

Report of National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) 2020

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment was established in November 1987 as a successor to the Curriculum and Examinations Board and was reconstituted as a statutory body in July 2001. The Council's work spans Early Childhood Education, the Primary Curriculum Framework and Junior and Senior Cycle Developments in Post Primary Curriculum and Assessment. It is a great privilege to represent ACCS for a second term on the Council and to work with the NCCA personnel, all of whom are deeply committed to the work which they do in the area of curriculum and assessment development in Irish education. In addition, this year, I continue to serve as Chair of Board for Junior Cycle and as a member of the NCCA Governance Committee.

Council 2019-2022

The Council is a representative structure. The membership is determined by the Minister for Education and Skills. The 25-member Council comprises nominees of the partners in education, industry and trade union interests, parents' organisations and one nominee each of the Minister for Education and Skills and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. The current Council chaired by Professor Mary O'Sullivan, teacher educator at University of Limerick, commenced its work in September 2019 and will complete its term on 28th February 2022.

During 2020 the Council bid farewell to Paul Brady, Assistant Principal (NCCA) on his retirement and thanked Paul for his long and dedicated service to the NCCA and the Public Service. The year also heralded a change at CEO level as John Hammond announced his retirement in October. John has led the NCCA with great passion, insight, care and integrity and his wisdom and sharp intellect will be sorely missed. ACCS wishes John well in his retirement and future endeavours. The Minister approved the appointment of Arlene Foster to the post of CEO effective from November. Arlene has served as Deputy CEO for a number of years, has significant experience in primary education and in the various roles which she has held in the NCCA and we wish her every success in this new role.

Board for Early Childhood and Primary, Board for Junior Cycle and Board for Senior Cycle

In the NCCA's existing structure, oversight of the curriculum and assessment work in early childhood and primary, junior cycle and senior cycle is carried out by Boards. This oversight is important in ensuring that strands of development contribute to a coherent and manageable whole for schools and early childhood settings. Boards have responsibility to ensure that curriculum and assessment development is carried out in accordance with the terms of the agreed briefs, to review each strand of work within the sector in the context of each of the other strands. Boards can discuss significant issues as they emerge within each sector and make connections with developments in other sectors.

Development Groups

To provide a strong, representative and responsive basis for its curriculum and development work, the NCCA has established Development Groups to undertake specific tasks in curriculum areas or subjects.

The NCCA 2019-2021 Strategic Plan sets out important actions in Council's work across five strategic goals:

- **Curriculum and Assessment** To develop innovative curriculum and assessment for engagement, progression, quality, inclusion and continuity across sectors and across educational transitions.
- **Engagement and Collaboration** To work with and support all teachers, practitioners, learners and our partners in education to build capacity for change, model ways of working, and inform curriculum and assessment development and implementation.
- **Knowledge and Research** To generate, use and share knowledge and research to support the development of curriculum and assessment advice and practice in all educational settings.
- **Communications** To communicate, present and share the work and achievements of the NCCA effectively, to improve its capacity to engage with others in leading and supporting educational change.

- **Governance and Corporate Affairs** To develop NCCA governance and organisational structures, processes, skills & competences effectively to achieve the vision of the organisation.

Cross-cutting themes in the work of the NCCA

In the NCCA's work in recent years, six themes, as set out below, have been identified which cut across the five goals of the organisation and the four sectors within the Council's remit - early childhood, primary, junior cycle and senior cycle.

- Focusing on dispositions, competencies and skills when developing curricula.
- Including the voice of learners in the process of curriculum development.
- Contributing to greater autonomy and support for practitioners and teachers.
- Establishing the focus on the impact of teaching on learning as the focal point of educational change.
- Designing and developing curricula to include ALL Learners.
- Paying attention to questions of continuity/progression across sectors and times of transition.

These six themes overlap and intersect and are both informed and shaped by the emphasis NCCA places on research in education.

COVID-19

The Plan of Work as approved in early 2020 has been impacted and significantly revised in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. New workplace measures have been put in place across the NCCA including moving meetings online, extending consultation timeframes and adapting the design and implementation of consultation events and development work in response to the current restrictions.

The NCCA Executive has worked closely with the DE on contingency measures for COVID-19 contributing to work on curriculum and assessment matters/examination arrangements. In August 2020 the DES published specific guidance on assessment arrangements for the Junior Cycle Examinations 2021 which included the decision that the Assessment Task (AT) in subjects with this element will not be examined in 2021. Other changes included extension of the deadline for completion of CBA 1s into the school year 2020/21 and the requirement to complete just one CBA in each subject for students entering 3rd year. The design of the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA) for 2021 will be adjusted to accommodate all changes to assessment. This work in relation to subject arrangements for the Leaving Certificate examinations in 2021 continues in conjunction with the SEC and led by the DES.

Early Childhood and Primary Developments Update

In early 2020, the Council discussed the review of Aistear, the early childhood curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years in Ireland. Aistear provides the basis for curriculum planning and implementation in early education settings and informing the pedagogical approaches in the early years of primary schooling. Aistear's guidance for the 0-3 age group informs developments for this age group through the National Siolta Aistear Initiative. In its discussions, the Council considered the resourcing, increased regulation and the need to integrate the principles and pedagogies of Aistear throughout the Primary Curriculum Framework. The development of the Primary Curriculum Framework must, in turn, take due regard of the impact of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme which provides two years of early childhood care and education for children of preschool age but is not accessed by all children as it is not compulsory.

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework

This framework builds on the 1999 Primary Curriculum, is based on the key competencies and addresses the issue of curriculum overload. It provides teachers with greater autonomy in the classroom and places assessment central to teaching and learning. The framework promotes the importance of Student Voice, wellbeing, playful pedagogy, inquiry-based learning and integration throughout the eight years of primary school. At the time of writing this report the draft framework has been approved by Council for consultation.

Current Research

Children's School Lives (CSL) Funded by the (NCCA) Annual Report Number 1-January 2020 (UCD) Overview: This report presents a summary of the first year of research on the Children's School Lives (CSL) study. CSL is a nationally representative mixed methods study of primary schools in Ireland commissioned by (NCCA) and carried out by (UCD) School of Education. CSL is taking place over six school years in 189

primary schools across Ireland. In CSL, approx. 4,000 children and their class teachers, school principals, parents and a subsample of grandparents are helping the UCD research team to explore primary schooling in Ireland. This activity is ongoing between May 2019 and June 2024. The report is available on www.ncca.ie.

Children’s School Lives: COVID Report – Experiences of Remote Teaching and Learning in Ireland During the COVID-19 Pandemic (March – May 2020) Funded by the (NCCA) Report No. 2

The Children’s School Lives (CSL) (UCD) study captured the experiences of children, their principals, teachers and parents, at the height of the first national lockdown in Ireland in May 2020. A total of 149 schools, 123 principals, 85 teachers, 418 parents, and 548 children participated in the national research. This sub-study, although informative, raises questions about teaching and learning during the lockdown. Over time CSL will track the longer-term impact on children’s academic achievement and wellbeing. Clear questions arise in relation to the provision of timely, appropriate, and targeted supports to schools and families, in addition to teacher education for digital learning. The focus on realising not only children’s rights to education, but the rights of all children in their experience of that education be it from home or in school, is central. The final report will be published shortly.

Cultivating Conditions for Primary Curriculum Development and Enactment—Policy Alignment and Coherence. The concept of ‘policy alignment and coherence’ is widely referenced in the literature on curriculum development and enactment as a key condition to support change. **The review and redevelopment of the Primary School Curriculum** provides opportunity and a need to consider the conducive conditions to support curriculum change in our education system. An Advisory Panel has been established to support the review and redevelopment of the primary curriculum. The four members of the panel are: Prof. Louise Hayward, Glasgow University, Prof. James Spillane, North Western University, Dr. Thomas Walsh, Maynooth University, Prof. Dominic Wyse, University College London. The work is not unlike the work carried out by the OECD on Senior Cycle Review and represents a different way of thinking seeking coherence across policies and structures in the system during a very challenging, complex time.

A tender for a **Junior Cycle Research Study** was awarded to University of Limerick by the NCCA in June 2020. This research study will focus on the implementation and impact of the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle and is separate to the early enactment consultations on the subject specifications described below.

Junior Cycle Update

In September 2019, all phases of new Junior Cycle subject specifications were introduced including Phase 5 subjects. From September 2020 students study English, Irish, Mathematics and History. (NCCA is currently developing a Level 2 Short Course in History.)

In 2019, the NCCA commenced a process of consultation on the early enactment of the English specification and the Business Studies and Science Specifications at Junior Cycle. Draft reports on **the early enactment of these Phase 1 subject specifications** were produced in 2020. The purpose of the reviews/consultations upon which these reports are based was to assess the experience of teachers and students in working with the specification; the extent to which the learning outcomes are effective and relevant; and the experience of students and teachers in engaging in the assessment of the specifications. A draft report on the early enactment of the CSPE short course has also been produced. These reports are welcomed in the system and allow for the consideration of changes and improvements in the relevant specifications by the stakeholders.

In January 2021, the NCCA established a new Development Group to commence work on the development of a **135-hour Physical Education** course. The purpose of the 135 course is to consolidate the medley of different options within which schools have had to plan previously. The course will be flexible to enable teachers to plan their PE course within 135 hours but with an understanding of the different facilities available to schools.

A **Maths in Practice** group has been established to discuss and make recommendations on the implementation of the maths specification.

During 2020, the **Wellbeing Guidelines** were reviewed and updated for schools. In the context of the disruption of the pandemic, schools have been given the option to defer the increase of wellbeing provision at Junior Cycle from 300 to 400 hours by one year, until the 2021/22 academic year. Since, the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA) was not produced in respect of Junior Cycle 2020, this area of learning will now be reported on in the JCPA for the first time in 2021.

Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) At the request of the Minister of Education, the NCCA undertook a major review of RSE in primary and post-primary schools. The review began in June 2018 and included an examination of the RSE curriculum, the approach to teaching and learning, supports needed, and ways to improve the experience of RSE for students. Following this review, the NCCA undertook significant work in this area over the course of 2020 which will continue in 2021.

Children in Detention and Children in Care

An advisory group for Children in Detention and Children in Care commenced its work in early 2020. This group is advising on re-designed curriculum guidelines for this group of young people. The current framework and guidelines (2007) need to be updated to reflect curriculum developments e.g. Framework for JC and new approaches in areas such as Transitions and Personalised Learning.

Traveller Culture and History in the Curriculum

In September 2020, Dr. Hannagh McGinely was appointed as Education Officer to take responsibility for curriculum supports for integrating Traveller culture and history into the curriculum at early childhood, primary and post primary. The first meeting of an expert group for Traveller culture and history was convened in November 2020. The purpose of the expert group is to advise on aspects of Traveller culture and history such as Irish Traveller origins, language, nomadism, and culture. This work should lead to the publication of the report which will be the basis of the NCCA curriculum work in this area.

Senior Cycle Update

Senior Cycle Review

The Advisory Report on the review of Senior Cycle has been prepared by the NCCA during 2020 and will be available for publication and consultation in early 2021. This document identifies the purpose of Senior Cycle education and outlines a vision for a redeveloped Senior Cycle emerging from that purpose. It summarises review findings of what should be most valued in Senior Cycle education and articulates a set of guiding principles which emerge from these findings for schools to use as they plan and design their Senior Cycle provision now and into the future.

Leaving Certificate: Revised Specifications to be introduced to 5th year in:

Agricultural Science	Sept 2019
Economics	Sept 2019
Art (Revised)	Sept 2021
Applied Maths	Sept 2021
Classical Studies	Sept 2021

Leaving Certificate Applied: Revised module descriptors to be examined in:

English and Communications	June 2022
Mathematical Applications	June 2022
Introduction to ICT	June 2022
Information and Communication Technology: Specialism	June 2022

1. Leaving Cert Agricultural Economics is now discontinued, examined for the last time June 2020 and replaced by the two new specifications above.
2. Leaving Certificate Politics & Society has some minor adjustments and updates to the original specification and is available to all schools.
3. Leaving Certificate Computer Science and Leaving Certificate PE was rolled out to schools on a national basis in September 2020. (Schools who have opted to offer this subject can defer for one year in the light of the pandemic)
4. All students in Senior Cycle study the Senior Cycle PE Framework which now replaces *guidelines in relation to Physical Education at Senior Cycle* currently set out in the *Rules and Programmes for Secondary Schools*. However, if a student is studying the optional Leaving Certificate PE specification, they are not required to also study the SCPE Framework, although this is not prohibited.

5. Leaving Certificate Modern Foreign Languages Chinese (Mandarin), Lithuanian, Polish and Portuguese were rolled out to schools on a national basis in September 2020. Polish/Lithuanian and Portuguese are available only for examination as non-curricular languages until 2021.
6. A revised specification in Leaving Certificate Classical Studies is currently being finalised.
7. Leaving Certificate Biology, Physics, Chemistry, Arabic, Ancient Greek and Latin – revised subject specifications are being developed by NCCA.
8. Leaving Certificate Gaelge (T1 and T2) specifications have been approved for consultation commencing in 2021.
 - a. Leaving Certificate Gaelge T1 specification is aimed at native speakers and learners in Gaeltacht schools, and students in the sector that operate through the Irish language (Gaelcholáistí and Aonaid Ián-Ghaeilge). In schools that operate as English medium schools, there will also be the option to provide the T1 specification.
 - b. Leaving Certificate Gaelge T2 specification is aimed at students whose first language is English in English medium schools.

Choice: Schools have the autonomy based on the language proficiency of their students to offer both in exceptional circumstances. Where students are studying T1 at JC, schools can decide to study T1 at LC.

**Áine O’Sullivan,
Assistant General Secretary, ACCS,
February 2021.**