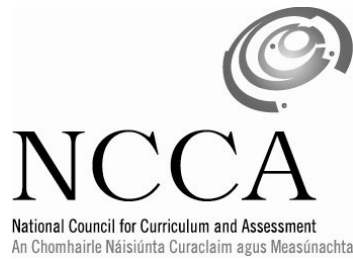


# **NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT**



## **Update on the Junior Cycle Review**

**April 2004**

# Update on the Junior Cycle Review

## 1. Introduction

In 1989 the Junior Certificate programme was introduced in order to provide a coherent unified programme and equal access to certification for all students in the junior cycle of post-primary schools. In May 1996, the Minister for Education, Niamh Bhreathnach, T.D. asked the NCCA to review the curriculum framework for the junior cycle, with particular reference to the range of subjects required of students. Following this, in 1997, the Minister for Education and Science, Micheál Martin, T.D. asked the NCCA to give particular attention to four issues in the course of the review:

- whether the principles which underpin the curriculum are being fully realised
- the current participation rates for junior cycle and whether the grades obtained in the various subjects, at different levels, show evidence of underachievement
- whether the current assessment arrangements are appropriate to the curriculum and syllabus aims and objectives
- whether the literacy (including IT literacy), numeracy and oracy needs of the student are being addressed.

In 1999, following a consultation process which involved a national survey of principals, bilateral meetings with the education partners and international comparisons, the NCCA published a report entitled, *The Junior Cycle Review – Progress Report: Issues and Options for Development*. The report dealt with the terms of reference of the review under the headings: the curriculum at junior cycle; assessment; and underachievement in terms of performance and participation. The NCCA held a number of countrywide meetings in 2000 to discuss the issues raised by the progress report. One of the key issues identified was overlap and overload. The introduction of new syllabuses at junior cycle, including CSPE and SPHE, had given rise to concerns that there is duplication or overlap of topics being delivered by teachers, and that there was excessive content in some syllabuses.

The purpose of this document is to update Council on the aims and emphases of the review, as expressed in the 1999 progress report, and to examine current NCCA work in junior cycle in light of these (see overview diagram, Appendix 1). It gives particular attention to the work in three current areas of the review, namely rebalancing of subject syllabuses, assessment for learning and the transition from primary to post-primary school. The document also presents for discussion some of the thinking in relation to the next stage in the development of each of these initiatives.

## **2. Curriculum**

### **2.1 Issues raised by the review**

The junior cycle programme is based on the curricular principles of breadth and balance, quality, equity, relevance, coherence, continuity and progression. In reviewing the intended outcomes of junior cycle the review addressed the issue of what constituted a ‘core’ curriculum, to which all students should have access. It proposed that the outcomes would best be met through a curriculum framework structured around **eight areas of experience** (see Appendix 2). The areas of experience represent a further development of, and provide continuity with, the six areas that underpin the revised primary school curriculum. Within this framework, schools have the flexibility to design a programme that best meets the needs of the student cohort and reflects the tradition of the school. This has particular significance for schools working in the context of educational disadvantage.

The review also highlighted the potential within the junior cycle curriculum for the development of a range of skills that students would need for participation in school, in working life and in society. It is of note that the issue of key skills has again come to the fore in the context of recent developments at senior cycle.

While it was important to identify the subjects that constituted a **required course** for the granting of recognised status to schools and students, the areas of experience and their associated skills were viewed as central to curriculum provision at junior cycle.

## **2.2 Responses to date - curriculum**

*Curriculum planning:* in 2001, to support school-based curriculum planning and to reinforce the areas of experience as a model of curriculum design, the NCCA, in association with the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI), published a set of four review instruments for school use entitled *School Development Planning: Curriculum Review at Junior Cycle*. The instruments continue to be used by SDPI facilitators and regional development officers in their work with schools. The instruments have been successful in introducing teachers to the aims, intended outcomes and areas of experience in the junior cycle curriculum. They have encouraged schools to consider how they might restructure their curriculum in a way that would ensure a broad and balanced curriculum for all students.

The SDPI facilitators found that the review instruments promoted good discussion and dialogue about curricular provision in the school. The resource has encouraged teachers to look beyond their own subjects, to dialogue with colleagues who teach other subjects, to consider areas of overlap in subject content, and to look for opportunities for cross-curricular learning. A number of schools, having completed a school planning cycle, that included the use of the curriculum review instruments, made a decision to amend their junior cycle curriculum.

*Breadth and balance:* work has progressed in developing the curriculum to offer a wider range of opportunities and experiences for students and to provide for different aptitudes and interests. New syllabuses in Religious Education and SPHE, and revised syllabuses in Mathematics and Science have been introduced, as has a junior cycle programme in Physical Education. Following a period of consultation, NCCA is proposing a framework for provision of technology education in the junior cycle. The report of the Board of Studies charged with this task will be presented to Council in June 2004.

Guidelines on intercultural education for post-primary schools are at an advanced stage of development. The main body of work being undertaken at the moment is focused on identifying intercultural themes in a range of junior cycle subjects and developing exemplar material to support these themes. It is expected that the post-primary guidelines will be completed by mid 2004.

A Curriculum Framework for Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is currently under development. The framework will identify the kinds of ICT learning experiences students should be afforded as they progress through their primary and post-primary education. A key principle in this framework will be the integration of ICT across the curriculum. General ICT guidelines for post-primary schools, exemplifying good practice, are also being developed to support the framework. In addition, the role of ICT as a teaching and learning tool will be made explicit in all new and revised syllabuses and teacher guidelines at junior cycle.

*Overload and overlap:* since March 2003, course committees in five Junior Certificate subjects (History, English, Home Economics, Business Studies and Music) have been engaged in the process of restructuring their respective syllabus documents to a common template. Important features of the template include: (i) syllabus content is expressed in terms of learning outcomes; (ii) learning in each subject is clearly linked to the areas of experience of junior cycle; (iii) a clear statement of links is included to establish continuity with the primary school curriculum and senior cycle. In the rebalancing process, each committee has been asked to consider excessive or obsolete content and to report on any other issues pertaining to the syllabus examined.

The first phase of this work is nearing completion with each course committee submitting their rebalanced syllabuses and accompanying report. Outcomes of the process to date have been encouraging. The course committees have been successful in applying the template to their respective syllabuses and a significant number of recommendations on overload and obsolescence have been made.

A further meeting of each of the committees will take place to complete the first phase of the work. The purpose of these meetings is to harmonise the learning outcomes, to examine the overall tuition time required to achieve these outcomes, and to consider matters of congruence between learning outcomes and assessment. The issue of overlap will be considered on completion of this work. A report on Phase 1 of the work will be presented to Council in the autumn of 2004.

The thinking in relation to Phase 2 of the work is to reconvene the existing 5 committees to address the issues raised in the first phase of the work, and to bring together course

committees in a further tranche of subjects to rebalance their subject syllabuses to a revised brief over a shorter timeframe. Ultimately, it is envisaged that this work will feed into the publication of a handbook for schools, parents and students, containing information on the junior cycle curriculum and setting out each of the Junior Certificate syllabuses side by side.

Looking to the future, one question that arises is the extent to which this focused work on syllabus rebalancing will take account of and integrate emerging educational perspectives such as developments in the area of special educational needs, recent work at senior cycle, and the relevant outcomes and recommendations of the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) report on transition.

### **3. Assessment**

#### **3.1 Issues raised by the review**

The review considered the aims, purposes and effectiveness of both summative and formative assessment in the junior cycle. The progress report examined questions of reliability and validity related to the Junior Certificate examinations and the potential of formative assessment to support learning.

The review stressed the importance of certification at the end of junior cycle, the significance of examinations in student motivation and the role of external assessment in providing reliable information on student progress.

However, significant issues were raised in relation to the validity and suitability of assessment arrangements as they related to the Junior Certificate examination. The original intention was that the Junior Certificate examination would employ the widest possible range of assessment methods in order to achieve congruence with the aims and objectives of the programme. However, the progress report identified a mismatch between the intended outcomes of most Junior Certificate subjects and the assessment employed in the examination. The preponderance of terminal written examinations was seen to be at odds with the principle of breadth and balance, to disadvantage students whose strengths lay outside the formal written context and to lead to teaching that was narrow in focus with an over-emphasis on product. In addition, early school leavers were seen as being unlikely to be motivated solely by a

certificate system based on assessment after three years. The review also questioned the high stakes approach to a low stakes examination which no longer performed a 'gatekeeper' function for the majority of students.

It is of note that the Junior Certificate examination featured in the consultation process on the directions for development at senior cycle. The need for an examination and for a certificate was stressed, notably by students. However the need for a re-configuration of assessment in the junior cycle to lay the foundation for a different approach to assessment in senior cycle was also emphasised.

### **3.2 Responses to date - assessment**

The work of the NCCA in relation to summative assessment at junior cycle has focused on implementing a wider range of modes and techniques of assessment in the Junior Certificate examination, such as in the new Religious Education syllabus and the revised Science syllabus, and in adopting a common syllabus template which, as mentioned above, expresses syllabus content in terms of learning outcomes.

The NCCA has been conducting a developmental initiative in assessment for learning. The aim of the initiative is to give assistance to teachers in the use of assessment in the classroom to support students' learning, and to assist schools and teachers in reporting to parents on students' progress. Phase 1 of the initiative involved two strands:

1. developing a general understanding of formative assessment among post-primary teachers. Web-based information and exemplar material was placed on the NCCA website and a leaflet, giving an overview of assessment for learning and drawing attention to the site was circulated to schools, education centres and support services
2. building expertise in assessment for learning among small groups of teachers. In cooperation with the education centres in each area, teachers from two school networks (in Cork and Sligo) were trained in the classroom approaches of assessment for learning and applied those approaches in first year classes for English and Geography. They generated feedback on progress and additional exemplar materials to be posted on the website. These included:
  - exemplar lessons in English and Geography
  - teacher reflection on these lessons

- examples of student learning logs
- examples of student work to which ‘comment-only’ marking had been applied.

Feedback from the teacher networks indicates that the classroom approaches work in the following ways:

- make teaching more structured and thoughtful
- contribute to a more democratic classroom thereby contributing positively to learner motivation, especially in the hitherto reluctant learner
- improve student-teacher interaction and relationships
- yield more comprehensive information on student progress making reporting to parents—during parent/teacher meetings—more complete and more purposeful.

Building on the outcomes of the initial phase, two future directions suggest themselves:

1. Continue with the current teacher networks but with a changed focus. Each teacher takes a new class group and uses the assessment for learning classroom to help students to monitor their own learning more formally and consistently using more extensive learning records. The main focus of the work would be to develop samples of student work which exemplify and reflect agreed standards for the work of students to allow teachers to make judgements about their students’ work and facilitate reporting to parents. The exemplars of student work would be made available on the NCCA website.
2. Test the more general applicability of the assessment for learning approach by working with whole-school staffs. This could be done through a number of school-wide pilot studies initially involving a substantial proportion of first year students and their teachers.

## **4. The quality of students’ experience at junior cycle**

### **4.1 Issues raised by the review**

In discussing the complex factors that might lead to a poor quality experience for students at junior cycle the review identified two clusters of issues, that of student achievement and student participation.



*Achievement:* the review sought to identify some of the factors that hindered students from doing well at school in both the social and cognitive domains. Issues of concern included low achievement in oracy, literacy and numeracy (including IT literacy), the number of students (particularly boys) taking Ordinary level subjects only in the Junior Certificate, and the effect of early failure on student motivation.

*Participation:* concern here centred around mainstream students and students from special schools who failed to transfer from primary to post-primary school, those who left school before completing junior cycle and those who did not progress to senior cycle.

#### **4.2 Enhancing quality - recent initiatives**

A number of recent initiatives already mentioned in this update have the potential to improve literacy and numeracy and help to raise standards of achievement at junior cycle. These include the introduction of the revised Primary School Curriculum with its greater emphasis on literacy and numeracy, the implementation of a revised syllabus for Junior Certificate Mathematics, the development of a framework for ICT and the assessment for learning initiative. However, the ESRI report on transition, which will be discussed later in this paper, has indicated that much more needs to be done.

*The Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP):* is an intervention that sets out to make the experience of school relevant and accessible to those students who find it difficult to cope with the mainstream school system and who would benefit from special support in working towards the aims of the Junior Certificate programme. The NCCA has completed a review of the JCSP and work to progress the recommendations of the review is ongoing. The NCCA has recently been briefed by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Science on interim findings of their evaluation of the programme. The NCCA will continue to engage with the DES to identify the next steps to be taken to support the development of the JCSP.

*Special Educational Needs:* Draft Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities were launched in 2001. Informed by feedback from the ensuing consultation process work has begun on rebalancing post-primary exemplar material in the areas of Language, Literature and Communication, Mathematical Applications and Studies and Social, Political and Environmental Education. Work on new areas of experience, Physical Education, Visual Arts and Technology has also begun.

*Towards a curriculum framework for 12-16 year olds with general learning disabilities:* NCCA is currently working on the development of a curriculum framework which will provide students with general learning disabilities with the opportunity to access a broad, balanced set of learning experiences, as well as developing their personal, independent and living skills during this phase of compulsory schooling. The NCCA is also looking at the potential of the framework to be associated with an award which would have national acceptability and provide recognition of the different learning experiences and achievements of students.

## **5. ESRI research project**

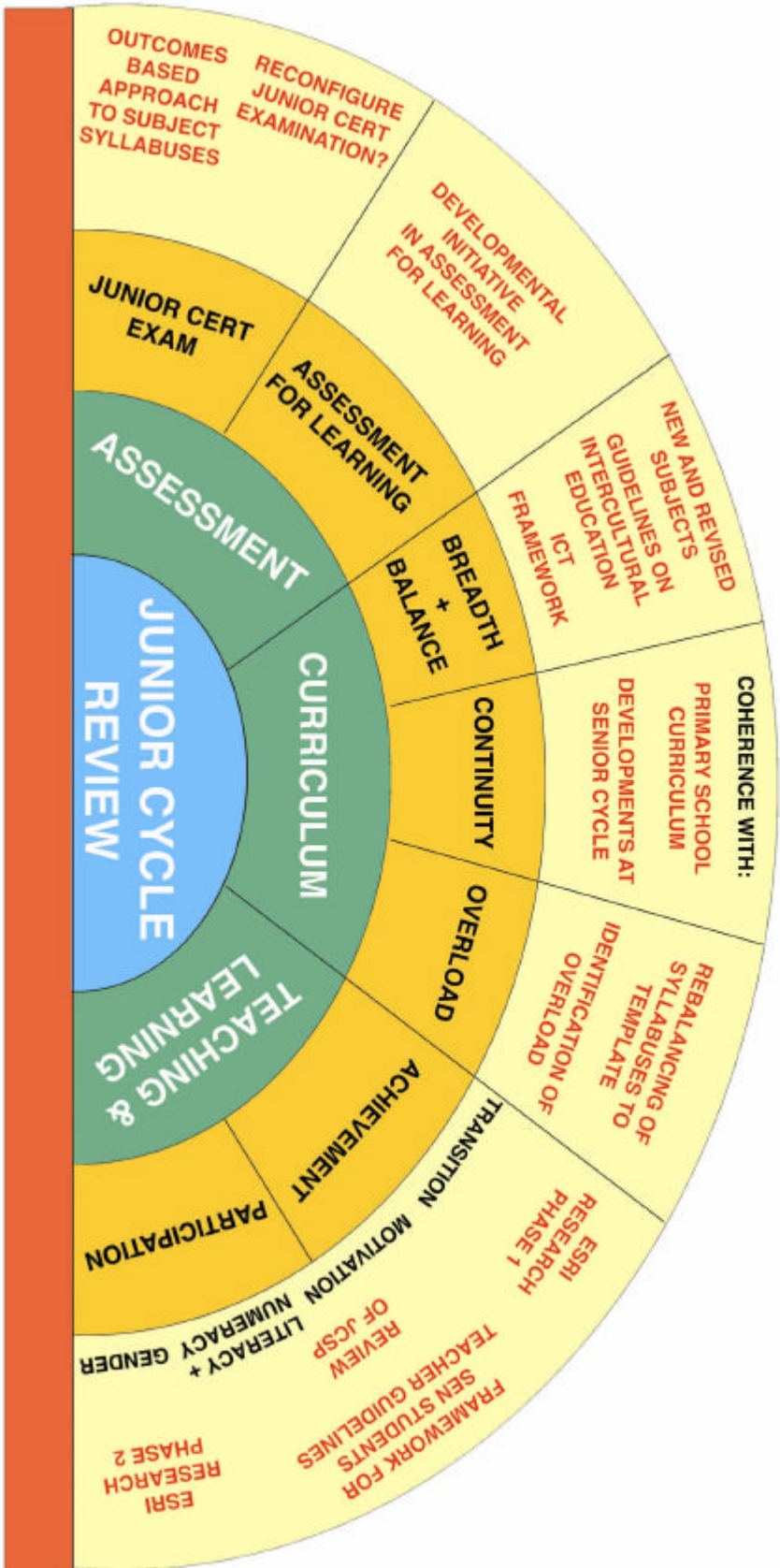
This research, commissioned by the NCCA as part of the review of junior cycle, sought to gain insights into good practice in easing students' transition from primary to post-primary school and into the type of curricular provision that best ensured that students experienced a smooth transition and high-quality education in junior cycle. The findings and recommendations of the research clearly resonate with many of the issues raised in this update and will inform the future direction and priorities of the review. While many of these have been discussed in a recent paper, *NCCA commentary on ESRI research into curriculum provision and school integration among first year students*, the importance to the review warrants their reiteration here. Important findings of the research that pertain to the review include:

- the negative effects that curriculum discontinuity (between primary and post-primary) can have on students' academic progress over the course of first year
- the influence of the informal culture of the school, particularly the relationship between teachers and students, on student integration, and the decline in 'liking school' among students in schools with a weak emphasis on integration
- the benefits of an approach where students can experience a range of subjects as 'tasters' prior to selection of subjects for Junior Certificate

- the relatively low level of student interest in Irish, English, Mathematics and Modern European Languages compared with subjects with a more practical orientation such as Materials Technology (Wood), Physical Education, Art, IT and Science
- the importance of offering a broad and balanced curriculum that includes a range of subjects with a more practical orientation that engage students and provide early success for those less academically orientated
- the concern expressed by over 40% of teachers that the first year curriculum is unsuitable for lower-ability students, and teachers' perceived difficulties in covering the curriculum in the time available
- the positive contribution of mixed ability groupings to students' learning and the negative effects of streaming on students in upper and lower streams
- the importance of early targeted support for 'at risk' students to help them to cope academically and socially and to prevent early failure and disaffection.

As an initial response to the ESRI report, NCCA will prepare a booklet to be distributed to schools and parents outlining the main findings and recommendations of the research. The purpose of the booklet will be disseminate findings from the research that are relevant to the organisation of induction programmes in schools, to curriculum planning and to supporting students who experience particular difficulties in transition. It will also provide useful information for parents of students who are about to, or have just moved to post-primary school. The second phase of the ESRI research, already underway, will further inform the review and raise new issues to be addressed.

**APPENDIX I - OVERVIEW OF JUNIOR CYCLE REVIEW**



## **Appendix 2: Junior Cycle programme – areas of experience, key skills and required course**

### **Areas of experience in Junior Cycle**

- Language, literature and communication
- Mathematical studies and applications
- Science and technology
- Social, political and environmental education
- Arts education
- Physical education
- Religious and moral education
- Guidance, counselling and pastoral care

### **Key skills**

- Communication and literacy skills
- Numeracy skills
- Manipulative skills
- Information technology skills
- Thinking and learning skills
- Problem-solving skills
- Personal and interpersonal skills
- Social skills

### **Required course (as outlined in the Junior Cycle Review Progress Report 1999)**

- Irish
- English
- Mathematics
- History\*
- Geography\*
- Science or a Technology subject
- CSPE
- SPHE
- All students should have access to the study of a Modern European Language and to a programme in Physical Education.

\* Schools who currently offer Environmental and Social Studies (ESS) may continue to offer ESS instead of History and Geography.