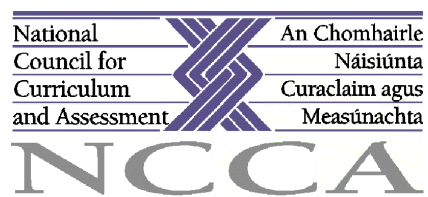# NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT

Developing the Senior Cycle

Online Survey

Results

August 2003

Developing senior cycle education

On-line survey

Results

Introduction

This survey, which is a strand of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) consultative process on the future of senior cycle education, was launched on 22nd January 2003 and was open for completion until 30th June 2003. It sought to gain a wider audience for the consultations than would traditionally have taken part in such a debate. The survey was available in two forms: a printed questionnaire which, on completion, could be posted to NCCA, and an online version, containing identical questions, accessible through the NCCA website. Electronic versions of the senior cycle paper and its executive summary could also be downloaded from the same site.

Hard copy versions of the questionnaire were distributed along with the senior cycle paper and its executive summary to all post-primary schools, third level institutions, parent and student organisations, Youthreach centres and other national agencies working in education or in related fields, such as social and community development. It was also sent to representatives of the business community.

Prior to publication, the online and hard copy versions of the survey were piloted among a representative sample taken from inside and outside the field of education.

Two security measures were built in to the online survey to reduce the possibility of spurious responses and to remove the possibility of multiple entries from the same source. Respondents who did not fill in the personal information at the beginning of the survey could not proceed to completion. Initially, only a single response was permitted from each computer. However, this filter was removed as a result of feedback from the piloting phase. This was carried out to enable more than one member of a household to complete the survey and to facilitate participation by schools and other institutions where computer facilities are shared by different classes or groups.

Data from completed surveys was analysed on submission. Any visitor to the website could view a summary of the survey results as they accumulated. Access to personal information and more detailed data was available only to NCCA.

The results from items which used a four point Likert scale are presented as rounded percentages, while other items are presented to one decimal point.

From the outset, NCCA recognised that a survey of this nature would have its limitations. Because of its open access, for example, it would not be possible to achieve a truly representative sample of public opinion. Lack of access to computers and the Internet would result in disadvantaged sectors of society being under-represented in the survey. Organisations that encouraged their membership to participate were likely to be over-represented in the sample.

As mentioned above, the NCCA views the survey as an exercise in gathering public opinion in relation to senior cycle education and in generating discussion on the issues raised in the senior cycle paper. The outcomes were not intended to stand alone, but would be evaluated in the light of the other strands in the consultation process.

Structure of the survey

The survey was structured follows:

- **Section 1** introduced the context of the survey and linked it to the senior cycle paper.

- **Section 2** gathered general information in relation to the respondent.

- **Section 3** sought opinions on the current situation of senior cycle education.

- **Section 4** asked respondents for their views on what would be important for learners in the future and what educational changes this might necessitate.

- **Section 5** sought opinions on the type of actions that would be necessary to enable learners who were disadvantaged or who had special educational needs to gain more benefit from senior cycle education.

- **Section 6** invited respondents to express opinions on each of the four programmes offered in the senior cycle; Transition Year, Leaving Certificate Applied, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and Leaving Certificate (established).

- **Section 7** asked respondents to indicate views in relation to the range of subjects offered in the Leaving Certificate (established).

- **Section 8** posed questions relating to assessment in the Leaving Certificate examination and how the range of assessment used might be broadened.

- **Section 9** asked participants to identify achievements which, in their view, should be included as part of a learner's certification in senior cycle.

- **Section 10** asked respondents to express their views on the four options for future configuration of the senior cycle, which were laid out in the senior cycle paper.

The majority of questions employed four-point Likert scales. For example, respondents were asked to *strongly agree*, *agree, disagree* or *strongly disagree* with a particular statement. Comments were invited in questions 4, 5, 8 and 10 of the survey.

Responses and respondents

By the closing date on 30th June 2003, NCCA had received a total of 1,813 responses to the survey. Of these 1,116 were online responses and 697 were in hard copy format. The total responses in each category are presented below.
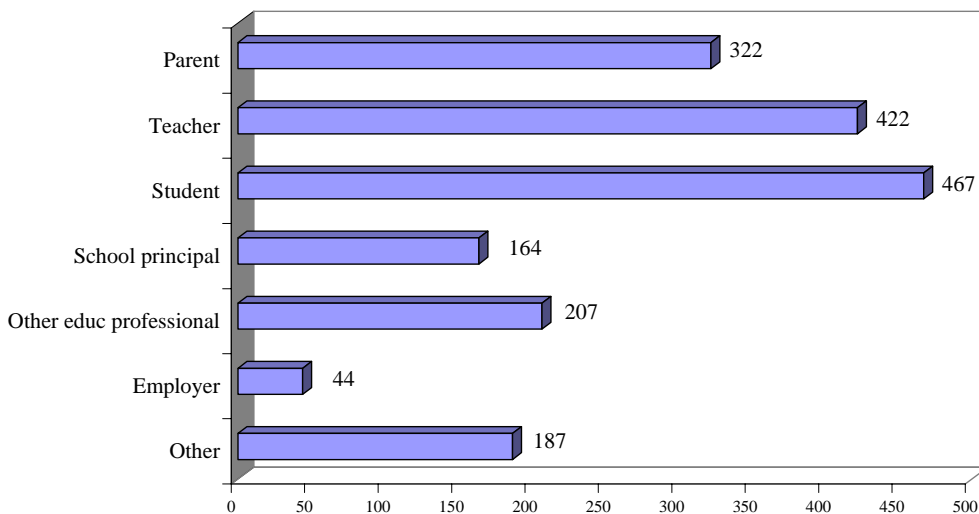

Figure 1. Response to survey by category

It should be noted that 108 of the 1,116 respondents completed only the information section of the survey.

The scale of response by parents (17%) and students (25%) was significant and indicative of the opportunity the survey gave to these groups to express their voices. Approximately 25% of the student response was from third level students. Participants from all groups were widely geographically distributed. The low number of employers who took part (2.4%) was disappointing bearing in mind the frequent calls by this sector for senior cycle to be more responsive to the needs of the economy.

Other responses came from third level students, interested members of the public, graduates, post-graduates, supporters of the Irish language, public servants and civil servants.

The majority of postal and online submissions came from individuals rather than from organisations. There were, however, 90 responses from undergraduate teachers in a university education department, 23 responses from teachers in one school, and a number of clustered responses from parents and students. In six cases the questionnaire submitted was identified as a group response, for example, a school staff or members of an educational association or community group. Eleven responses contained two, three or four names, indicating that they were the result of collaborative discussions.

Senior cycle education in Ireland today

This item sought respondents' perceptions of the nature of senior cycle. Unsurprisingly, 90% of respondents agree that senior cycle is 'dominated unduly by the final examinations'. This view is strongly supported by all groups.

Parent	Teacher	Student	Principal	OEP*	Employer	Other	Overall
89%	87%	96%	88%	92%	75%	88%	90%

* OEP = Other educational professional

Table 1. Percentage of respondents who *strongly agree/ agree* that senior cycle is dominated unduly by the final examinations.

There was broad consensus that senior cycle offers a good level of continuity with junior cycle, that it prepares learners well to participate in further education, training and working life, and

contributes positively to gender equality. Interestingly, only 33% of teachers agree that senior cycle offers a range of options for those with differing aptitudes and abilities, and 46% of students agree. A total of 76% of respondents believe that senior cycle does not meet the needs of learners with special educational needs. Senior cycle is also perceived as being inflexible, in that only 40% of respondents agree that it can be accessed by all learners. This pattern of results is replicated across all the respondent groups.

Senior cycle education into the future

This section had two parts. Respondents were asked to express their opinion on the relative importance of a list of challenges that may be faced by learners in the future. All options presented are strongly supported by respondents from each grouping. The following challenges were perceived as being particularly important:

Communicating with others	81%
Coping with stress and insecurity	67%
Making successful decisions and choices in life	66%
Appreciating different cultures	62%
Finding gainful work	61%
Maintaining family and community life	60%

Table 2. Challenges seen as being very important to students in the future.

While finding gainful work is seen as very important, what is of particular interest here is the proportion of respondents who placed the greatest value on learners' personal development (e.g. coping with stress, making successful decisions) and their social development (e.g. communicating with others, appreciating different cultures).

In the second part of this section respondents were invited to comment on, or suggest additions to, the options listed. An analysis of the 325 responses highlights some interesting outcomes. The issue that generates the greatest interest among students, in one in four of those who made a comment, relates to cultural diversity.

I feel that, in the future, appreciation of different cultures needs to be developed. In Irish society today we have many other nationalities in our midst. Reaction to these has been negative. Tolerance needs to be developed in an attempt to create harmony. (Student)

Our attitudes toward other cultures and races is still an issue which needs to be addressed, we Irish have a habit of letting ourselves down when a coloured person enters the room. (Student)

The ability to cope with stress and the importance of personal fulfilment are also highlighted by students.

Coping with stress and study is very much a part of students' life, and could be approached using group discussions and helping to get a balance between academic and relaxation. (Student)

Happiness for the individual is a very important issue and if you can get that then you can build up the other aspects at that person's life. This needs to be dealt with in the school. (Student)

A number of respondents are unsure about the ability or suitability of schools to respond to the challenges to be faced by students in the future.

There can be little question that all of the above points are very desirable - the issue hinges in how they can be best encouraged and promoted through the curriculum. (Parent)

These may be challenges facing the students of the future, as many of them are and have been to present and past students. Is school the only place to learn coping skills? What part do families and society have to play? Are teachers academic tutors or social integrators? (Teacher)

I have indicated that the issues raised are of importance or very important for young persons in the future. However to what degree a school as an educational institution can provide the support and development of young people in this regard is questionable, both from a resource and a practical point of view. (Principal)

The learning environment of the future

Respondents were asked to suggest how the learning environment at senior cycle might be changed in order to meet some of the challenges to be faced by students in the future. Three perspectives emerge from the responses. A high proportion of respondents agree that 'learning for understanding' should take precedence over 'learning for examinations' (94%) and that learners 'should receive more feedback on their work' (92%). There is also support for a greater emphasis to be placed on basic skills (91%). There is little support evident for greater academic focus in the senior cycle.

The second perspective suggests that the future learning environment should be more varied and more appropriate to the needs of learners. Respondents agree that 'more project-based learning

should be encouraged' (82%) and that 'learning should have a more practical focus' (85%). Overwhelming support exists for the students' involvement in 'more creative activities and problem-solving' (97%) and for the increased use of technology as a tool for learning (90%).

Learning should be more relevant to the young person and more experiential. (Parent)

The way forward for education is change and adaptation. The senior cycle must move away from a system where recall is dominant and must adapt to a system where critical thinking and understanding holds more precedence. (Teacher)

I strongly agree that individuals need to learn for understanding and not just for exams. I feel this is at the heart of the unsuccessfullness of the current system, and affects not only what and how pupils learn but also what and how teachers teach. (Student)

Learning should be about process. Learners should be able to have more control over the content of their learning. Learners should be able to develop all their intelligences, not just the linguistic and mathematical. (Other educational professional)

The third perspective reflects the view that the range of learning settings should be diversified to include the community and the workplace. A majority of respondents agree that there ought to be closer links between learning and work (85%), more community-based learning (77%), and greater opportunities to take out-of-school courses (77%).

Opinion is divided as to whether learners should have the opportunity during the senior cycle to 'specialise' for future careers. Only 58% of parents, 49% of teachers and 29% of school principals support a move in this direction. A striking 80% of students, however, support the provision of an opportunity to specialise. This represents one of the greatest divergences between students and other participants in the survey.

Students will be more willing to learn and understand something if it is in their interest and they feel they will use the knowledge in the future not just to know for the "big" exam then forget about it. (Student)

Students are too young to specialise, life intervenes and students should be taught that they can change direction at any time in their lives. An attitude of lifelong learning should be instilled at second level. (Parent)

The idea that students should have the opportunity to specialise for future careers is good as long as other areas of their learning needs are not disrupted or discarded because they need the opportunity to experience all areas of study before they can make an educated decision on career paths. (Other educational professional)

One of the strengths of the Irish education system is that it is broad and general. Irish school leavers are comparatively young and the breadth of material covered allows them to make their choices later, while leaving their options open. (Teacher)

Further analysis of the data presents interesting patterns in attitudes to project-based learning across the different groups. While there is strong support for project-based learning across all respondent groups, the support from parents, principals and teachers is noticeably less strong than that from students. Increased project work is supported in the responses because it is perceived to encourage student participation, develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, provide greater success for students with differing abilities, and support collaborative learning. Those who do not favour such a development claim that project work may often merely involve 'cutting and pasting' of material that is not the student's own work. It is also perceived to take up valuable teaching time and lead to work overload for students, teachers and parents.

Students should be allowed to be more participative in their learning. Project work would encourage students to develop and learn more about things that they are interested in themselves and give them a chance to show what they can do when not under stressful examination situations. (Teacher)

Projects, portfolios [and] practical tests will help to improve and motivate a student who doesn't do well in written exams. (Student)

We need active project type learning where students have a period of time to complete tasks/projects and all the skills and qualities that the task/project seeks to develop can be assessed. (Teacher)

Although project based learning is ideal, in my experience at the moment students search the Internet and cut and paste, and don't actually learn anything. (Parent)

If there are going to be more projects will the syllabus be reduced? Who will correct the projects? How much time will be given? (Teacher)

Equality of access and opportunity

In this section respondents were offered a list of actions that might enable students who are educationally disadvantaged to gain more benefit from senior cycle. Respondents were asked to rate actions on a scale. In all, 92% of respondents agree with the statement that 'all schools should have the resources to offer all senior cycle programmes'. Interestingly, teachers and parents are stronger in this view than principals. Many of the respondents doubt whether resources would be made available to implement such proposals.

> *Funding for resources as we know from other areas as we know is terribly difficult to get so many students have sub standard equipment which only does the job by half. If schools are to offer all the perks the senior cycle has to offer huge investment is required.(Student)*

Sharing of resources between schools in an area is suggested, as was the wider use of the school as a community resource.

> *All schools do not have to offer all programmes. Schools in an area should specialise in certain programmes and co-operate with others to provide for all the school communities. (Principal)*

There is strong support for broadening teaching and learning methods and this support is equally strong from teachers (93%) as it is from students (95%). There was equally strong support for widening the range of assessment methods. However, in this case, the proportion of teachers in favour (86%), is somewhat less than the proportion of principals (98%), parents (93%), and students (92%). There is universal support for improving guidance and personal learning support (97%).

Greater flexibility, increased modularisation and more frequent assessment are all strongly supported. In the case of the latter, principals show the strongest level of support (96%), followed by parents (90%), and teachers and students (both 82%). A considerable number of comments in the qualitative data relate to modularisation of the curriculum and whether such modularisation would benefit the learner. Supporters of a modular approach argue that it would offer more choice to students and provide greater opportunities for adult learners and those with special educational needs. It would also provide more realistic goals and lead to early success for learners. Those critical of modularisation warn of the dangers of fragmentation of the learning experience.

> *I like the idea of a modular style of learning which could incorporate more choice for the student and which could be assessed with more regularity. Students can monitor their learning and progress (or lack of) more efficiently and it would allow them to develop lifelong learning skills.*

Students could feel more in control and allow them to engage with and participate more in their learning. (Teacher)

I feel modularisation would be a definite step forward so it would allow pupils to learn a variety of things in a specified space of time. If there were more regular exams, perhaps at the end of each module, then pupils wouldn't be under so much pressure as it would be evenly spread out. This modularisation would also allow for a greater range of teaching and learning methods to be used in the classroom. (Student)

Care needs to be taken when offering programmes in module form. In theory a good idea, but in practice a short module, almost immediately forgotten does little for a student. (Teacher)

The programmes at senior cycle

This section of the survey focuses on the four programmes offered to learners at senior cycle:

- Transition Year (TY)
- Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA)
- Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP)
- Leaving Certificate (established) (LCE).

Respondents were asked to rate a series of identical statements on each of the programmes. It was open to respondents to respond on all of the programmes or just on one or two.

The results are summarised in the table below.

	TY	LCA	LCVP	LCE
Relevant to the life experiences of learners	80%	89%	85%	45%
Promotes the health and well-being of learners	71%	73%	62%	30%
Promotes the development of work-related skills	86%	90%	89%	32%
Promotes the development of personal and social skills	89%	84%	78%	47%
Achieves a balance between 'academic' and 'practical'	72%	79%	72%	32%
Uses appropriate teaching and learning methods	71%	85%	75%	40%
Uses a good range of assessment methods	61%	83%	71%	22%
Enjoys a high level of public support	45%	43%	57%	72%
Caters for learners of all abilities	62%	59%	61%	23%

Table 3. Summary chart for senior cycle programmes, indicating the combined percentage of respondents who *strongly agree/agree* with the statements listed.

The above table illustrates the contradiction at the heart of attitudes to senior cycle education. There is little confidence in the potential of the LCE to deliver on any of the desired outcomes for senior cycle education. There is little enthusiasm for the teaching and learning or assessment methods used. However, respondents believe that the LCE enjoys a high level of public support, far higher than that enjoyed by any other senior cycle programme.

Leaving Certificate (established)

The extent to which respondents identify the LCE as inadequate under a range of headings is startling. Of particular note is the lack of confidence among school principals that the LCE is meeting the needs of students. Only 21% of principals agree that LCE promotes the health and well-being of learners. Only 24% believe that it promotes the development of work-related skills while 29% believe that it achieves a balance between 'academic' and 'practical' education. A mere 10% agree that it uses a good range of assessment methods and 12% are convinced that it caters for learners of all abilities.

These figures are highly significant given the pivotal role played by principals in shaping curriculum and assessment policies in schools. However, following the established pattern, 94% of principals believe that the LCE enjoys a high level of public support. As shown in Table 4 below, the views of the principals are shared, albeit to a lesser degree, by teachers, parents and students.

	Teachers	Parents	Students
Relevant to the life experiences of learners	44%	45%	45%
Promotes the health and well-being of learners	32%	31%	33%
Promotes the development of work-related skills	27%	34%	41%
Promotes the development of personal and social skills	38%	37%	42%
Achieves a balance between 'academic' and 'practical'	35%	32%	35%
Uses appropriate teaching and learning methods	43%	43%	44%
Uses a good range of assessment methods	22%	25%	27%
Enjoys a high level of public support	89%	69%	74%
Caters for learners of all abilities	21%	23%	34%

Table 4. Summary table for Leaving Certificate (established), indicating the percentage of teachers, parents and students who *strongly agree*/*agree* with the statements listed.

While the data shows relatively high satisfaction with aspects of the LCA and LCVP, some further issues emerge with more detailed analysis of the results.

Leaving Certificate Applied

A striking feature of the data is the differing perspectives on aspects of the LCA expressed by teachers and principals on the one hand and parents and students on the other. 87% of principals and 84% of teachers agree that the LCA promotes health and well-being in learners. This is in sharp contrast to figures of 67% and 66% recorded for parents and students respectively. In addition, 93% of principals and teachers and 81% of students agree that the LCA promotes the development of personal and social skills whereas, by comparison, only 69% of parents concur. Principals and teachers appear to be more positive about the impact of the programme than parents and students.

The data also reveals a perceived low level of public support for the programme (43%). The fact that only 45% of school principals agree that that the LCA caters for learners of all abilities is noteworthy as principals play a key role in the organisation of the LCA in schools. This may reflect principals' perception of the type of student who is suited to the programme and which may in turn contribute to reinforcing the apparent low level of public support for the LCA.

Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme

The survey results for the LCVP show that it is highly valued for its relevance to learners and its contribution to the development of their work-related skills. Despite this, only 57% of respondents agree that it enjoys a high level of public support. This contradiction may be attributed to confusion in the public mind as to the nature of the programme as illustrated by the following quote:

> *I believe that the LCVP is like a subject in the LCE rather than a different programme and I believe many pupils think this. (Student)*

It appears that the responses are based on satisfaction with the link modules and not necessarily on the overall nature of the programme. There also appears to be broad agreement that the LCVP (or possibly the link modules) achieves a balance between 'academic' and 'practical' education and that it caters for learners of all abilities.

Transition Year

One of the noteworthy aspects of the data for TY is that, when compared to students' views, teachers see greater benefits in the programme and are more positive in relation to its outcomes. For example 83% of teachers as opposed to 64% of students agree that TY promotes the health and well-being of learners while 87% of teachers and 73% of students regard TY as relevant to the life experiences of learners.

Also of note is the fact that parents express lower satisfaction ratings than both teachers and students. For example, only 48% of parents as opposed to 66% of teachers and 65% of students agree that TY caters for learners of all abilities. The perception of public support for TY (45%) is low (as illustrated in Table 3).

Subjects in the Leaving Certificate

In this section respondents were presented with a list of subjects currently offered for Leaving Certificate and were asked whether each should be taken by all students, should be an optional subject or should not be offered at this level. A majority of respondents express the view that English (89%), Mathematics (84%) and Irish (55%) should be taken by all students.   All other subjects are supported as optional subjects. There is no significant support for discontinuing any existing subject.

Of interest here, is the number of online respondents who express support for Irish as a compulsory subject and do not answer any other question in the survey. Many of these responses were submitted over a 4-day period at the end of the consultative process.

In the second part of this question respondents were invited to express their views on the introduction of a number of new subjects. Strong support is expressed for the introduction of Physical Education (59%) and Social, Personal and Health Education (60%) as compulsory subjects and for General Science, Media Studies, Philosophy, Politics, and Social and Political Education as optional subjects.

Respondents were provided with the opportunity to propose up to three additional subjects. A total of 389 responded. The subjects most frequently proposed are recorded below.
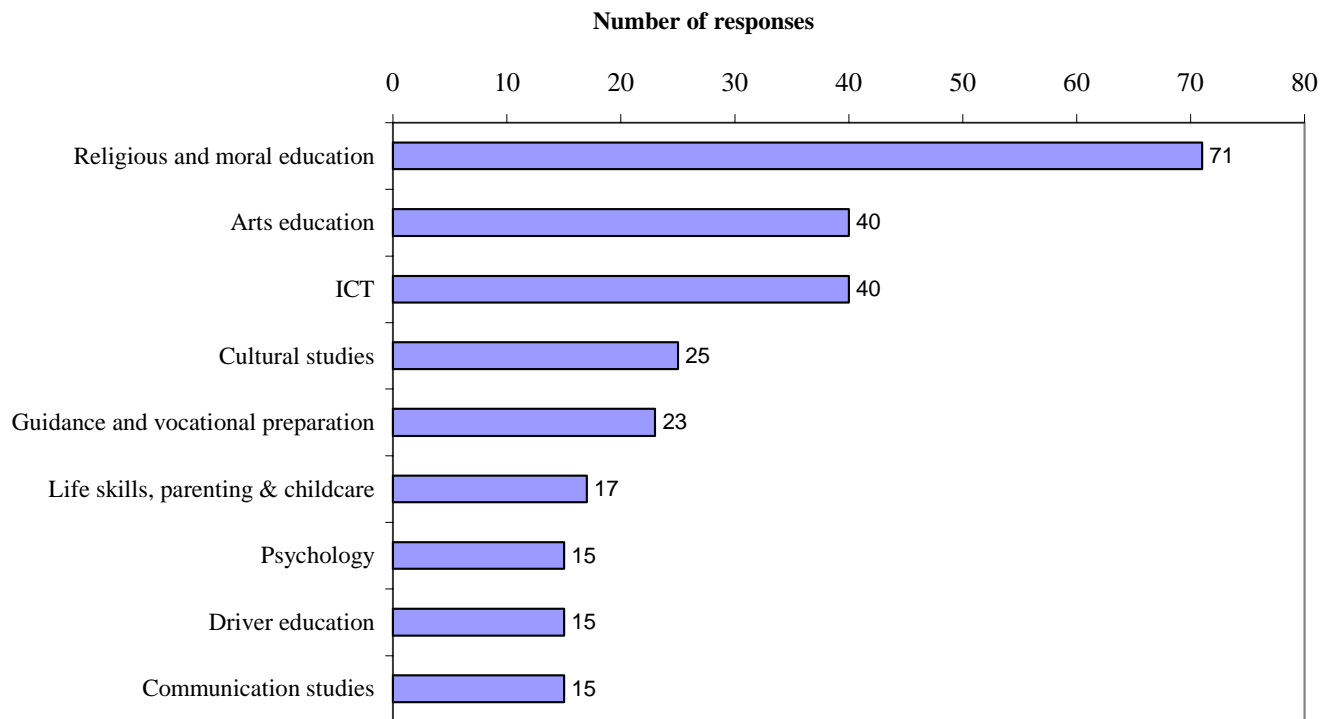
Number of responses

Figure 2.   Subjects which ought to be included in the senior cycle curriculum.

The Leaving Certificate examination

This section, which was divided into two parts, focused on the current assessment arrangements for the Leaving Certificate examination. The first part asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with a set of statements about the Leaving Certificate examination.

Of note is that the views on this issue are generally more tentative than on other issues. Respondents shied away from the more extreme *strongly agree* or *strongly disagree* options for each of the statements presented. A definite pattern emerges as illustrated in Table 5 below.

The Leaving Certificate examination	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
is a reliable measure of academic ability	15%	47%	26%	12%
is a reliable measure of general achievement	7%	34%	41%	18%
caters for students with differing learning styles	3%	16%	50%	31%
provides an appropriate challenge for all students	5%	27%	47%	20%
caters effectively for students with special needs	8%	30%	39%	23%
is a good predictor of success in higher education	9%	31%	42%	19%
is a good predictor of success in the workplace	4%	16%	46%	33%

Table 5. Respondents' attitudes to the Leaving Certificate examination.

While the reliability of the examination as a measure of academic ability appears to be endorsed, closer analysis of the data shows that this endorsement is not shared equally across the school community. Principals (80%) and teachers (72%) support the examination as a reliable measure of academic ability, but only 50% of students do so. Responses to the other statements, however, indicate a high level of dissatisfaction with the Leaving Certificate examination. Of particular note is the view expressed that examination performance is not a good predictor of subsequent success in higher education or in the workplace.

When the views of the students are examined more closely a disturbing picture emerges.

The Leaving Certificate examination	Strongly agree	Agree
is a reliable measure of academic ability	12%	38%
is a reliable measure of general achievement	6%	35%
caters for students with differing learning styles	4%	20%
provides an appropriate challenge for all students	8%	29%
caters effectively for students with special needs	4%	35%
is a good predictor of success in higher education	10%	25%
is a good predictor of success in the workplace	9%	17%

Table 5a.   Students' attitudes to the Leaving Certificate examination.

The levels of satisfaction with the Leaving Certificate examination are worryingly low among those who are about to sit the examination or those who have just taken it.

The second part of this section sought respondents' views on the idea of broadening the range of assessment components used in the Leaving Certificate examination. There is a consensus among all respondents that the introduction of additional assessment components would improve student motivation (86%), would increase student achievement (88%), and would lead to more varied teaching and learning (88%). This is matched by a strong concern that these developments should not reduce class time (80%).

Two of the statements in this question referred directly to how these additional components should be assessed. 72% of respondents agree that all components should be externally assessed in order to guarantee objectivity. The final statement invited respondents to comment on whether 'the results of regular coursework assessment (continuous) should contribute to the final examination results'. Here, 88% agree that they should. There is strong support for external assessment but there is also strong support for ongoing regular assessment. Further analysis of this data is set out below:

	Parents	**Students**	**Teachers**	**Principals**
All components of the Leaving Certificate examination should be externally assessed in order to guarantee objectivity	75%	75%	80%	59%
Results of regular coursework (continuous) assessment should contribute to final examination marks	90%	90%	80%	95%

Table 6. Percentage of respondents who *strongly agree/agree* with statements on assessment.

The table shows strongest support for external assessment among teachers (80%), followed by parents and students (both 75%) and principals (59%). Teachers are equally supportive of continuous assessment (80%), but here, principals provide strongest support (95%), followed by parents and students (both 90%). The weight of support for changing the Leaving Certificate examination is undeniable.

Respondents were also invited to submit a comment in this section. Continuous assessment is the main theme of the responses (324 in all) and it is evident that, for the majority of these respondents, continuous assessment means school-based assessment carried out by teachers of their own students, in their own schools.

The comments from parents strongly support continuous assessment, as do those from students and other educational professionals:

> *The person ideally suited to assessing some aspects of a student's education is the teacher. (Parent)*

> *Regular assessments of students would lead to more motivation and not as much pressure to do well in one written examination. There is a lot of pressure on students to do well in the written examination and this is simply not fair. (Student)*

> *I believe the idea of continuous assessment would be of great benefit. This would allow for those people who become very stressed before their leaving certificate. Furthermore, I believe it would contribute to a student's broader education as they are studying all year round instead of the "cramming" in the weeks after Easter. (Student)*

> *From my experience at third level, continuous assessment is an essential part of learning, and contributes greatly to student's control over the learning process. It should be strengthened at Leaving Certificate level. (Other educational professional)*

The comments from teachers, however, show that they are divided on continuous assessment.

> *External assessment along with school-based assessment would be ideal. Teachers should be trained adequately and paid properly for both school based and external assessment. (Teacher)*

> *Assessment of one's own students will lead to a very subjective, unfair appraisal of ability and learning. External assessment is the only guarantee of impartiality and fairness (Teacher)*

> *It is important not to overload the student with any one type of assessment. Too many projects, coursework is just as stressful as too many written papers. Modes of assessment should be looked at in terms of a student's total programme of study, not on a subject by subject basis. (Teacher)*

Certification: what should be included?

This section sought respondents' views on items that should be included on the certificate that students receive on completion of senior cycle. Respondents were asked to select the items they would favour including from a list of eleven options. The results are presented in Table 7 below.

Certificate should include	Overall
Achievement in non-examination subjects	81.0%
List of responsibilities held within school	68.1%
Additional qualifications obtained outside school	63.5%
Additional qualifications obtained within school	83.0%
Personal achievement awards	74.3%
Participation in school debates, drama, sport	74.2%
Record of community involvement	59.5%
Analysis of skills and competences	61.2%
Record of attendance and punctuality	72.6%
Account of aptitudes and interests	51.8%
Account of overall behaviour	63.5%

Table 7. Certification: what should be included?

The table shows that all options presented are supported by over 50% of respondents. The strongest support is for 'additional qualifications within the school' (83%) followed by 'achievement in non-examination subjects' (81%). The lowest support is for an 'account of aptitudes and interests' (51.8%). A pattern emerges in the data which indicates that respondents support the inclusion on the certificate of items that can be objectively measured (e.g. additional in-school qualifications) or easily verified (e.g. record of attendance and punctuality). However, elements that might involve a more subjective judgement by the teacher or the school (e.g. students' aptitudes and interests, or overall behaviour) are less strongly supported.

The data also reveals that students and school principals strongly support the inclusion of attendance and punctuality on the certificate. 84.4% of students and 91.1% of principals supported the inclusion of such a record on the certificate. This view is endorsed by 81% of employers.

Options for the development of senior cycle education

In the final section, respondents were given descriptions of four possible future configurations of senior cycle. They were asked to rate each on a scale from *preferred option* to *should not be considered*. Options 1 and 2 represent a moderate degree of change while Options 3 and 4 reflect a more radical approach.

% *

Options	Parents	Students	Teachers	Principals	OEP	Employers	Other
OPTION 1 – maintain current programmes; continue to update subjects; broaden assessment and certification in line with existing proposals	26.3	15.4	25.0	13.1	25.0	36.8	18.2
OPTION 2 – merge LCE with LCVP; keep TY and LCA as separate programmes.	11.0	12.9	22.4	14.6	9.8	23.5	10.3
OPTION 3 – a three-year senior cycle combining the best of LCE LCVP and Transition Year; keep LCA separate.	30.8	28.1	23.7	35.7	25.0	23.5	29.6
OPTION 4 – a unified, three year senior cycle programme for all students; certificated foundation year; greater emphasis on portfolio-based assessment and key skills.	31.5	38.8	25.0	29.6	32.9	26.3	33.0

Table 8. The percentage of respondents who identified each option as their *preferred option*
* Percentages in each population category do not add up to 100 as some respondents did not choose a preferred option

What appears to emerge here is a wide spread of opinion between respondents who wish reform to progress along established patterns and those who wish to radically change senior cycle. The responses of teachers are particularly interesting, in that opinions are almost equally divided across the four options.

I believe option one to be the preferred solution. However I believe option two is worth considering, but until a programme with specifics is laid out, I can't say that it would be my preferred solution. The broadening of the assessment methods plus the introduction of new syllabi in the Leaving Cert established programme should be prioritised. Then in 5 years, having practical results from these developments, the possibility of merging programmes can be reviewed and considered again. (Teacher)

At the risk of sitting on the fence, I think options 1, 2, and 3 offer the best prospects. (Teacher)

Some version of option four seems the best choice to me. It would provide only one type of certificate. This should remove the perceived bias towards the traditional Leaving Certificate. It should cater for all levels of ability. (Teacher)

Option four has the effect of representing radical change but the strength of the Irish system is its continuity, faith in tradition and gradual change, flexible evaluation. That's why I (marginally) prefer option 3 as merging these two strands together in a coherent way, i.e. radical change and continuity, but it's not an easy call.(Teacher)

As the final comment perceptively observes, deciding on any one of these options is 'not an easy call'. The list of options is neither exclusive nor exhaustive. Further options and variations will almost certainly emerge. While few respondents propose any options beyond those listed in the survey, one interesting variation does emerge in the responses of parents, teachers and principals. This proposes a senior cycle comprising a two-year course for all, followed by an optional one-year course that would prepare students for third-level education.

While I would like a unified senior cycle programme, I do not think that all students want a three-year senior cycle. I would suggest allowing students sit a pass LC in two years, and those who want could continue to upgrade to honours level in the third year in preparation for University or other third level education. (Principal)

Students were the strongest advocates for radical change.

Option 4 is the preferred option, though being realistic; this could be a very drastic change to the senior cycle, as we know it. However, if this is aimed for, some good will come of it and finally we may have a senior cycle curriculum that is broad and balanced in all aspects as Option 4 outlines. Option 3 and 2 should also be considered as I feel these are attainable. Option 1 is too conservative and it is time we moved forward. (Student)

I think that in order for deep change to occur that the change has to be a big one. That is why option 4 is my preferred option. (Student)

School principals also favour Options 3 and 4, matching students in their desire for radical change. Many (35.7%) are particularly supportive of Option 3.

> *Many worthy initiatives have been introduced in senior cycle over recent years, such as the Leaving Cert Applied. However, these changes have not impacted on the educational experience of all senior cycle students. I would favour options 3 or 4 as models for change as they would I feel bring the type of planned, systematic change that is needed at senior cycle (Principal).*

Further analysis of the open-ended components identifies three recurring themes: the ring-fencing of LCA, the future of TY and the desirability of a three-year senior cycle.

Respondents who support the continued ring-fencing of the LCA argue that it is a coherent programme, working well, and meeting the needs of a particular cohort of students who might otherwise leave school early.

> *Retain ring-fencing of LCA to preserve its unique philosophy, style of teaching and learning, modes of assessment. Such retention should not preclude other programmes learning from LCA (i.e. methodologies). If LCA is not ring-fenced, students for whom this programme is appropriate might be lost in the system. Also, in the absence of ring-fencing, LCA itself might be lost in the mix or subsumed into other programmes. (Other educational professional)*

Other respondents argue that ring-fencing creates a two-tier system in which LCA students are '*ghettoised*', have little opportunity to learn with the wider school community, and have restricted progression routes.

> *The LCA, while being a major innovation, sets students apart in their schools and some that most need it will not opt for it because of being perceived as 'less able'. They also feel that it limits their options. (Teacher)*

Transition Year is widely perceived to provide an opportunity for social and personal development and for exploration of a wide range of subjects before making a selection for Leaving Certificate.

> *I feel that transition year should be compulsory for all - where they sample wide range of subjects, get the feel for them and this may give them a more balanced subject choice option in Leaving Cycle. (Student)*

> *I strongly believe in the 'time out' element of the transition year students and as a teacher in recent times have seen the difference when present with a mixture of transition/non-transition in a fifth year group. (Principal)*

The responses also express concern about a perceived lack of monitoring of TY, about the use of the programme in some schools as year one of the Leaving Certificate (established), and about the apparent differences in programme quality between schools.

> *I feel very concerned that the current Transition year (optional in many schools and often used as a third year for LC) is serving to reproduce inequality in the system - it is mostly the advantaged who are availing of it to improve their life chances. (Other)*

> *If the time from TY were used to develop students on a personal and social level and to vary teaching strategies, it would be the best option. But my fear is that it will be used as an extra year to teach the current syllabus. (Other educational professional)*

The quote above highlights another interesting pattern in the qualitative data. Many respondents are both supportive *and* critical of Transition Year. The quotes below are typical.

> *The experience of Transition Year varies greatly from school to school and can be as negative as it is positive. Having said that, it should be a positive experience. (Parent)*

> *The Transition Year is one of the great riches of the Irish system - when well managed. (Teacher)*

The concept of a three-year senior cycle proposed in Options 3 and 4 occupies the minds of many of those who responded to the open-ended question, particularly the minds of students.

> *I believe a 3-year senior cycle should be introduced, as far too much pressure is on students for two years to complete such vast courses! (Student)*

> *The idea of a three-year cycle with one year as common ground for all pupils is catching and then each pupil decides which programme to specialise in for the final two years. (Student)*

Responses in favour of a three-year senior cycle are in the majority. A reduction in examination pressure, space to develop a more holistic learning experience, opportunity to give attention to personal and social development, and provision of time for students to mature, are most frequently cited in support of this option.

> *I feel the 3-year senior cycle option would best accommodate the larger student body for not just further education but also preparation for the world and the holistic development of the person as a valuable member of society. (Teacher)*

> *A three-year senior cycle would offer a more comprehensive programme to all students. It would also ensure that Irish students would remain in school until they are somewhat more mature. (Principal)*

The main argument expressed by respondents against a three-year senior cycle is the difficulty in retaining students for three years, particularly those students already at risk of early school leaving. In addition, it is felt that such a development might widen current inequalities in the education system.

> *A 5-year programme at senior level is enough, as most students can't wait to get out of school, especially if they are 17/18 years doing Leaving Cert. (Parent)*

> *A three-year senior cycle is too long for students in disadvantaged schools who are expected culturally to be out working and pay their own way by 16/17 years of age. (Principal)*

> *It is crucial that the needs of the students who end up as early school leavers are taken into consideration. I would not be in favour of a 3-year cycle. I feel that a high percentage of students find it a challenge to do the 2 years of senior cycle let alone 3. (Other educational professional)*

Conclusion

When the NCCA began its consultative process on the future of senior cycle education it faced an unexpected hitch over the term 'senior cycle education'. The term generated some confusion, because in Ireland, 'we don't really have senior cycle education', explained one student, 'we just do the Leaving'.

'Doing the Leaving' is a particularly Irish experience; it is without equivalent in the education systems of other developed economies, and without parallel in the life experience of young people. What this survey presents is a series of snapshots taken from the perspectives of all involved of just what it means to 'do the Leaving'. It is clear that senior cycle education has become synonymous with 'doing the Leaving', a development that is lauded by none and criticised by most.

Respondents to the survey are wholly supportive of tackling the inadequacies of the Leaving Certificate as a programme and an examination. But they are equally supportive of taking the opportunity afforded by the consultative process to reflect on the aims of senior cycle education, to consider the kind of education young people need to live, work and find fulfilment in contemporary and future Ireland. Proposals for change in education are always engaging, always controversial, because they concern our children and their lives. 1,813 people took the time to complete and submit the survey from their homes, their schools, their libraries and their places of work or study because they wanted to have their say, to make a point, or to voice a concern for

the future. This represents a vote of confidence in the education system we have, and a vote of confidence in the education system we might have in the future. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment expresses gratitude to all who participated and particular thanks to students who offered their views from the classroom and from the exam hall.

Work is already underway on preparing a set of proposals for the development of senior cycle – and the Leaving Certificate – that run to 2010. These proposals are wide ranging, focusing on curriculum and assessment, and the culture and organisation of senior cycle education. The proposals draw on the results of this survey and the other strands of the consultative process recently concluded.

In September next, a full report on this consultative process will be published followed by the launch of the proposals for development. On 23rd September, at a specially convened forum, in the presence of the Minister for Education and Science, Noel Dempsey, T.D., the proposals for change will be presented to the education partners. Discussions on implementation will take place from September to December 2003.

ENDS