



# Developing Senior Cycle Education

Directions for Development



**NCCA**

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

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## Directions for Development

### Introduction

*Directions for Development* follows on and builds upon the recent NCCA consultative paper on senior cycle education and the ensuing, extensive consultation process. Its thinking, however, is firmly focused on the future. It takes as its horizon the year 2010 and envisions what direction developments in senior cycle education may have taken by that time. The subjects of this visioning are of central importance: the school and its culture, the structure of the curriculum and its content, and how learning achievement is assessed and certificated.

Ours is an education system with ambitious goals. At second-level, the system seeks to provide all students with a high-quality learning environment which enables them to live full lives and to realise their potential as individuals and citizens. It aims to prepare students for adult life and to help them proceed to further and higher education or directly to employment.

Since January 2003, the NCCA has been asking people to reflect on the education system at senior cycle, and to consider how effectively the educational experience of students is meeting those goals. Much has been achieved in recent years to improve the quality of senior cycle education. The development of programmes such as the Transition Year, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving

Certificate Applied has made this phase of education a site of ongoing innovation and change. That's as it should be. While education is always developing, senior cycle education can never be static. At the interface between second level and further and higher education, and on the threshold of working life, it's a phase of education that has to be responsive to changes in social and economic patterns. The consultation process highlighted the strengths of the system in meeting new challenges, and the failure of the system to meet old ones, particularly the challenges to meet the needs of all students, to treat students equitably, to reward different kinds of achievement and support the independent self-directed learning that is the foundation of lifelong learning. These challenges have been raised before, in the White Paper on Education, in the report of the Commission on the Points System, and are widely recognised. In setting out *Directions for Development*, the NCCA aims to meet these challenges, and in the process, build upon the strong vision for senior cycle education set out in the White Paper, and address the recommendations of the Commission.

The future scenarios in *Directions for Development* are grounded in a number of fundamental goals. They are aimed at maintaining and improving the quality of the educational experience for senior cycle

students and the quality of the professional experience for those who work with them. They focus on ensuring that the experience provides all students with a foundation for taking advantage of future life chances and work and further education opportunities in a knowledge society. They contribute to an equitable distribution of the benefits of education to all students. They underline the contribution of education to the twin aims of social cohesion and continued economic development.

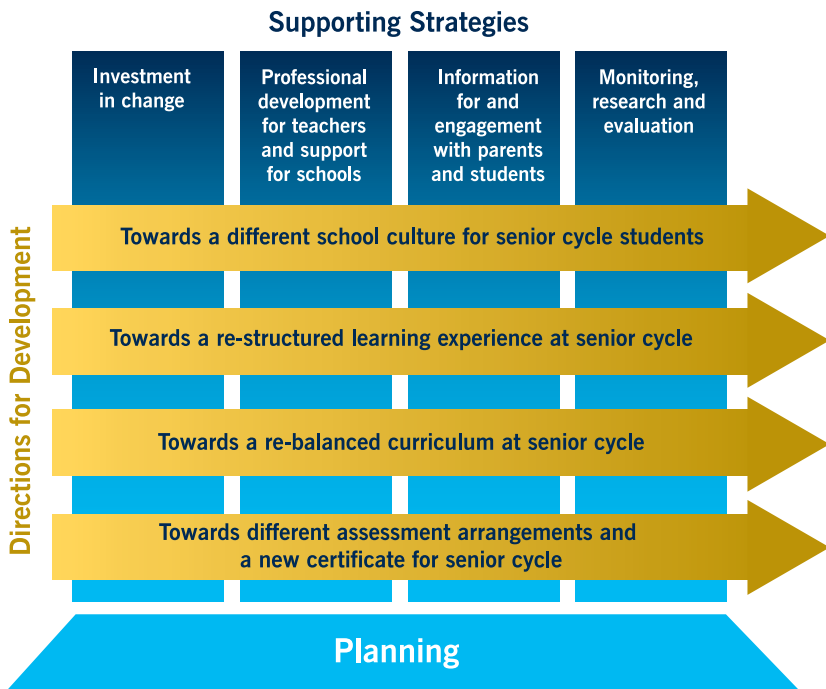
In placing these futures in 2010, the NCCA is attempting to extend the horizons for decision making and planning in education. As noted by the OECD in its *Schooling for Tomorrow* project, if policy deals only with the short-term, schools are left ill equipped to deal with the demands of change. Of note is that within that project, a number of education systems are already looking at 2020 in an attempt to keep up with the rapid pace of social, cultural and economic change.

Futures' thinking is not simply speculative. It extends to detailed consideration of the essential support strategies that would sustain movement in the directions envisaged. The achievement of meaningful change would have to be predicated on an integrated, coherent and well-resourced

planning and implementation process, whose milestones are negotiated, agreed and shared by all. The support that would facilitate change includes strategies related to planning; investment; professional development for teachers and support for schools; involvement of parents and students; and research, monitoring and evaluation.

*Directions for Development* represents an invitation to discussion and debate on the future of senior cycle education, a number of characteristics of which are clearly set out in the four directions identified. The document was launched at an NCCA Forum on Senior Cycle Education in September 2003 and is the subject of discussion until the end of 2003. Following this, the NCCA will advise the Minister for Education and Science on the future shape of senior cycle education.

The consultative process to date has been characterised by a high level of interest, involvement and enjoyment in discussing the fundamental issues related to senior cycle education and to education more widely. *Directions for Development* offers a further opportunity for constructive engagement with and thinking about the future of senior cycle education.



**Developing Senior Cycle Education**  
**Directions for Development and Supporting Strategies**

# Towards a different school culture for senior cycle students

The student's experience of senior cycle education is influenced by many aspects of school life, some within the classroom and some outside the classroom. These aspects of school culture are very significant in ensuring that the experience of all senior cycle students is characterised by mature relationships, involvement, engagement and enjoyment.

In 2010:

- There is a clear difference between junior cycle and senior cycle. Senior cycle students are involved in aspects of school organisation and policy development such as: the school behaviour code, the school dress code and health-promotion policies.
  - Each senior cycle student has a schedule that includes class contact time and time for independent learning. The school timetable is flexible, allowing time for self-directed learning, research, use of technology and small group work. Class periods are of different lengths than at junior cycle to facilitate collaborative learning methodologies and to allow students time between classes to research and develop class work.
  - Students do not expect to be supervised at all times when engaged in research and independent work and are given responsibility for managing their time during non-timetabled sessions. This flexibility allows for an understanding of the transitional phase that this period is for many young people—transition from junior to senior cycle, from adolescence to adulthood, from school to a more independent life stage, whether that be to work or further education or both.
- The curriculum allows time and space for teachers to meet students in small groups or one-to-one to provide guidance and monitoring on self-directed assignments and projects.
  - Learning is not confined to the classroom or the school. There is increased facilitation of learning through technology and learning beyond the classroom. School-community links are valued and supported. Inside the school, learning is characterised by high levels of motivation, engagement and reward and school is viewed by many students as an enjoyable experience.
  - The relationships between students and teachers and students and school management are characterised by trust and engagement. Students have responsibility for managing their school day in relation to their arrival in school, balancing school interests with other aspects of their lives, dress code and

timetabled and non-timetabled time. These areas continue to be monitored by the school, with emphasis on negotiation and responsibility.

- There is an increased emphasis on educational and vocational support and guidance for students. The focus here is on helping students to develop the skills to make informed choices and decisions in school and for their futures.
- Teaching senior cycle students is different than teaching students at junior cycle. The learning relationship between teacher and student is one of facilitation and negotiation. Teachers and students are working together to achieve the best outcomes. This is facilitated by working with small groups of students for some tasks, more frequent and more relevant assessment components and discussing outcomes of class assessments with students. There is time and space to consider the diverse interests of students coming from different educational backgrounds and with different learning styles.
- Developments in relation to skills and reduction of content in Leaving Certificate curricula provide opportunities for students to collaborate on some elements of the curriculum, and to reinforce skills in areas such as personal development, communication, working with others and decision-making.
- A number of schools have engaged in piloting different proposals for the organisation of the school day. The pilot involves some schools operating a longer school day, for example 8 o'clock in the morning until 6 o'clock in the evening. The response to this has been positive, as it allows for flexibility in the structure of the school day for teachers, students, adult and returning learners, and is providing for a different relationship between school and part-time work undertaken by students.
- Changes in the culture of senior cycle have resulted in a very positive response from students, teachers, parents, employers and further and higher education institutions, as it is helping to prepare students for the transition from school to adult life. Students appreciate being treated like adults and are taking more responsibility for their school experiences, leading to greater levels of motivation and improved participation rates.

## Towards a re-structured learning experience at senior cycle

Attention to how the curriculum is structured can ensure that a senior cycle education of a high quality is available to all students. This direction for development is concerned with the nature and composition of the educational programmes available to students and their relationship to each other.

In 2010:

- Some students have two years of senior cycle education, others have three. All students participate in at least one Transition Unit (TU). Those following a three-year senior cycle must take up to 5/6 Transition Units, which can be taken together in the first year of senior cycle as part of a full Transition Year, or spread across the three years. These units include: work-related learning, community participation, enterprise education, special studies, arts education, ICT literacy, study skills etc. –formerly associated with the Transition Year and the Link Modules of the LCVP. The TU's also place a strong emphasis on the skills embedded across the senior cycle curriculum. It is a requirement of matriculation that completion of at least one TU is presented on the certificate awarded on completion of, or departure from, senior cycle education. Research is showing

that the benefits of TY are spread more equitably across the system.

- Leaving Certificate subjects are no longer expressed as lists of topics to be covered, but as outcomes to be achieved, and some of these outcomes relate to skills. Subjects are also broken down into units, with all students taking a subject studying a number of common subject units, and further units being differentiated. While most of the assessment for the examination takes place from January to June of the final year of senior cycle, some can take place at the end of the first and second years, in some subjects where it is appropriate to do so.
- Short courses are available in politics and society, media studies, social personal and health education, science and society, and European and global studies. Students can be assessed in these at the end of any of their years in senior cycle.
- LCA is composed of the LCA modules and a number of TU's which may be taken with other senior cycle students. This has greatly enhanced the integration of LCA students with their colleagues, and there are now plans to allow LCA students to access the short courses.

- Adult learners and returning learners can present an account of prior or out-of-school learning as a TU. The presentation of subjects as units allows for returning learners to pick-up where they left off.
- Senior cycle has come through a period of strategic planned development. There is general satisfaction that the experience of senior cycle education has improved for all—for students, schools and teachers. There is international interest in senior cycle education here, and in how an education system can respond to planned development over time with flexibility to deal with changing social and economic circumstances.
- There is general acceptance that the changes to the TY, LCVP and LCA programmes and the reduced emphasis on different levels within subjects has made senior cycle education more equitable.



## Towards a re-balanced curriculum at senior cycle

This direction for development is concerned with the content of the senior cycle curriculum. The focus turns to the nature of subject syllabuses and programme statements, the degree of emphasis placed on skills and their relationship to knowledge content, and the range of subjects available to students and schools.

In 2010:

- Alongside the emphasis on the knowledge content of subjects, there is a strong emphasis on skills and how they are linked with knowledge. Subject syllabuses and programme statements are expressed in terms of the learning outcomes that will be achieved, including learning outcomes related to skills.
- The breadth of knowledge content in most existing subject syllabuses has been reduced.
- Particular skills have been identified and embedded in subjects and programmes. They are now an important focus of teaching and learning and are assessed through the examination of subjects and programmes. They include the skills of learning to learn, information processing, personal effectiveness, communication, critical thinking and working with others.
- In order to offer balance in the range of subjects available to learners for examination at this level, a number of additional subjects have been introduced on an optional basis. These include: civic and political education, physical education, philosophy, drama, dance, and languages.
- The experience of implementing the restructured senior cycle curriculum has brought into focus the question of programme requirements. There is ongoing debate about the learning experiences and curriculum components that should be part of the education of every senior cycle student.
- Curriculum change enjoys strong support within the education system, from parents and from employers. It has contributed to lessening the gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged in education through greater clarity regarding the learning outcomes and a greater focus on the skills of all students.

# Towards different assessment arrangements and a new certificate for senior cycle

Assessment and certification strongly influence the nature of teaching and the quality of students' learning at senior cycle. This direction for development is concerned with the arrangement, methods and modes of formal and informal assessment. It also considers the type of certificate students receive at the end of their senior cycle experience.

In 2010:

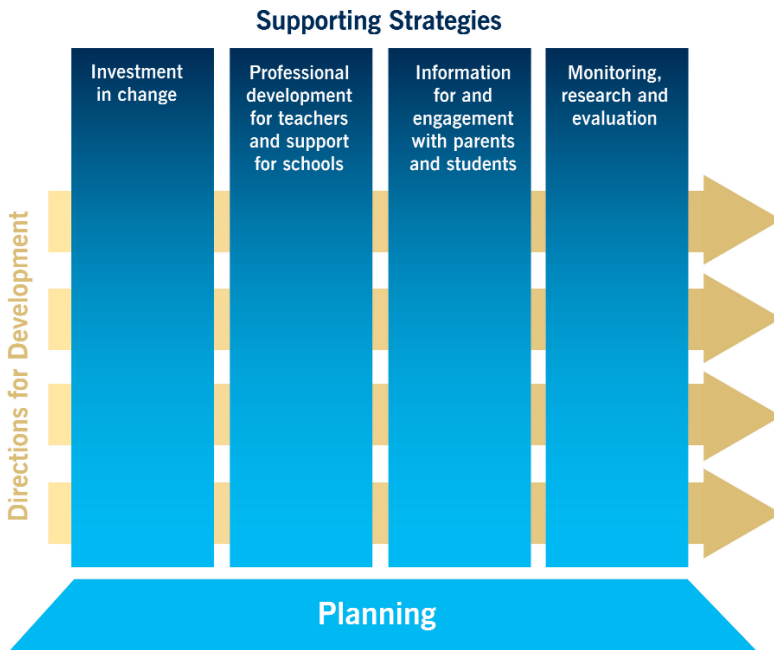
- There is a strong relationship between the aims of the curriculum and the assessment methods used in the certificate examinations.
- Assessment events are spread out across courses of study and are available to students more frequently. Ongoing monitoring and review of curriculum and assessment change has ensured that students are not burdened with over-assessment.
- A variety of assessment methods are in common use—including written examinations, orals and aurals, project assessment, assessment of the performance of students in completing tasks, portfolio assessment, assessment of group work.
- Assessment for certificate examinations on an external basis is the norm for all students and the vast majority of assessment components. However, school-based assessment with external moderation is in use for some students, for some assessment components and for some subjects.
- The interest generated by these different assessment arrangements has led to growing emphasis on assessment as an important aspect of the day-to-day life and learning of the classroom. Developments in curriculum content and the culture of learning in schools, associated with other strands, have also contributed to this growing emphasis.
- A new form of certification, which includes examination results and achievements in other areas, has been introduced. The certificate is a requirement for entry from second level schooling to higher education and to higher levels of learning in further education. Extensive dialogue has taken place to ensure successful transition from second level to third level education by students and to agree arrangements and requirements for entry.
- Sitting for examinations is not a prerequisite for the awarding of the

certificate. The certificate can also be awarded on the basis of partial completion of senior cycle education. In particular, this facilitates part-time and returning learners.

- The development of extensive provision for new assessment arrangements in the certificate examinations at senior cycle has been paralleled by scaling back of the Junior Certificate Examination.

- Changes in assessment and certification arrangements have contributed to the continuing high level of public confidence and status that the certificate examinations enjoy. Furthermore, the changes have contributed to addressing issues of inequality in education associated with socio-economic disadvantage, gender and achievement, and learners with disabilities and special educational needs.

# Strategies for Supporting the Development of Senior Cycle Education



The kind of change suggested by the four 'Directions for Development' requires significant levels of practical and tangible support for the people and institutions that make the change happen. Strategies for supporting change are central to planning for change. The strategies employed relate to the process of planning itself, to investment in change, to the professional development of teachers and support for schools, to information for and engagement with parents and students, and to monitoring, research and evaluation.

## Planning

- Planning has maintained the momentum of the directions for change and the coherence and integration of the other support strategies.
- Planning has been central to the negotiation and agreement of key milestones in the implementation of change.
- The planning associated with senior cycle has allowed for the prediction of resource needs and effective allocation and/or redirection of resources.

- The use of research and evaluation data has informed the planning process and ensured value for money in investment.
  - Effective planning has ensured that the change load associated with developments in senior cycle is monitored and manageable.
  - The planning strategy has confirmed and facilitated the role of teachers as agents of change through the timely provision of professional development and its ongoing evaluation.
  - Planning has allowed for informed and coherent change, ensuring that all have a clear sense of where senior cycle is, and where it is going at every stage of the process.
- flexibility in school time, the organisation and length of the school day and the structure of curriculum provision
  - developmental work by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
  - research.
- In addition, following a review, the level and application of funding for TU's and LCA are adequate and fair.
  - Because of the emphasis on monitoring, research and evaluation, value for money principles have informed the investment.

### **Professional development for teachers and support for schools**

#### **Investment in change**

- A development plan for senior cycle education (2004-2010) has been prepared and agreed.
  - While in some cases an increased level of investment has been required, in others the focus has been on the redirection of resources. Investment in five areas has been prioritised
    - examinations, assessment and certification
    - professional development for teachers
- The system of pre-service and professional development is based on the principle of teachers as the key agents of change in curriculum and assessment.
  - Professional development is characterised by comprehensive approaches to planning, and thorough and ongoing evaluation procedures. Regular, systematic participation in professional development is seen as essential at every stage of the teacher's career.

- Professional development is focused on areas such as
  - recognition and accommodation of distinct learning styles
  - assessment
  - motivational influences in the learning of young adults
  - teaching for skill-related learning
  - strategies for promoting reflective practice in teaching
  - in-school curriculum development.
- There is an emphasis on the school as the critical site of professional development for teachers and for whole staffs. In addition, a strong emphasis is placed on developments related to school organisation, staffing arrangements and the capacity of school buildings to cater for the planned developments.
- Planning and implementation of professional development is assisted by parallel developments in the education system. These include
  - the establishment of a Teaching Council
  - integrated planning and evaluation based on school development planning.

## **Information for and engagement with parents and students**

- Parents and students are fully informed about and positively engaged with the system and its structures, and are afforded an increased role in shaping ongoing change. Important information on the senior cycle–unit descriptions, subject content, details of assessment procedures, are made available to parents/students in booklet format, on the web and through other media.
- Strategies agreed with community-based social inclusion programmes have ensured that all parents have access to essential information about the restructured senior cycle. Parents are fully informed about the different choices and pathways available to students and are empowered to maximise the benefits of education for their children.
- A number of pilot projects are set up to explore the potential for the involvement of parents in the design of school-developed Transition Units. The pilots are carefully monitored and the outcomes are evaluated.
- Students are enabled to become involved in the negotiation of learning outcomes and assessment arrangements in school-developed TU's.

- The voices of parents and students have continued to inform decision-making in relation to directions for development.

## Monitoring, research and evaluation

- A comprehensive research and evaluation strategy has been built into the planning process. This has ensured coherence and has given an overall sense of direction to developments at senior cycle.
- A number of academics and research agencies have been commissioned to provide research and evaluation data on
  - The impact of the changes on student attitudes to school, on achievement levels, and on participation.
  - The impact of the changes on teacher work and the effect of professional development on classroom and school practice
  - Public response to the developments, especially the response of employers.
- The evaluation strategy has also been supported by the work of the Inspectorate in schools.
- The research reports, as well as reports from the Inspectorate on its evaluative work, are published regularly over the course of the developmental period and the results are used to inform ongoing development and to modify plans where necessary.