



NCCA

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

Background paper and brief for the review of Leaving Certificate English

March 2024

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1. 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 1 subjects will be completed in 2024 for introduction to schools in 2025. The redevelopment of the specification for Leaving Certificate English is included in Tranche 2, which will be completed in 2025 for introduction to schools in September 2026.

This paper provides a context for the review of Leaving Certificate English and has been informed by the views of teachers, school leaders and students gathered through a programme of school visits conducted in a representative sample of schools. It begins by considering the background of Leaving Certificate English with Section 2 presenting an overview of the current context, including consideration of relevant policy developments. Section 3 sets out how Leaving Certificate English is currently provided for within the Irish curriculum before focusing in more detail on the current Leaving Certificate English syllabus. Section 4 details the insights into the lived experience for schools, teachers, and students, while Section 5 considers similar education opportunities internationally and presents an overview of the curriculum for English in different jurisdictions. Section 6 draws on the previous three sections to categorise and briefly discuss some issues identified for consideration in the redevelopment of Leaving Certificate English before finally setting out a proposed brief for this work in Section 7, which will guide the work of the development group.

2. Background and context

This section sets out some of the significant developments in the world of English language education over the past twenty-five years. It also outlines the policy initiatives and developments over the last decade within education which are most relevant to the review of Leaving Certificate English.

The last revision of Leaving Certificate English took place in 1999. The current Leaving Certificate English Syllabus (1999) is a first-language (L1) curriculum specification. The syllabus reflects a personal growth through English model of language learning, which stresses the importance of oral, aural, reading and writing skills, fosters critical engagement with the student's own experience and with authentic texts, and views literature in the English classroom as a source of valuable aesthetic experiences that contribute to the personal growth of the student. Its aim is to develop the student's literacy while reflecting a rich understanding of that term.

It is a complex task to become literate in modern society. A bewildering variety of linguistic forms and styles challenges students today, both inside and outside of school. (NCCA, 1999. P.6.)

Reflecting on the curricula for English in Ireland, Cahill and Dennehy (2023) note that

...English in the Irish curriculum takes a broad approach to the subject in that it folds together the teaching and learning of language education, language arts and literacy development. (Cahill, K., and Dennehy, N. (eds.), 2023, p.3).

Sketching the development of any school subject can be challenging, and to do so for English is sometimes complicated by a vagueness that besets attempts to define exactly what it is! As Peter Medway has claimed, English 'seems in general ill-defined and...manifestly strange' because English lessons appear to be

...not about English but about old people, getting into trouble, gender or space adventures...and preoccupied with a...subset of the forms of writing...such as stories, which have no likely utility in the future existences of most of the students. (Medway, 1990.)

Part of that 'strangeness' to which Medway refers relates to a duality at the heart of the English classroom, where students engage in a process through which their personal language facility develops while, at the same time, they encounter the world and critically engage with literature. And while a particular course of literature (the subject content, if you will) may change from year to year the outcomes for students are essentially the same. Indeed, English is sometimes considered problematic because in the school in which it is the language of instruction it has a cross-curricular dimension, which raises questions such as: does the teacher of English contribute to language learning for all subjects, and, are the teachers of all subjects also teachers of English?

The remit for the development of the current LC English syllabus included: that it would provide for continuity with the Junior Certificate syllabus of 1989; that it would make LC English less overtly academic and more accessible to a diverse population of school-goers, (at that time some 52% of students opted for the examination at Ordinary Level); that it would address concerns about falling literacy standards; that it would reflect Ireland's European dimension. In essence, the response of the committee was that a

'...holistic approach to English was the best way forward. One cannot teach language competence in isolation from personal growth: development of linguistic skills in mother-tongue education is intimately linked with cultural and social factors.' (Mullins, 2002, p.260)

From a curriculum perspective some significant changes have occurred in recent years. The [Primary Language Curriculum](#) (NCCA, 2019) integrates the teaching and learning of English and Irish and includes learning outcomes and progression continua for all children and the language knowledge and experiences that they bring to the classroom. Also of note in this context is that the Primary Language Curriculum includes the teaching and learning of English both as an L1 and L2 of the school. Work to explore the integration of modern foreign languages in the redeveloped primary curriculum is currently underway.

A major evolution of the curriculum for junior cycle education has been taking place since 2012, guided by the [Framework for Junior Cycle](#) (DE, 2015). This included the introduction of key skills across the junior cycle curriculum; a dual approach to assessment combining classroom oral and project-based assessment with state examinations; a revised approach to reporting and the development of Level One and Level Two Learning Programmes (L1LPs and L2LPs) to meet the specific needs of students with general learning disabilities. L1LP is a programme for a specific group of students with general learning disabilities in the range of lower functioning moderate to severe and profound categories. L2LP is a programme for a specific group of students who have general learning disabilities in the higher functioning moderate and low functioning mild categories.

The completion of the NCCA review of senior cycle culminated in the publication of the [Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report](#) (NCCA, 2022a). Responding to this report, Minister Foley initiated a programme of senior cycle redevelopment. As part of this work, a set of student key competencies are being embedded across learning outcomes in new and redeveloped subjects and modules.

Advances in digital technologies have had a profound effect on our world. A central aim of [Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027](#) (DE, 2022) is that digital technology becomes a core part of the education journey. The Strategy commits to supporting all curriculum developments with the overall aim that digital technology be an integral part of teaching, learning and assessment in every subject. Furthermore, the [National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young people 2011-2020](#) (DES 2011) and the work that is underway on a new [Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy](#) will support the group in their work.

'Literacy and numeracy skills are crucial to a person's ability to develop fully as an individual, to live a satisfying and rewarding life and to participate fully in our society. Ensuring that all young people acquire these skills is one of the greatest

contributions that we can make to achieving social justice and equity in our country.’ (DES, 2011 p.2)

The past twenty-five years have seen very significant social and cultural changes to our world. At a global level, there is political instability and conflict, an ever-increasing gulf between the wealthiest and poorest, the climate crisis that threatens our very existence, a global communications revolution that has ironically led to isolation and fragmentation, the rise of protectionist and aggressive nationalism, and an exponential growth in disinformation and misinformation as significant influencers of opinion and action. Migration is occurring at scale that seemed unimaginable in the 1990s. Among the effects of changes in this regard are the emergence of increasingly multi-cultural and diverse societies, with a growth in plurilingualism changing the language profile of population groups. The challenges identified here have also led to an enhanced awareness of social justice and equity issues, with the young people who experience the curriculum also confronting these changes and the impact on their lives and their world. These and other developments mean that it is timely to reconsider the challenge of how best to support young people ‘to become literate in modern society’. This redevelopment of Leaving Certificate English provides an opportunity to ensure that learning is relevant for students in terms of their language and literacy development.

Section Summary

- The current syllabus for Leaving Certificate English (1999), reflects ‘a personal growth through English’ model of language learning. As a syllabus for language and literature it is marked by an integrated approach to teaching and learning.
- English in the curriculum can seem somewhat vague in terms of the breadth and measurability of its course content and its focus on the development of the student’s unconstrained skills in language and literacy, and where it is the language of instruction it is the means through which learners access the entire curriculum.
- The Primary Language Curriculum (2019), the Digital Strategy for Schools (2022), the National Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy and the Senior Cycle Advisory Report (2022), along with the revised specification for English in junior cycle (2015) provide the impetus and background to this redevelopment of Leaving Certificate English.
- The past twenty-five years have seen such dramatic change to so many dimensions of our world and experience that it is timely to reconsider the challenge of how best to support young people ‘to become literate in modern society’.

3. English in the curriculum

This section provides an overview of English within the curriculum in Ireland, and details insights from recent school visits before focusing on the most recent Chief Examiner’s report on the subject.

Curriculum for English in junior cycle

The current specification for Junior Cycle English was introduced in 2014. The Framework for Junior Cycle (DES 2015) provided the context and parameters for this specification, which is a redevelopment of the Junior Certificate English syllabus of 1989. The 1989 syllabus was underpinned by a theory of language learning as personal growth; it fostered growth in language learning by doing, and it looked for a balance of listening, speaking, reading and writing. It conceptualised the development of a ‘personal proficiency in language’ as three key literacies: Personal, Social, and Cultural. The student’s language development was to be marked by an ‘organic wholeness of experience’, which, as a statement of principle, implies that decisions about content relate to the interests and developmental experiences of the learner, that lessons in language are not separate from lessons in literature, and that assessment is not separate from teaching and learning. An open course allowed teachers freedom ‘to choose...the material they consider most suitable for their students’ programme.’ The syllabus promoted a breadth of language experience and it introduced, too, the notion of ‘a critical consciousness with respect to all language use’ which it glossed variously as language awareness, and awareness of the ‘selectivity of all language use’.

The [Junior Cycle English specification](#) (DE 2014, amended 2018) retains the personal growth and literacy orientation of its Junior Certificate predecessor, as is clear from its first statement of aims, encouraging students ‘to be creative through language and to gain enjoyment and continuing personal growth from English in all its forms’. It aligns with the Primary Language Curriculum through its broad learning outcomes across the three Strands of Oral Language, Reading, and Writing and the related Elements of communicating, exploring, and understanding. It foregrounds oral language, seeking to make the English classroom ‘an active space, a place of “classroom talk” where learners explore language and ideas as much through thinking and talking as through listening and writing.’ The key skills of junior cycle are embedded in the specification’s learning outcomes and the open course has been replaced by prescription from a range of texts and text types combined with open choices in a number of areas, to support learner access to a breadth and variety of language experiences. Assessment as part of teaching and learning is supported by two Classroom Based Assessments (CBAs)—Oral Communication, and Collection of the Student’s Texts—the assessments of which are recorded on the student’s Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA). An Assessment Task and a two-hour written examination are assessed and certified for inclusion on the JCPA by the State Examinations Commission. [Adjusted assessment arrangements](#) (DE, 2024) remain in place for students in third year in the school year 2023/24. These adjusted assessment arrangements were designed to reflect and recognise the disrupted learning experienced by students due to Covid 19. In terms of Junior Cycle English each student must complete a minimum of one CBA in each subject. Students will not be required to complete an Assessment Task in English.

The [Report on the enactment of Junior Cycle English 2020](#) (NCCA 2020) concluded that the specification is consistent with international trends in the teaching of English, embracing a growth model of English, incorporating cultural and critical literacy and encouraging wide critical reading. The curricular principles and the assessment are well aligned, and, in broad terms, the specification and its enactment are viewed by teachers as having benefitted teaching and learning.

Curriculum for English in senior cycle

Leaving Certificate Established

The current syllabus for [Leaving Certificate English](#) was introduced to schools in 1999 and examined for the first time in 2001. Developed some ten years after the Junior Certificate Syllabus upon which it aims to build, Leaving Certificate English structures language learning around two domains, Comprehending and Composing, across five language categories – Language of Information, Argument, Persuasion, Narration, and the Aesthetic Use of Language. Comprehending implies more than reading and is used to indicate a rounded, dialogical engagement with text, while Composing indicates a process that is inclusive of researching, drafting, and editing. Students are expected to see every language product, whether it be a memo or a poem, a political speech or a play, as a text which needs to be explored and its specific genre understood. It promotes student writing in genre-specific forms across the range of language categories.

The aims of the syllabus are to develop in students:

- a mature and critical literacy to prepare them for the responsibilities and challenges of adult life in all contexts
- a respect and appreciation for language used accurately and appropriately and a competence in a wide range of language skills both oral and written
- an awareness of the value of literature in its diverse forms for enriching their perceptions, for enhancing their sense of cultural identity, and for creating experiences of aesthetic pleasure.

The aims are expanded upon by reference to Contents and Processes, Knowledge and Content, Skills, and Attitudes and Effects. In turn, learning outcomes for Comprehending and for Composing are detailed for each of the five language categories. The outcomes are the same for Ordinary and Higher levels, but the levels are differentiated by reference to the degree of critical engagement with texts and by the complexity of the texts themselves. The levels are further differentiated in the two sections: Course Requirements and Examinations (see below: Assessment for certification).

Higher Level Course:

- language in a wide variety of contexts, genres, functions, and styles
- one literary text (the study of Shakespearean drama is compulsory)
- a group of texts in a comparative manner

- a range of poetry, to include a representative selection from the work of eight poets

Ordinary Level Course:

- language in a wide variety of contexts, genres, functions, and styles
- one literary text (the study of Shakespearean drama is optional)
- a group of texts in a comparative manner
- a selection of poetry (some 36 poems).

Transition Year

In the new Transition Year Programme Statement (2024) English, as an important continuity subject in Transition Year, develops aspects of the key competencies of senior cycle and provides opportunities for students to explore and expand their strategies for learning. Key competencies are supported when students' literacies and numeracies are well developed and they can make good use of various tools, including technologies, to support their learning. Whether it is through collaborative or individual projects, involving digital and non-digital skills, the transition year programme can provide many experiences that enable self-expression and enhance students' personal growth through language. Formal and informal opportunities to speak and present in class, in public and in interviews sustain and enlarge upon the growth in oral language skills begun in junior cycle. Managing a TY portfolio affords opportunities to showcase learning and sharpens reflective and critical thinking. Greater levels of choice and student input into their learning increases engagement and the capacity for independent learning. Growth in language and literacy is not confined to the English classroom and transition year provides a unique opportunity for students to encounter a range of literacies, as in, for example: learning about sustainability; linked to civic and community engagement; incorporating the literacy of the workplace.

Leaving Certificate English in focus

This section explores participation rates in Leaving Certificate English drawing on statistics from the State Examinations Commission (SEC) and provides an overview of assessment for certification and some insights into student engagement with different areas of the current Leaving Certificate English syllabus based on the most recent report of the SEC Chief Examiner for English (SEC, 2013).

Student participation

Some 98% of students sitting Leaving Certificate Established take the examinations in English at Higher or Ordinary level. Just over 75% of candidates taking English took the examination at Higher Level in 2023; the percentage uptake at Higher Level in 2019 was 73%; the Report of the Chief Examiner for 2013 indicates an uptake rate for that year of 65% at Higher Level.

Table 1: Number of students sitting Leaving Certificate English at higher and ordinary Level 2019-2023

Year	Higher Level	Ordinary Level	Total Candidates	Total LC candidates	English as a % of total candidates
2019	40,217	14,477	54,694	56,071	97.5
2020	41,950	14,639	56,589	57,569	98.3
2021	42,936	14,129	57,065	57,952	98.5
2022	43,757	13,484	57,241	58,056	98.6
2023	43,275	13,996	57,271	58,006	98.7

Assessment for certification

Leaving Certificate English is assessed by terminal written examination by means of two papers at both Higher and Ordinary levels. Paper 1 is 2 hrs 30 with 20 minutes reading time, and Paper 2 is 3 hours plus 20 minutes reading time. Papers 1 and 2 each carry 200 marks.

Paper 1 (Higher and Ordinary Levels)

Section I Comprehending: Three texts on a general theme appear on the examination paper. Two questions, A and B, follow each text. Candidates must answer a Question A on one text and a Question B on a different text. Candidates must answer only one Question A and only one Question B. Candidates may not answer a Question A and a Question B on the same text.

Section II Composing: Candidates must answer on one of the seven compositions set.

Paper 2 (Higher Level)

Section I Single Text: Candidates are required to answer one of two questions.

Section II The Comparative Study: Candidates have a choice of questions (one of two questions) on each of two of the three modes prescribed for study in a given year. Candidates are required to answer on a question on Shakespearean drama. They may do so in Section I, The Single Text, or in Section II, The Comparative Study.

Section III Poetry: Part A: Unseen poetry – Candidates are required to answer one of two questions. Part B: Prescribed poetry – Candidates are required to answer one of four questions.

Paper 2 (Ordinary Level)

Section I Single Text: Candidates are required to answer three questions. Question 1 and Question 2 are compulsory. Candidates have a choice of three test items to answer one in Question 3.

Section II The Comparative Study: Candidates have a choice of questions (one of two questions) on each of two of the three modes prescribed for study in a given year.

Section III Poetry: Part A: Unseen Poetry – Candidates are required to answer all questions

Part B: Prescribed poetry – Candidates are required to answer on one of four poems. Two questions are based on the list of poems by poets common to both Higher and Ordinary Level, and two from the list of poems prescribed for study at Ordinary Level only. Candidates are required to answer Question 1 and one test item from a choice of three in Question 2.

Insights from the Chief Examiner’s Report 2013

The most recent Chief Examiner’s Report for English (SEC, 2013) was published after the examinations in 2013. In general, candidates who displayed a capacity to communicate fluently and effectively were rewarded. However, the management and control of language posed problems for some candidates and poor attention to the formal aspects of language, such as spelling, grammar and punctuation, was noted in some responses. While evidence of some candidates’ critical engagement with texts in the Comparative Study section was noted, in general the report states that candidates scored less well here than in other sections of the examination paper. They were hindered at times by formulaic approaches to answering questions, which inhibited engagement with the terms of the questions and curtailed the expression of independent opinions.

The report recommends that adopting a process approach to writing would be of significant benefit to all students of Leaving Certificate English, as would wide reading from a diverse selection of texts in a range of genre. Such reading would help students develop the necessary skills to shape their responses with greater control and confidence. Finally, the report urges teachers to avail of the opportunities offered by the Leaving Certificate English course to develop students’ critical thinking skills and skills in critical literacy, so that they can assess and challenge the validity of ideas presented in texts and form independent views more confidently.

Section Summary

- The specification for Junior Cycle English (2014) provides continuity with Junior Certificate English of 1989 in retaining its personal growth and literacy orientation. It aligns with the Primary Language Curriculum (2019) through its learning outcomes across the three Strands of Oral Language, Reading, and Writing. The key skills of junior cycle are embedded in the specification’s learning outcomes and the open course has been replaced by prescription from a range of texts and text types.
- In line with the Framework for Junior Cycle (2015), Junior Cycle English stresses the importance of assessment as part of teaching and learning. This is supported by two Classroom Based Assessments (CBAs): Oral Communication, and Collection of the Student’s Texts—the assessments of which are recorded on the student’s Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA).
- Leaving Certificate English, taken by more than 98% of students of Leaving Certificate Established, is offered at Higher and Ordinary Levels. The learning outcomes are identical for the two levels and the course content is aligned to allow for flexibility and movement between the levels.

4. Insights from school visits

School visits were conducted as part of the scoping work for this Background Paper. The representative sample was selected from the 55 schools that expressed an interest in becoming involved in Leaving Certificate English curriculum developments. The six schools were selected using criteria relating to DEIS status, gender, school size and type. Visits to these schools took place in January 2024 and involved focus group meetings with 37 senior cycle students, 31 Leaving Certificate English teachers and 5 school leaders. The following section provides an overview of the insights gathered through these visits.

Strengths and challenges of current syllabus

Teachers are passionate about English. I am privileged to share that passion with students...to build that empathy and to give texts room to breathe. (Teacher, focus group)

The focus group discussions reflect a marked confidence in and enthusiasm among teachers for the Leaving Certificate syllabus. Priorities included building ‘that critical thinking...where the students look beyond the words on the page’, and the development of transferrable skills. English has ‘a huge foundational importance for the rest of the curriculum.’ It is ‘also about an enjoyment of the art form...they can enjoy the creativity of language that is playful.’ Teachers enjoy, too, the ‘vast level of choice’, ‘the massive variety’ of the course, as one teacher summarised: ‘What is considered a text is so broad. Having that scope to drill down into something that sparks them is so important.’ Ironically, the breadth and size of the course was also identified as perhaps its greatest challenge. It is perceived as ‘such a broad subject’ that teachers feel ‘we must be conscious of the workload...the length and vastness of the curriculum’ and that ‘the amount of content can make it seem like a lottery’. Some felt that the scale can militate against creativity and depth when ‘naturally you want your students to explore their creative strengths’. Students’ feedback echoed much of the strengths and challenges identified by teachers in the focus groups.

It’s hard to put a pin in what you can change. It is beautiful that English can be learned through listening and writing. (Student, focus group)

The general sense from the student consultation is that students enjoy the poetry course. They also generally enjoy ‘the Paper 1 stuff’, which they identified as the chance to express their opinions and be creative. They enjoy ‘the diversity of texts’, both literary and non-literary, offering ‘a broader viewpoint on life and its different aspects.’ Two students summed it up in this way:

‘The aesthetic of language. How to use it to express yourself and your feelings and make yourself heard. It happens through reading and understanding and having the will to understand.’ And, ‘it helps with other subjects as well.’

‘There are moments when you are learning poems and that is what you are really learning. I think that English should be based around that feeling.’ (Student, focus group)

Text prescription

Regarding their hopes for the review, teachers felt the current model of text prescription—including the lists for poetry and poets—should be revisited with a view to lessening the rate at which texts change. (Currently, a revised text list is issued annually for each cohort of students taking the Leaving Certificate examination). As one put it: 'From a practice point of view, I hate to see the quick overturn of texts. It is wonderful when you are revisiting a poet or a text again.' They welcomed the move towards more diverse texts and authors, but not 'at the expense of the classics...A blend of old and new is good.' There was a suggestion that given the difficulty of the comparative study the modes might be reviewed and renewed.

Stronger emphasis on Oracy

Teachers and students favoured a stronger emphasis on oracy in the redeveloped specification. Learning through listening, talking and discussion was seen as essential to the English classroom. One teacher summed up the aim of English as: 'Promoting empathy, getting them to think outside of their own lives. They are very vocal – if you can get them to speak and talk it just changes everything!' Other teacher views stressed the importance of oral language to inclusivity, as in: 'That would help the SEN students. They can express themselves orally in a way that they can't through writing; they learn to talk socially.' Student responses to questions about how they learn best in English included the view that 'there needs to be more conversation' and 'You learn from other people. I have to hear from everyone in the class. That is the most valuable part of English.'

Regarding the additional assessment component, an oral assessment component, as an entity in itself or as one from a number of optional formats, was among suggestions offered by teachers and students. One teacher group suggested that, in an extension of the CBA from junior cycle, the additional assessment component might take the form of a presentation, a recording, or a podcast. Referring back to the junior cycle CBAs, students were also in favour of a choice of formats in which to present work. One student explained: 'Some people would rather make a project and others would prefer to speak. Shy people are forced to speak, and I know it gets them out of their comfort zone.'

Assessment

Teachers would welcome a research project as an additional assessment component, but not necessarily one linked to the comparative study; it could have an oral dimension (a presentation or podcast etc.); and as one teacher said: 'If we are serious about reading for enjoyment, we need to make space for it!' Regarding an Additional Assessment Component, the students were strongly supportive of 'something that would take away from the overall stress of the exam', such as a project, an extension of the CBAs of junior cycle perhaps, with options for different formats like podcast, presentation, 'maybe a portfolio of your work', or 'something like the Gaisce programme that might be incorporated into an English course'. 'There needs to be more conversation in English, it's so important for critical thinking'. A student whose first language was neither English nor Irish made this observation: 'I think for the EAL students, their experience of literature is beyond what is in the list because of their cultural backgrounds or whatever. I think that would be very cool if they could draw on that.' One student offered the following caveat: 'I'm doing three projects and I'm finding it more stressful trying to get them all done...dates and deadlines need to be coordinated!' Finally, this uncompromising note was struck:

We like a break from the phones. Don't put anything to do with social media on the course. Phones stop people from focusing! (Student, focus group)

All school leaders interviewed were of the view that with the introduction of Additional Assessment Components there will be significant additional pressure points for schools throughout the year and that the State Examinations Commission and the Department of Education should give careful consideration to when work needs to be handed up. Questions of timing will have a significant impact on teachers, many of whom will be teaching more than one subject, and on students, who may have six to eight projects to be submitted. In addition, the projects will need to be presented in digital formats and this will have significant resource and technical support implications for schools and teachers.

Regarding the likely impact of changes to assessment it was felt that a balance will need to be struck between the testing of student knowledge and ensuring that experiential learning takes place; getting the most out of student experiences in terms of the social dimension of school is critical. In addition, it would be important that teachers would stand back and let the students do their own projects.

Section Summary

- Teachers and students enjoy the breadth and scope of Leaving Certificate English. Teachers note that the subject helps students to enhance their critical thinking and to acquire important transferable skills. Teachers stress the value and importance of English in facilitating students to access the curriculum more broadly, across all subjects and programmes. However, the size of the syllabus is also noted as a challenge in some respects.
- Teachers and students enjoy experiencing a wide variety of texts. Teachers welcome opportunities to engage with diverse texts and authors, as well as the classical works of English literature. However, teachers observed that the rate at which new text lists are prescribed could be lessened.
- A stronger emphasis on oracy in the experience of Leaving Certificate English was called for by many teachers and students, with the importance of conversation and discussion in the English classroom highlighted. The benefits for inclusivity were noted in this context, including for students whose first language is not English.
- An Additional Assessment Component for English was broadly welcomed by students and teachers. It was noted that such a component could help to reduce student stress, while also allowing for different formats of presentation by which students could demonstrate their work.

5. International trends in upper secondary curriculum arrangements for English

This section considers the English education landscape internationally. A review of upper secondary English education in a number of jurisdictions: Northern Ireland, England, Scotland, New South Wales, and Queensland.

Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Curriculum, set by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), provides students with a broad range of subjects for post-primary education including specifications for English Language and for English Literature. The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) marks the end of compulsory education in Northern Ireland. At age 16, some pupils stay at school and choose to study for Entry Level qualifications, Vocational Qualifications, or the General Certificate of Education (GCE). These can be either AS or A2 units or a combination thereof. GCE A Level is a two-year course. AS (Advanced Subsidiary) is the first year and examinations are taken at the end of that year. In Northern Ireland the result for the AS examination counts for 40% of the A Level (Advanced) qualification. At the end of year two the results for AS and A levels are combined to give the final A level result. Those choosing GCE levels normally pick three or four subjects. Leaving Certificate English would equate to the AS and A2 Level courses, *GCE English Literature* being the equivalent course.

GCE in English Literature

[GCE in English Literature](#) (2019) has five assessment units, four of which are externally assessed and one internally assessed. It provides students with opportunities to study a range of English literature written by Irish writers and opportunities to read texts from the canon of English literature as well as texts by more modern writers. It supports students to develop as discerning readers, capable of independent and critical research. Course units include:

- AS 1: The Study of Poetry 1900–Present and Drama 1900–Present
- AS 2: The Study of Prose Pre 1900
- A2 1: Shakespearean Genres
- A2 2: The Study of Poetry Pre 1900 and Unseen Poetry
- A2 3: Internal Assessment [Students complete a 2500-word essay on one of the given themes].

Assessment

Each unit is available for assessment in summer each year. It is possible to re-sit individual AS and A2 assessment units once and count the better result for each unit towards an AS or A2 level qualification. Candidates' results for individual assessment units can count towards a qualification.

Assessment at AS level is by two external written examinations carrying 60% and 40% of AS level and 24% and 16% of A2 level respectively. Assessment at A2 level comprises two external written examinations each carrying 20% of A2 level and an internal assessment (the 2500-word essay) carrying 20% of A2 level.

There are five assessment objectives for the specification. Candidates must:

- articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression
- analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts
- demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received
- explore connections across literary texts
- explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.

Detailed guidelines for both the external and internal assessments are provided, including instructions regarding the teacher's certification of authenticity to accompany the candidate's work.

England

Marshall (NCCA, 2023) characterises the national curriculum for English, leading to the GCSE, as reflecting a literary heritage model in which the dominant influences are classic texts of 'seriousness and value', which students must be taught as preparation for the assessments that effectively police the curriculum. The approach to language and literature is not an integrated one as in Ireland's Junior Cycle specification and LC syllabus. Specifications are available for English Language and English Literature. There are separate specifications for [English Language](#) and [English Literature](#) at GCSE level. There are separate specifications for English Language and English Literature at GCE AS and A level. Reforms to A Levels in England, begun in 2015, have 'decoupled' AS from A Level, meaning that AS results no longer count towards the overall A Level. AS Levels are available as a standalone qualification only. The Department for Education sets the subject content AS and A levels must cover while exam boards develop, mark and award AS and A level qualifications. There are currently four exam boards: AQA, OCR, Pearson and WJEC Eduqas. [For illustrative purposes the specifications referred to here are those of the AQA board.]

GCE English Language

Subject content for the [English Language specification](#) at AS level comprises, textual variations and representations, language diversity and writing skills. Methods of language analysis underpin the study of these topics. These include: phonetics, phonology and prosodics; graphology; semantics; grammar; pragmatics; discourse.

At A level, subject content comprises; textual variations and representations, children's language development and language diversity and change, language discourses, writing skills, language

investigation and original writing. Again, these components are underpinned by the methods of language analysis as above.

Assessment

Assessment at AS level is by two written examination papers, each carrying 50% of the marks available. Assessment at A level is by two written examination papers, each carrying 40% of the marks available and a non-exam assessment entitled Language in Action carrying 20% of the marks available, assessed by teachers and moderated by the exam board. This school-based project allows students to explore and analyse language data independently and to develop and reflect upon their own writing expertise. They do this by carrying out a language study or investigation of 2000 words and by providing a piece of original writing accompanied by a reflective commentary amounting to some 750 words.

GCE English Literature

In terms of the [specification for English Literature](#) the historicist method of studying texts diachronically (across a broad time period) is at the centre of the specification. Subject content at AS level involves studying a set theme, e.g. Love Through the Ages. Students are expected to read widely from the lists of set texts and to study: one Drama (Shakespeare), one Poetry anthology (anthologies are prepared by the exam boards), and two prose texts.

Subject content for the specification at A level involves exploring the relationships that exist between texts and the contexts within which they are written, received and understood. Essentially, texts are studied in pairs, e.g. theme: Love through the ages – A One core set text (Shakespeare) B Two comparative set texts (one poetry and one prose text - one must be written pre-1900); theme: Texts in shared contexts – one core set text and two comparative set texts; theme: Texts across time – two independently chosen texts (one must be written pre-1900).

Assessment

Assessments are linear, meaning that students sit all the AS exams at the end of their AS course and all the A-level exams at the end of their A-level course. For AS level there are two examination papers, each carrying 50% of the total marks for the level. At A level there are two examination papers, each carrying 40% of the total marks and non-exam essay (2500 words) on the comparative study of two texts, teacher assessed, moderated by the exam board and allocated 20% of the total marks.

Scotland

The English curriculum sits within Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) as English and Literacy for lower secondary. At upper secondary, Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) National Courses for English are available for Higher and Advanced Higher levels. National courses reflect Curriculum for Excellence values, purposes and principles. They offer flexibility, provide time for learning, focus on skills and applying learning, and provide scope for personalisation and choice. (SQA, *Higher English* 2023 p.2)

Higher English Course Specification

The [Higher English Course Specification](#) (SQA 2023) outlines the purpose and aims of the course as to enable students to develop the ability to:

- read, write, talk and listen in detailed and complex contexts, as appropriate to purpose and audience
- understand, analyse and evaluate detailed and complex texts, including Scottish texts, in the contexts of literature, language and the media
- create and produce written texts and spoken language, as appropriate to purpose, audience and context, through the application of knowledge and understanding of detailed and complex language.

When compared with the heritage and historicist approach of England's GCE specification for English Literature, the aims of the specification are more redolent of Leaving Certificate English. Texts for study are not prescribed as such. 'With the exception of the Scottish text list, which offers a range of prescribed texts across the genres of drama, prose fiction and poetry, there are no restrictions in the selection of texts for study. Texts can be chosen from literature, language or the media, where the content, style and structure allow candidates to conduct detailed and complex analysis, and evaluation. In addition, texts should promote an extension of candidates' imaginative, emotional and intellectual reach.' (SQA, *Higher English 2023*, p.4.)

Assessment

Question papers are set and marked by SQA, and examinations are conducted in centres under conditions specified for external examinations. There are two exam papers: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation, and Critical Reading which has two sections – Scottish texts and Critical essay. In addition, there is a Course assessment entitled Portfolio-writing.

Some further detail on the assessment arrangements for Portfolio-writing might support this redevelopment of Leaving Certificate English particularly relating to considerations for the Additional Assessment Component:

- the portfolio-writing provides evidence of candidates' skills in writing for one of two purposes: broadly creative, and broadly discursive. These purposes are not mutually exclusive, and writing may contain elements of both.
- the portfolio-writing is allocated 30% of the overall marks for the course assessment. The 30% weighting is achieved by doubling the mark for one piece.
- candidates produce one written text: either broadly creative or broadly discursive. They can choose this text from their writing done throughout the course. Candidates produce the portfolio independently, but the teacher or lecturer supports them to choose the focus, theme and genre of the piece of writing.

- this portfolio-writing is set by centres within SQA guidelines; conducted under some supervision and control; evidence is submitted to SQA for external marking; all marking is quality assured by SQA.

Advanced Higher English Course Specification

The purpose and aims of the [Advanced Higher English Course](#) (SQA 2023) are similar to the Higher course and the skills build upon those enabled by the previous course. The specification illustrates the qualification in these terms:

The course provides a clear progressive pathway for candidates who wish to go on to study English literature, language or other disciplines in further and higher education. Through the acquisition of a set of advanced communication skills, the course offers a link to many vocational settings, for example writing, teaching, research, publishing, journalism, law, marketing, media, industry, commerce, public relations, cultural and public service industries. (SQA Advanced Higher English Course, 2023, p.3.)

Assessment

There are two exam papers: Literary Study and Textual Analysis. The course assessment comprises Portfolio-writing which assesses evidence of candidates' skills in writing in one genre, and a Project-dissertation. The guidelines describe the Project-dissertation as assessing candidates' independent reading of complex and sophisticated literature. It provides evidence of candidates' skills in critical analysis, evaluation, investigation and writing. The dissertation has three stages: planning, research and development, and writing. In terms of stage one planning, candidates are expected to choose appropriate texts and formulate a precise and focused dissertation task on an aspect of literature. For stage two, research and development, candidates should investigate and research relevant materials and record all sources consulted. Stage three, writing involves reflecting, redrafting and proofreading the dissertation before final submission. Candidates' chosen texts for the dissertation must be literary, and must be untaught. Writers or texts studied in the dissertation cannot be used in the Literary Study question paper. As with the portfolio-writing for the Higher course, the dissertation is submitted to SQA for marking.

Australia – New South Wales

In Australia English is mandatory for students up to 18 but each state has a different final examination so the curriculum goes from Foundation to year 10 and then has an additional section for senior years 11 and 12. All states have to follow the curriculum in that the demands of the Australian curriculum overarch the state requirement. Each state, however, interprets the national curriculum slightly differently. This section of the paper focuses on English for years 11 and 12 in New South Wales. (Marshall 2023 p.8)

English for senior cycle is available at Standard and Advanced levels. Students at Advanced level can also take Extension courses (NSW Education Standards Authority). There are specifications for English Studies, and English EAL/D which are language courses with intercultural and vocational dimensions. School-based assessment is conducted during years 11 and 12. At the end of year 12 students may sit the state-wide Higher-School Certificate examinations. Marshall (NCCA 2023) notes: 'The HSC is 50% examination and 50% school-based coursework. The coursework is moderated by groups of schools together. Significantly, if the coursework is graded higher than the examination it is the coursework that moderates the exam result.'

Australia – Queensland

In Queensland, a syllabus for a senior subject is an 'official map' of a senior school subject. A syllabus's function is to support schools in delivering the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) system through high-quality and high-equity curriculum and assessment. (QCAA 2024 p.1) The QCAA English learning area is made up of five senior secondary subjects: Essential English, English, Literature, English & Literature Extension, and English as an Additional Language. These subjects share common features that include the continuing development of students' knowledge, understanding and skills in listening, speaking, reading, viewing, designing and writing. Differences between the subjects lie in the emphasis on how language and skills are developed and the contexts in which they are applied. (QCAA 2024 p.2)

This section of the report focuses on the [English, General Senior Syllabus](#), (2024). The syllabus is used by teachers to develop curriculum for their school context. The term course of study describes the unique curriculum and assessment that students engage with in each school context. A course of study is the product of a series of decisions made by a school to select, organise and contextualise subject matter, integrate complementary and important learning, and create assessment tasks in accordance with syllabus specifications. The syllabus recommends that each course of study is designed such that teaching, learning and assessment activities are integrated and enlivened in an authentic setting. The syllabus contains four QCAA-developed units, each with a notional teaching, learning and assessment time of 55 hours, from which schools develop their course of study, which includes open choices of texts for units 1 and 2, and texts from a wide-ranging prescribed list for units 3 and 4. Guided by the relevant policy and procedures handbook, schools design and carry out assessment tasks for each unit. Opportunities for the development of complementary skills (literacy, numeracy, and 21st century skills) have been embedded throughout the unit subject matter. The 21st century skills are described as: 'the attributes and skills students need to prepare them for higher education, work, and engagement in a complex and rapidly changing world. These skills include critical thinking, creative thinking, communication, collaboration and teamwork, personal and social skills, and digital literacy.' (QCAA 2024 p.7)

A pedagogical and conceptual framework for English is set out as:

Education in the discipline of English offers students ways of thinking about, creating and engaging with texts, and how they represent the world and human experience. The framework for the subject's interrelated objectives is informed by an understanding of the relationships between language, text, purpose, context and audience, and how these relationships shape meaning and perspectives.

Students engage critically and creatively with a variety of texts, taking into account the ways:

- language and structural choices shape perspectives to achieve particular effects
- ideas, attitudes and perspectives are represented in texts, and the effects of these representations on readers, viewers and listeners
- that meanings in texts are shaped by purpose, cultural contexts and social situations
- texts position readers, viewers and listeners.

All senior secondary English subjects aim to develop students' critical and creative thinking, both independently and collaboratively, and their capacity to understand and contest complex and challenging ideas in order to form their own interpretations and perspectives, and to understand the interpretations and perspectives of others. (QCAA, 2024,p.8.)

Assessment

Queensland has a long tradition of school-based assessment which it introduced for senior cycle in the 1970s; teachers devised the assessment instruments and made judgements about student achievement. However, the current QCE system started in 2019. This new system was developed in response to an independent review of senior assessment and tertiary entrance, and in response to a call from teachers and parents seeking more transparency regarding where students' marks come from. Its core components include a new approach to senior assessment, combining school-based assessment with external assessment set and marked by the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority.

The syllabus for English requires four assessments linked to the syllabus units:

- Internal assessment 1: Spoken persuasive response (25%)
- Internal assessment 2: Written response for a public audience (25%)
- Internal assessment 3: Examination – extended response (25%)
- External assessment: Examination – extended response (25%).

External assessment is developed and marked by the QCAA. The external assessment in English is common to all schools and administered under the same conditions, at the same time, on the same day.

Section Summary

- Unlike Ireland's English language and literature syllabus, many European and international jurisdictions offer separate specifications for language and for literature.
- Most of the curriculum specifications surveyed across the jurisdictions are similar to Leaving Certificate English in terms of the rationale, aims and course structure.
- Approaches to summative assessment, in terms of the balance between external and school-based, vary considerably across jurisdictions, but all jurisdictions employ a combination of examinations and additional assessment components.

6. Issues for consideration

This section sets out a number of issues for consideration in the development of a new curriculum specification for Leaving Certificate English. These arise from the nature of the subject itself, and the influence of social, cultural and technological change in our world, the ever-expanding literacy demands on young students, and the diversity of our society and our classrooms, in addition to drawing on themes emerging in the previous sections of this background paper.

The scope and structure of the specification

As noted in Section 2 of this report, the size and scope of a specification for English can be a matter of some debate due on the one hand to the development of unconstrained language skills at its heart and to the nature of open-ended engagement with literary texts on the other. The feedback from teachers and students in Section 3 of this paper draws attention to the breadth and size of the course as being its greatest challenge. Consideration should be given to course content in terms of the literary texts required for study (drama, fiction and poetry for example) and to the inclusion of the comparative study of texts. The recommendation from teachers recorded in Section 3 is that the comparative modes be reviewed and renewed.

In considering questions of size and scope, the relative demand of the specification for students at Higher and Ordinary Levels merits consideration. Teachers in the school focus groups were generally of the view that the size of the course at Ordinary Level allowed greater scope for exploration of the literary texts. Nevertheless, in order to allow for students with varying abilities and linguistic levels to engage meaningfully with the curriculum, it is pertinent to ask whether, especially in terms of course content and assessment, a specification at Ordinary Level should mirror that at Higher Level so closely.

The syllabus will require review in terms of its continuity with learning in Junior Cycle English, which is structured by reference to Strands and Outcomes, as in the Primary Language Curriculum. In particular, the overarching concepts of Comprehending and Composing, the focus for language study on five categories (which the syllabus admits to being an artificial construct, section 2.5), and the number of associated learning outcomes will need to be reviewed in the context of the [Technical form of curriculum specifications](#) for subjects and modules in a redeveloped Senior Cycle (NCCA, 2023). This part of the review will ensure that the attributes of the Key Competencies of senior cycle are embedded in the specification's learning outcomes.

Literacies and numeracies

The NCCA framework, *Key competencies in senior cycle (Draft)* (NCCA 2023), will be a key resource for considering the dimensions of literacy and numeracy in the redeveloped specification. The attributes relating to Thinking and Solving Problems, Communicating, Participating in Society, and Managing Learning and Self are pointedly relevant in this regard.

The 1999 Leaving Certificate English syllabus prioritises the goal of supporting learners 'to become literate in modern society'. A bewildering variety of linguistic forms and styles challenges students today, both inside and outside of school. To this end the syllabus takes a holistic and integrated approach that aims to develop in students: 'a mature and critical literacy to prepare them for the responsibilities and challenges of adult life in all contexts'. Although clarification was

offered in the *Draft Guidelines for Teachers* (NCCA, 1999) it is important that a redeveloped curriculum specification would be clear about terminology in this regard. The *Guidelines* addresses the issue by drawing attention to the difference between criticality in literary study and critical literacy as such:

Developing students' ability to think critically has always been central to literary study at Leaving Certificate level. Critical literacy is a development of that traditional emphasis and an enlargement of its scope. (DES 1999 p.18)

It links that enlargement of scope to terms such as: challenging assumptions; determining the way texts represent and shape experience; exploring alternatives; developing scepticism in relation to absolute and general statements. This perspective is supported in the report of the Chief Examiner for 2013 referred to in Section 3, where teachers are encouraged to look for opportunities offered by the English syllabus to develop students' critical thinking skills and critical literacy, so that they can assess and challenge the validity of ideas presented in texts and form independent views more confidently.

Cahill (2023) argues that developing critical voices among post-primary students 'has never been more relevant as our kids negotiate an information maelstrom fuelled by *fake news* and a consumer culture that has gone so far, we are in danger of consuming ourselves!' A review of this dimension of the specification is timely given the commitment in NCCA's Strategic Plan 2022-2025 to ensuring that young people 'develop as responsible, resilient and compassionate actors for social justice, climate action, sustainability and equality'. (NCCA 2022)

In addition to the consideration that must be given to the bewildering variety of forms of literacy that stimulate, excite and challenge our young learners, the development group will need to be cognisant of the perspectives offered by the Department of Education's *Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027* (DE 2022) which reflects an 'overall aim that digital technology is an integral part of teaching, learning and assessment in every classroom and every subject.' Further, the report of the Chief Examiner for English (SEC, 2013), stresses the need to foster a process approach to writing and advises that attention be given to the development of visual literacy in support of the close "reading" of visual images. The development work should also take cognisance of the new strategy on literacy, numeracy and digital literacy which is currently in development by the Department of Education.

Assessment

The redevelopment of senior cycle will see the introduction of an additional assessment component (AAC), which will carry a minimum weighting of 40%, in all senior cycle subjects. The introduction of an AAC offers the potential to assess a range of skills that cannot be adequately assessed through the traditional format of the written examination paper. This will mark a significant change for Leaving Certificate English, raising questions that resonate with issues touched upon in this background paper and suggesting focus points for consideration during the development process, including:

In terms of the design of the AAC, whether it should be a single assessment event or a range of events over time; whether it might mirror or extend the CBAs of Junior Cycle English; whether it should focus on a significant area of the literature course (such as the Comparative Study) thereby moving it from the exam hall into the classroom; whether its focus should be on language

development more broadly, perhaps encouraging expressiveness in a number or variety of modalities etc.,

- How the AAC can prioritise the formative dimension of assessment as learning and for learning, thereby supporting and being supported by the key competencies of the senior cycle curriculum
- What impact the existence and nature of the AAC might have on the design of the written examinations

What is the likely impact of the AAC on: the (perceived or actual) breadth and size of Leaving Certificate English, especially in relation to the timing of assessment events; the rhythms of teaching and learning across the two years of Leaving Certificate English; plans to spread the assessment load and thereby alleviate the pressure placed on students in 6th year.

Arrangements for summative assessment by written examination have some resonance too in relation to the scope and breadth of the specification. In its review of assessment, the development group should take account of the ameliorating impact of the wider choice of questioning on literature offered through the changed assessment arrangements during the Covid 19 pandemic. (Although it is acknowledged that these changed arrangements may have led to a narrower educational experience in English for the students involved as the number of texts studied was, by design, reduced.

Finally, a wholeness of experience through the integration of language and literature is an intended goal of the LC English syllabus. The review should consider the extent to which revised assessment arrangements might lead to a fragmentation of experience for learners over the two years of the course and how any such fragmentation can be minimised.

Continuity, progression and support

In the course of this redevelopment, questions such as the following will need to be considered:

- how will the specification for English articulate with the specification for Drama, Film and Theatre Studies?
- how will the specification articulate with the revised programme statement for Transition Year?
- How will the specification articulate with the Junior Cycle English specification?
- What supports will be needed in light of the impact of key competencies upon pedagogy?

The model of text prescription

Engagement with literary and non-literary texts across a wide range of genres is an essential feature of courses in English. As described in Section 4 of this paper, internationally a variety of models of text suggestion and/or prescription exists in support of teacher and student choice. Currently, Leaving Certificate English employs a model of rolling prescription of literary texts (drama, fiction, poetry, film, and non-fiction narratives) which aims to promote wide reading and which facilitates both continuity and change. Ironically, the recent NCCA review, *Prescribing Texts* (NCCA 2023), draws attention to the likelihood that the provision of wide and varied lists of

prescribed texts is in itself no guarantee of wide and varied reading or study. This conundrum was reflected in the views of some of the teachers in the school focus groups: 'From a practice point of view, I hate to see the quick overturn of texts. It is wonderful when you are revisiting a poet or a text again.' (Teacher focus group). The redevelopment of Leaving Certificate English affords an opportunity to consider the model of text prescription with reference to some of the following:

would a greater level of text continuity increase teacher willingness to invest time in preparation for teaching of unfamiliar texts?

Would such continuity support students to enjoy a richer experience of engaging with a wider range of texts?

would a slower rate of change lessen teacher perception of the size and breadth of the course?

would a lessening of the rate of text change facilitate the provision of additional resource materials?

English – a language among languages

The *Report of the Board of Studies for Languages* (CEB 1987), a seminal document which informed the development of the English syllabuses for Junior Certificate (1989) and Leaving Certificate English (1999), argues that 'language should constitute a key curriculum area, and that the relationship between first, second and foreign language learning should be made explicit not just in the curriculum but in classroom practice.' (Quoted in Little, D., NCCA 2003). Further, in the school in which it is the language of instruction English has a cross-curricular dimension, which raises questions such as: what and how does English contribute to language learning for all subjects, and, are the teachers of all subjects also teachers of English?

In the 25 years since the 1999 syllabus, Ireland and its schools have become places of far richer cultural and linguistic diversity, the fact of which raises questions at the level of language policy and curriculum provision. The review of international trends in Section 4 of this paper indicates that Northern Ireland includes a specification for English Language to GCSE level, England offers an English Language specification (in reality a specification for linguistics) to GCE level, Scotland provides a qualification at N2 in English and Communication, and both New South Wales and Queensland offer courses in English as an Additional Language for upper secondary.

The Insights from school visits section of this paper notes that teachers of students whose first language was not English felt that this redevelopment might be a good occasion on which to begin work on an English Language specification. In this context, some consideration might be given during the broader redevelopment of senior cycle to the place of English in relation to language learning more broadly.

In keeping with its conception of "language" as a curriculum area and its concern to do justice to language's communicative function, the Board of Studies for Languages emphasised the importance of developing students' listening and speaking skills in all language subjects. ...However, students continue to be assessed by written examinations only, which leaves teachers of English with little incentive to develop, for example, their students' oral presentation skills. (NCCA 2003 p.8)

This extract reflects the emphasis upon oral language in the specification for Junior Cycle English and the introduction of the Oral Communication CBA. The redevelopment of Leaving Certificate English should consider the value of such a re-orientation in terms of transferrable language skills, especially in light of the key competency of Communicating which can help students and teachers to make meaningful connections between and across different areas of learning.

Section Summary

- Continuity with Junior Cycle English, including the model of text prescription, the breadth and scope of the specifications in a flexible and potentially modular curriculum will require consideration.
- Revised assessment arrangements, especially the introduction of an additional assessment component, will require careful consideration in terms of the possible impact on how young people experience the subject of English
- Resourcing, guidelines and support for teacher CPD will also require consideration.

7. Brief for the review of Leaving Certificate English

NCCA has established a development group to undertake the task of redeveloping the curriculum specification for Leaving Certificate English. The work of the Development Group is, in general terms, agreed by the NCCA Board for Senior Cycle and approved by the Council in the form of the brief set out below.

This brief is designed to provide the basis for redeveloping the Leaving Certificate English curriculum specification. While the brief is derived from the key insights and issues for consideration identified in the previous sections of this paper, it is also guided by the parameters for the design of assessment arrangements in the development of specifications for all Tranche 2 subjects (Appendix 1).

The redevelopment of the new specification for Leaving Certificate English will take account of current research and developments in the field of English. It will remain student-centred and outcomes-based and in general terms, the specification should be aligned with levels 4 and 5 of the National Framework of Qualifications.

The specification will align to the template, agreed by Council, for curriculum specifications as set out in the [Technical form of curriculum specifications](#) for subjects and modules in a redeveloped senior cycle (NCCA 2023).

The Senior Cycle Key Competencies will be embedded in the learning outcomes. Leaving Certificate English will be available at both Higher and Ordinary level. It will be designed to be taught and assessed in a minimum of 180 hours. The development will be completed in Q2, 2025.

More specifically, the updating of the specification will consider and address the following:

How the specification aligns with the guiding principles of senior cycle and the vision for senior cycle education.

How the specification can support continuity and progression, including how to connect with and build on related learning at junior cycle, Transition Year, and in other senior cycle subjects and modules, as well as future learning in life, study, entrepreneurship, further education and training, higher education, apprenticeships, traineeships, and the world of work.

The rationale for LC English, making it transparent and evident to students, teachers, and parents.

How the specification can support the development of Senior Cycle Key Competencies and the development of a range of digital skills relevant to future life, work, and study.

How the specification, in its presentation and language register, can be strongly student-centred and have a clear focus on how students develop and demonstrate their knowledge, skills, values and dispositions.

How the specification can support students' literacy across a wide range of contexts.

How the specification can support students in developing responsible dispositions and values in relation to citizenship and society through a focus on their personal growth through language and their critical engagement with issues of equality and social justice.

The assessment of LC English that is aligned to the parameters for the design of assessment arrangements in the development of specifications for all Tranche 2 subjects and modules (Appendix 1).

The potential to contribute to a reduction in or spreading of pressure on students by exploring the completion of the 40% assessment component in year 1 of the course.

How the AAC can support young adults in their personal growth through language learning, in effect, how the AAC might support literacy including critical literacy.

How the AAC can support and extend the agency of teachers and students, offering choices that support the inclusiveness of the curriculum and allow for students with varying abilities and linguistic levels to engage meaningfully with relevant tasks, whilst continuing to develop their competencies.

How the introduction of an additional assessment component, necessitate a review of course requirements more broadly, and possibly the development of a different model of text prescription.

How a change to the model of text prescription might contribute to the pedagogical impact of the key competencies across the curriculum.

How the specification, in its presentation, can support teachers in planning for teaching, learning and assessment.

How to embrace and embed technology in teaching, learning and assessment.

The work of the LC English Development Group will be based, in the first instance, on this Brief. In the course of the work and deliberations of the Development Group, elaborations of some of these points and additional points may be added to the brief.

Appendix 1: Overarching parameters for the design of assessment arrangements in the development of specifications for all Tranche 2 subjects.

Executive summary

- The Minister for Education announced an update on September 20, 2023, on the approach to be taken to the introduction of new and revised subject specifications including how assessment would be addressed in those specifications. Specifically, each subject shall have an assessment component in addition to the terminal written examination.
- This assessment component will be worth at least 40% of the total available marks.
- Each subject is to have one written examination; typically marks for the written examination will be 60%,
- Typically, there should be two assessment components: One written examination and one other assessment component. However, there may be exceptions to this that are justified even after extensive consideration of the overall assessment load on students.

Introduction

This document outlines the overarching assessment arrangements and parameters to guide the design of specifications for all Tranche 2 subjects/ modules. These subjects/modules are:

- Accounting
- Construction Studies
- Engineering
- English
- Geography
- LCVP Link Modules
- Physical Education.

This advice is informed by ongoing work with Tranche 1 subjects and will be amended, as appropriate, for future tranches which may take account of their subject areas and existing assessment arrangements.

The arrangements as detailed here reflect the policy direction issued by the Minister of Education that all subjects will have an assessment component, to be in a form that is not a traditional written examination, for those components to be set and assessed by the SEC and thereby lead to a reduced emphasis on final examinations in June of 6th year.

Specifically, the arrangements for all assessment components as outlined in this document are framed by the Minister's announcement(s) on March 29, 2022, and subsequently on September 20th, 2023. Underpinned by the following understandings, the assessment components:

- will not take the form of traditional written examinations.
- will be set and marked by the SEC.
- will be subject to SEC arrangements for their completion, authentication, and submission.

In developing the arrangements outlined below, the following rationale for moving towards all subjects having another assessment component is central. This rationale is informed by deliberations on research commissioned by the NCCA and the SEC, and on the assessment literature more generally. From this work, it is evident that these components have the potential to:

- **Reduce dependence** on written summative examinations and therefore provide for a **broader assessment system**; written examinations have an important role but can be seen as a ‘snapshot’ of learning and can lead to teaching and learning having an excessive focus on examination preparation; other forms of assessment can mitigate the potential for this narrowing of learning by assessing aspects of student learning better and/or more comprehensively than written examinations alone can do; or assess learning that is not readily assessable through written examinations.
- Support and enhance teachers’ understanding and assessment of **key competencies** by contributing to a greater understanding of how students’ knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions are assessed.
- Provide opportunities for students and teachers to **reflect on student learning**, boost students’ motivation to learn and enhance opportunities for formative feedback practices.
- Extend the range and diversity of assessment opportunities; **spread the assessment load** and thus contribute to a reduction in or spreading of pressure on students.
- Build and develop **teachers’ assessment skills and assessment literacy** as teachers support students in working through the assessment activities as detailed within assessment briefs or guidelines.
- Generate student assessment data which can help reduce the vulnerability of the system to future unprecedented or unexpected system shocks such as COVID.
- Allow for assessment opportunities that are more **authentic** than a system relying on terminal written examinations solely.

It is also important to note that a review of the assessment literature more generally also indicates that when introducing other assessment components, it is necessary to consider how to mitigate risks, for example, of:

- over-assessment of students
- over-rehearsal of assessments
- the assessments becoming overly structured, compartmentalised, repetitive, and routine.
-

As is already the case where other forms of assessment apply, the new assessment arrangements will be guided by the overarching principles of equity, fairness, and integrity.

Table 1 below sets out the general parameters and processes to guide the work of the subject development groups (SDG) as they consider the most appropriate assessment for every subject. The specific parameters for each of the Tranche 2 subjects are set out in Table 2.

Table 1: Assessment parameters and processes – general application to tranche 2 subjects

Considerations	Parameters to guide the work of the development group.
Nature	The purpose and nature of the assessment component will be clearly outlined in the subject specification and accompanying guidelines to

	<p>support the completion of the assessment. Details will be provided on the nature of the component. Existing examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • research project/extended essay • oral assessment • performance assessment • portfolio assessment • creation of an artefact • field study • experiment/ proof of concept/ practical investigation. <p>The subject specification and the accompanying guidelines will articulate clearly what the students are required to do, the form(s) in which it can be carried out and submitted, and the workload expectations associated with the assessment. The alignment of the assessment component to a particular set of learning outcomes from the subject specification will be provided, as well as details on which key competencies and associated learning outcomes will be assessed. This does not preclude the same LOs from being assessed in the final examination.</p>
Weighting	<p>The assessment component in each subject will be worth at least 40% of the total available marks. There will be the option for this weighting to be worth 50% in the cases of Construction Studies, Engineering and PE, and up to 60% for the LCVP Link Modules.</p>
Timing	<p>The SDG will advise on the time required for the carrying out of the assessment component.</p> <p>While the SDG may suggest when this may occur, the final decision will need to be made following consideration of the overall schedule of completion dates for all assessments across all subjects and this will be finalized by the SEC further to collaboration with NCCA and DE.</p> <p>The date for completion of the assessment component by the student will be published by the SEC and this detail will not be included in the subject specification.</p>
Design	<p>The majority of assessment components will result in an artefact/document being transmitted to the SEC and assessed by the SEC.</p> <p>In some instances, the design of the assessment may require examiners to visit schools to conduct the assessment but manageability at school and system level will need to be considered.</p>
Guidance	<p>Guidelines to support the assessment components will be specific to each subject. These guidelines will be developed collaboratively by the NCCA</p>

	<p>and SEC. They will be informed by the deliberations of the SDG during the development of the specification and will detail:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the purpose of the component concerned i.e., what it is intended to assess. • the nature of the assessment component/activity. • descriptors of quality in the form of a graduated rubric and details on assessment standards at higher and ordinary levels if deemed necessary by the assessment method. • details on the timing of the assessment (its duration and when it could happen). • guidance on the processes that may be used for the administration of the assessment.
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Table 2: Parameters for assessment arrangements for each Tranche 2 subject

Subject	Current arrangements	Parameters for new assessment arrangements
Accounting	One written examination. (3 hrs)	<p>Written examination: 60% weighting.</p> <p>Assessment component: 40% weighting.</p> <p>Written examination will be set at higher and ordinary levels.</p> <p>Assessment component would be based on one submission to SEC based on a common brief.</p>
Construction Studies	<p>Written examination (OL: 40%; HL: 50%) 1 paper (OL: 2.5 hours; HL: 3 hours)</p> <p>Coursework (artefact and portfolio) (OL: 30%; HL: 25%)</p> <p>Practical skills test (OL: 30%; HL: 25%)</p> <p>Coursework and practical are examined at a common level. Written examination is examined at higher and ordinary levels.</p>	<p>Written examination: 50% weighting.</p> <p>Assessment component: 50% weighting.</p> <p>Written examination will be set at higher and ordinary levels.</p> <p>Assessment component would be based on one submission to SEC based on a common brief.</p>

<p>Engineering</p>	<p>Written examination (OL: 40%; HL: 50%) 1 paper (OL: 2.5 hours; HL 3 hours) Coursework (artefact and portfolio) (OL: 30%; HL: 25%) Practical skills test (OL: 30%; HL: 25%)</p> <p>Coursework is assessed at Higher and Ordinary levels.</p> <p>Practical skills test is examined at a common level. Written examination is examined at higher and ordinary levels.</p>	<p>Written examination: 50% weighting.</p> <p>Assessment component: 50% weighting.</p> <p>Written examination will be set at higher and ordinary levels.</p> <p>Assessment component would be based on one submission to SEC based on a common brief.</p>
<p>English</p>	<p>Two papers with a 50/50 % split. Paper 1: Broadly essay and comprehension focused (2 hours 30 + 20 minutes reading time).</p> <p>Paper 2: Poetry, Literature focused (3 hours + 20 minutes reading time).</p>	<p>Written exam: 60% weighting.</p> <p>Assessment component: 40% weighting.</p> <p>Written examination will be set at higher and ordinary levels.</p> <p>Assessment component would be based on one submission to SEC based on a common brief.</p>
<p>Geography</p>	<p>Written examination: 80% weighting (2 hours 30 + 20 minutes reading time).</p> <p>Geographical Investigation: 20% weighting.</p>	<p>Written exam: 60% weighting.</p> <p>Assessment component: 40% weighting.</p> <p>Written examination will be set at higher and ordinary levels.</p> <p>Assessment component would be based on one submission to SEC based on a common brief.</p>

<p>LCVP Link Modules</p>	<p>Portfolio: 60% weighting.</p> <p>Written examination: 40% weighting</p> <p>Portfolio submitted with written exam in March of 6th year.</p> <p>Written examination has 3 aspects: Case study, audio visual and extended answer questions.</p> <p>Portfolio has combination of core and choice aspects and completed under supervision of class teacher.</p>	<p>Portfolio: 60% weighting.</p> <p>Written exam: 40% weighting.</p>
<p>Physical Education</p>	<p>Physical Activity Project: 20% (to a common brief)</p> <p>Performance assessment: 30% (to a common brief)</p> <p>Written examination: 50% (at Higher and Ordinary Level)</p> <p>PAP: over an 8- to 10-week period and submitted as digital format.</p> <p>PA: choose one of 3 physical activities; submit as digital artefact.</p>	<p>Written examination: 50% weighting.</p> <p>Assessment component: 50% weighting.</p> <p>Written examination will be set at higher and ordinary levels.</p> <p>Assessment component would be based on one submission to SEC based on a common brief.</p>

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