment of the specification, which now includes the development of oral skills, there were calls for this aspect of the specification to be amended.

Throughout all modes of the consultation there was a call for the production of clear guidelines and rubrics for assessment to give clarity for planning to teachers ahead of the introduction of the course. There was a lot of discussion on the previous experiences of Professional Learning for teachers as part of the implementation of the Junior Cycle English specification. Many expressed the need for clarity and consistency of messaging in order to ensure smooth enactment of this specification. In particular, there were requests for professional learning to develop expertise in the development of oral skills, provision of clear success criteria, sample questions and recordings of sample oral assessments. Clear reasonable accommodations guidance for students was also requested to support teachers in preparing their students for the assessment components.

Many called for greater supports in schools for the enactment of the specification such as IT support and access to media such as the productions of plays or access to prescribed film. It was pointed out that the inclusion of the Creative Writing Task, where drafting and redrafting are central to the experience of students, would require greater engagement with IT in the English classroom than is currently the case. While many supported the development of these digital skills as part of the preparation of students for life beyond school, many worried that the absence of the necessary supports would lead to greater inequity in the system. Many also commented on the difficulty in sourcing material on the text list, in particular the films or plays prescribed. Teachers referenced films that had been on streaming sites and then disappeared and queried if a common platform where prescribed plays and films could be available for schools was a viable option to support enactment.

To support the oral assessment component, various systemic supports were referenced. Some mentioned the need for an additional exam aide for schools when the English oral assessment was held to support the implementation. Teachers mentioned willingness to examine the oral component for the State Examinations Commission as long as the remuneration was commensurate with the work.

Other issues raised in the consultation: texts, prescription and poetry

Throughout the responses there was a high level of support for the focus on the diversity of texts that should be encountered and engaged with by the student. Many respondents commented on the diverse and multi-ethnic population in the English classroom and the focus on presenting multiple perspectives and representations in the choices of texts available outlined in the specification was lauded by most. The need for teacher agency and choice in the selection of texts to respond to the various needs encountered in the classroom was extensively expressed. There was also extensive discussion on the requirement to study Shakespeare. While many expressed the desire to maintain the requirement to study Shakespeare at higher level, there was considerable discussion around the limitations this placed on the experience of the students and questions were raised as to the necessity of this requirement. It was also suggested that an extension of the time a text remained on the text list would be welcomed to ensure familiarity with the course content for teachers. However, some welcomed the current rate of change as it adds a rejuvenating dimension to the course where new texts can be prescribed quite quickly. There was some commentary on the phrase "at least two texts" used to describe the requirement for the Comparing Strand. While many expressed a preference for clarity in stating either two texts were required or three texts were required to ensure equity in the system, others reflected that the given instruction allowed for different approaches to be taken depending on the class or the texts chosen. Another factor that would have impact on this decision-making process is the timing of the oral assessment component which could considerably shorten the time available for the comparative study.

Throughout the consultation there was discussion on the study of poetry and there was disappointment that more had not been done to rejuvenate this aspect of the course. The background paper had raised the concern that the number of poets and poetry prescribed for study at higher and ordinary level was excessive and demanded a significant time allowance in the classroom that limited authentic engagement with the poetry. The draft specification reduced the number of poets to be studied from 8 poets to 5 at higher level. The response to this change in the consultation was not positive. The reduction of the number of poets was not seen as a reduction of workload, as many currently select 5 poets from the list to study, but instead was viewed as a reduction of choice and agency for the teachers. The poets on the list for higher level were viewed as lacking diversity and contemporary relevance due to the requirement to have a selection of poetry from a body of work. The list available at ordinary level, which includes individual poems from an array of poets, was seen to be more varied, relevant and engaging for students. There were calls for a rethinking of this aspect of the course to allow for a deeper engagement with a smaller number of poems, possibly across a number of themes, similar to the approach prescribed in the UK.

Section 3: Considerations and Conclusion

Considerations

Overall, the draft specification for Leaving Certificate English was very well received and the consultation fulfilled its objective of initiating discussion and debate on key aspects of the design of the redeveloped subject, in particular, debate on the introduction of an oral component as part of the modes of assessment and consideration of the systemic implications of this introduction.

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

Issues raised for consideration in this context included:
- The place of critical literacy in the specification.
- The inclusion of references in the glossary to support clarity and the possibility of these references dating the specification.
- The use of the word 'etc.' in the Students Learn About column and the wording of individual Learning Outcomes.
- Supporting the diversity of texts available to teachers to support representation, agency and choice.
- Clarity around the number of texts required for the comparative study.
- The place of Shakespeare in the specification given the limitations placed on its inclusion as a requirement due to the introduction of the oral component.
- Ways to innovate the approach to poetry in the specification in line with requests to include more diverse, representative and contemporary poetry.
- The name of the second AAC and ways to reduce the possible negative impact of AI on the authenticity and reliability of this component.

The development group also considered some feedback raised in the consultation in order to advise on other issues that, while outside the remit of the specification, have implications for successful implementation. These considerations include:

- The timing of the oral assessment component given the discussions on the impact on learning and scope of the course.
- The style of questions, rubrics and reasonable accommodations that will have an influence on the oral assessment component.
- The supports required for successful enactment of the specification as raised during the consultation process.

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 very positive views on the draft specification, while acknowledging that provision of professional learning, supports and resources are fundamental to successful enactment. The high level of teacher input to the consultation is gratefully acknowledged and the positive response from teachers indicates a sense of optimism about the opportunity to revitalise the subject, given that it has not undergone any meaningful changes in several decades.

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Appendix One: List of Contributors

The following contributed to the consultation and indicated their wish to be identified in the final report.

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