



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

Developing Transition Units

Draft Handbook for Schools

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1. Introduction

This handbook introduces transition units, one of the new curriculum components in senior cycle. Its primary purpose is to support schools in developing transition units and writing them up to the transition unit template. It also supports schools, transition year coordinators and teachers in reflecting on their current TY curriculum and on how the introduction of transition units can enhance the overall programme offered to students.

Transition units (TUs) are 45-hour units of study. The units are developed by a school and are intended to be integrated into the school's transition year programme. In developing transition units schools may devise some 'from scratch' – opening up a new area of learning for students. They may decide to adapt some of the modules they already offer as part of their transition year programme, and redraft them as TUs. Schools may also work with external agencies, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), in the development of TUs.

Teachers (preferably in collaboration with colleagues) prepare written outlines of transition units to the template. Support and feedback is provided by NCCA during the developmental phase.

The introduction of transition units to the senior cycle curriculum provides an opportunity for schools

- to offer a broader range of educational experiences to their students
- to recognise and certify different types and smaller units of learning
- to engage in curriculum development and planning at local level.

1.1 The overall purpose of transition year

The mission of Transition Year is to promote the personal, social, educational and vocational development of pupils and to prepare them for their role as autonomous, participative and responsible members of society

(Transition Year Programmes Guidelines, DES 1994)

Transition units should reflect the overall purpose and spirit of Transition Year. In particular, they should incorporate

- creative and diverse approaches to teaching and learning
- opportunities for self-directed learning
- interdisciplinary approach
- extending the learning environment beyond the classroom
- an emphasis on formative assessment including assessment for learning
- development of skills for learning and skills for life
- a focus on the process of learning rather than content
- integration of ICT into teaching and learning
- opportunities for students to catch up and progress to the next stage of their education

(Adapted from TY Support Service Guidelines)

1.2 The link between TY and the Leaving Certificate programmes

The school should ensure that in all areas studied there is a clear distinction between the TY programme and the corresponding Leaving Certificate programme. A transition year programme is not part of the Leaving Certificate programme and should not be seen as an opportunity to study three years rather than two studying Leaving Certificate material...Where Leaving Certificate material is chosen for study it is to be studied in an original and stimulating way that is significantly different from the way it would have been treated in the two years to Leaving Certificate.

(Transition Year Programmes Guidelines, DES 1994)

The development of transition year course material and teaching approaches that are distinctive from what the students will experience in Leaving Certificate is a challenge for all teachers. This is especially so in the case of core subjects such as Irish, English, Maths and Modern Languages. The process of developing transition units to the template and using these Guidelines will assist teachers in this regard, especially when the development of the transition unit takes places with subject teachers working collaboratively.

1.3 Teaching approaches in transition units

Transition units offer the opportunity for teachers to use a wide range of teaching/learning methodologies, such as negotiated learning, activity-based learning, group work, discussion, debate, project work, research, use of ICT, study visits and work experience. This ensures

that the needs of students with different educational backgrounds and different learning styles are adequately met. Transition units should seek to provide a worthwhile learning experience to all, giving particular attention to students' personal and social development, and the development of key skills.

1.4 Approaches to assessment in transition units

Assessment is built into the teaching and learning of each transition unit. While a variety of formative and summative methods may be used, particular emphasis is placed on the type of assessment that will provide quality feedback to students with regard to their strengths and weaknesses—to help them improve their learning, and to assist teachers in effective planning. The State Examinations Commission will not externally assess transition units, nor will they be reckonable for points. An important feature of transition year is that students should have a space to learn, mature and develop in the absence of examination pressure. In this context, the assessment burden in transition units should be light.

1.5 Development and organisation of transition units

The learning in each transition unit, which should be completed in **45 hours**, can be organised in a variety of different ways.

- 45 hours of traditional classroom-based contact (including assessment)
- a combination of classroom-based work with some independent/group research within the school or outside (e.g. library, local community, art room, computer room)
- work experience, involving classroom-based preparation, the work experience itself, followed by de-briefing and evaluation
- a week-long experience in which students plan, participate in and evaluate a special event, such as organising and participating in an outdoor pursuit, or organising a thematic event within the school (e.g. social justice week, Seachtain na Gaeilge).
- in some cases, transition units may be made up of two or more separate but complementary parts, which might be taught by more than one teacher. For example, a Business Studies teacher and English teacher might work together on a school magazine/mini-company; or teachers of History, Geography and English might work together on a multidisciplinary study of the students' local area.

2. Support for the development of transition units

Schools have different structures and procedures for curriculum planning, at whole school, programme or subject level, and it is important that plans for developing specific transition units arise within and from this planning process. When modules or topics that may be suitable for TUs are identified, a small working group could be formed to write up and develop the TUs. In most cases, this group would include staff with expertise in the particular area/s of study and the appropriate programme or curriculum coordinator. It is important that time is made available to teachers to facilitate this planning and drafting process.

During the developmental phase, the NCCA will provide support and feedback to teachers, schools and agencies in the design and development of their transition unit/s. This is to assure that the transition unit provides a quality educational experience to the students as well as meeting the criteria as set out in the handbook.

The transition unit is written up using a template provided and then submitted electronically to the NCCA for feedback (email schoolnetwork@ncca.ie). In some cases the TU may need some refinement, requiring further contact and consultation with the NCCA. Once finalised the school may include the transition unit as part of their transition year programme.

3. Completing the template

The template requires the writer to supply information under each of the following headings:

1. **Title of transition unit**
2. **Area of study**
3. **Overview**
4. **Related learning**
5. **Summary outline of unit**
6. **Breakdown of unit**
7. **Aims**
8. **Learning outcomes**
9. **Key skills**
10. **Teaching approaches**
11. **Assessment approaches**
12. **Evaluation**
13. **Resources**

Each of these elements is explained below, and examples are provided to assist in completing the template.

1. Title of transition unit

Try to come up with a short catchy title for your transition unit that reflects the subject matter.

2. Area of study

Transition units generally fall within one of eight areas of study although some may relate to more than one area of study. Fig. 3 on page 17 shows these different areas and broadly defines them. You can use this chart to identify the best match for your transition unit.

3. Overview

The overview is a short statement describing the transition unit. It should simply express the essence of the TU. The overview should be brief and to the point. It should highlight

- the features of the unit that will interest the student
- the knowledge and skills the student will develop by taking the unit
- how this transition unit will help students build on their existing learning and progress to the next stage.

4. Related learning

Describe the specific ways in which the learning in the transition unit relates to Junior Cycle, Leaving Certificate programmes and subjects, other transition units and modules/courses in Transition Year and with the world of learning outside the school. It is better to provide three or four clear and specific links than a long list.

5. Summary outline

Describe what the students will actually **do** in the unit and in what order they will do it. For example, a summary outline for a transition unit on *The Green School* might look like this:

- I. Students will partake in an audit of the recycling practices in their school.
- II. Students will design and implement an effective communication network within the school community and outside the school, in the local community. For example, they will need to consider how they can harness the local media to raise awareness and

get 'buy in' to their plans and they must also come up with some good PR ideas for promoting the Green School within the school (such as a competition to create hats from recycled materials.)

- III. Students will construct a permanent recycling infrastructure within the school to facilitate the successful recycling of paper/cardboard/aluminium cans/plastic bottles.
- IV. Students will take direct responsibility for the management of recycling practices.
- V. Students will record and document the quantities/volumes of material recycled every week.
- VI. Students will present their results and describe their actions in a portfolio presentation.

In some cases, a more detailed outline may be needed to provide a clear picture of what is planned within a TU.

6. Breakdown of the unit

Describes how the transition unit is broken down and how it will be timetabled. Give an approximate number of hours for each activity, for example

class contact time	30 hours
out of school visit	5 hours
independent research	5 hours
preparing report	5 hours

Transition Units can be timetabled in a number of ways. For example

- a. Over 15 weeks or half a year - One double and one single class (Approx 30 hours class time)
- b. Over 10 weeks - Two double periods per week (Approximately 27 hours class time)
- c. For a full year - One double period per week (37 hours)

It is envisaged that the remainder of the 45 hours would comprise a combination of guest speakers, independent research and project work, and group activities outside the classroom.

7. Aims

Provide a maximum of three short, general statements that best describe the overall aims of the transition unit. For example, a TU on Voluntary and Community Enterprise might have the following aims:

- to provide students with an opportunity to actively investigate a range of voluntary and community activities operating in the locality.
- to help students to recognise, through participation, the value of personal involvement in community activity.

8. Learning outcomes

Learning outcomes are brief, clear, specific statements of the knowledge, understandings, skills, values, and attitudes, which it is expected students, will be able to demonstrate as a result of the learning associated with the topic or syllabus element. They provide teachers with a guide to teaching and assessment and assist students in understanding what they can expect to know and be able to do at the end of a transition unit. Providing clearly defined learning outcomes serves a number of purposes.

- i. They give students clear information about what they can expect to learn by taking the TU.
- ii. They can be used to form the basis of a 'learning contract' between student and teacher.
- iii. They help to identify what should be assessed in the TU (i.e. the types of evidence that students will be asked to produce to demonstrate understanding).
- iv. They can facilitate overall coherence of the TU, as the learning outcomes prompt one to consider how the objectives of the TU, the learning/teaching strategies adopted and the assessment used are consistent with each other.

Some advice on writing learning outcomes

- All learning outcomes should focus on the student. A good outcome should appropriately complete the statement "On completion of the TU the student should be able to..."
- Keep statements short and focused on a single outcome.
- When writing the outcomes make use of action verbs.

Useful action verbs for learning outcomes include *recall, identify, define, describe, list, summarise, interpret, explain, demonstrate, investigate, analyse, write, plan, design, formulate, evaluate, present, measure, operate, perform, construct, listen with respect.*

The following words are difficult to quantify and should be avoided: *know, study, realise, comprehend, cover, learn, gain knowledge of, understand, become acquainted with.*

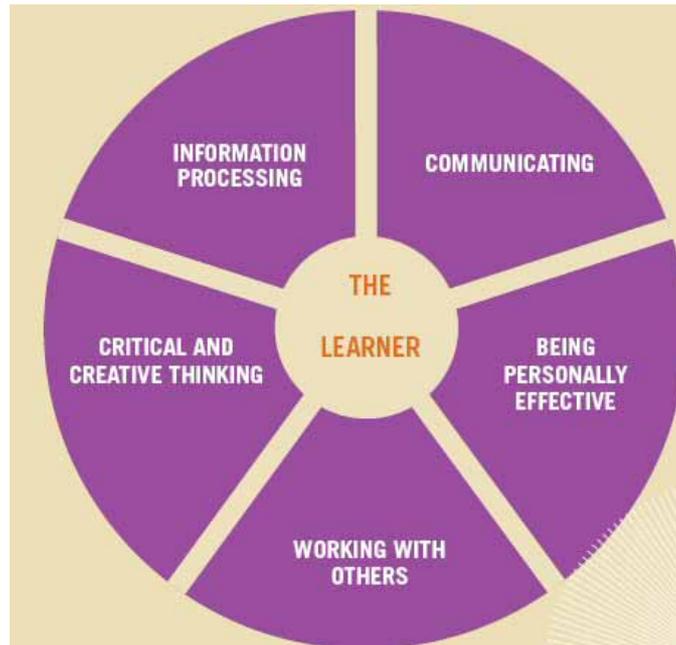
The learning outcomes used may relate to the cognitive, psychomotor or affective domains of learning. For example, *'students will be able to demonstrate respect and empathy when listening to different viewpoints'* would relate to the affective domain. *'students will be able to practice basic first aid skills'* relates to the psychomotor domain; while *'students will be able to discuss and evaluate characters and themes of the novel'* relates to the cognitive domain. Occasionally, learning outcome might relate to more than one domain. For example, *'students will be able to participate in group discussion on the impact of poverty and social exclusion on people's lives.'*

Learning outcomes may be

- content based (e.g. analyse an historical event)
- product based (e.g. prepare a report)
- or
- process based (e.g. conduct an experiment, conduct a role-play)

9. Key skills

This section describes the types of skills that students will encounter through participating in the TU. Five key skills have been identified as important in helping senior cycle students to become effective learners. The key skills are illustrated below.



Information processing

Developing this key skill will help students become more effective learners in an information-intensive environment. This includes the specific skills of accessing, selecting, evaluating and recording information.

Critical and creative thinking

Developing this key skill will help students be more aware of different forms and patterns of thinking so that they can become more skilled in higher order reasoning and problem solving.

Communicating

Developing this key skill will help students become better communicators who are able to use a variety of media, and to recognise how communication methods influence their own understanding and knowledge. Specific skills include reading, expressing opinions, writing, making oral presentations, analysing visual forms and so on.

Working with others

Developing this key skill will highlight the role that working with others has for learning and for achieving both collective and personal goals. Students will gain some appreciation of the dynamics of groups and the social skills needed to engage in collaborative work.

Being personally effective

Developing this key skill will help students to grow as persons, to become more self-aware, and to develop personal goals and life plans. As well as giving students specific strategies related to self-appraisal, goal setting and action planning, an important dimension of this key skill is to enable young people to act autonomously according to personal identities and personal values.

When you have identified the key skills that are characteristic of the TU, provide a comment on **how** the student will encounter each key skill. Bear in mind that the extent to which each skill is encountered in a TU will differ.

The learner

As students encounter the five key skills through transition units and across the senior cycle curriculum, they begin to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will enable them to become more effective learners. Being effective as a student involves development of positive beliefs about learning and a willingness to engage in new learning situations. This emphasis on becoming effective students will assist students to take more responsibility for their own learning as they proceed through their senior cycle education, gradually decreasing their levels of dependency on teacher direction. Consequently, transition units should be characterised by the type of teaching and learning that encourages students to

- develop positive beliefs about learning
- learn in ways that suit their own strengths and needs
- develop a range of learning strategies
- make connections across learning
- develop a commitment to improving learning
- be willing to engage in new learning situations
- develop reflective practices.

The NCCA website www.ncca.ie/seniorcycle has further details on the key skills and provides ideas on how teachers have embedded the key skills within their teaching.

10. Teaching approaches

A key feature of transition year should be the use of a wide range of active learning methodologies and learning settings, which provide a challenge for students and develop

their skills. In particular, TY should develop students' confidence and their ability to take responsibility for their own learning. The teaching and learning should be designed to enable students with different abilities and learning styles to experience success. Particular consideration should be given to students with special needs, i.e. those who have physical/medical and or specific learning difficulties.

The aims and learning outcomes of the unit will strongly influence the teaching approaches adopted in the TU. For example, a transition unit that seeks to develop students' communication skills will involve the students in a range of activities that enables them to practice and develop their communication skills. Different teaching strategies might be used for teaching different parts of the TU. When writing this part of the unit you should name the different teaching approaches and when/how, they will be used. For example, ICT will be used when students conduct internet research for their projects. Role play will be used to stimulate discussion on the impact of climate change on people in the developing world.

Possible teaching approaches include

- negotiated learning;
- activity-based learning;
- making cross curricular links in appropriate areas of learning;
- team teaching approaches;
- group work, pair work
- discussion, debate
- project work and research;
- visiting speakers and seminars;
- use of ICT for research and presentations
- use of digital cameras
- study visits and field trips;
- work experience, work simulation, community service.

Some useful websites for further ideas on active teaching approaches include:

www.ty.slss.ie

www.co-operation.org

www.geoffpetty.com

11. Assessment approaches

Assessment should be built into the teaching and learning of each transition unit. This means that a portion of the 45 hours should be given over specifically to assessment, either ongoing assessment during the course of the unit or a specific assessment event at the end of the unit, or both. Assessment of transition units may be

formative (assessment **for** learning) – where the teacher provides students with focused feedback to students, during the course of the unit, to help them improve their learning

summative (assessment **of** learning) – where the teacher sets a task or test at the end of the unit or at particular intervals during the unit, to measure their achievement.

The balance between these different forms of assessment will depend a lot on the nature of the TU.

Providing students with a self-assessment sheet that forms the basis of a discussion with the teacher may be a valuable approach as this encourages students to reflect on their learning and take more responsibility for it. Some ways of facilitating self-assessment include

- *Self assessment using a personal learning journal.* This is particularly useful when the learning relates to the development of attitudes and values as well as their knowledge and skills. If you check out the NCCA website you will find a very good example of a learning journal attached to a transition unit entitled, *Ireland - a Level Playing Field?* devised by the Combat Poverty Agency.
- *Self assessment using assessment proformas.* An assessment proforma is a kind of checklist, which students and teachers can devise together. The teacher sets the students an assignment and then asks the students to discuss, what criteria would you use to judge an excellent assignment? From this discussion a list of criteria for success can be agreed which will form the basis for an assessment proforma to be used at the end of the assignment.

Peer-assessment is also worth considering as this can encourage peer-learning as well as positive and more collaborative relationships within the classroom. It has also been found that students will often understand their mistakes better when pointed out by their peers as students use language that their peers understand.

Consider the following when selecting assessment methods for the TU:

- i. think about which learning outcome/s you want to assess. You don't have to assess all the learning outcomes.
- ii. then ask yourself: what method/s is/are appropriate for assessing the learning outcomes of the unit? For example, in the case of a TU on *Coastal Studies*, a fieldwork report on '*My Local Coastline*' would be a more appropriate assessment instrument than an examination paper.
- iii. bear in mind that the TU is a 45-hour course. It should not be weighed down by assessment on the scale of a Leaving Certificate subject. One assessment event is usually enough.
- iv. it will not be possible or even desirable to assess every learning outcome in a TU. A 'best fit' model is recommended, where the assessment relates to the key aims and learning outcomes of the unit and provides an opportunity for students with different aptitudes and abilities to demonstrate their achievement.

Examples of assessment methods might include:

- a portfolio
- a project
- design an artefact
- a presentation using PowerPoint
- an essay or report
- a written test or examination
- an interview
- a self-assessment exercise
- peer assessment
- a learning journal

12. Evaluation

And, finally, don't forget that while the words assessment and evaluation often trip off our tongue together they are not the same thing. Assessment seeks to gathering information about the students' learning. The purpose of evaluating the transition unit is to find out, from both the students' and teacher's perspective, the success or otherwise of the TU and how it can be improved for the future. While ongoing evaluation is a normal part of teaching it is also important to take time at the end of a TU to organise an evaluation. In addition, all TUs should be evaluated on a regular basis (say every three years) as part of the school's overall

evaluation of its senior cycle programme/s. This is important as a means of ensuring the continued relevance and freshness of all transition units and the overall balance and coherence of the programme on offer to students.

An evaluation asks questions about what was most enjoyable, most interesting and most useful, and what might be adapted or done differently if this were being taught to another group of students. Important questions that a teacher will ask in evaluating the transition unit will include:

- To what extent were the aims and learning outcomes of the TU achieved?
- Were the teaching and assessment approaches effective?
- Did the subject matter and teaching approaches interest and motivate the students?
- Was the pace of teaching suited to the student group?
- Did the length the unit suit the timetabling arrangements?

Having students evaluate the TU is important too. Some useful questions to consider when devising a students' evaluation might include:

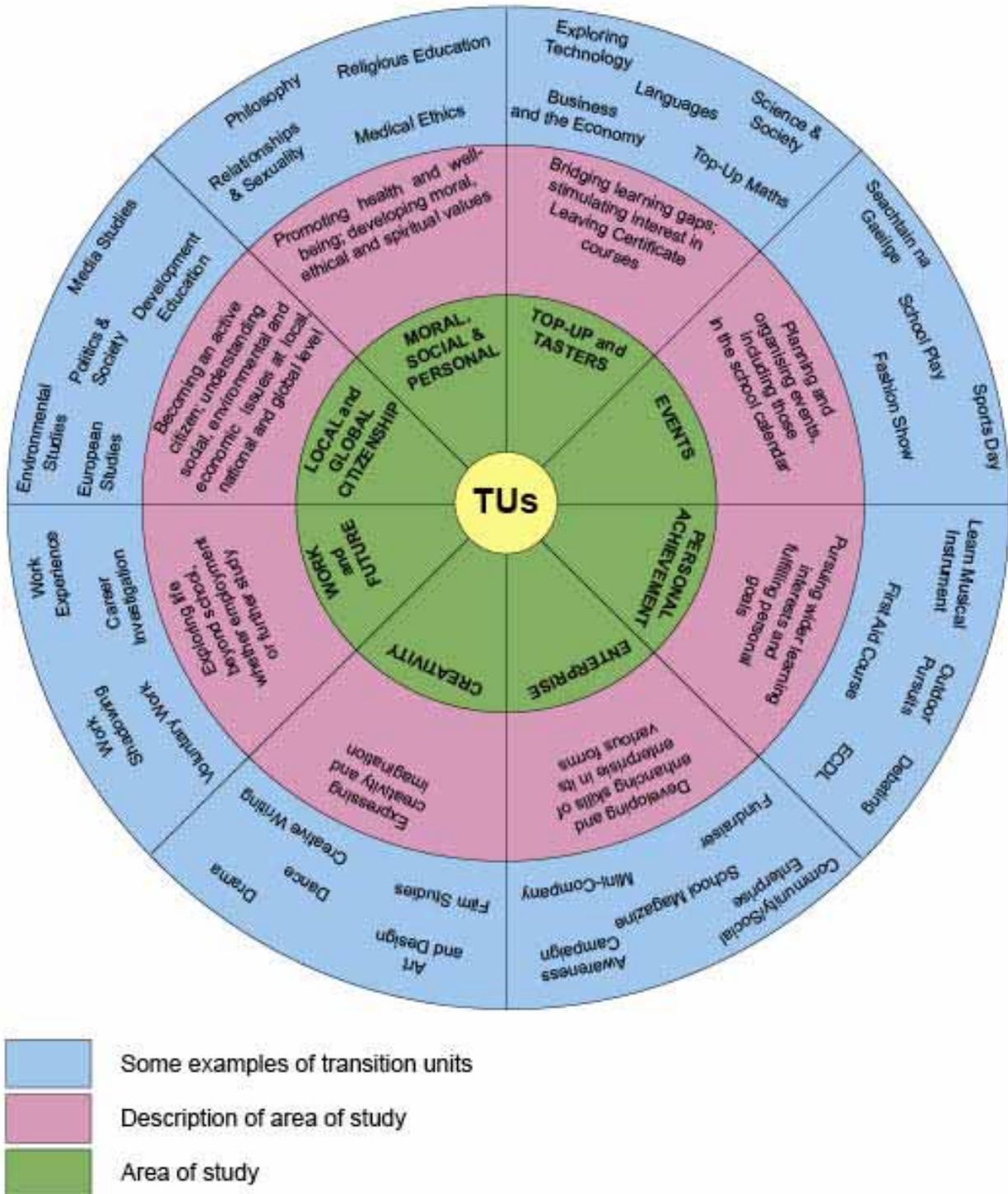
- The things I most enjoyed about this transition unit were....
- The most interesting thing I learned was....
- This will be useful because...
- The things I least enjoyed about this transition unit were...
- The things I found most difficult were...
- If this transition unit was being taught to another group of students I would suggest the following changes to make it better...

13. Resources

List the main resources that you anticipate using in teaching this Unit. Examples include texts, websites, audiovisual material, local amenities and guest speakers. In the case of books, please cite the author, title, date of publication, place of publication and publisher as follows:

Sexton R. (1998) *A little history of Irish food* London: Kyle Cathie

4. Types of Transition Unit



5. The transition unit template

TRANSITION UNIT TEMPLATE		
1	Title of Transition Unit	The title clearly describes the unit. Should be short.
2	Area of study	Transition units generally fall within one of eight areas of study (e.g. Creativity). These are outlined and exemplified on a chart in the handbook.
3	Overview	Describes clearly and concisely what the TU is about. This can be used to inform students, parents and other teachers.
4	Related learning	Describes ways in which the learning in the transition unit links back to Junior Cycle, forward to Leaving Certificate and with other transition units. Links with the world of work and the community should also be mentioned.
5	Summary outline	This is a description of what the students will actually do in the unit, and in what order they will do it.
6	Breakdown of unit	Assigns an approximate length in class periods/ hours to each activity/element of the unit.
7	Aims	Describes, in about three statements, the broad impact that the unit will have on the student's learning.
8	Learning outcomes	Are specific statements that describe the different attitudes, values, knowledge and skills that students will gain/develop and be able to demonstrate as a result of taking the transition unit. Inclusion of about eight learning outcomes is recommended.
9	Key skills	A list of the key skills that students will encounter in the transition unit and how each of these skills will be evidenced. The skills are based on the key skills of senior cycle.

10	Teaching approaches	Describes the methodologies that will be a feature of the transition unit. Use of a range of active learning methodologies is recommended.
11	Assessment approaches	Describes the assessment approaches that will be used in the unit. Assessment should be clearly linked to the aims and learning outcomes of the unit.
12	Evaluation	Describes how teacher and students will evaluate the success or otherwise of the TU, with a view to improving the learning experience.
13	Resources	Lists the main resources available to support teaching of the transition unit. Examples would include texts, websites, audio- visual material, local amenities and guest speakers.

6. Criteria for evaluation of draft transition units

Title of TU			
School			
Contact person and contact details			
Criteria	Satisfactory	Needs further work	Comment
Template is complete			
Unit title and area/s of study clearly identified			
Subject matter is interesting, age-appropriate and of relevance to students			
The TU approaches the topic in a creative and innovative way that is different than the way the topic might be approached in the Leaving Certificate			
Amount of work is realistic and appropriate			
Aims clearly show what it is hoped will be achieved			
Summary outline provides a clear and logical summary of what students will do			

Learning outcomes are clear and focused and linked to the aims of the TU			
Key skills are identified and clear evidence provided as to how they are integrated into the TU			
Teaching approaches are active and appropriate to the aims of the unit and to the aims of TY			
Assessment approaches are clear and appropriate to the aims and learning outcomes, and length of the unit			
Evaluation is purposeful and involves both teacher evaluation and student evaluation			
Resource information is appropriate, adequate and properly cited			
TU is flexible enough to be adapted and used by a teacher with experience in this area			

Recommendations

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