

# **NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT**



**NCCA commentary on ESRI research into curriculum  
provision and school integration among first year students**

**March 2004**

## **NCCA commentary on ESRI research into curriculum provision and school integration among first year students**

In early 2002, as part of the review of junior cycle, NCCA commissioned the Educational Policy Research Centre of the ESRI to engage in a longitudinal study of students' experiences of curriculum in the first three years of their post-primary schooling. Given the critical role of first year and the impact of subject choice in a student's education, it was decided to focus on this year, and to include a focus on transition as part of the study. The research included a postal survey of all post-primary school principals in early 2002 and an in-depth study of a representative sample of 12 case study schools carried out between September 2002 and May 2003. The school-based strand of the study included interviews with students, teachers, principals and parents.

The research team has collected rich data, both quantitative and qualitative, that highlight key elements of discontinuity between the curriculum experienced by students at primary and post-primary level and has clearly identified the factors that help or hinder students' successful integration into post-primary school. The ESRI is to be congratulated on the quality of the research and of the report that it has generated.

This commentary will highlight the findings and recommendations of the ESRI report that are of particular relevance to the current work and advice of the NCCA. It will outline how the outcomes of the research can inform the review of junior cycle, in particular (i) rebalancing subject syllabuses to reduce curriculum overlap and overload; (ii) making syllabus content more explicit and outcomes-based; (iii) improving the practical and skill base of subjects and (iv) providing support for teachers in assessment for learning in the classroom. It will also propose appropriate actions that may be taken in response to the findings in the short to medium term, notwithstanding that the research is longitudinal in nature and that the NCCA would not wish to prejudice its ultimate conclusions.

## **1. The information gap**

One of the significant issues identified by the research findings is the gap in information and understanding seen to exist between primary and post-primary schools and the resulting effect this has on students' experience of transfer. The report notes that '*only a minority of post-primary schools receive information on all incoming students*' and that the information received is mostly verbal, relating primarily to students' academic performance and behaviour. Post-primary principals are dissatisfied with the level of information they receive, in particular, information on coverage of the curriculum. However, there appears to be no formal arrangement in post-primary schools for processing the information received for incoming students. For example, one third of teachers surveyed indicated that they received no information on first year students prior to their entry.

At a national level, this report exposes the uncoordinated approach to information transfer between primary and post-primary schools. In so doing, it points to the need for a shared strategy between the primary and post-primary sectors regarding the recording and transfer of student information. The extent to which this information will be meaningful and useful to principals and teachers at post-primary level, however, will depend on their familiarity with the primary school curriculum, their understanding of the reporting mechanism, and their ability to interpret the types of information that is passed on.

The NCCA has recently completed the development of an overarching statement on assessment in primary schools, '*Assessment in Primary Schools*'. The purpose of this advice is to assist schools in approaching the issue of assessment in such a way that it fulfils the dual role of furthering the learning and development of individual children and providing parents and others concerned with the education of the child with accurate and helpful information on the child's progress and attainment. Under the Education Act 1998, there is now a statutory onus on all involved in the education of children to co-operate in the best interests of those children. This includes the promotion of effective liaison and consultation between schools, parents and other bodies with an interest in the needs of children. NCCA should consider the

implications of this act for transfer of information from primary and post-primary school and, also the rights of parents in relation to this information about their children.

Only half of the teachers surveyed in this study considered themselves familiar with the nature of the primary school curriculum. The student and parent interviews reveal that this lack of awareness of the thrust of the Primary School Curriculum can lead to much repetition of subject matter in first year, to early work in some subjects being pitched at too high a level for the student to understand, and to missed opportunities for students to make connections with and build on the learning that has taken place in primary school.

From the perspective of the post-primary school, it is important that subject teachers familiarise themselves with the teaching and learning approaches that characterise pupils' experiences in primary school. In particular, the 'child as active learner' focus of the primary school curriculum.

It must be noted that the current implementation of the Primary School Curriculum is one key context for this study. During the main phase of data collection in 2002, inservice for primary school teachers had been provided for just four curriculum subjects, with only three of these (English, Gaelige, Visual arts) having been formally implemented in classrooms. Issues regarding student transition from primary to post-primary school must be viewed in the context of primary school teaching and learning being in a state of transition itself. Through its primary curriculum review project, the NCCA will continue to gather information regarding children and teachers' experiences with the primary school curriculum, nationally.

The survey also sought information on post-primary schools' use of entry tests on students coming into first year. The vast majority of schools (94%) use some form of ability test for incoming students, half of these being pre-entry and over a quarter post-entry tests. Reasons given for holding tests include the identification of students who require learning support, providing baseline data for ongoing monitoring of

students' achievement and allocating students to baseline classes. Schools surveyed employed a wide variety of test types (26 different types) and 42% used their own tests, principally in mathematics, Irish and English. These findings raise a number of concerns: the lack of uniformity in testing approaches may lead to confusion among parents and students; some of the tests used by post-primary schools may repeat those already administered in feeder primary schools; preparation for pre-entry tests may place undue and unnecessary pressure on teachers of the 6<sup>th</sup> class in primary schools; and the allocation of a student to an ability grouping based on the measurement of a narrow range of subjects may not accurately reflect his/her aptitudes and capabilities. If a collaborative approach were adopted by primary and post-primary schools and an effective system for the communication of appropriate information about students developed, it might obviate the need for multiple testing.

Many of the teachers interviewed in the research said that they use a variety of methods to develop students' interest in their subject. Methodologies employed include experiments, project work, demonstrations, exploratory work and discussions. However, the report also points out that a significant number of teachers (20%) say that they never ask students questions in class, 15% say that students never ask questions in their class and few teachers report that they give students the opportunity to suggest topics to be covered in class. Furthermore, just over half of these teachers indicate that they generally teach students individually using the textbook and less than one in six regularly use pair or group work.

Clearly, there is a need to provide support for teachers and schools in adapting their teaching approach to take into account the learning needs of first year students. A developmental initiative is already underway in which the NCCA is working with small networks of teachers to develop classroom-based formative assessment approaches that will 'scaffold' students' learning by sharing learning goals, through active questioning, giving appropriate feedback and through student self-assessment. Initial feedback indicates that teachers participating in the initiative are developing the confidence to adopt these new approaches, and students—particularly less able students—are gaining in confidence as a result. The findings of the ESRI report give

urgency to the plans, already in hand, to extend this initiative and to disseminate its outcomes.

In promoting the overall development of the student, the junior cycle review committee, in 1999, defined the areas of experience that underpin junior cycle and established clear linkages between these and the curriculum areas in the Primary School Curriculum (see below). The continuum between primary and post-primary education is clear, but an understanding of this has apparently not permeated the system in a meaningful way.

<b>PRIMARY</b>	<b>POST-PRIMARY</b>
Language	Language and Literature
Mathematics	Mathematical Studies
Social, Environmental and Scientific Education	Science and Technology
	Social, Political and Environmental Education
Social, Personal and Health Education	Guidance, Counselling and Pastoral Care
	Religious and Moral Education
Physical Education	Physical Education
Arts Education	Arts Education

As an initial measure, both primary and post-primary teachers could be made aware of the resources available on the NCCA website. These include the aims, intended outcomes and areas of experience of the Junior Certificate Programme, and the Primary School Curriculum online. This information could be augmented by the inclusion of short summaries of the key features of each curriculum on the website.

An obvious way to bridge the gap in knowledge and understanding between the two sectors would be to include some form of briefing programme as part of the pre-service training of primary and post-primary teachers. An initiative along these lines should be encouraged.

Current NCCA work, aimed at rebalancing Junior Certificate subject syllabuses to a common template, has identified the need for a ‘statement of links’ to be included. Linkages with the Primary School Curriculum have been identified and will be included in the syllabus transcript. There are understandable reasons why gaps and differences emerge between primary and post-primary schools in terms of information transfer, understanding of curricula and approaches to teaching and learning. However, it is clear from the research that the failure to establish a real continuum between primary and post-primary schooling is having an impact on the success or otherwise of students’ successful transition.

Consideration of this idea would also be consistent with another relevant area of work within the NCCA—the development of a curriculum framework for guidance in post-primary schools—significant elements of which will include provision for successful transition and the scale of educational guidance that should be provided at junior cycle.

## **2. Student integration**

The report makes the following statement in relation to its findings on student integration:

*‘Within the framework of this study, the ‘success’ of the transition into post-primary education is seen to reflect the school’s approach to student integration, its approach to subject choice and the method of ability grouping used.’*

The next part of the commentary will look at these factors in turn.

### **Schools’ approaches to integration**

The study looks at the different ‘packages’ developed by the case study schools to help children to know what to expect in first year and to settle in over the course of the year. Structures to assist student integration include open days, parent briefings, and information booklets, induction programmes of varying length and sports camps.

It is encouraging that almost all (91%) of the students had visited the post-primary school before the beginning of the school year, while the majority of students reported visits from a post-primary school teacher and/or the school principal to their primary school. The importance of the class tutor as a point of contact and advice for students is affirmed by the study as is the role of the learning support teacher. The work of subject teachers (33% of those interviewed) in assisting first-year students to settle in is also noted.

An interesting finding is that half of the schools are using volunteers drawn from senior year groups to support first year students and to liaise with the class tutor. These 'student mentors' are seen as making an important contribution to the integration process. The idea of involving senior students in this way is consistent with the emerging NCCA advice in relation to the development of a school culture at senior cycle in which a more adult relationship between student and school is envisaged. Clearly, this practice should be encouraged, although it would be useful, in further stages of this research, to seek out the views that students hold of the mentor approach.

The report draws the important conclusion that students experience fewer transition difficulties in cases where schools have strong integration programmes in place... However, it also goes on to say that

*'for an integration programme to be successful, it must be underpinned by a positive 'informal' climate in the school, in which good relations exist between students and their peers and with their teachers.'*

This aspect of the report points to the need for the NCCA, perhaps in co-operation with School Development Planning Support (SDPS) at primary and the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) at post-primary level, to inform schools of good practice and to assist them in developing policies that will facilitate students' smooth transfer between the two sectors. As a first step in this process, it is intended to draw attention to this aspect of the research in a series of leaflets for parents and schools outlining the important findings of the research.

Consideration of these issues would be consistent with another relevant area of work within the NCCA—the development of a curriculum framework for guidance in post-primary schools—significant elements of which will include provision for successful transition and the scale of educational guidance that should be provided at junior cycle.

### **Schools' approaches to subject choice**

The report reveals a striking difference between schools in the number of subjects provided to first year students (from 10 to 21). Issues emerge at each end of this scale. In case study schools where a large number of subjects were taken in first year, many students reported that they felt overwhelmed by the scale of work involved. The low number of subjects available to students in vocational schools, in boys' secondary schools and in very small schools generally is also a cause for concern. Here, it is likely that students will not have access to the broad range of learning experiences espoused in the aims of junior cycle education.

In relation to the timing of subject choice, the report finds that in one fifth of schools students choose their subjects before or immediately on entry to the school. In these cases, lack of knowledge about subjects may mean that students are more likely to rely on information from parents and friends, which may not be accurate and may lead to a tendency to choose the familiar 'traditional' subjects. Sometimes students in this position regretted their choice subsequently. Students in the case study schools expressed a preference to be given the opportunity to try new subjects before they made their choice. Indeed, the research shows that students who delay their choice of subjects are more likely to be guided by teachers in making their selection.

The majority of the sample schools offer a wide range of subjects to first year students as 'tasters'. The research team was concerned that this approach might cause transition difficulties. However, no evidence emerged to support this concern. Students' reading and computation ability was unaffected and students were seen to settle in better when this approach was adopted. Having a large number of taster

subjects did lead to a perception among some of the students interviewed that they had too great a workload.

The report recommends that schools be encouraged to provide students with some exposure to a range of subjects before they are required to select their junior certificate subjects, that schools should be afforded the resources to provide such taster programmes and that parents be provided with appropriate information on the curriculum, especially the 'newer' subjects. It also recommends that curriculum content and assessment at junior cycle should reflect the fact that some students will have spent less time on particular subjects in first year.

The report notes that school size may have a significant effect on the number of subjects that can be offered at first year. Support will be needed to enable small schools to provide a wider range of subjects, particularly subjects with a practical orientation. In this regard, the possibility of local schools providing a broader curriculum through the sharing of teaching resources offers a way forward.

These findings and recommendations have a number of implications for the NCCA in its review of curriculum provision at junior cycle. Work is already underway to redraft the Junior Certificate syllabuses to a common template, so that subjects available at junior cycle can be compared side by side to identify areas of overload and overlap and, ultimately, to prepare and publish a guide to the junior cycle curriculum. Work is nearing completion in English, history, home economics, music and business studies. As part of this process, the review should consider how the subject syllabuses might be further reconfigured to allow for specified parts to be taught as taster units, perhaps following closely the structure and emphasis evident in the Primary School Curriculum. The review should also consider the reduction in content that would be required to enable teachers to cover the course in a shortened time frame and the assessment implications of such changes.

In relation to curriculum planning, the NCCA, in cooperation with the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI), has published a set of draft instruments to

assist schools in reviewing their curriculum provision at junior cycle, in order to plan for its development. In light of the findings of the ESRI, the NCCA will engage with the SDPI to augment and enhance these materials, with a view to supporting schools in developing a first year curriculum that offers breadth of choice to students.

### **Ability grouping**

The research notes that the majority (70 per cent) of schools surveyed used mixed ability classes in first year with 16 per cent using banding and 14 per cent streaming. In some cases students from mixed ability classes were grouped by ability for certain subjects, such as mathematics (setting). The increase in the use of mixed ability base classes since the 1990s is worthy of note.

From a teaching point of view, it was felt that it is much easier to teach students when they are all at the same ability level. However, the negative contribution of streaming to student integration and to other aspects of students' progress revealed by the research is significant. The report found that students in mixed ability classes make the most progress in reading and computation over the course of first year while those in middle or bottom classes in streamed schools tend to make the least progress. Many students in the lower streams experience a loss of self-esteem and develop more negative attitudes towards teachers and the school. Surprisingly, students in the top streams also experience difficulties, particularly in trying to cope with 'academic' pressure.

The message of the research to schools is clear in this regard. Schools that currently employ streaming in first year should be encouraged to develop alternative approaches to class grouping and be supported to do so. Investment in teacher professional development will be important in order to fully realise the potential of mixed ability teaching. This important finding should be included as a feature in information leaflets to parents.

### **3. Curriculum suitability and relevance**

The findings of the research in relation to the perceived suitability and relevance of the junior cycle curriculum for students are a cause for concern. While four fifths of principals feel that the junior cycle curriculum is suitable for a majority of first year students, 57% consider course content to be too challenging for a *significant* minority of first year students. Furthermore, 44% of teachers questioned the suitability of the curriculum for lower ability students.

Another noteworthy finding to emerge is that fewer than half of school principals feel that the curriculum is relevant to students' everyday lives. This is confirmed by the views expressed by students in the in-depth interviews in the case study schools. The research found that, over the course of first year, there is a decrease in the proportion of students finding schoolwork interesting, liking being at school and looking forward to coming to school.

The report also highlights students' preferences in relation to different parts of the curriculum. Students prefer subjects with a practical orientation, such as Art, Materials Technology (Wood), Home Economics, Computer Studies and Physical Education. Irish is the least liked subject, followed by Mathematics, History, Modern Languages, Business Studies, Geography, English and Science. Students also feel that too much time is spent on 'academic' subjects and not enough time on 'practical' subjects.

Undoubtedly, the totality of these findings gives urgency to the review of junior cycle. It is clear, for example, that the length and content of junior cycle subject syllabuses needs to be looked at, especially the appropriateness of course content for lower ability students. There is also a need to consider, where appropriate, strengthening of the practical, skill-based aspect of subjects, and for these to be reflected in the methods of assessment employed.

The revised Junior Certificate Science syllabus, introduced in September 2003, adopts an outcomes-based approach and has a much stronger ‘hands-on’ investigative focus. Recommendations of the Board of Studies for Technology Education at junior cycle, under consideration by Council, will also give scope for a stronger practical dimension in the technology subjects. Guidelines for ICT at post-primary level, currently under development, will give advice to teachers on how information technology can be integrated into teaching and learning across the curriculum. The NCCA is currently engaged in a review of languages at post-primary level. Through this review, the NCCA will be able to examine provision of modern languages, Irish and English in the junior cycle curriculum.

#### **4. Learning support**

The positive effects of learning support in easing the transition process for students of low academic ability is noteworthy. The report records that 13% of students in the case study schools receive some form of learning support in first year and that those who receive learning support tend to show an improvement in their self-image. The report also records that many students interpreted learning support to mean ‘extra help’ provided by teachers, such as assistance with homework. As the report notes, there appears to be a significant number of students, in addition to those of low ability, who find some of the academic subjects difficult and would like extra help if it were available. The provision of additional teaching resources in first year and the provision of supports such as supervised study are recommended.

#### **5. Bullying**

The prevalence of references to bullying and the ‘first year initiation’ by students in each of the case study schools, particularly among boys, is a matter of concern. Bullying is seen to have a particularly unsettling effect on students and a reduction in bullying is students’ second most frequent recommendation (42.1%) for helping them settle into school. Students particularly ‘at risk’ are quieter students, those who are immature, and members of minority groups. Of further concern is the reluctance of students to talk about these and other problems with school personnel, although the reported positive role that student mentors play as a liaison with class tutors in

relation to incidences of bullying is to be welcomed. These findings point to the need for schools to have well-developed, proactive anti-bullying policies and reinforce the recommendation that resources, such as pastoral care support, be focused on the early months of students' post-primary experience. The recent introduction of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) in the junior cycle curriculum provides schools with the opportunity to raise the issue of bullying, and its consequences, with first-year students.

#### **4. Educational disadvantage and minority groups**

While it is encouraging to learn that the majority of students settle in to their new school over the course of the first month, the research reveals that a significant minority of students (on average one in ten) experience sustained transition difficulties. Students' academic ability, difficulty with the amount of homework, along with students' personality and level of maturity are seen as significant causal factors.

However, the difficulties encountered by students from minority groups, students with low literacy and numeracy levels and students from designated disadvantaged schools, revealed in this study, make for very stark reading.

The report draws particular attention to students from traveller backgrounds and children of non-national parents. Students from both groups appear to take longer to settle into post-primary school. Students from a traveller background are significantly more likely to miss primary school, feel isolated in post-primary school, depend more on school personnel and are more likely to be bullied by other students. They also achieve lower reading and mathematics test scores. Students from non-national backgrounds are also more likely to be singled out for bullying.

Students with lower reading and mathematics test scores were also more likely to be 'given out to' by teachers and to experience a high level of negative interaction with them. Students in disadvantaged schools tend to take fewer subjects in first year than those in non-disadvantaged schools. This is understandable on the one hand, given the

reported difficulty they experience in coping with a large number of subjects and the level of learning in each. On the other hand, this would tend to limit these students' options in the later years of their schooling.

In its recommendations, the report indicates the importance of early intervention and support for 'at risk' groups of students to ease their transition to post-primary school. Key supports recommended include (i) improving the allocation of learning support teachers, especially in designated disadvantaged schools; (ii) providing information to parents on available support structures; (iii) training of student mentors; (iv) developing a strong anti-bullying policy; (v) providing a study skills programme; (vi) homework clubs. The provision of supports of this nature in all schools would go a long way towards addressing the needs of these students

The NCCA and the Department of Education and Science are currently engaged in a review of the Junior Certificate School Programme. The outcomes of this review will be of value in developing the NCCA's advice on how the programme might effectively be used to address specific areas of educational disadvantage. Also, in its current work in the area of special educational needs, the NCCA is developing a curriculum framework to provide opportunities for students with general learning disabilities to access a broad, balanced set of learning experiences throughout their years of post-primary schooling. Both areas of work will also address the issues previously referred to of curriculum suitability and relevance.

## **7. Gender**

The research reveals important differences between boys and girls in their responses to and experiences of transition. Girls reported being more anxious about moving to post-primary school, worried more about their body image and were significantly more likely to express missing primary school than boys. Surprisingly, while boys were more concerned about their academic performance, they were more confident about moving up to post-primary school and reported settling in more quickly than girls. Physical bullying was more likely to be experienced by boys while girls were more likely to suffer from verbal aggression. Girls report less negative interaction

with teachers whereas boys reported a greater decline in 'liking teachers'. These findings are of particular interest and warrant further investigation. In this regard, the NCCA has asked the ESRI, in the next phase of the study, to include a focus on the gender dimension of students' experiences of curriculum and schooling.

## **8. The views of parents**

Research into the views of parents on transition was conducted by direct telephone interview or by interviews mediated by the school. While this imposed limitations to the nature of data collected, the inclusion of the voice of parents in the study is to be welcomed. Parents affirm the benefits of pre-entry contacts between primary and post-primary schools in helping to smooth the transition process. They also view open days and parent meetings, supplemented by information booklets or leaflets, as being important and useful. The value of study skills programmes in assisting students to plan their homework is also noted.

While some questions have recently been raised about the usefulness and efficiency of printed media in providing information to schools, there is clear evidence of a need among parents for accurate information about the junior cycle curriculum. As mentioned earlier the NCCA is committed to publishing a guide to the junior cycle curriculum, with the rebalanced junior certificate subject syllabuses set out side-by-side. This work should be expedited to as short a time-frame as possible and should be augmented by the publication of a leaflet for parents on transition from primary to post-primary school.

## **9. Decline in students' attitude and progress**

The decline in students' academic progress during the course of first year is a particular cause for concern, as is their diminished enthusiasm for, and less positive attitude to, school. Both boys and girls reported that they enjoyed school less, had more negative views about subjects and teachers, and were less likely to look forward to going to school as the year progressed. This decline was more pronounced for students of low academic ability and those from designated disadvantaged schools. Over the course of the year there was slight improvement in some students' reading

ability and, to a lesser extent, in their computation skills. However, there was a general decline in literacy and numeracy scores among students in lower streams, those in 'at risk' groups and students from designated disadvantaged schools.

These findings would seem to indicate that curriculum and learning discontinuities has a profoundly negative effect on student progress in first year, and that effect is more pronounced for some groups of students than for others.

## **10. Conclusions**

The breadth of the study has provided the education system with a unique perspective into the views and experiences of those who receive and those who provide the first year of post-primary schooling. In particular, it has given expression to the voice of students and of their parents.

The ESRI has presented a comprehensive analysis of the nature and extent of the discontinuity between primary and post-primary schooling and identified effects it can have on the academic, social and psychological dimensions of young people's experiences of transition. The key findings in this respect are

- the flow of information between primary and post-primary schools is inadequate
- primary schools have no formal arrangements for passing on information about students and post-primary schools have no formal arrangements for processing the information if it is received
- many teachers in post-primary schools have little knowledge and understanding of the content of the Primary School Curriculum and the teaching methodologies employed in primary schools
- the absence of accurate information about curriculum coverage and learning needs of students transferring from primary school can lead to repetition of subject material and to teaching that is pitched beyond students' comprehension

- students feel anxious and excited about transferring to ‘big school’ and may experience difficulties in relation to the greater number of subjects, increased academic pressure, additional homework and a different relationships with teachers in first year
- a discontinuity exists in teaching approaches between primary schools, where the focus of teaching is ‘child as active learner’, and post-primary schools where the emphasis is on instruction rather than participation
- the discontinuity is greatest and transition difficulties most frequently sustained for a minority of ‘at risk’ students including students from designated disadvantaged schools, students with low self-esteem, students with low academic ability and students from minority groups
- curriculum discontinuity causes significant disruption to students’ academic progress over the course of first year.

The research has also examined integration programmes in different school contexts, the different ways in which schools make subjects available to first year students and the way in which students are arranged in class groups. Through this analysis the research has identified practices that support student integration and those that contribute to transition difficulties. The implications of these findings for post-primary schools include

- pre-school contact between personnel in post-primary school and incoming students and their parents can reduce anxiety and smooth the transition process. Involvement of key personnel is considered very important; these include the principal, year head, induction programme co-ordinator, home-school liaison co-ordinator, learning support teacher and student mentors.
- students settle in quicker where schools have well developed induction programmes. Effective programmes include such activities as open days for parents and students, open nights for parents, organised visits to the post-primary school for 6<sup>th</sup> class students, staggered start to the school year, sports

camps, provision of study-skills programmes and the assignment of tutors to class groups.

- the informal culture of the school, particularly the relationship between teachers and students, strongly affects student integration
- an approach where students can experience a range of subjects as ‘tasters’ prior to selection of subjects for Junior Certificate benefits students
- provision of a range of subjects with a more practical orientation can engage students and provide early success for those less academically orientated
- mixed ability grouping of students is desirable as streaming leads to lower achievement among students in bottom streams and increased transition difficulties for students in higher streams due to academic pressure
- provision of early targeted support can reduce sustained transition difficulties experienced by ‘at risk’ students.

From an NCCA perspective, the study provides a rich source of data that will inform its ongoing review of the junior cycle curriculum, in particular, developments at primary and post-primary level in general, and the development of policy and advice across a range of dimensions of its statutory brief. In relation to the review of junior cycle the research will support the NCCA in

- addressing overload and overlap in subject syllabuses
- cutting back on content
- making content of subjects more explicit and outcomes-based
- improving the practical orientation and skill base of subjects
- considering the elements which could/should be taught in first year
- making more explicit links between the content of learning and the methods of teaching and learning

- developing a greater variety of assessment elements that engage students more
- informing parents and students on subject selection
- placing greater emphasis on assessment for learning in the classroom
- ensuring clear continuity between curriculum and assessment at primary and post-primary level.

## **11. Follow-on research**

In the second phase of the research, the NCCA has commissioned the ESRI to re-engage with the student cohort in the case study schools. During this phase, the ESRI has been requested to focus on the gender dimension of the curriculum and schooling experienced by students and on matters related to language and the curriculum. The ultimate purpose of this research will be to trace the different pathways taken by students from the point of entry into post-primary school to their Junior Certificate year, and to explore the way processes of subject choice are shaped by school, background and attitudinal characteristics. Such a study will facilitate analysis of the relationship between school experiences in first year and subsequent student outcomes, including performance, early school leaving and personal and social development.