



Proposals for the future of Senior Cycle Education in Ireland

Overview

June 2004

Proposals for the Future of Senior Cycle Education

Part One: Introduction and Rationale

1.1 Introduction

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's review of senior cycle post-primary education commenced with the publication of *Developing Senior Cycle Education: Consultative Paper on Issues and Options* in 2002 and has been progressed since then through a range of consultative fora and publications. *Developing Senior Cycle Education: Directions for Development*, published in 2003, gathered together, through an exercise in foresight planning, some key ideas and directions for the development of senior cycle up to and beyond 2010. The directions document was not an agreed Council position on the future of senior cycle; rather it was a consultative tool to focus attention on potential medium to long-term developments.

The advice contained in this document goes further. The NCCA is presenting its advice to the Minister for Education and Science on the future direction of senior cycle education in two parts. This part sets out an *Overview* of the advice. The second part, setting out more extensive and detailed advice, will be presented to Council for discussion in October 2004.

This *Overview* sets out the proposals for the development of senior cycle education and describes the strategies necessary for their implementation. It suggests the nature of the steps that should be undertaken during the period 2005 to 2007 to progress these proposals. It offers a rationale for the proposals presented. The rationale is based in the various elements of the senior cycle review process outlined below, and also takes into account the comparative research on upper secondary education commissioned by the NCCA to ensure that any proposals are reflective of good practice and current research.

The second part of the advice will offer a fuller account of the proposals, setting out detailed recommendations that take account of the practical implications and issues

involved in implementing change on this scale for students, parents, teachers, schools and the wider education system. This advice will offer more detailed specifications of the proposals, examples of the transition units, short courses and embedded skills proposed, and a comprehensive analysis of the implications of implementing change on this scale in the Irish education system. The months between the dissemination of the *Overview* and the more detailed advice will allow for considered engagement with the broad proposals and a further opportunity to explore their implications and consequences.

The *Overview* sets out the agenda, and a general rationale for that agenda, that must be advanced significantly in the more detailed advice. Both focus on the steps that can be taken to advance the work of the review into the field of action. Both parts of the advice are also rooted in the premise that curriculum review and development are best addressed on a rolling basis with the full support of those directly involved. In advancing change on this basis, the advice itself needs to be subject to continuous review and modification in the light of developments in the education system and beyond.

1.2 The NCCA's review process

The advice offered in this document is based on, and supported by, an extensive review process. The review commenced with the publication of the consultative paper (2002). Following its publication the NCCA embarked on a consultative process which comprised:

- briefings for organisations
- issues seminars
- bilateral meetings with the education partners
- an online survey
- a senior cycle forum
- a virtual forum
- school-based research.

Briefings for organisations

These briefing meetings were arranged in consultation with a number of organisations and in some cases at their request. These events were originally envisaged as opportunities to brief the relevant agencies on the key issues. They ultimately evolved, however, into a very valuable exchange of ideas and opinions.

Issues seminars

As part of the preparation for the consultative paper, the NCCA commissioned research on international developments in upper secondary education and hosted an international seminar on post-primary senior cycle education at which this research was discussed. The seminar provided a valuable frame of reference for the subsequent work undertaken in setting the agenda for reviewing senior cycle. The proceedings of this seminar – *International Developments in Upper Secondary Education: Context, provision and issues* – have been published by the NCCA.

Two issues seminars were also organised by the NCCA to explore specific ideas presented in the discussion paper with guidance from experts in senior cycle education. The first seminar, *Developing Senior Cycle Education – Key Issues*, focused on key skills and the structure and organisation of the curriculum. The second seminar, entitled *Changing Structures in Senior Cycle Education* placed the issue of senior cycle reform in the context of Irish education since the 1950s and underscored the central role of developments in teaching and learning to reform.

Bilateral meetings

Following the conclusion of the consultation strands described above, the NCCA held fifteen bilateral meetings with various education partners. These allowed organisations to bring their particular concerns and perspectives to the debate. In some cases delegates made formal written submissions that formed the basis for the discussion. In others, a semi-structured discussion was held on the key issues. Some organisations availed of the opportunity to make a written submission after the bilateral discussion had taken place. The outcome of the briefings, seminars and bilateral meetings *Developing Senior Cycle Education: Report on the Consultative Process – Consultative Meetings, Seminars and Submissions* was published in 2003 and is available on the NCCA website.

On-line survey

The on-line survey received a total of 1,813 responses. The survey represented a new element in the review process for the NCCA and gave rise to increased public and media involvement in discussions on the future of senior cycle education. The findings of the survey *Developing Senior Cycle Education: Report on the Consultative Process – Online Survey (2003)* were published and are available on the NCCA website.

Senior Cycle Forum

Following the initial consultation process the NCCA hosted a Forum on Senior Cycle Education in September 2003. Four directions for the development of senior cycle education into the future were presented in the publication associated with the forum, *Developing Senior Cycle Education: Directions for Development (2003)*. These directions related to the areas of school culture, a restructured learning experience, a re-balanced curriculum and different assessment and certification arrangements. Informed by the scenario-planning tools developed by the OECD for use in considering the future of education, the medium to long-term perspective was taken. The focus was on the schools and students of 2010 and the supporting strategies needed to make the envisaged change happen.

School-based research

Following the Forum on Senior Cycle the NCCA conducted a school-based research initiative to consider the practical implications of the ideas presented at the forum. Staff of the NCCA visited eight schools in early 2004 and met with parents, students, teachers and management and engaged in structured focus group discussions on the ideas. This research allowed for the further participation of students in the review process and for engagement with the real day-to-day challenges faced by schools in responding to and leading change. The work with schools was important in adapting and re-shaping the directions for development and supporting strategies. The school-based research was augmented by a virtual forum on the NCCA website. A resource pack to support schools in conducting their own research was also made available on the website. The NCCA also took account of further submissions made by individuals and organisations at this stage of the review process.

1.3 The review: general responses

A broad welcome for the ideas, directions and supporting strategies

The ideas, directions and supporting strategies that have emerged from all stages of the review have been well received. The directions for development in curriculum and assessment, and the ideas about the culture of schooling for senior cycle students have been supported across all sectors of the education system and have received support from outside education.

What has been contested is the issue of how far the system should move in the directions as outlined and the pace at which these kinds of changes can realistically be introduced to schools. In the course of the consultations and the engagement with schools a number of issues were prominent. They included:

- a concern to find the right balance between independence and structure in the learning environment for 16-19 year olds
- strong support for the indivisibility of the proposals for curriculum and assessment change and the strategies for supporting teachers, schools and the education system in implementing change
- the need to root the senior cycle culture in experiences at junior cycle
- the need to preserve the best elements of the Transition Year, and a concern that its division into units might result in a loss of its distinguishing features
- a concern that in moving towards a senior cycle made up of subjects, short courses and transition units, coherence might be lost and fragmentation ensue
- considerable concern about activities being included on the envisaged certificate of senior cycle education which depended on the availability of extra school or family resources leading to further inequalities in the system

- the need to ensure that concern that proposals for a wider range of assessment methods and more frequent assessment take account of the capacity of students, teachers, schools and the education system for change in this area
- the implications of certain aspects of the proposals for the terms and conditions of employment of teachers.

These concerns and needs have been taken into account in arriving at the advice for the development of senior cycle.

A broad welcome for the focus on coherence

While the ideas and directions were the subject of some contestation, the supporting strategies were relatively uncontested. They were mentioned frequently at meetings and fora, but only to add emphasis and weight to the idea that without these strategies, nothing can change. The coherence of the approach to change set out was welcomed, and the integrity of the approach stressed. The extent to which the ideas, directions and supporting strategies fit together was acknowledged – each connects with, contributes to and depends upon others. The ‘connectedness’ has been carried through into this advice.

Planning and resources

In the consultative process, the need to resource change was given considerable emphasis. Doubts were expressed by parents, teachers, principals and by students that the resources needed for the reform of senior cycle would be made available.

No doubts were expressed about the importance of planning in any system-wide change of this nature. The foundation of the supporting strategies in planning, and the emphasis on monitoring and evaluation were widely welcomed. That un-connected, un-planned, and un-evaluated initiatives will never attract the level of resources needed to bring about meaningful change in the educational experiences of senior cycle students was a shared realisation. Coherent, planned and monitored change as the basis for new resource models and increased resource levels was widely endorsed.

Building on junior cycle

In the course of the review a considerable number of participants stressed that any change and development in school culture would have to begin in junior cycle. Equally, new emphases on skills would have to have their foundation in the curriculum for the first three years of post-primary education if they were to form a significant part of the learning experiences of students in senior cycle.

The NCCA's work on the review of junior cycle is important in this regard. The reduction in the content of Junior Certificate subject syllabuses, as well as an increased focus on assessment for learning, are already underway. This means that some progress is already being made on potential foundations for a new senior cycle.

The Junior Certificate examination featured in the consultation process. The need for an examination and for a certificate at this stage of education was stressed. However the issue of a re-configuration of assessment in the junior cycle to lay the foundation for a different approach to assessment in senior cycle should be considered.

1.4 The general rationale for change

The NCCA's consultative paper (2002) suggested that for most students, senior cycle education amounted to 'getting the Leaving'. While much had changed in senior cycle – this stage of education had been the focus of considerable development in the 1990s – the fundamentals remained the same. The consultative process that followed, including the online survey, confirmed that this was the case, but that there was strong support for building on the strengths of the current system towards a senior cycle where 'getting the Leaving' remained important but with greater emphasis placed on learners taking more responsibility for their own learning, on an improved relationship between the acquisition of skills and knowledge, and where there was focus on the learning and the learner as well as on 'the Leaving'.

Not changing, leaving things as they are, is not an option. It is a temptation. At a glance it may seem that senior cycle is 'not broken', and requires no 'fixing'. A closer look confirms that it is 'not broken' but that the pressures from a student cohort participating in education for longer with diverse learning needs, together with the

dynamics of social, economic and cultural changes are beginning to tell. These pressures are well documented in the reports on the school-based research and in the submissions and responses received. Senior cycle is too important a stage in the life and education of a young person to attempt to hold the system together with superficial repairs or to await the onset of a crisis. More significant re-building is needed. Some progress has already been made: teachers experienced in the reforms associated with Transition Year, Leaving Certificate Applied, and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme; principals skilled in the management and leadership of change; students seeking more active participation; parents and families who value education.

One of the recurring themes in the review was the need for a slow, steady and well-resourced path of change guided by a vision of reform that is characterised by informed planning and resourcing, careful monitoring and regular checks on system progress. The 'slow and steady' approach puts the school at the centre of the change process and the teachers and students at the heart. The traditional approach to change has been to 'develop' then 'implement' the change. Teachers and schools become the 'implementers' of change. Moving a whole system forward in the ways suggested below may require a model of change in which schools and teachers actively shape and lead rather than simply respond to change. The role of established partnership processes as a vehicle for negotiating certain elements of change outlined in this advice must also be acknowledged. Equally, certain proposals will require the agreement of the parties to the Teacher Conciliation Council where the terms and conditions of employment of teachers are discussed.

What follows in this advice, is the setting out of a period of two years (2005-2007) of a strategic approach to the development of senior cycle, which highlights the decisions and actions that would be required to progress the proposals for change. This period is indicative; it may be the case, for example, that with further consideration the period may need to be extended to 2008. The advice also flags some of the engagement that would be needed with other sectors of the education system, further and higher education for example, and with industry and employers. At different stages in the strategy critical support, and/or decisions by key agencies and institutions will be needed before progressing to the next stage. The central principle

of all-or-nothing is fundamental to the vision. Each decision, each action has a critical relationship with another. If one falls, all fall.

Proposals for the Future of Senior Cycle Education

Part Two: Progressing Key Ideas and Proposals for Change

2.1 Curriculum

Curriculum developments in the 1980s and 1990s opened up new possibilities for students to undertake a different kind of senior cycle and it is in the context of the collective experience of these initiatives that the debate around future development has taken place.

2.1.1 Re-structuring the curriculum at senior cycle

International trends in the re-structuring of upper secondary education have been underpinned by aspirations towards increased flexibility for all students and promotion of the principle of lifelong learning. The research commissioned by NCCA into developments in upper secondary education in a number of countries established that, compared with Ireland, many countries present learners with greater levels of flexibility in making and taking curriculum choices. In addition, European countries are increasingly recognising the need for curriculum and assessment provision at this level to clearly relate to frameworks and structures established for adult and continuing education. Throughout the course of the review, there was a recurring emphasis on the building of a senior cycle that would recognise the needs of all learners in a context of lifelong learning, preparing students for the world of work, for further education and for higher education. There was frequent reference to the need to encourage young people to see education as a continuum that they can return to at any time, where prior learning is recognised.

While there was some support for a three-year senior cycle for all, concerns were expressed that there was a cohort of students for whom two years was more suitable for a variety of reasons. Notably, where there is a history of limited participation in senior cycle schooling and where there are issues related to the financial cost of that participation for the families involved, the view was that a two-year senior cycle should be retained.

Just as there was a preference for the option of a two or three-year cycle, there was also strong support for courses that might not necessarily last for the full two or three years within whatever option is chosen. Consistent with the principle of lifelong learning, there was a strong emphasis within the review on the value of more flexible curriculum structures for all types of learners, featuring subjects and courses that would present variety in length, content and assessment methods.

The Transition Year, the Leaving Certificate Applied and the LCVP were designed to respond to needs only partially addressed in the Leaving Certificate (established). The manner in which these programmes have developed over the past twenty years has meant that students engage in discrete sets of educational experiences depending on the programme in which they participate. Participants in the review process supported integrating the best aspects of Transition Year and the LCVP Link Modules into a three-year senior cycle. In the case of Transition Year, however, many were concerned that its existing impact as a coherent programme of learning and personal development should not be diminished in an attempt to make elements of it more widely available. A very clear message permeated almost all comment on the Leaving Certificate Applied that students in that programme would continue to benefit from the maintenance of its 'ring fenced' status, combined with some points of linkage with other senior cycle courses. However, concern was also expressed at the continued low status and limited progression opportunities of the Leaving Certificate Applied.

The Consultative Paper (2002) pointed out that while the Leaving Certificate Applied is a self-contained prescribed programme of study, other Leaving Certificate students have little sense of following a programme but rather study what appears to be a largely unconnected series of subjects. International trends towards more unified programmes in upper secondary education were to some extent supported in the review process. Teachers involved in the school-based research emphasised the need for students to experience a coherent, planned and well-balanced programme of study. Representatives of teacher unions, of third level and of school management stressed the importance of ensuring curricular breadth and balance in the overall programme of study followed. On the other hand participants stressed that flexibility should also be a key consideration in developing programme parameters. Development of ideas on the number and combination of courses and the degree of breadth and balance required in

a senior cycle programme would represent a first step in addressing the question of programme requirements.

In the period 2005 to 2007, the current senior cycle programmes will remain in place. During this time, the details of a re-structured senior cycle will be finalised and planning completed for its introduction. It is envisaged that senior cycle will be structured along the following lines.

- The option of taking a two-year or a three-year senior cycle will remain.
- The restructured senior cycle curriculum will comprise transition units, short courses and subjects. Subjects will become more unitised: organised in smaller units, which fit together, one leading to another. There has been an increasing trend, in recent syllabus revision and development, towards outlining the content of subjects in units and learning outcomes. Feedback from teachers in the school-based research indicates that they tend to follow this approach in the organisation of their teaching.
- Transition Year and the Leaving Certificate (established) will gradually merge. Elements of Transition Year will be available to all as transition units, distributed throughout a two or three-year senior cycle. The potential for retaining the current model of the Transition Year, or substantial elements of it, in the first year of senior cycle will remain.
- The LCVP in its current format will be discontinued. Link Modules on preparation for the world of work and enterprise education will become short courses that may be accessed by a wider number of students.
- The Leaving Certificate Applied will be retained, largely as a stand-alone programme. However, as at least one transition unit will be taken by all senior cycle students and in all likelihood several, the possibility exists that students of the Leaving Certificate Applied will study some transition units with other senior cycle students.

The number and combination of transition units, short courses and subjects that comprise a two-year and a three-year senior cycle will be specified. Within these parameters, schools will have the flexibility to offer programmes that are consistent with the realities of school size and meet the diverse needs of all students, including students with special educational needs and those from a variety of educational backgrounds. Such flexibility will also serve to meet the needs of returning learners. Further detail of the ways in which transition units, short courses and subjects can be combined will be developed and exemplified in the more detailed advice to issue by the end of 2004.

2.1.2 Re-balancing the curriculum at senior cycle

As the review progressed it became clear that in order to meet the challenge of providing improved access to, and equality in, senior cycle education for all and to ensure the relevance of the senior cycle educational experience to the needs of the Irish people, society and economy, the *balance* of elements within the curriculum, particularly knowledge and skills, would need to be examined.

Participants in the review process considered the skills learners should develop and how an increased emphasis on skills might interface and be embedded within existing curriculum structure and content. Gaps in curriculum provision were identified, where new subjects might be developed. The emphasis on skills is also consistent with the emerging consensus in most advanced western economies that the development of certain key skills provides an important foundation for participation in the knowledge society.

A theme presented in the Consultative Paper (2002) which was prominent at various stages in the review process related to the structure and knowledge content of the subjects which have traditionally formed the basis for study at senior cycle. In general, participants were critical of the excessive breadth of content in most subjects which has the effect of exerting pressure on teachers and more particularly on students, to 'cover' large amounts of knowledge content. This leaves little or no time for reflection, deeper engagement with and deeper understanding of the topics, processes and concepts involved. Allied to this perception of overload was the

concern that subject syllabuses should be re-focussed to incorporate an increased emphasis on the development of key skills.

Support during the review for the concept of Transition Year and the experiences provided to many students as a result of participation was tempered somewhat by concerns relating to the absence of structure and monitoring of Transition Year and a perceived inconsistency of provision between schools. The challenge for the future evolution of the programme is to support the creativity shown by teachers and schools in developing new local curriculum initiatives, which has been a feature of many Transition Year programmes to date, while at the same time ensuring an element of consistency from year to year and from school to school. Providing the opportunity for students to collaborate and maintaining a strong relationship between skills-focused transition units and the embedded skills in subjects and short courses are key issues in this area.

It is difficult to overstate the centrality of the traditional 'subject' entity in the current senior cycle. While the desire to maintain all that is good in this proven structure was evident during the review process, it is clear that the path to reform must also lead to a re-consideration of this established concept. Many contributors expressed a desire to provide students with a more diverse range of options, more manageable blocks of study, shorter-term goals and regular feedback. The proposals for the introduction of transition units and short courses and some unitisation of subjects will address these needs.

In the period 2005 to 2007 the details of a re-balanced senior cycle will be finalised, the make-up of the various curriculum elements exemplified, and their relationship with further and higher education clarified. It is envisaged that the following will comprise the key elements of this work.

Transition Units

A range of transition units will be developed in partnership with schools. A template will be drawn up and a process agreed whereby schools and other agencies may gain approval for transition units they have developed. All students will undertake at least one transition unit. These transition units, of approximately forty hours duration, will

be taken at a common level. Care will be taken to ensure that transition units, by their nature and structure, can be studied by those taking the Leaving Certificate Applied. Some areas within which transition units might be developed include: community participation, enterprise education, arts education, information and communications technology, and study skills.

The development of transition units by schools will offer the potential for schools to include modules already developed for their existing Transition Year, a relevant school activity or co-curricular activity as the basis for a transition unit. Activities that might qualify for such a transition unit include the organisation of a school sports day, a drama event or a community-based social awareness project. In addition, transition units may also be a means for returning learners to gain recognition of their prior learning. For example, the work/life experience of a returning learner could be recognised as equivalent to completing one or more transition units in preparation for work, work experience or some more specialised work-related unit.

Completion of transition units will be recorded on the certificate of senior cycle education. Agreement will be sought that the completion of at least one transition unit will comprise a matriculation requirement for entry to higher education.

The consultation process indicated that representatives of higher education organisations are well disposed towards re-configuring matriculation requirements to reflect and support proposed reforms at senior cycle.

Short Courses

A number of short courses will be developed in consultation with schools to an agreed structure and standard. Short courses identified for development in the first instance include: social and political education, personal and health education, science and society, enterprise education, information and communications technology and drama. Some short courses will be extensions of full subjects to allow students to further their study of a topic or application arising from those subjects. For example, students might take a short course in creative writing to augment the full subject in English, or students might take a short course in Irish language studies in addition to their study of Gaeilge.

In addition, a limited number of short courses may be developed in partnership with agencies, educational authorities and networks. Again, these will be developed to an agreed common structure and standard. The short courses will be outcomes-based and this will be reflected in their assessment. It is essential that short courses be recognised for entry to higher education and be valued through the points system. Short courses will be of approximately 80 hours duration. They will be examined following course completion and achievement will be recorded on the certificate of senior cycle education.

Subjects

NCCA will conduct an audit of the length of senior cycle subjects. The purpose of the audit will be to re-assess the breadth of subjects in order to ensure adequate depth and to provide for an increased emphasis on key skills.

The audit will lead to revisions of subject syllabuses. This revision will include all subjects and will extend to those subjects only recently revised including Physics, Chemistry, Biology and Home Economics. Revised syllabuses will focus on the learning outcomes to be achieved by studying the subject and will place particular emphasis on the links between knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. Full subjects are currently developed on the basis of 180 hours duration. Given the introduction of short courses and transition units and the requirement to emphasise the skills in subjects, it will be appropriate to reconsider this and to examine questions surrounding the relative difficulty of subjects.

There will be further development of the recommendations relating to transition units, short courses and full subjects in the detailed advice. These will include the development of sample transition units and short courses and exemplification of the ways in which transition units, short courses and subjects can be combined in senior cycle.

Skills

There will be a strong emphasis on key skills and how they link to knowledge in a future senior cycle. The key skills identified as important in the review will be embedded within the content and learning outcomes of transition units, short courses and subjects. During 2005 to 2007 specifications for the following key skills will be developed and embedded: learning to learn, information processing, personal effectiveness, communication, critical thinking and working with others. Details of the inclusion of one of the key skills and how it will be embedded in subjects, transition units and short courses will be presented in the detailed advice towards the end of 2004.

2.2 Assessment and certification

The reform of assessment and certification at senior cycle, and in particular of the Leaving Certificate (established), has attracted considerable attention in the course of the review. While the Consultative Paper (2002) acknowledged the progress made on assessment in Transition Year, LCVP and Leaving Certificate Applied, it emphasised that little has changed within the Leaving Certificate (established) and suggested that the lack of reform in this programme could be described as a lack of assessment reform. This view was also expressed in the *Commission on the Points System: Final Report and Recommendations (1999)* which suggested that little will change in the areas of teaching and learning and the quality of the educational experience offered to students unless reform of the Leaving Certificate (established) encompasses assessment change.

The Consultative Paper (2002) also referred to the narrow range of achievement currently included on the Leaving Certificate and suggested that this should be broadened to include non-examination subjects and co-curricular activities and possibly presented as a record of achievement. There was broad agreement across all the strands of the consultative process that the certificate awarded at the end of senior cycle should be expanded to include achievements in subjects, short courses and transition units. However, teachers, parents and school management were concerned at the possible inclusion of co-curricular activities, on the basis of equality of opportunity and standardisation.

While participants in the review process recognised the importance of protecting public confidence in the reliability, objectivity and perceived fairness of the Leaving Certificate examination, there was widespread agreement about its limitations as a vehicle of educational assessment. Contributors were critical of the narrow range of learning assessed; the lack of congruence between the aims and objectives of syllabuses and their assessment; the dominance of assessment of recall and the pressure on students to perform over a concentrated period of time at the end of senior cycle. The importance of assessment reform and its potential and requirement to effect real change in school culture and curriculum was discussed at the NCCA issues seminar, “Changing Structures in Senior Cycle Education”. Participants argued that without reform of assessment other suggested changes would have little effect on the teaching and learning students experience in their senior cycle years.

There has been considerable discussion of the assessment of skills in the course of the review. Parents, teachers, students, management, employers and higher education representatives all drew attention to the need for a greater focus on the assessment of the process of learning and of skills. All agreed that key skills should be taught and assessed within subjects and suggested that there should be some recognition of the skills attained on the certificate. In a scenario where key skills were clearly embedded within subjects, short courses and transition units this could be achieved by the certificate presenting an account of the key skills *encountered* by the student through the combination of courses taken.

The possible involvement of teachers in the assessment of their own students for the purpose of examinations was the subject of some contestation during the review. Some contributors expressed the view that teachers are best placed to assess their own students and that the results of these assessments should contribute to state examination results and certification. This argument reflected a particular interest in the assessment of the process of learning alongside the assessment of product. Others were concerned that the reliability of the Leaving Certificate examination would be compromised were teachers to assess their own students. It was noted that the practice across most international upper secondary education systems indicates that a significant portion of student work at this level is assessed on an external basis. This

is reflective of the high-stakes involved in assessment at this stage of education given the role the results of assessments play in selection processes for further and higher education. In general, it was recognised that where assessment change might give rise to changes in the conditions of service of teachers, the agreement of the appropriate parties will need to be secured.

Discussions in the school-based research predominantly referred to the timing and methods of assessment, where there was considerable support for spreading assessment events across senior cycle, tempered with some concern that this should not lead to over-assessment of students and excessive involvement of teachers in assessment-related tasks. Parents, teachers, students and management further supported the introduction of a greater variety of assessment methods. The need for support for teachers and schools in the implementation of changes to the methods and timing of assessment events was repeatedly emphasised.

Principles of assessment

In the period 2005 to 2007 the principles for the assessment and examination of subjects and short courses at senior cycle will be established. Guidance on the appropriate assessment of student achievement in transition units will also be developed. This work will proceed in conjunction with the work on curriculum. The assessment principles will be developed around a number of areas that were addressed in the course of the review.

Ensuring that there is congruence between the aims and objectives of syllabuses and their assessment

There is a need to ensure that the methods of assessment used should be more closely aligned to the aims and objectives set out in subject syllabuses. Many of the subjects developed in recent years are outcomes based and as such are well positioned to include a greater variety of assessment components. Advice on assessment of subjects under review will be updated where necessary and the assessment arrangements for particular short courses will be developed hand-in-hand with the course outline itself.

Methods of assessment

Appropriate methods of assessment will be established for each subject and short course, reflective of the aims and objectives of each syllabus. A greater variety of methods of assessment will be available, including written examinations, oral and aural assessments, project assessment, assessment of the performance of students in completing tasks and portfolio assessment. The principle of avoiding over-assessment of students and the excessive involvement of teachers in assessment-related tasks will also inform this work.

The number and timing of assessment events over a two or three-year senior cycle

The current concentration of assessment into one event at the end of senior cycle is unacceptable and unproductive in relation to meeting many of the desired aims and principles of assessment and of senior cycle education. The demand to spread the assessment events over the two or three years, bringing them closer to the point of learning, has been consistent throughout the review process. It is likely this will involve the assessment of some subjects at the end of year one / two and some at the end of year two/ three. With this in mind work will be progressed aimed at establishing the number of assessment events appropriate to the needs of students and sustainable by the schools and the education system as a whole.

The scale of assessment

The monitoring of the assessment load for students must be an important principle of assessment. For this reason work will proceed on establishing the required scale of assessment within subjects and evaluating the likely cumulative effect this will have on the total assessment experience of students. In the latter context, the aim will be to avoid over-assessing students, short courses and subjects. The cumulative effects of more varied and frequent assessments on the workload of teachers and on the organisation of schools will also be considered in this context.

The role of assessment in providing information for the learner

The introduction of different methods of assessment and the spread of assessment events over the two or three years of senior cycle will provide greater opportunities for assessment to influence learning in the classroom. The opportunities for the

learner to receive information from completed assessments and to benefit from this information to improve progress will be investigated.

Mode of assessment

Given the concerns of many teachers in respect of assessing their own students in high stakes settings, it is envisaged that most of the new assessment components will be examined on an external basis. The option for teachers to assess their own students in the components of some subjects and short courses will be considered.

Assessment of skills

The embedding of skills in subjects and short courses will be a feature of the developmental work in 2005 to 2007. Where appropriate and feasible, the assessment of these skills will be part of the assessment of subjects and short courses. The potential uses of ICT in the assessment of skills and in developing statements of the skills encountered by students in the particular subjects, short courses and transition units they have taken will be investigated.

Differentiation

Differentiation for Ordinary and Higher levels will continue but there will be a focus on differentiation of learning outcomes and assessment, in addition to differentiation of content, as is currently the practice. The revision of subjects will include a particular focus on differentiation. This will facilitate greater access to subjects and short courses for a wider range of students, and will serve as the basis for a review of the role of Foundation Level in the reformed senior cycle.

Assessment of transition units

The development of the transition units to a common format and structure will include guidance on the appropriate assessment of student achievement in transition units. Transition units will not be externally assessed by the State Examinations Commission. Their completion will be recorded on a certificate of senior cycle education.

A new certificate of senior cycle education

In the years 2005 to 2007 specification of the format and content of a new certificate will be agreed. The reference points for this work will include:

- The availability of the certificate on departure from senior cycle as well as on completion
- The recording of the level of achievement gained by the student in any subjects and short courses taken
- The recording of any transition units completed by the student
- The inclusion of a skills profile identifying the skills encountered in each subject, short course and transition unit.

The new certificate will provide an account of the student's achievements in short courses and subjects as well as recording completion of transition units and presenting an account of the key skills encountered by the student through the combination of courses taken.

Achievement in other areas of school life

Student achievement or participation in less formal features of the senior cycle experience in individual schools could also be presented on a separate school statement. This might, for example, include participation in co-curricular activities, school councils or committees, task groups and school responsibilities.

2.3 School Culture

In the course of the review of senior cycle education, the theme of school culture became the subject of extensive debate. In the Consultative Paper (2002), the importance of developing a school culture conducive to teaching and learning in the post-compulsory period of education was highlighted. This culture was largely described in terms of the key skills to be fostered in order for students to fulfil their

potential as learners and to contribute to the needs of society and the economy. Greater emphasis on self-directed, independent learning was also a prominent feature of this view.

As the review proceeded, school culture became a focal point for the expression of many concerns about the experience of senior cycle for students. These included the need for clarity surrounding the ‘ideal’ experience for students in junior cycle and senior cycle in terms of the way they learn, their relationships with their teachers and their school, the level of responsibility they take for their own learning, and the extent to which they see their educational experience extending beyond the classroom and school into communities, workplaces and ‘virtual’ worlds. Clarity is needed in order to be able to, firstly establish the *differences* between the junior and senior cycle experiences and secondly to identify the *foundation* that would need to be laid in the junior cycle for students to engage meaningfully with a more mature, adult learning environment at senior cycle.

Students, parents, teachers and school management viewed developments in the culture of schooling as fundamental to achieving more specific curriculum and assessment change at senior cycle. Participants in the various consultations often described schools as currently “keeping a lid on” tensions ascribed to the pace of social and economic change in the lives of students. They viewed changes in school culture aimed at enhancing the role of students in their own education as pivotal to defusing these tensions and improving the quality of learning taking place at senior cycle.

However, such change would not be easily achieved. All participants in the review process highlighted the challenges involved; students and teachers in particular citing how all involved would need to be educated in self-directed learning. A careful balance would need to be achieved between student self-directed learning on the one hand and the influence of the teacher and the school on the management of the learning programme and experience on the other. The important role of educational and vocational guidance in this context was also repeatedly emphasised.

The idea of changing school culture along the lines envisaged is inextricably linked to other developments in curriculum, assessment and certification and is predicated on the support strategies outlined in this advice. In the period 2005 to 2007, developments in curriculum and assessment such as those outlined below will prepare the ground for the realisation of changes in school culture.

- Restructured curriculum and assessment arrangements will redefine differences between the junior cycle and senior cycle learning environment.
- Reducing the content of subject syllabuses will create space for a greater student role in structured, well-managed, independent learning and research, thus creating an environment where they become more self-directed in their learning over time.
- Appropriate investment in the supporting strategies will also contribute to changes in school culture. Piloting of proposals for different ways of organising the school day will take place. Strategic planning will be needed on extending school opening hours to create a more flexible senior cycle. Such pilot schemes and proposals will require the agreement of appropriate parties to the Teacher Conciliation Council where the terms and conditions of employment of teachers are discussed.
- Analysis of the implications of these changes for school buildings will also be required. Achievement of a school culture based in more varied approaches to the management and experience of learning will give rise to the need to view the physical spaces and facilities within schools differently and will necessitate investment in
 - Libraries
 - ICT equipped learning spaces
 - Social spaces
 - Access to learning environments beyond the school

- A new emphasis on supporting teachers and schools in the area of professional development will enable careful alignment of the support offered to schools and teachers with emerging ideas about developments in school culture.
- An increased emphasis, through supporting strategies, on educational and vocational support and guidance for students will help them to make informed choices. The provision of timely and appropriate information to both parents and student will also assist in this regard.
- Increasingly, schools are establishing structures to facilitate the involvement of students in the life and operation of the school, most often in the form of school councils. The evidence gathered from the NCCA's school-based research shows the value of incorporating the unique voice and perspective of students as they experience senior cycle 'live', with the practical, realistic and creative ideas and views that this can give rise to. In the period 2005 to 2007 the NCCA will work with and support schools in relation to the development of models for greater inclusion of the student voice.

Furthermore, in the period 2005 to 2007 the NCCA will collaborate with a number of agencies on initiatives designed to support a changing school culture including projects on

- *The management of learning* to develop ideas around the respective roles of school management, teachers, students and parents in achieving a structured, well-managed learning environment which offers students the potential to become more self-directed and responsible as learners. Clearly this would involve attention to the range of teaching and learning approaches to be employed. It would also involve looking at class and group sizes to accommodate the learning opportunities envisaged. The question of how to develop the capacity in students for directing their own learning would also need to be probed. Finally, the exemplification of ways of organising the school day and the school timetable to provide for the greater range of learning approaches and opportunities available to students would be an

important outcome of the project. Exemplification from the student, teacher and school perspectives will be provided.

- *Guidance tools for parents and students* to help them to understand the nature and structure of a revised senior cycle and how to maximise the potential benefits from the learning experience.

Proposals for the Future of Senior Cycle Education

Part Three: Progressing Supporting Strategies for Change

3.1 Introduction

Any proposal for educational change must take into account the capacity and resources of the system to achieve the change required. During the consultations which followed the publication of the Consultative Paper (2002) there was widespread agreement that if change is to be effective it must be well planned, incremental and adequately resourced. Many were doubtful that resources at the level required would be made available.

The indivisibility of the vision for change and the strategies necessary to support the implementation of change has been a distinguishing feature of this initiative to develop senior cycle. What is more, many participants in the review process referred to the need for coherent change. Schools had, in the past, been subject to fragmented change, with little sense of an overall policy direction. There was a need to set out a programme of change, with agreed milestones, that all involved in the process could support.

The elements of support that have been given greatest emphasis or seen as critical to successful implementation of the changes envisaged at senior cycle are outlined in this section and will be explored in greater depth in the more detailed advice to follow. It is clear that during the period 2005 to 2007 significant, tangible progress must be made in these elements of support in order to prepare for, and generate momentum within, the programme of change and to maintain confidence in the integrity of the vision.

3.2 Supporting Strategy: Investment in Change

During the period 2005 to 2007 investment will be needed in a number of areas. For example, planning for the development and improvement of school buildings will need to get underway during this period with a view to developing the capacity of schools to have greater access to spaces for small group work, ICT equipped learning

spaces, library facilities and social spaces that are essential to a changed school culture at senior cycle. This will involve looking at plans for future school buildings, development of existing buildings and investigation of how schools in a given location can access and share local education and community facilities.

The nature and scale of improvement in the staff allocation to schools will need to be investigated. Additional staffing will be required to increase the choice of courses available to students and to cater for additional staff roles.

Each of these areas of investigation and planning will need to take account of the practical realities of school organisation and life, including the situations and implications of school type, school size and school location.

During the period 2005 to 2007, the NCCA will be engaged in extensive curriculum revision and development activity and will require an additional allocation of resources for this purpose. Equally, the work of other agencies in the development activity associated with these proposals may give rise to specific resource needs.

3.3 Supporting Strategy: Professional Support

During the period 2005 to 2007 there will be a focus on the development of a framework for professional development of teachers and support for schools that can combine the best elements of current support structures with new approaches. The collaborative work planned for this period is aimed at bringing the process of curriculum development and review closer to schools and to the daily lives of teachers. In this way, curriculum development and review can grow to be seen as a natural part of what schools and teachers engage with in the process of implementing meaningful and relevant educational change. This approach needs to form part of a larger framework for professional development of teachers and support of schools that would also address areas such as the career progression of teachers, accreditation for professional development undertaken by teachers, and arrangements for teachers to avail of sabbatical leave. The links between such a framework and the terms and conditions of service of teachers would need to be considered by the appropriate parties to the Teacher Conciliation Council.

Bringing the process of curriculum development and review closer to schools and making progress in implementing the changes envisaged at senior cycle will not obviate the need for the inclusion of a range of different types of support for specific purposes. Any framework would need to incorporate these types of support for use on a 'fitness for purpose' basis:

- *System-focused support* where particular curriculum and assessment change is supported by well-planned and relevant support aimed at enabling professionals to engage with the change effectively.
- *School-focused support* where schools identify and provide the professional development and support they need to achieve their aims and programmes of work. This kind of support includes planning time, team meetings, school development planning and staff development events.
- *Professionally-focused support* where individual teachers and management staff are provided with opportunities to plan their own individually-tailored programme of professional development aimed at maintaining, rejuvenating or re-energising their professional lives. This may be through taking further educational or management qualifications, through refresher courses in particular disciplines, through placement schemes in business and industry, trade unions and the community and voluntary sector, through working in the education systems of other countries, or through sabbatical leave.

3.4 Supporting Strategy: Information for and engagement with parents and students

Effective change on the scale envisaged at senior cycle must be predicated on the awareness, involvement and support of a fully informed public. Schools and the education system more generally have made considerable progress in recent years in informing parents and students and involving them in discussions about developments

in education. However, the consultations surrounding the review would indicate that there remains much to be achieved in this context.

During the period 2005 to 2007 the emphasis in this area will be on:

- Identifying and disseminating experiences of good practice in involvement of parents and students in developing curriculum and assessment arrangements and activities at senior cycle and in influencing changes in school culture.
- Identifying good practice and developing prototypes in the media adopted for communicating with and disseminating information to parents and students.
- Establishing, with clarity, the scale of educational guidance required to support parents and students in making effective choices and decisions in relation to a more flexible and varied senior cycle curriculum. The needs of educationally disadvantaged students and parents will need to be to the fore in this work.

3.5 Supporting Strategy: Monitoring, research and evaluation

In order to ensure that in developing senior cycle education good policy decisions and choices are made, and that the ‘soundness’ of these decisions and success of their implementation can be judged, it is essential that a strategy related to monitoring, research and evaluation is put in place. During the period 2005 to 2007 and beyond, the central elements in this strategy will be:

- Ensuring that the proposals for change are informed on an ongoing basis by emerging research findings, and trends in education systems internationally.
- The proofing of recommendations for change in terms of the contribution made to a number of important national and educational criteria such as quality, equality, lifelong learning, citizenship, building a knowledge society, economic development, inclusion, equity and social cohesion.

- The identification of a range of more specific indicators that will provide the basis of monitoring and evaluation of developments at senior cycle and enable a judgement of the success or otherwise of the changes to be made. These could include indicators such as: the levels of achievement of students within and beyond senior cycle; the extent and diversity of participation in senior cycle education; the extent to which the needs of adult learners are provided for in the system; the extent to which the changes in senior cycle have enabled effective participation in further and higher education; the general responsiveness of the changes to general system needs; public perceptions of assessment load. In addition, the use of more complex indicators such as the evaluation of how the provision of transition units across a two or three year senior cycle has benefited students and how the increased emphasis on skills has enabled learners to gather, select, transfer and generate knowledge effectively.

Proposals for the Future of Senior Cycle Education

Part Four: Next Steps

This *Overview* has set out proposals for the development of senior cycle and described the strategies necessary for their implementation. The proposals have been developed with a view to

- Improving the educational experience and learning achievements at senior cycle for all
- Ensuring coherent and meaningful progression from junior cycle
- Ensuring improved access to, and equality in, senior cycle education for all
- Contributing to the emergence of Ireland as a knowledge society
- Aligning developments at senior cycle with developments in the field of qualifications in Ireland and Europe, in keeping with the guiding principle of lifelong learning
- Building upon the best features of the existing senior cycle educational experience, which is well regarded by people in Ireland and abroad
- Ensuring that the educational experience at senior cycle is in line with good practice and developments internationally.

The advice is premised on the belief, repeatedly emphasised in the review process, that the key to achieving the necessary integration between the proposals and the strategies to support their implementation is effective planning. Planning represents the foundation upon which the proposals and the strategies for their support are built. The three elements—planning; proposals for change in school culture, curriculum and assessment; and support strategies are inextricably linked and indivisible.

The planning commences with this *Overview* suggesting the steps that can be taken over the period 2005 to 2007 to move ideas, directions and support strategies into the arena of action. It is envisaged that the process of planning and offering advice, as with the process of curriculum review and development, will be a rolling, overlapping, developmental one. The advice contained here will be supplemented by the publication of more detailed advice by the end of 2004 and it is envisaged that all

advice will need to be revisited, reviewed and modified as the development of senior cycle proceeds.

Above all, planning should take place in the overall context of a clear vision of senior cycle to be worked towards and should elucidate the what, when, how and why of the milestones to be reached along the way.

The planning process is a complex one as the table in Appendix I illustrates. A cycle of change in education must take account of the preparation for that change. It must recognise the starting point of the individual student embarking on an education that will bring her or him in contact with that change. It should appreciate that even at the end point of the cycle the teachers and school charged with implementing the change will have worked with that change with only one or two cohorts of students. In short, the cycle of educational change is an extended one and requires the kind of clear direction and comprehensive planning and support envisaged by this advice.

To begin with, however, the development of senior cycle along the lines envisaged in this and the ensuing advice requires a commitment among all those involved that this is the direction to take and that the steps set out in this advice are strategic, meaningful and appropriate starting points for the journey.

Proposals for the Future of Senior Cycle Education

Appendix I

An illustration of a typical cycle of change associated with developments at senior cycle

SCHOOL YEAR	MILESTONES
Year Minus Two	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Curriculum and assessment development for the changing senior cycle commences
Year Minus One	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Extensive information campaign highlighting the changes at senior cycle commences
Year One (Sept 20??)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Junior cycle commences for student X
Year Two	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Comprehensive programme of professional development and school support commences
Year Three	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Student X takes Junior Certificate examination under revised arrangements that take account of developments at senior cycle
Year Four	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Senior cycle commences for student X ▪ First new senior cycle exams (short courses) ▪ First availability of certificate of senior cycle education
Year Five	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ First two-year senior cycle complete
Year Six	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ First three-year senior cycle complete

Proposals for the Future of Senior Cycle Education

Appendix II

Aspects of the proposals for inclusion in the second part of the advice for October/November 2004

Curriculum

- A template for the design of a transition unit
- Sample transition units
- A template for the design of a short course
- Sample short courses
- The brief for the revision of subject syllabuses
- Specifications for embedding one of the key skills identified, in subjects, short courses and transition units
- Sample two-year and three-year senior cycle programmes, showing possible combinations of subjects, short courses and transition units

Assessment

- Clarification of the assessment, examination and certification arrangements for the curriculum components – transition units, short courses and subjects
- A framework for the number and timing of assessment events in a range of subjects and short courses
- Initial examples of how the changes in assessment can be managed by the education system as a whole

Certification

- A sample certificate
- A sample skills profile, showing how the key skills accessed by students in their chosen subjects, short courses and transition units would be recorded for presentation on the certificate

School culture

- Initial samples of student, teacher and school timetables incorporating the proposed changes
- Initial analysis of the implications of the senior cycle reforms for school buildings
- Plan for collaborative initiatives on the management of learning and the development of guidance tools for parents and students

Supporting strategies

- Detailed plan of action for the developmental period 2005 to 2007.
- Proposals for the timely mobilisation of the supporting strategies outlined in this *Overview*.