



## **Submission to the NCCA on Developing Senior Cycle Education**

**June 2003**

## **Introduction**

The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) welcomes the opportunity to make a written submission to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment on Developing Senior Cycle Education. NYCI's submission is a follow-up to the meeting held in the NCCA with members of the Community & Voluntary Pillar (including NYCI) and outlines NYCI's position in relation to developing senior cycle education.

This submission to the NCCA is based on NYCI's education policy 'Class Action', which outlines policy recommendations in relation to lifelong/lifewide learning, education disadvantage/early school leaving and access to higher and further education<sup>1</sup>.

The submission has also been informed by a consultative meeting with the Youth Affairs Standing Conference, a consultative structure of NYCI where member organisations contribute their views on the various policy areas that the Council are involved in. The following questions in relation to developing senior cycle education were put to our member organisations and form the basis of this submission:

1. What is the purpose of Senior Cycle Education?
2. Should any subjects be compulsory? If so, why? Which subjects should be compulsory?
3. What are the basic skills that every student should leave with? How should they be assessed?
4. What should a new senior cycle programme look like?

## **What is the purpose of Senior Cycle Education?**

NYCI's education policy emphasises the importance of incorporating a lifelong learning ethos into the formal education system. NYCI believes that the education system should recognise learning in a continuum that offers the most appropriate learning to fit in with the needs of the learner rather than the system. We also believe

in the importance of senior cycle education as a programme that educates young people for life, not only for employment.

The latter point corresponds to the main thrust of the European Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, which outlines 6 key messages on lifelong/lifewide learning:

1. New basic skills (including IT skills, foreign languages, technological culture, entrepreneurship and social skills).
2. Raising level of investment in Human Resources
3. Innovation in teaching and learning
4. Valuing learning (particularly in non-formal and informal settings)
5. Guidance and Information
6. Bringing learning closer to home

NYCI endorses the philosophical thrust of the European Memorandum on Lifelong Learning and suggests that it should be at the heart of developing the senior cycle programme.

In terms of what senior cycle education should provide young people, the following elements should be included:

- Life skills
- A foundation for employability
- A foundation for young people to access further education
- Basic skills
- An environment for interacting with peers
- An environment to develop practical skills
- An environment to use knowledge
- A place to achieve successes.

## **Should any Leaving Certificate subjects be compulsory?**

Only one subject is currently compulsory in the senior cycle programme. Opinion is divided within NYCI on whether Irish should remain a compulsory element of the

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<sup>1</sup> Please find NYCI's education policy enclosed for further analysis.

senior cycle programme. It must be noted that making subjects compulsory, including Irish, can act as a disincentive to students who may not 'perform' as well in that particular subject compared to others on the curriculum. However, there is also merit in keeping Irish compulsory in order to promote the Irish language and Irish culture.

In order to address this concern, NYCI suggests that Irish remain a compulsory subject in the senior cycle programme, but that students who are struggling with the subject, are regularly assessed to see whether Irish is impacting on their ability in other subject areas.

NYCI also suggests that no other subject be made compulsory within the senior cycle programme and that a review is carried out on whether the average take-up of six to seven subjects is too burdensome for some students.

## **What are the basic skills that every student should leave with? How should they be assessed?**

NYCI strongly believes that there should be a minimum level of basic skills that every person leaves school with. While the senior cycle programme is regarded for its high standard of quality both nationally and internationally, it must also be kept in mind that it is a system that fails approximately 18% of the school-going cohort (NESF report on Early School Leavers, 2002). While every effort must be made to reduce this figure and to create opportunities to keep young people in some form of education and training, it is also essential that if young people do leave school early, for whatever reason, that they leave with a minimum level of basic skills that are easily identifiable, transferable and certifiable.

In essence, the senior cycle programme must be changed in order to cater for the students that are most likely to drop out of formal education. NYCI suggests the following options may be reviewed by the NCCA:

- Review the transition from the Junior Certificate programme to the Leaving Certificate Programme. We note that there is a major difference in the standard of

knowledge and learning between the two programmes which may be off-putting to some students;

- Review the possibility of modularising the Leaving Certificate Programme. There are pros and cons to this option. However, there is a need to create more flexibility within the system to cater to the changing needs and lives of young people;
- Review the possibility of integrating continuous assessment into the senior cycle programme. Again, the British model would suggest that continuous assessment puts too much pressure on students to perform. However, there is merit to developing a continuous assessment model for the Irish system that integrates a number of basic skills into the curriculum (see below).

In terms of acquiring basic skills, our internal consultations highlighted quite strongly the need to incorporate a number of interpersonal/transferable skills into the curriculum, such as creative skills, active citizenship, project management skills, team work skills etc. It was noted that many of these basic skills are already used in youth work curricula and that there was therefore much learning that could be achieved between the youth work sector and the formal education sector in relation to embedding basic skills into the senior cycle programme.

NYCI therefore welcomes the opportunity for an open dialogue between the NCCA and the youth work sector in developing senior cycle education.

### **What should a new senior cycle programme look like?**

Our consultation included an examination of the four options for change outlined in the NCCA's document "Developing Senior Cycle Education: Consultative Paper on Issues and Options". Some changes are clearly required in the senior cycle programme in order to:

1. Accommodate weaker students who could potentially drop out of the formal education system
2. Match the senior cycle programme to the needs of young people as 'human capital' as well as active citizens

3. Adapt the senior cycle programme to the changing lives of young people (NYCI research shows that up to 23% of school-going students work part-time).
4. Prepare students more effectively for further and/or higher education.

We believe that the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) was a good option for many less academic students. However, the following concerns with the LCA were noted:

- Students taking the LCA are still dropping out after taking LCA Level I. There is a need to review the effectiveness of the LCA in retaining students and whether students are receiving all the necessary supports to progress.
- There is a stigma attached to taking the LCA and this needs to be reviewed in terms of the overall development of senior cycle education.

Although no preferred option was identified, it was clear that any new developments in senior cycle education must put the learner at the centre of the programme, allowing a certain level of flexibility between academic and vocational courses as well as embedding interpersonal and transferable skills throughout the curriculum.

## **Further Suggestions**

The following issues were also raised in our consultations with member organisations, which should be addressed in the overall development of senior cycle education:

- There needs to be further consultation between second level and third level education. It was noted that compulsory subject requirements at third level (for example, in Medicine or Science) could put extra pressure on students taking the senior cycle programme.
- Young people with special educational needs (including Dyslexia) need extra support and guidance
- Young people must be at the centre of the development of senior cycle education. The Union of Secondary Students must be consulted on a par with other education stakeholders and student councils should be encouraged to put forward their views on the development of senior cycle education.

- Developments in senior cycle education should be cognisant of the changing nature of Irish society. The principles of equality and diversity need to inform curriculum development. Special attention must be given to the needs of young immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees in the development of senior cycle education.

## **Conclusion**

NYCI would be happy to discuss further any of the issues highlighted in this submission.