

Report of National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) 2017

It is a great privilege to represent ACCS 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. I wish to acknowledge the work of Ms. Brigid Mc Manus, Chairperson, NCCA and Mr. John Hammond, CEO and to thank Ms. Majella O'Shea, retired Acting CEO for her major contribution to the work of the NCCA and indeed, to wish her well on her recent retirement. Other recent changes in personnel include the appointment of Mr. John Halbert to the position of Acting Deputy CEO and Ms. Elaine Ní Neachtain, NCCA Education Officer for Irish who was appointed to the position of Director, Curriculum and Assessment, with particular responsibilities in post-primary education in early October 2017.

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. The current Council was appointed in July 2015 and will remain in place until December 31st, 2018. The Council has set out its targets for 2018 in line with the DES Action Plan for Education 2016-19 and in the knowledge that all its targets for 2017 have been reached. In December the Council launched its newly revised website which features a new minimalist approach with a greater focus on the user's journey and ease of accessibility.

Research and Events:

The findings of the INTEGRATION INTO PRIMARY EDUCATION: INSIGHTS FROM THE GROWING UP IN IRELAND STUDY by Ms. Emer Smyth which was commissioned by the NCCA and is due for publication in 2018 were presented to Council in November 2017. This is the 3rd report in this series and focuses on the experiences of 5 -year olds and their experiences of integration into primary school.

One of the highlights of the calendar for NCCA in 2017 was the CIDREE Consortium of Institutions for Development and Research in Education in Europe Conference which was hosted by the NCCA in Dublin Castle, in November. The theme of the conference was "Wellbeing in Our Schools: international perspectives". The event provided a tremendous opportunity for sharing ideas and experiences in supporting students' wellbeing, through informal discussions and facilitated workshops, with our international partners. Professor Andy Hargreaves from Boston College was invited by the NCCA to provide a keynote presentation on the topic of Wellbeing at the CIDREE Conference. In addition, he also provided inputs to several seminars and meetings over the two days of his visit. One of these inputs was a presentation to over 100 delegates at the Leadership for Learning Seminar which was organised by NCCA in partnership with the JCT. The focus of this seminar was on how schools and other organisations might best progress the Wellbeing agenda in their local and broader contexts.

Other events and conferences which the NCCA participated in during the year include the CIDREE Physical Education Expert Group Meeting which explored assessment and what countries have in place to support professional judgement in the field of assessment. Countries shared what we mean by 'understanding standards' and what supports are in place to support teachers to develop their confidence, knowledge and skills to make professional judgements on performance and learning.

NCCA also attended the EMINENT Meeting which was held in Brussels in November 2017. EMINENT is European Schoolnet's annual Expert Meeting in Education Networking which brings stakeholders from across Europe together to discuss the next challenges and solutions for innovative education. The theme of the conference was 'Learning Space, Time and Eco-Systems', and featured stimulating discussions on school scheduling, space and technology as learning agents, as well as featuring the voices of students as digital learners and citizens. The EMINENT conference offers a great opportunity to get insights into innovative practices and experiences in other countries, and to hear from our European partners about their work as part of Erasmus + and other EU projects.

Early Childhood Update:

The NCCA was asked by the DES to develop and pilot workshops based on the Aistear/Síolta Practice Guide. The Aistear Workshop and Coaching Pilot was facilitated in various locations throughout Ireland during the first six months of 2017. Although it was positively reviewed by both practitioners and mentors, the data suggests, that the materials, and the workshops and coaching model will need some revision in advance of wider implementation.

Primary Curriculum Framework Update:

A report on the progress of the “Sharing Inclusive Practice Network Initiative in Interculturalism and Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics” was presented to the Council in late 2017. Building on the Intercultural Guidelines for Primary Schools (NCCA, 2005) this work includes gathering examples of how intercultural, religious and ethical education can be developed in Irish classrooms. In the medium- to long-term, it is hoped that the work of the network will help inform the redevelopment of the primary curriculum and, in particular, assist with integrating ERB and Ethics within it.

Work has been ongoing on the new Primary Language Curriculum development for third to sixth class which will complement the revised curriculum implemented in the earlier years. Findings have highlighted the need for a new Primary Language Curriculum which integrates English and Irish and which includes all children and the language knowledge and experiences that children bring to school and which engages teachers and learners and supports children in developing positive dispositions toward language and literacy. It is expected that this Primary Language Curriculum document will be ready for Council approval in early 2018. It is also acknowledged that alignment with Junior Cycle specifications will be essential to ensure smooth transition between the two stages.

The new Primary Mathematics Specification has been under development since September 2016 and is due to be published online at www.curriculumonline.ie in Autumn 2018. Findings have indicated the need for a new Primary Mathematics Curriculum which is coherent in terms of aims, goals (relating to both processes and content), and pedagogy and that supports teachers to design and develop rich and challenging mathematical tasks that are appropriate to their children’s learning needs. The rationale for the new Primary Mathematics Curriculum addresses the importance of mathematics in children’s lives. It recognises that children should be encouraged to have a positive disposition to mathematics and to develop their mathematical understanding, language, communication skills, perseverance and resilience, interactions and expressions. Enabling children as mathematicians lays the foundations for children to become confident and life-long learners.

In the context of the changes and revisions to the Primary School Curriculum, the final report on the “Consultation on Curriculum Structure and Time” was presented to Council in December 2017 for discussion. As well as new research on teaching and learning, and new insights into children’s experiences of their primary school years, NCCA has been requested to add more and new ‘content’ to the primary curriculum. Schools and the curriculum, together, are often viewed as a critical site for responding to national priorities or needs, and addressing societal problems. This is evident in calls for increased time to be allocated to existing curriculum areas such as Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Physical Education (PE), and in demands for the inclusion of new curriculum areas such as Coding, Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics, Modern Languages, and Wellbeing. The NCCA is now tasked with advising on time allocation across the curriculum. Informed by the consultation findings, the overview of a redeveloped curriculum will include a new suggested time allocation framework. The final report will be published online in early 2018 and seminars based on the findings and research are scheduled for Spring 2018.

Junior Cycle Update:

As the year 2017 ends, Junior Cycle developments are well established in schools and there remains activity in all curriculum areas. In November the draft specification for Junior Cycle Mathematics was approved for consultation. The specification has been designed for a minimum of 240 hours timetabled student engagement across the three years of Junior Cycle. The issue of time remains a concern (Current requirement is 330 hours) and use of this time is an issue which has been discussed at length by the group. The draft specifications for Geography, History, Home Economics and Music were approved for consultation by Council in late 2017. Following consideration and consultation on the length of the SEC examination, it was agreed that the final examination in Junior Cycle Music and Home Economics would be consistent with other subjects that have a practical examination component and would be scheduled for 90 minutes. The draft specifications of Junior Cycle Technology subjects, Religious Education and Classics were made available for consultation in Spring 2018. Observations on these subjects include the following:

- Technology Subjects: The imbalance in gender uptake of the subjects is a concern and it is recognised that the development of new specifications is an opportunity to promote the subjects and STEM education in second level.
- Religious Education: The existing RE syllabus is perceived to focus disproportionately on Christian religions and this imbalance should be addressed in the development of a new specification/should strive to include the topics/study relevant to students’ lives.
- Classics: The low number of students taking Latin, Greek, Classical Studies and the declining number of teachers qualified to teach the subjects is of some concern. There is a possibility of reconsidering these subjects in the context of Short Courses.

The consultation phase for the overall review of Junior Cycle English, the first specification to be assessed in CBAs and SEC assessments, has been extended and remains open to all stakeholders until January 2018.

A Draft Assessment Schedule 2021-2022 for Junior Cycle was presented to Council for discussion at the end of 2017. The way in which the Junior Cycle Assessment schedule is presented makes it look very busy. However, the same congestion would certainly arise if a similar exercise were conducted for current assessment activity. The current prominence given to specific assessment events, house examinations, mock written and sometimes oral examinations, should not be discounted. This reality is clearly referred to in the Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation (2015) which states that *“in looking at the general assessment profile of the reformed junior cycle, the Classroom-Based Assessments will substitute other assessments currently undertaken in the school such as in-house examinations, etc. as appropriate”*. When viewed in this light, the apparent congestion of the schedule in the tables is contextualised. While the schedule presents a significant range and number of CBA entries, they should be understood to have such a close link to the ongoing work of the classroom that they should not, in effect, stand out from the everyday flow of school life to the extent that existing ‘house’ examinations do.

Final examinations: The reference to assessment in the documentation relating to junior cycle reform describes a dual approach to assessment for the purposes of recording the student’s learning achievement over her/his time in junior cycle. Part of this approach is predicated on changing the number of final examinations being undertaken by a student and changing the nature of those examinations. As stated in the Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation (2015) *“There is agreement on the need to reduce the maximum number of subjects which are examinable at Junior Cycle level, the need to shorten the exams themselves and to be more imaginative in the type of questions posed in exam settings, as well the need for wider types of learning to be recognised during these three important years of a young person’s life”*. Therefore, while there are final written examinations scheduled for most subjects, these will be shorter, no longer than two hours and will comprise single papers in all cases. These will also present question types differently from existing papers. These are significant departures in practice. The experience of the examinations for the student should also be impacted positively because of the associated assessment that she/he has already completed in advance of the end of year three and the realisation that other learning achievements are recorded for inclusion on the JCPA. The NCCA is exploring the development of a web based version of the schedule which can be made accessible to all stakeholders.

Senior Cycle Update:

In Autumn 2017 specifications for Senior Cycle Economics, Applied Mathematics and Computer Science were approved by Council. The revised Applied Mathematics specification is presented as a subject which requires a minimum of 180 hours of class contact time/study and so is expected to be fully timetabled in the curriculum and it is anticipated that digital technology will be used as a learning tool in some aspects of this course. Computer Science is a new subject and involves the study of computers and algorithmic processes. The specification includes how programming and computational thinking can be applied to the solution of problems, and how computing technology impacts the world around us. Students learn programming by solving problems through computational thinking processes and through practical applications such as applied learning tasks. The Leaving Certificate Computer Science specification is designed for all students, applies to many aspects of students’ lives and is therefore relevant to a wide range of student interests. The nature of the course is very important – this is not a pre-university course but rather is seen as an opportunity which enables students to increase their skills set in all areas of the key skills. In this way the specification is an experiential subject in which the theory is developed in the engagement with the content and practice. The schools which have been invited to participate in the pilot phase of implementation were announced in December 2017 and the official launch of the subject is scheduled for February 2018.

A presentation of the desktop study research to inform a review of Senior Cycle School Education was completed during April – July 2017. The research focused on the structure, organisation, curriculum & assessment in upper secondary education in eight jurisdictions including: England, Finland, France, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Ontario (Canada), Queensland (Australia) & Sweden. The conclusions of the study across all jurisdictions were as follows:

- Upper secondary education systems appear not to be a ‘one-size-fits-all’ offer, but rather to provide students with a range of options with a view to suiting their future destination.
- There is demand for upper secondary alternatives to traditional academic pathways.
- Internal assessment arrangements feature prominently in the upper secondary phase, but have a heightened role in vocational, as opposed to academic pathways, and are a particular feature of credit-based systems.
- Preparatory ‘years’ or programmes, offering a ‘breathing space’ between lower and upper secondary education, are being offered or considered as a way in which students can better plan for and be better prepared for the upper secondary phase.

- Bridging programmes, to allow more permeability between tracks, are developing features of upper secondary education in international jurisdictions.
- Environments outside of school, e.g. alternative providers, work-based learning or community learning make a key contribution to experiential learning in this phase.
- Official records of achievement, in addition to certificates, are a feature of the upper secondary phase, serving the needs of students and of future employers or educational institutions.
- There is a focus on ensuring students' physical and mental wellbeing.
- Links to the previous and next phases of a student's career and education are crucial, and consequently reforms introduced in this phase can have wide-ranging implications at individual and system level.

This research will be used to inform the review taking place currently of Senior Cycle Education and the complete report is available at www.ncca.ie along with all other research reports conducted by the NCCA in the past 12 months.

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