

Smyth, Emer; MacCoy, Selina; Banks, Joanne

**Research Report**

## Student, teacher and parent perspectives on senior cycle education

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# STUDENT, TEACHER AND PARENT PERSPECTIVES ON SENIOR CYCLE EDUCATION

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**November 2019**

**RESEARCH SERIES**

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

CAO	Central Applications Office
CBA	Classroom-based assessment
DCU	Dublin City University
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
LCE	Leaving Certificate Established
LCVP	Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NPCPP	National Parents Council Post-Primary
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
SEC	State Examinations Commission
TY	Transition Year



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The nature of senior cycle has been subject to much policy discussion. Most recently, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) initiated a review of senior cycle, with a scoping phase followed by consultation with case-study schools and national seminars. Forty-one schools were involved in this process; they conducted consultations with staff and parents and NCCA staff carried out focus group interviews with junior and senior cycle students. This report draws on the two phases of the school-based consultation to document teacher, parent and student perspectives on the current senior cycle and potential directions for change. Because the schools volunteered for involvement, there should be caution in generalising to the broader population of schools. Nonetheless, the findings yield important insights into the benefits and challenges of senior cycle, closely mirroring findings from previous Irish research.

Both teachers and parents pointed to a number of positive aspects of senior cycle, as it currently stands. In particular, they indicated the range of programmes and subjects available to students, highlighting the role of the Transition Year (TY) programme in offering young people a variety of learning experiences and in fostering a range of skills. The objective and fair nature of assessment was viewed as a positive feature of senior cycle, with some also highlighting the variety of assessment approaches. Teachers and parents both emphasised the way senior cycle is implemented in their specific school setting as a positive feature, pointing to the supports available for students, the positive school climate and the quality of teaching. Compared to teachers and parents, students at both junior and senior cycle level were more critical of the current senior cycle, especially in relation to access to the kinds of interactive learning experiences they find engaging. However, they highlighted relationships with teachers and the TY programme as positive aspects of their experience.

There was a good deal of consensus among teachers, students and parents in relation to the challenges of senior cycle. All of the groups highlighted the workload involved, with teachers and students under pressure to 'cover the course', resulting in a focus on rote learning in order to prepare for the Leaving Certificate examination and a reduced focus on higher order thinking and broader skill development. This situation was seen as having a negative impact on student wellbeing, with reduced involvement in extra-curricular and social activities to the detriment of young people's broader development. Not surprisingly, students were particularly vocal about the impact on their stress levels, with even junior cycle students expressing apprehension at the pressure involved at senior cycle level. Furthermore, the current system was seen by many as favouring particular ways of learning, thus providing limited pathways to success, especially for those with a more practical orientation and those with special educational needs.

The three stakeholder groups highlighted the need to embed life skills in the curriculum in order to better prepare young people for further/higher education, employment and adult life. Participants often interpreted 'life skills' in a variety of ways but comments centred on the need for exposure to work experience, for the development of practical skills (such as completing a tax return or driving) and enhancing soft skills such as independence and resilience. The stakeholder groups suggested there is a need for greater flexibility in combining different elements of senior cycle programmes and highlighted the potential of an approach whereby subjects are taken at varying paces or levels of intensity. Many pointed to the content-heavy nature of a number of subjects and suggested a reduction in the material included or in the number of subjects taken. Assessment was the dominant focus in discussion of potential reform. Students, parents and teachers all favoured spreading out assessment over the course of senior cycle and using a wider variety of approaches to assess student performance (such as project work, portfolios and presentations). Teachers very strongly emphasised that assessment should continue to be externally marked in order to maintain a fair and transparent system.

The accounts of students in the case-study schools provide rich insights into their day-to-day experience of teaching and learning, and reinforce the value of 'student voice' in informing policy development. In keeping with previous research, many students highlighted positive relationships with their teachers, feeling they were increasingly treated like adults after the transition to senior cycle. As in earlier research, the students interviewed pointed to the way in which the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) examination narrowed the kinds of learning they experienced and they contrasted the interactive methods used in junior cycle with the exam-focused approach in senior cycle. In critiquing the current system, many provided a clear vision of the kinds of learning that would help develop them to their potential and prepare them for the changing world ahead of them.

In tandem with other research studies, the findings presented here provide an important evidence base for policy development. The Leaving Certificate exam is found to have strong currency from the perspective of teachers, parents and students. However, the outcomes of the consultation process within schools and more generally suggest an appetite for change, in order to respond to current challenges and to make senior cycle more inclusive of all young people. A strong consensus was evident among students, their parents and teachers on the value of integrating life skills into the senior cycle curriculum and providing an opportunity for all young people to engage in work experience, regardless of the programme they take. Students, parents and teachers all suggested there is a need to spread out LCE assessment during senior cycle and to adopt a broader variety of approaches to assessment, to better reflect student skills. Teachers were clear that such assessment should be set and assessed externally. The findings also highlight the need for senior cycle to be seen in a broader context, with a number of

stakeholders pointing to the challenge in adapting senior cycle in the absence of any changes in the system of higher education entry.



## CHAPTER 1

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### Introduction

#### 1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

For several decades, there has been considerable debate about the nature of senior cycle education in Ireland, in particular about the role of the Leaving Certificate exam and its use as a selection mechanism for higher education (see, for example, Commission on the Points System, 1999; NCCA, 2003a, 2003b, 2011; Department of Education and Skills, 2015). In response to these concerns, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) initiated a review of senior cycle education in 2016, a central feature of which involved two rounds of consultation with 41 case-study schools and other policy stakeholders about the benefits and challenges of senior cycle and the kinds of learning experiences that should be embedded in this educational stage. This report analyses information collected through the two rounds of the consultation process to outline the perspectives of teachers, parents and students in the 41 case-study schools, building on initial findings presented in Banks et al. (2018) and Smyth (2019). The remainder of Chapter 1 places this consultation process in the context of previous research on senior cycle education, before discussing the methodology used in collecting and analysing the feedback from schools.

#### 1.2 THE STRUCTURE OF SENIOR CYCLE IN IRELAND

Significant variation is found across countries regarding the nature of upper secondary (senior cycle) education and the kinds of certification young people receive on completion of this phase of education (Le Métais, 2003; Dufaux, 2012; O'Donnell, 2018). The Irish system has a number of distinctive features: its high rates of school completion (Department of Education and Skills, 2018); its largely undifferentiated nature (in contrast to strongly tracked systems such as Germany and Switzerland); and the dominant role of exam-based assessment. There is some flexibility in terms of subject and subject-level choice but none in terms of combining different subjects or modules at different phases of senior cycle.

Lower secondary education (junior cycle) comprises a three-year phase in the Irish system, culminating in assessment in the form of the Junior Certificate. Since September 2014, junior cycle has been the subject of phased reform, with a shift towards allowing schools more autonomy in programme design (including short courses), a focus on key skills and wellbeing, and new approaches to assessment and reporting (Department of Education and Skills, 2015). Prior to the reform, subjects could be taken at higher or ordinary level, with an additional (lower) foundation level in Irish, English and maths. Take-up of levels at junior cycle has been found to shape the levels open to young people within senior cycle, with

almost no movement from ordinary-level maths at Junior Certificate, for example, to higher-level maths at Leaving Certificate (Smyth and Calvert, 2011). On the roll-out of junior cycle reform, subjects (with the exception of maths, English and Irish) will be studied and assessed at a common level.

After junior cycle, students may take a Transition Year (TY), a programme that was developed to provide an opportunity for wider educational, personal and social development in an otherwise exam-focused system. TY is provided in the vast majority of schools – 89 per cent in 2014–2015 (Clerkin, 2018) – but has been less likely to be offered in schools serving more socio-economically disadvantaged populations, reflecting concerns on the part of school personnel about the potential effect of an extra year in school on student retention (Clerkin, 2013; Smyth et al., 2004). Over two-thirds of the student cohort are estimated to take part in the programme (Department of Education and Skills, 2019; McNamara et al., forthcoming).

The vast majority (95.8 per cent) of young people now stay in school until the first year of the Leaving Certificate programme (Department of Education and Skills, 2018). There are three types of Leaving Certificate programme: the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). All of the programmes are two years in duration. The LCVP was introduced in 1994 to foster a spirit of enterprise and initiative in students and to develop their interpersonal, vocational and technological skills. As part of this programme, students must take at least five Leaving Certificate subjects, two of which must be from a specified list of vocational subject groupings, a recognised modern language course plus two link modules, which focus on preparation for the world of work and enterprise education. The link modules are assessed on the basis of a portfolio of coursework and a written examination. For all other subjects, students are assessed in the same way as LCE students. The LCVP programme is provided in the majority of second-level schools and is taken by 27 per cent of students (Department of Education and Skills, 2019).

The LCA was introduced in 1995 for young people who were not being catered for by the other Leaving Certificate programmes and who might otherwise be at risk of early school leaving. It differs from the other two programmes in offering a combination of general education, pre-vocational education and vocational preparation courses. The approach to assessment is also quite distinct, being based on completion of modules, the performance of tasks and achievement in the terminal examination with a single award (pass, merit or distinction). Unlike LCE and LCVP, the LCA qualification is not recognised for direct access to higher education. It is offered in around 40 per cent of schools, with higher rates of provision in schools taking part in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme and larger schools (Banks et al., 2017). In 2017–2018, five per



cent of the cohort took LCA, slightly down from the 6–8 per cent over the previous decade (Department of Education and Skills, 2018).

The LCE is taken by the largest group of young people (68 per cent of the senior cycle cohort in 2017–2018). Students following the programme are required to study at least five subjects but usually take seven. Assessment is generally on the basis of written examination, although in some subjects written examinations are supplemented by oral and aural tests (in languages) or by student practical or project work (such as in art, music, history, geography and technological subjects). LCE exams can be characterised as very high stakes, with the grades achieved determining access to higher education and influencing entry to high quality employment (Smyth and McCoy, 2009). There have been a number of recent changes relating to the transition from senior cycle to further/higher education in order to reduce the pressure on students to achieve high points. These include a reduction in the differentiation in the grading system, with the award of points for the first time for those achieving 30–39 per cent on a higher level, the expansion of the use of non-exam-based assessment in some subjects and a move towards more general entry courses in higher education to reduce the points pressure resulting from highly differentiated courses. The following section outlines existing research on the senior cycle programmes in greater detail.

### **1.3 RESEARCH ON SENIOR CYCLE**

A number of existing studies provide useful insights into the different senior cycle programmes and into teaching, learning and assessment more generally. The proportion of schools offering the TY programme has increased over time, with an accompanying increase in levels of student participation. Research indicates that TY participants tend to be those who are more highly engaged in school, have higher educational aspirations and who have achieved higher levels of academic performance; participants also tend to be younger than average (Smyth et al., 2004; Clerkin, 2019; McNamara et al., forthcoming). Student perceptions of the programme tend to be positive, with more critical perceptions among those in schools where TY is compulsory (Smyth et al., 2004; Jeffers, 2007; Clerkin, 2019). Even taking account of the more positively selected group taking the programme, participants are found to have higher Leaving Certificate grades, higher rates of entry to third-level education and improved maturity (Clerkin, 2019; Smyth et al., 2004).

Research findings in relation to the LCA programme have been more mixed. Participants include those who have struggled with academic work during junior cycle, those with special educational needs and those who want to take more practical subjects (Banks et al., 2010). The programme has been seen as largely positive by participants, who highlight the use of more active teaching and learning methodologies and the modular approach. However, many students reported feeling isolated from their peers in school and rates of progression to further

education and employment have been poor; this was especially so during the recession (McCoy et al., 2014; Banks et al., 2010). There has been less research on the LCVP but findings indicate that it is not seen as a distinct 'programme' by many students (Smyth and Calvert, 2011). Motivations for taking LCVP centre on the potential for 'extra points' and the opportunity to take part in a work experience placement.

Perhaps not surprisingly, most existing research focuses on the LCE programme. Findings from the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study highlight the way in which the exam-based nature of assessment is seen by students as leading to a focus on covering the course and preparing for the exam rather than more engaged and engaging forms of learning (Smyth et al., 2011). Preparation for the high stakes exam is viewed as a period of stress and anxiety, especially among female students, one that involves curtailment of involvement in sports and other social activities (Banks and Smyth, 2015). The perception of the exam as high stakes is further fuelled by the extensive media attention devoted to the content of exam papers, coverage that is more prominent in Ireland than in other countries (Baird et al., 2014). Many students, especially more middle-class students aiming for high-points courses, become highly instrumental in their final year of second-level education, seeing good teaching as 'teaching to the test' and using private tuition (grinds) as a way of preparing for the exams (Smyth et al., 2011). A more recent study (McCoy et al., 2019) on changes in Leaving Certificate grading echoes many of these themes, suggesting, if anything, a growing instrumentalism in exam preparation, with a greater prominence of the marking scheme in student discussions of preparing for the exams. The role of marking schemes in knowing what is needed for a 'good response' and in assessing what different questions are 'worth' was also evident in student interviews conducted by Baird et al. (2014).

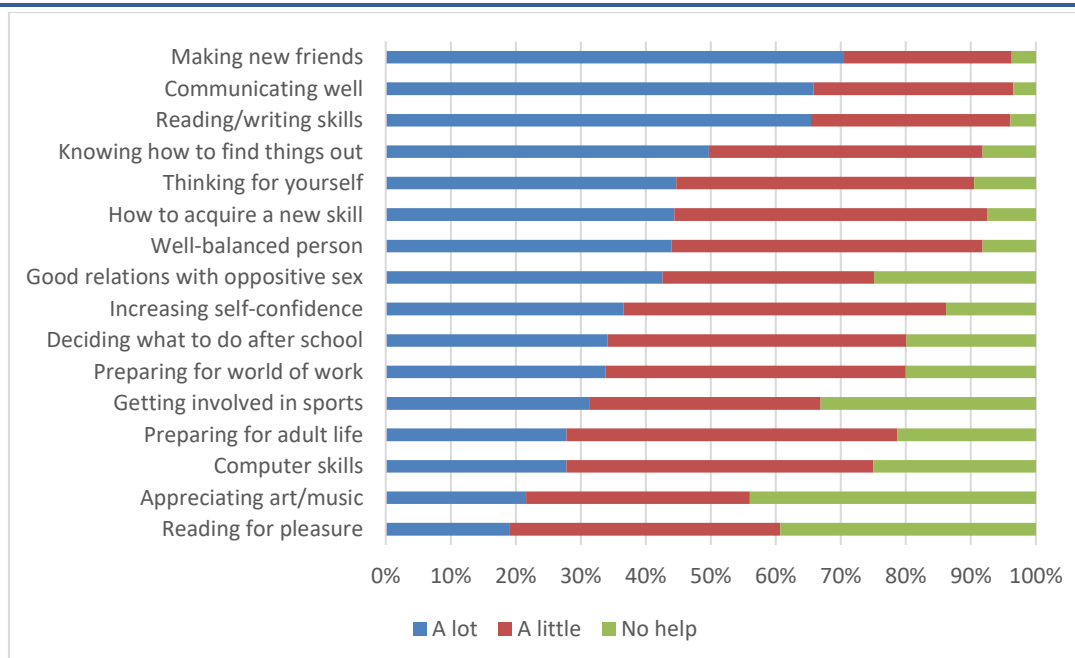
Analyses show that, with the exception of English, written exam papers in most subjects do not reward higher-order thinking, focusing instead on recall, understanding and procedural knowledge (Burns et al., 2018). These findings echo a much earlier investigation of nine Leaving Certificate subjects, which highlighted the 'burden' of exam papers on student recall (Madaus and McNamara, 1970). Baird et al. (2014) also point to an over-emphasis in some subjects on the recall of facts, to the detriment of higher-order thinking.

The nature of senior cycle education has been found to contribute to difficulties for young people in the transition to further/higher education. Many students have reported a mismatch between second-level and further/higher education, with resulting difficulties in adapting to independent learning, managing their workload and knowing what standards are expected of them (McCoy et al., 2014; McGuinness et al., 2018). In a study of first-year undergraduates in DCU, O'Leary and Scully (2018) similarly found that students did not feel their second-level education had prepared them well for higher education, with particular gaps in

relation to thinking independently and critically, using and evaluating information sources, using technology to improve their learning and working in teams. Students also highlighted the greater variety of assessment approaches used in higher education in contrast to LCE. While critical overall, students pointed to some positive gains from second-level education, including being well organised and having the resilience to cope with heavy workloads.

More broadly, reflecting on the benefits of second-level education, young people and their parents have pointed to the positive impact on personal–social development and developing friendships, though have highlighted gaps in relation to preparation for the world of work and for adult life (Byrne and Smyth, 2010; Smyth et al., 2011; McCoy et al., 2014). More recently, data from the Growing Up in Ireland study show similar patterns. Young people aged 17–18 years have been found to be most positive about the benefits of their second-level education in terms of making new friends, helping them communicate well with others, their reading and writing skills, knowing how to find things out and thinking for themselves (Figure 1.1). However, young people are less positive about the extent to which school has prepared them to engage with, and appreciate, different skills and sets of knowledge (appreciating reading for pleasure or art/music, getting involved in sports and having computer skills). They are also less likely to report that their second-level education has been ‘a lot’ of help in preparing for the world of work or for adult life.

**FIGURE 1.1 PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF SECOND-LEVEL EDUCATION AMONG 17–18 YEAR OLDS**



Source: Growing Up in Ireland study.

## 1.4 METHODOLOGY

The NCCA set out to involve schools at an earlier stage in the policy development process than is usually the case. With the support of school management bodies,

the NCCA invited second-level and special schools to become involved in a consultation process over the 2018–2019 school year. From among the 50 schools who indicated a willingness to participate, 41 were selected to capture diversity in terms of DEIS status, gender mix, school type, size, language medium and geographical spread; two special schools were also included in the selection. The selected schools also reflected variation in the provision of different senior cycle programmes, with the vast majority of the 41 schools offering TY and the LCE programme. Over half of the schools provided the LCVP and almost half offered the LCA programme.

A ‘link teacher’ was appointed by the principal in each school in order to liaise with the NCCA. The case-study schools were provided with support materials, including research documents and templates to guide discussion when consulting with teachers and parents about senior cycle and potential directions for the future.<sup>1</sup> An induction day was hosted by the NCCA in May 2018 in order to help build capacity in the schools to conduct the consultation process. The school principal, link teacher and a parent representative were invited from each of the case-study schools. Each participating school received a small grant to assist in organising the review work in the school, were provided with guidance and support through phone/email for the school’s link teacher from a designated member of the NCCA, and received substitute cover and travel expenses to attend induction meetings and national seminars.

For teachers and parents, two separate consultation meetings were held during the course of the school year. The first round of consultation looked at teacher and parent perspectives on the benefits and challenges of senior cycle and asked about the kinds of skills young people will require for the 21st century. The second round examined perspectives on current pathways and structures within senior cycle and looked at the kinds of learning experiences teachers and parents would like to see. The questions included in the templates for schools were informed by previous research and policy discussions, with input from the ESRI research team. Schools generally involved the whole staff in the group discussion, with the content of the discussion summarised in written form by a teacher in the school for later analysis. In some cases, the teacher recorded a series of bullet points, while in others a more narrative account of responses was provided; the quotes from teachers in Chapter 2 therefore reflect the form in which they were submitted to the NCCA.

For the induction day for schools, the NCCA worked with the National Parents Council Post-Primary (NPCPP) to devise the questions for the parent groups in schools. The workshop modelled facilitating a parent session and suggested additional materials to be included in the parent pack. At school level, the parent sessions were led and facilitated by parents, usually the parent association

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<sup>1</sup> Guidelines to schools, templates and research documentation are available at <https://www.ncca.ie/en/senior-cycle/senior-cycle-review/information-for-schools>.

representative. Some schools were unable to gather parents for these discussions, and so hosted the discussions at their Parent Association's AGM. Within each school, the numbers of parents involved were typically small – usually between four and 12 for each of the rounds. Parents were not required to be parents of the students included in the focus group interviews. The notes gathered were sent to the link teacher, who then sent them back to the NCCA. As with the teachers, there was variation in how these notes were recorded (for example, the use of bullet points as opposed to a more narrative approach).

Increasing importance has been attributed to the rights of children and young people in formulating policy (Smith, 2015). Linked to this awareness has been the growing emphasis on 'student voice' as an input into educational policy at the system and school levels (Baroutsis et al., 2016; Lundy and Cook-Sather, 2015; Robinson and Taylor, 2007, 2012; Rudduck and Flutter, 2000; Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). However, in practice, young people are rarely given a real say in the matters that affect their lives, particularly in a school context (McCluskey et al., 2013; Horgan et al., 2015). In order to tap into the expertise of young people on their own learning, NCCA staff conducted focus group interviews with junior and senior cycle students in the case-study schools.<sup>2</sup> This approach was used in order to enable young people to offer opinions without them being affected by the presence of their teachers. The schools were asked to select students for their focus group randomly to ensure a broad representation across the student cohort. The students involved all received information sheets and a parent/guardian information sheet, providing clearly understandable information on what was involved in the session. Assent/consent forms were signed by all students and guardians before involvement in the sessions. Participating students also had to give consent to comply with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guidelines. All NCCA staff who conducted the student voice sessions were Garda vetted and had taken part in child protection training.

Round 1 saw focus groups being carried out with students across 20 schools, while Round 2 involved student focus groups across 21 schools. The process involved first a 'warm-up session', with between 50 and 60 students working in small groups to answer some questions regarding their general views on senior cycle, after which a subset of these students was selected for the focus group, held later on the same day. Depending on school size and composition, the interviews usually involved one group of junior cycle students and two groups of senior cycle students (with around 10–12 students per group). These interviews focused in detail on the kinds of learning experiences young people felt worked best and the kinds of changes they would like to see made to teaching, learning and assessment. The interviews were recorded and notes were also taken by a member of the NCCA staff.

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<sup>2</sup> It was more practical for NCCA staff to conduct the school visits rather than members of the research team, due to the high number of school visits required over a concentrated period of time, coupled with resource constraints.

Questions in the sessions with teachers, parents and students were drawn from templates designed by the NCCA; this allowed for comparability across schools, while at the same time enabling schools to raise other issues they felt were important. The case-study schools provided two rounds of written templates, which summarised the views of teachers and parents respectively. Summary notes of student focus group interviews were prepared by a note taker for each group. These notes were then used to identify a selection of these interviews for full transcription. In total, recordings for 42 out of 101 focus groups (over the two cycles) were transcribed. These were selected on the basis of the type of issues raised, the profile of the school and whether the students were at junior or senior cycle level. In the case of interviews conducted in Gaeilge, these were transcribed in Gaeilge and then translated into English. The analysis for this report was therefore data-led, rather than guided by a theoretical framework or specific hypotheses. Immersion in the written material and transcripts allowed for the identification of key themes that were evident across schools and the extent to which responses varied by school type (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017). Throughout the report, quotes are used to illustrate the main patterns found. To place the views of the participants in context, these quotes are labelled by the gender mix and DEIS status of the school. In addition, quotes from students are labelled to indicate whether they were in junior or senior cycle (JC and SC respectively).<sup>3</sup>

The nature of this consultation process means that caution should be exercised in generalising from those who expressed the perspectives represented in this study to the general population of schools. The schools were selected from those who had volunteered to take part and so could be expected to be more proactive in terms of reflecting upon or embracing change. Furthermore, only a small group of parents in each school volunteered to take part in the consultation, and are therefore likely to be comprised of parents who are more involved in the school. Nonetheless, while caution is needed in generalising from the findings presented, they do nonetheless provide important insights into the perceptions of key stakeholders in the education process – students, their parents and their teachers. In order to contextualise the findings, the analyses cross-refer to previous research on senior cycle, with a good deal of commonality emerging between the case-study accounts and findings from previous research studies.

## 1.5 OUTLINE OF THE REPORT

Chapter 2 examines the perspectives of teachers on senior cycle, firstly looking at their views on the main benefits and challenges before considering their perceptions of the different programmes and how they would like senior cycle to develop in the future. Chapter 3 explores the parent perspective, following the same structure as Chapter 2. Chapter 4 looks at the views of students, focusing in

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<sup>3</sup> Note also that throughout the remainder of the report, the terms ‘Girls’ and ‘Boys’ are used in quotation captions as shorthand for ‘girls’ school’ and ‘boys’ school’ respectively.

particular on what helps students to learn and how they would like to see senior cycle develop. Chapter 5 concludes, summarising the main themes emerging from the study and discussing the implications for senior cycle reform.





## CHAPTER 2

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### Teacher perspectives on senior cycle

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter draws on the consultation with schools to outline teacher perspectives on the current senior cycle and the potential for change. Section 2 discusses teacher views on the main benefits and challenges of the current senior cycle while Sections 3–6 examine the different senior cycle programmes in turn: the Transition Year (TY) programme, Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE). These sections outline teacher views on the positive and negative features of each programme and on their perceptions of the approach to assessment and reporting used within them. Section 7 discusses the relationship between junior and senior cycle, while Section 8 examines whether current senior cycle pathways and structures are seen as suitable for, and inclusive of, all students. Section 9 outlines teacher views on potential changes to senior cycle, focusing on learning content and assessment.

#### 2.2 THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF SENIOR CYCLE

##### 2.2.1 The benefits

Teachers were asked about the overall benefits and challenges of the current senior cycle in Round 1 of the consultation, with more detailed information on perceptions of the senior cycle programmes collected in Round 2 (see Sections 2.3 to 2.6). The degree of choice open to students was highlighted as a positive feature of senior cycle: firstly, in relation to the number of subjects from which students could select; and secondly, the diversity of programmes to cater for students with different strengths and interests. Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) schools placed particular emphasis on the importance of having different pathways to accommodate their student population.

*The senior cycle programme offers a broad range of subject choices and caters for students of all abilities. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*There are a great many programmes and subjects available in the school, which are selected by students and which respond appropriately to their very diverse needs, abilities and interests. (Girls, DEIS)*

A significant number of schools highlighted the approach to assessment as a positive feature of senior cycle, mentioning both the importance of external

assessment in providing a fair benchmark for student work and the variety of assessment approaches used in many subjects.

*The anonymous nature of a set exam for all students does ensure that all students are on the same playing field and college access is open to all based on achievements that are comparable from school to school.*  
(Girls, non-DEIS)

*Continuous assessment alleviates pressure in most subjects for June.*<sup>4</sup>  
(Girls, non-DEIS)

Teachers commented not only on the structure of senior cycle at national level, but also on the nature of senior cycle within their school, reflecting the way in which policy is enacted differently across contexts (Ball et al., 2012). Over half of the schools made explicit reference to the network of supports, such as career guidance, learning support, mentoring systems and pastoral care, and spoke of the embedding of such supports in positive, caring relationships between teachers and students as a particularly positive feature of senior cycle.

*Teachers engage with students outside class time and care about their needs. Senior students are supported by the Mentor System and there is good academic and holistic support. There are many links between this DEIS school and third-level colleges, which facilitate transition to those institutions.* (Girls, DEIS)

*There is a very good relationship between students and teachers. It is possible to give personal assistance and guide students to do their best and to get the best learning.*

[Tá caidreamh an-mhaith idir scoláirí agus múinteoirí. Táthar in ann cúnaimh pearsanta a thabhairt agus treoir a chur ar na scoláirí chun a ndícheall a dhéanamh agus an fhoghlaim is fearr a fháil.]  
(Coeducational, non-DEIS)

The high quality of the teaching staff, their dedication to their work and their involvement in ongoing professional development was mentioned by over half of the case-study schools.

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<sup>4</sup> From the context, the participant appears to have been referring to additional assessment components. Throughout the interviews, the term ‘continuous assessment’ was often used to refer to a variety of aspects of assessment other than a terminal exam.

*Students are taught by teachers who value learning, both their own and their students', and who are aware of new developments in their subjects and in learning and teaching in general. Students' learning experiences are rich and varied. The students are given opportunities to engage in independent learning, collaborative learning, fieldwork etc. They experience learning with a highly motivated and competent staff. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

Related to the quality of supports and staff engagement, a significant minority of schools pointed to the positive school climate in their school, characterised by good relations between staff and students and among students themselves.

*There is a good relationship between students and teachers, and [a] positive and enthusiastic environment. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

Teachers from girls' schools were somewhat more likely than those from other school types to explicitly mention a positive school climate.

### **2.2.2 The challenges**

The main challenges mentioned by teachers centred on the nature of the LCE, with very detailed course content in many subjects and a 'backwash' effect of predominantly exam-based assessment on teaching and learning, issues which are discussed in greater detail in Section 2.6. The pressure to cover course material and the focus on exam preparation were seen to lead to less authentic learning and a neglect of critical thinking skills.

*It was felt that some courses were too long and there was pressure to get material covered. There was a sense that the learning was therefore not as deep. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*The 'good teacher' can be seen as the one who 'fills the mind' rather than the one who encourages reflection and self-directed learning. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*Due to the fact that this single exam can have a significant bearing on students' entry to third level, this leads to teaching and learning to the test, which does not allow a number of students to shine, nor does it place emphasis on important skills needed for life after school. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

The impact of this on students was discussed by many teachers, who highlighted disengagement among lower achievers and high levels of stress among more ambitious students.

*Student stress – striving to achieve success and often do not get any pleasure or benefit from the subject.*

[Strus an scoláire – ag cur brú orthu féin chun rath a bhaint amach agus go minic níl siad ag fáil aon phléisiúr nó tairbhe as an ábhar.]  
(Coeducational, non-DEIS)

*Course content is too much, which affects students' ability to balance extra-curricular, therefore negatively affecting students' wellbeing. Therefore, no time for personal development. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Staff in girls' schools were somewhat more likely to emphasise the effects of the current system, in relation to rote learning and related stress, than those in other school types, reflecting the greater prevalence of exam-related stress found among girls (see Banks and Smyth, 2015).

*The Leaving Certificate, while 'brutally fair', is a high stakes examination. Much depends on one day. The large number of students who undertake grinds in multiple subjects is giving rise to 'burn out' and mental health problems. The need for such grinds stems from fear of underachieving on the day and a pressure from friends to do more and more. What a student does in school is never seen as enough. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

More general challenges cited by teachers relate to the nature of decision-making among students. It was felt that students often took inappropriate choices, taking higher level (especially in maths) to maximise points and being reluctant to take the LCA programme, even where it might suit them better.

*Students who are academically challenged suffer under the points system as they feel compelled to enter higher-level courses that they cannot access, all in a race to accumulate points. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*Many teachers felt the bonus points in maths were causing students who would traditionally have done ordinary level to take the higher level, placing extraordinary pressure on their other subjects. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*They will not opt for LCA as they feel the programme is inferior to the Leaving Certificate. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

A significant minority of schools highlighted challenges related to the extent to which senior cycle students are motivated and take ownership of their own learning. This group felt that students expected to be 'spoon fed' by their teachers, and through grinds, and that young people are reluctant to take responsibility for their own academic progress.

*They expect to be spoon fed in this school due to pressure from parents. How do we foster independent learning? (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*Many teachers felt that students wanted to be 'spoon-fed' and wanted the 'grinds' approach of notes and rote learning. ... They are seen as being reluctant to take initiative and work independently. This, it was felt, feeds into the grinds-school mentality that they seem to rely on. They therefore do not take enough responsibility for their own learning and a teacher is deemed ineffective if they do not follow the grinds-school model of 'education'. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

Lack of motivation among students was a somewhat more common theme in DEIS schools, where some teachers reported challenges in relation to student attendance and engagement.

*In relation to some of our students: Motivation. Attendance. Attendance requirements for LCA. Not taking deadlines seriously – lack of responsibility. Lack of self-belief and Low expectations. Lack of ambition & work ethic – Unwillingness to take responsibility for independent study. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

The following sections look in greater detail at the benefits and challenges associated with the different senior cycle programmes.

### **2.3 THE TRANSITION YEAR PROGRAMME**

Teachers in the case-study schools highlighted the TY programme as a particularly positive feature of senior cycle in their school, reflecting the very positive views of the programme among teachers found in previous research (Jeffers, 2007). In particular, teachers highlighted the variety of learning experiences to which students were exposed during the programme, the chance to engage in broader skill development and the opportunity to take part in work experience placements.

*TY is open to all students and there is a wide range of activities. Students experience subjects they would otherwise not have a chance to engage with. Work experience broadens their minds and helps with career decisions. In TY, there is a team approach and students have an extra year to mature. (Girls, DEIS)*

*All staff agreed that work experience was the most positive feature of TY. Work experience allows students to build confidence, investigate possible careers in real life situations and encourages students to get involved in [the] wider community. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

The variety of learning experiences in TY was accompanied by a greater diversity of assessment approaches than in other senior cycle programmes. Many schools used portfolio-based assessment and interviews at the end of the year, which they felt served as a more holistic reflection of student learning.

*A range of assessment methods are used, including project work, interview, and an eFolio some of which develop IT skills. The eFolio provides a showcase of work completed and of various achievements. There is less pressure and students who don't shine in [a] traditional exam setting may do so in TY assessment. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*Teachers praised the Transition Year graduation folders, which contain a collection of certificates of achievement across a range of subject areas, such as academic and other areas like Gaisce, etc. This gives a holistic report of the different skillsets and achievements of the individual student. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

In keeping with previous research (for example, Jeffers, 2007), teachers emphasised the contribution of the TY programme to the personal and social development of young people, reflected in their increased maturity.

*TY is very positive. It gives the girls a chance to develop in a more complete way and lets them try a variety of subjects with work experience and mini company.<sup>5</sup> (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*Students have the opportunity for personal self-development through class work, group work, presentations and discussions. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

Single-sex boys' schools placed particular emphasis on the role of TY in enhancing maturity, though this issue was also mentioned in other school contexts.

*[TY] enables students to mature and prepare them better for the LCE by way of subject sampling etc. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Although views of TY were positive, some challenges were highlighted around student motivation, with some students becoming unwilling to work and/or being absent from school.

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<sup>5</sup> The mini-company programme provides students with an opportunity to learn enterprise skills by setting up and running their own business.

*There is a sense that Transition Year is not being taken seriously by some students. The majority of teachers lamented the perceived high absenteeism rate of students and the impact that this had on creating a meaningful sense of continuity in the classroom. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

In addition, the number of outings and activities was seen as creating challenges in maintaining continuity in teaching and learning.

*Continuity for modules is poor where you have a group once a week and may not see them for 2–3 weeks depending on trips etc. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Some schools also raised the issue of costs involved in the TY programme; the expenses involved for families, in relation to paying for trips and outings, as well as the costs to the school in running the various activities.

*Students in more affluent areas have more opportunities to participate in trips/activities. This is an inequitable education system. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*TY is very expensive and thus some students simply cannot afford to do it; these are usually the students who would benefit from it the most. The government should be subsidising / putting a greater subsidy into TY so as not to discriminate against children from poorer backgrounds. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

While TY was seen as an opportunity for a more varied approach to assessment, it was sometimes felt that the lack of formal certification in the programme meant that student achievements were not fully recognised or valued by students and their parents.

*No formal assessment from the SEC [State Examinations Commission] can devalue the year and parents can view it as an expensive waste of a year. They like a piece of paper with the harp to prove assessment has occurred. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*Because terminal exams are of so much importance in the LC [Leaving Certificate], the TY credits are not seen as valuable by parents, and therefore students, even though they are an excellent representation of the students' work throughout the year. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Some schools felt that less assessment took place over the course of TY than should be the case, and that existing assessment could be fragmented in nature.

*Mention was given to the lack of regular reporting to parents throughout the year; reflecting loose and limited assessment. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

*Teachers felt that the fact that TY reporting was isolated and not connected to fifth and sixth year was negative. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

## **2.4 THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED PROGRAMME**

In schools where the LCA programme was provided, teachers highlighted a number of interrelated features of the programme, which were seen as contributing to a positive learner experience. Smaller class sizes meant that students could receive more individualised support and the approach to assessment meant that work was completed in more manageable segments.

*The smaller class sizes mean learning is more pupil focused. Students gain confidence with smaller class size. There is a more level playing field and students feel secure and more able to cope within their own group rather than the pressures of the traditional Leaving Certificate. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

Work experience was seen as contributing to skill development among students and enhancing their choices for the future.

*All staff agreed that work experience was the most positive experience of LCA. Students experience jobs they want to work in when they complete their education. Blocked work experience instead of once a week provides students with a more realistic experience of the world of work. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

These features were viewed as contributing to greater self-confidence and a sense of achievement among students, often in sharp contrast to the academic difficulties these students had experienced in junior cycle.

*It is a great programme for students who like hands on and they can see they are progressing and achieving as they complete tasks immediately, not after two years of work. Certain subjects have a mix of project, short questions and long questions assessment. This allows everyone to achieve and succeed. It allows students to gain marks before they go into the exam, taking the pressure off. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*Students who might not have experienced success in JC [junior cycle] do in LCA as a result of its structure and content. (Coeducational, DEIS)*



While LCA was viewed favourably across the schools providing it, teachers in DEIS schools tended to be more positive about the programme than those in non-DEIS schools.

From a more negative perspective, concern about the stigma attached to the programme, given its lack of recognition for direct higher education entry, was expressed by many teachers.

*It has been given a 'bad name' and is synonymous with a cohort of pupils who are not considered to be traditionally academic. This should not be the case and it should be formalised and promoted to encourage and attract a variety of pupils with different skills.*

(Girls, non-DEIS)

The different subjects and activities engaged in by LCA students, and sometimes their separate location within the school building (see Banks et al., 2010), meant that students often felt isolated from their peers.

*Students feel segregated from the rest of their year group.*

(Coeducational, DEIS)

Many teachers reported a lack of awareness of LCA and lack of familiarity with LCA certification in the wider society, reinforcing its perception as 'second-best'.

*Employers, general public etc. need to see a usable document which they can understand. Otherwise LCA reporting emphasises difference, lessens achievement, and is detrimental [to] students' self-esteem*

(Coeducational, DEIS)

The resultant labelling of the programme has meant that some schools have been reluctant to offer the programme; in many cases where they did so, schools saw relatively low levels of take-up, even among students who teachers thought better suited to taking it.

*The numbers interested in doing LCA is in low single figures. Even where the programme is better matched to students' needs than the LCE, students are not inclined to opt for this programme possibly because of the stigma attached to it.* (Girls, non-DEIS)

*We do not offer the LCA programme. [Because] there is a local context that cannot be ignored. Most schools in the area do not offer the programme. Exclusion from CAO has resulted in lower status for the programme.* (Boys, non-DEIS)

In addition, a significant group of the schools, especially among DEIS schools, felt that programme content was out-dated and not suitable to student needs.

*Course content is out of date and unchallenging. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*The programme is 24 years old (1995) with little update and development over that time – the programme needs revision and renewal. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

While using attendance as a criterion for certification was mentioned as a positive feature in several schools, many DEIS schools pointed to challenges for young people with high levels of absenteeism, with this group seen as ‘failing’ quite early on in the process.

*A student may have completed all key assignments to a good standard but credits may not be awarded because the student does not attain the 90 per cent [attendance] cut off. (Girls, DEIS)*

## **2.5 THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE VOCATIONAL PROGRAMME**

From a teacher perspective, the positive features of the LCVP centred on its focus on preparation for the world of work, the opportunities for work experience placements and the combination of the use of continuous assessment with an earlier exam.

*LCVP gives students an opportunity to experience [the] world of work/work experience with a theory side ... Generally success is experienced by most individuals, [it] facilitates personal development, can provide extra points for the Leaving Cert, develops skills for work, develops knowledge of company functioning. (Girls, DEIS)*

*Completion of a portfolio and the terminal exam being completed before June eases some pressure. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

Some features of LCVP were seen as more negative; for example, the fact that access to the programme is limited to students who have chosen particular groups of (LCE) subjects was viewed as an unnecessary restriction on take-up.

*Students taking the LCVP programme must take specific vocational subject combinations in order to access Enterprise Education or Preparation for the World of Work. All students should have access to these link modules. The lack of flexibility is a disadvantage. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

A difference in the points awarded to the link modules compared to those awarded to higher-level LCE subjects was also seen as a deterrent to take-up, especially among more ambitious students.

*At best, students can only score a H5 to be considered in points calculation – this means that the more academic students will not choose LCVP and therefore miss out on the benefits outlined.*

(Coeducational, DEIS)

Many teachers spoke about negative perceptions of the programme and the lack of awareness of LCVP among students and their families. Indeed, some teachers felt that LCVP could not be correctly framed as a programme.

*Lack of clarity among students, parents and staff regarding the programme is a drawback – the programme does not have a clearly defined identity. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

## 2.6 THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE ESTABLISHED PROGRAMME

Almost all schools highlighted the variety of subjects on offer to students taking the LCE programme as a positive feature. Many schools also emphasised the provision of different subject levels as facilitating achievement for students of varying ability levels.

*The vast majority of staff were in agreement that there is a wide range of subjects on offer to suit all interests. Teachers highlighted the student's ability to choose their subjects as one of the most positive aspects of the current Leaving Certificate. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*There is a wide range of subjects available in the school. Students also have the ability to choose the content they wish to choose at the level of ability they want.*

[Tá rogha leathan ábhair ar fail sa scoil. Freisin bíonn sé de chumas ag na daltaí an t-ábhar gur mian leo a roghnú ag an léibhéal cumais gur mian leo.]

(Coeducational, non-DEIS)

The majority of schools spontaneously mentioned the standardised nature of the assessment as a positive feature of the LCE programme as a whole. In keeping with the comments on the benefits of senior cycle more generally, the vast majority of schools described LCE assessment in very favourable terms. The key features highlighted included the transparency and anonymity of the system and the high regard in which the Leaving Certificate qualification is held by society as a whole.

*The integrity of the exam process is highly respected and seen as fair and equal. Standards are accepted and respected nationally. It is well established and clear to students, parents and teachers.*

(Coeducational, DEIS)

*The objectivity of the Leaving Certificate examinations was identified as a very positive feature of the current Leaving Certificate. Teachers stressed the fairness of the current examinations as well as the high standard/quality of the common examination papers. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

The majority of teachers across the case-study schools highlighted the value of the variety of assessment approaches, at least in some subjects. DEIS schools were somewhat more likely than non-DEIS schools to highlight this variety as a positive feature and somewhat less likely to focus on the objective nature of assessment. Having marks awarded to orals, aurals and/or project work was viewed as taking some of the pressure off students in relation to the final exams and as promoting and recognising a broader range of skills and achievements.

*Some subjects include project work and the opportunity to earn marks before sitting the written paper. Oral exams give students the chance to earn marks in a way that doesn't rely on written work.*

(Coeducational, DEIS)

*A certain amount of the course can be completed through orals, projects etc. before the final exam which helps to spread the workload throughout the year. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

When asked about the negative features of LCE, workload and associated pressure emerged as the dominant theme. Students and teachers were seen to be under pressure to 'cover the course', with many subjects viewed as involving a large volume of material. This was seen as resulting in less flexibility to adopt more learner-centred approaches in the classroom.

*Students study too many subjects and there is too much content. This leads to cramming and rote learning. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*There is very little room for autonomous or active learning given the amount of material on the courses. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Many schools highlighted the over-reliance on terminal exams as a basis for assessment and the lack of project or practical work in many subjects. This issue was particularly highlighted in DEIS schools.

*Many subjects lack project work, e.g. English is entirely dependent on a written exam. Subjects including project work may award too little marks; e.g. Home Economics project work is only 20 per cent of [the] overall grade. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*Assessment depends on performance on a single day, which can be stressful and tiring on students. I think that it is very focused on learning content and not on understanding content. It can sometimes be a memory game. (Girls, DEIS)*

The exam-based nature of much of the assessment was seen to encourage rote learning, with students seeking to memorise rather than fully understand the material covered.

*Rote learning is accepted as an effective, and, some might say, essential method of achieving high grades. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*The Leaving Cert currently serves only one purpose and that is access to third level. There is no reward for completing this in [and] of itself. It does not promote student centred learning, critical thinking, or reflection. It does promote teaching to the exam, rote learning, and this does not make it accessible for many students. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Teachers felt that current structures facilitated student emphasis on preparing for the exam rather than learning, leading to an emphasis on ‘notes’ and ‘grinds’ (private tuition) as ways of gaining valued points.

*Another negative aspect of the current LCE programme is the over-dependence on notes, on the ‘grinds culture’ and on students’ desire to be ‘spoon-fed’ notes and sample answers by teachers. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*It’s not continuous assessment and everything is based on one exam. The material being studied is often viewed as the subject matter for competitive effort between students. It is being increasingly subverted from its developmental role by the rise of grind schools and privately paid tuition in order to gain advantage. (Girls, DEIS)*

The workload involved coupled with the high-stakes nature of the exam were viewed as having a negative impact on the wellbeing of students, contributing to higher levels of anxiety and stress, an issue that was particularly highlighted by girls’ schools.

*In terms of the final exam, its high-stakes feature and short, intense duration are very negative. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*Students are suffering with anxiety and stress. Many put themselves under too much pressure to get points for college.*

(Coeducational, DEIS)

*The final exams are increasing stress levels and subjects with 100 per cent exam are very unfair for those who have a bad day.*

(Coeducational, DEIS)

The practical implications of students being ill during the exam period were also mentioned, with many teachers highlighting the lack of flexibility and students being required to repeat a full year in these instances.

*There is no accommodation for students who are sick during the exams.* (Girls, non-DEIS)

Overall, the approach to assessment and reporting in LCE was viewed as resulting in a neglect of broader skills and competencies and a lack of adequate preparation for life after school.

*Reporting in the LCE has a limited focus and fails to report personal and social development. Neither does it capture success in extra-curricular activities. This view was shared by many teachers.*

(Boys, non-DEIS)

*Many subjects are dependent on doing well on one day (100 per cent exam), e.g. Business, too much rote learning, huge exam stress and pressure for students. LCE also does not prepare students for university, where there is a big shift from books in school to group presentations, researching etc. It is content heavy. Students do not get the opportunity to go on work experience yet must pick their chosen career in this time.* (Coeducational, DEIS)

## **2.7 TRANSITION FROM JUNIOR TO SENIOR CYCLE**

The discussion so far has focused on senior cycle in isolation from the rest of second-level education. This section explores teacher accounts of the connection between junior and senior cycle and highlights potential challenges in the alignment of the two phases of education. The majority of the case-study schools pointed to the issue of discontinuity between (the revised) junior cycle and senior cycle. In keeping with recent research (McCoy et al., 2019), teachers expressed concern about the gap in course material between junior and senior cycle, with subjects at senior cycle having more complex material and requiring longer essay-style answers. This was seen as especially evident in relation to higher-level papers at senior cycle, with challenges identified in terms of student progression from common papers at junior cycle.

*There is disconnect between the requirements at Junior Cert and at higher Leaving Cert. For a student to successfully engage in study at third level in a very academic subject, like history, English lit, physics etc., they need to engage in school at a very deep level in that subject. It is a disservice to them to make these subjects too simple or 'accessible' at higher-level senior cycle level. This needs to be addressed as currently the new junior cycle (with common papers in many subjects) does not in my view adequately prepare them for SC. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*Students going from common papers in junior cycle to ordinary or higher level in senior cycle is going to be a big challenge. At present long answers are not required in the junior cycle exams e.g. English, students will have lost the associated skills in and will have difficulty giving detailed answers in senior cycle. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Several schools pointed to particular adjustment difficulties among students who had taken part in TY, who were seen as finding it difficult to cope with the volume and pace of work required in fifth year, having become more used to a wider variety of learning experiences and approaches.

*[There is] not enough emphasis on academic rigour [in TY], which leads to a wide gap to bridge when entering fifth year. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*Some students miss the sense of identity and belonging they experienced in TY when they go into fifth year. They find it hard to adapt to the change in learning. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

A particular issue around discontinuity in provision was raised in relation to young people with special educational needs, with the two special schools highlighting the lack of senior cycle progression options for those who had taken a Level 2 qualification at junior cycle.

*What will be implemented for JC Level 2 candidates at senior cycle? (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*The school have designed their own leavers' programme in the absence of a state recognised [one]. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

## 2.8 INCLUSION

In both phases of the consultation process, schools were asked about the extent to which senior cycle is currently suitable for, and inclusive of, all students. On the more positive side, a significant minority of schools highlighted the way in which

the provision of a variety of programmes offered pathways to suit different groups of students.

*Overall it is [inclusive], as the differing needs of students are catered for. There are various options available to students (i.e. LC, LCA, LCVP, ASDAN, higher / ordinary levels). This school takes every opportunity to include everyone. Increased weight on oral exams is a favourable change. This school is excellent at making adjustments for weaker students. Diverse backgrounds and talents are catered for in this school because there is so much on offer. The Access Programme helps. We are very inclusive of all backgrounds. (Girls, DEIS)*

*Subjects are all offered in higher and ordinary level. Practical subjects [are] offered for more practical minded students. Learning support [is] available to help the students who may struggle with certain aspects. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

A smaller group of schools also highlighted the fact that the variety of assessment approaches fostered inclusion by catering to a broader range of student abilities and interests.

Despite these acknowledged benefits, the majority of schools felt that senior cycle did not cater adequately for those who were less academically oriented, especially those with special educational needs. The system was seen as favouring those who were better at exams and more oriented towards academic rather than practical subjects.

*It does not allow ALL students to achieve their potential and is heavily weighted in advantage of academically minded students and those with a strong work ethic and support system at home. The terminal exam still rewards those who learn the formula of writing essays rather than showing evidence for their learning. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*It suits rote learners but does not prepare students with the skills they need for college / university / positive destinations. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*The LCE is a drudge for the non-academic students, being irrelevant to their interests and abilities. The written emphasis of the syllabi does not suit the low achievers. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

The reliance of assessment on a relatively long, written exam was seen as a particular issue in constraining the inclusion of certain groups of students.



*There is a significant number of students with SEN [special educational needs] and language needs in our school and the volume of learning for the LC is incredibly difficult for these students. In home economics, there is a written journal and a written exam with no practical element, which would be a lot more beneficial to our students many of whom would experience success in practical areas rather than learning off information and recalling it in the exam. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*The assessment process and in particular the traditional Leaving Cert represents significant challenges for a cohort of students such as English and learning support students. Specific mention was given to the lengthy terminal exams in respect of this. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Senior cycle was perceived as being oriented towards higher education entry rather than a diversity of pathways, leading to a more narrow focus in current provision.

*Senior cycle is totally CAO ... focused. There are very limited opportunities to alleviate stigma of non-degree courses and apprenticeship. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*All students do not have suitable pathways available to them, [it is] academic focused. Senior cycle is based on CAO points for college, which limits students that want to work in a trade – it does not provide skills required for students who want to work in a trade etc. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Previous research has pointed to the reliance of schools on the Junior Certificate School Programme and the LCA in catering for students with special educational needs (McCoy et al., 2014a). More recently, new learning programmes have been introduced, at Levels 1 and 2, to cater for students with general learning difficulties in the higher functioning moderate and low functioning mild categories. However, as mentioned in Section 2.7, several schools reported that there was no follow-on provision at senior cycle for those young people who were unable to participate in the LCA programme.

*There is currently no senior cycle curriculum for children in a special school; after completing L1LP [Level 1 Learning Programmes] and L2LP [Level 2 Learning Programmes] pupils are expected to go back to [the] primary curriculum. The individual class teacher must write the programme. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*Many students do not have suitable pathways. Many students with ASD [autistic spectrum disorder] are struggling to remember information for exams, which we know they will never use again. I would like to see a senior cycle version of L2LPs. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

In an effort to fill the gap in provision, one of the special schools involved in the consultation process had developed their own leavers' programme, tailored to the needs of their students.

*The Individual Education Programme developed for each child ensures the leavers programme is individually planned for each child, enabling them to reach their potential, it is functional and pupil-centred. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

The other special school and one of the mainstream schools offered alternative qualifications, including Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and ASDAN qualifications, in order to cater for students with special educational needs at senior cycle level.<sup>6</sup>

*ASDAN caters for students who have special needs, allows students with special needs to remain in the school for senior cycle; each student is facilitated. Each student achieves [a] qualification. It is being recognised at PLC level for students to continue to further ed. [It] gives students a chance to take part in senior cycle but at their own level. [It provides] life skills and [a] personalised programme. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*QQI is accessible for our pupils and entry level suits their ability level academically. ... Students are informed of their progress on an ongoing basis. As they complete their portfolio of work they can self-evaluate their progress as they sign off each section when complete. (Girls, DEIS)*

Many teachers framed the discussion in terms of senior cycle being overly 'academic', but were less explicit about the potential role of vocational education within the current system. Some highlighted the need to have more vocational or technical subjects within senior cycle.

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<sup>6</sup> ASDAN is a UK-based education charity and awarding organisation.

*There are no technical/vocational subjects in this school. Broadening the range of subjects available in single-sex schools to include e.g. construction studies in all girls or H Ec [home economics] in all boys would broaden the pathways available to students, as would more practical subjects. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

In contrast, others emphasised the importance of having valued vocational pathways for young people upon leaving school.

*There is an urgent need for vocational and apprenticeship pathways. Third-level academic study is not meeting the needs of many students. Many of our students do better in this area later when the learning is in the context of their work. ... Culture/attitudes towards apprenticeships needs to change. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

However, teachers recognised the challenge around dividing students into academic and vocational tracks at an early stage and the potential difficulties around securing parity of esteem for vocationally-oriented courses.

*I think it is important not to funnel students into a particular pathway at a young age. Students develop at different speeds. Also, the vocational subjects should be of equal value as academic subjects. (Girls, DEIS)*

## **2.9 TEACHER PERSPECTIVES ON THE FUTURE OF SENIOR CYCLE**

Teachers in the case-study schools were asked their views on the future of senior cycle at both phases of the consultation process; a good deal of commonality emerged in the views expressed, both across schools and at the two time points. The issues raised can be grouped broadly under two themes: the structure and content of senior cycle; and how senior cycle learning should be assessed and reported upon.

### **2.9.1 The structure and content of senior cycle**

Overall, there was a lack of consensus on the appropriate length of senior cycle, even within the same school. Some teachers favoured making TY mandatory for all students, either as a stand-alone programme or by integrating aspects of the programme into a three-year senior cycle.

*TY should be mandatory for all students – to give them time to mature and recover from stress. There is a need for a ‘settling in’ period to senior cycle. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*Sizeable majority of the staff felt that the senior cycle should be a three-year course with the liberating benefits and work experience of TY maintained. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

In contrast, others highlighted the value of having an optional TY to allow students a choice in whether to complete senior cycle in two or three years.

Some teachers suggested that senior cycle could be two or three years, depending on the kinds of courses taken by students and the level of difficulty at which they took them.

*Senior cycle should remain a two-year cycle, with the possibility of taking it over three years to facilitate students learning at a slower pace. (Girls, DEIS)*

*Three-year cycle suggested with some form of cert at end of year two and dedicate third year to university-bound students. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Such flexibility was seen as particularly important for students with special educational needs.

*We feel that the needs of our students might be best met if the curriculum were to be structured in terms of modules of work, with the possibility of varying the length of time needed to complete the modules allowing a degree of flexibility, which would suit our pupils. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*Modules or units of learning would suit the needs of our pupils. This enables them to complete each module at their own pace. The pupil can complete modules suited to their ability and individual strengths and priority need. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

While teachers made many positive comments about aspects of current senior cycle programmes, several argued for moving away from ring-fenced provision to integrating some of the benefits of, for example, LCA into the LCE programme.

*The use of interviews and oral communication language [in LCA] is effective and should be considered in the LCE. A large number of teachers felt that LCA is more reflective of what life will be like outside of school. Students complete a personal reflection task, which has a positive impact and should be an element for all in senior cycle. This would help all students in completing personal statements at university level moving forward. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*I do feel that those who sit the traditional Leaving Cert miss out on real world learning that those in LCA get. The obvious example would be work experience. However, LCA modules such as those in childcare on how to raise a child is a real life learning. We need to think about do students need all the theories in the world or do they need a mix of theory and real-life skills. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

Others advocated greater permeability between the boundaries of programmes, allowing students to take some elements of LCA as part of a broader modular approach.

*All agree that it is a disadvantage that there is no real possibility of transfer between the LCA and LCE programmes as they are so different. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*Can LCA be made one year?? If modular and LCE eventually becomes modular there could be criss-cross in levels – take away stigma of LCA. LCA students could slide into LCE areas where their strength lies. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Around half of the case-study schools wanted flexibility in provision in the form of a combination of traditional subjects and more flexible components such as modules or units of learning. Teachers in DEIS schools were somewhat more likely to emphasise the need for more flexible course provision. A modular approach was seen to facilitate students sampling different subject areas as a basis for career decision-making.

*It should be structured in term of subjects, modules and units of learning, as this will allow greater flexibility when it comes to students choosing relevant subjects for their chosen careers. A combination of all three will also allow for flexibility in catering for student individual learning needs. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Modules could allow some students to obtain broad exposure to a subject area, while others studied it more intensively.

*The overwhelming majority felt that modules incorporating a certain amount of core subjects were favourable. These subject modules could include electives within them, e.g. geography with landscape photography, art with special effects/animation, etc., to diversify content with skills. Modules could be very beneficial. Students can take from each module, with staff invested in their interests more[; this would] provide greater choice and flexibility – [it would be] tailor-made to student needs and would allow for cross-curricular learning throughout. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

A modular approach was also seen as conducive to reducing stress and pressure by allowing students to be assessed at the end of each stage, an issue discussed in greater detail in the following subsection.

Only one-fifth of schools wanted the retention of a solely subject-based curriculum, which they felt provided a clearer structure for students.

*Senior cycle should remain centred on subject learning. This is a well organised format which makes easy and obvious connections between areas of study within subjects. Students bring with them an understanding of this world view from junior cycle work and it helps them to deepen their understandings in this structured way.*

(Girls, DEIS)

*Modules might be ideal for college but a nightmare for timetabling. Subjects have been tried and tested and work.*

(Girls, non-DEIS)

However, even where they wished to retain a subject-based curriculum, many teachers wanted senior cycle framed more flexibly by reducing course content and/or the number of subjects that students were required to take.

*The number of subjects being studied at LCE/LCVP should be reduced to four to five, with no compulsory subjects. These should take a modular form being formally assessed by the SEC at the end of each module. The results in each module should form part of their overall grade. This would ease the stress experienced by students and teachers as exams could take place in both fifth and sixth year. The students should have access to a greater variety of both academic and vocational courses.*

(Coeducational, DEIS)

*Seven subjects is too demanding. We feel five subjects is enough.*

(Boys, non-DEIS)

A reduction in the number of subjects and/or amount of course content was seen as a way of reducing student stress around exam-based assessment, while at the same time providing students with a broader set of skills.

*Many felt that subject content should be reduced to enable the student to focus on research and how to be more independent as a learner. There is no emphasis on independent learning and research at the moment.*

(Coeducational, DEIS)

*Courses need to have less content than there is at the moment to provide more meaning for the students, instead of having the rush through content. If content is reduced, students could then work on projects that could go towards their final grade. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

In discussing which areas of learning should be studied by all young people, a consensus was evident among teachers in relation to three domains: English/literacy; maths/numeracy; and life skills/wellbeing. A range of other subject areas was mentioned but in only a minority of schools. English and maths were seen as providing key skills for the future, regardless of the specific pathway taken by a student.

*English and maths should be compulsory as these are fundamental to adult life. Maths allows for the formation of logic and English develops effective communication and creative use of language together with emotional capacities. (Girls, DEIS)*

*English: critical thinking, reading and writing skills are essential across so many career fields, as well as [that] the study of literature is expansive to one's life experience and creates opportunities to connect with others. (Boys, DEIS)*

The majority of teachers argued that life skills should form a core component of the senior cycle curriculum. This would involve providing young people with a set of practical skills as preparation for the future.

*Each student should be equipped with skills and knowledge that will help them in their everyday lives. Students might know how to solve an equation but struggle to change a light bulb, change a tyre on a car or how to fill out a tax return. Students should learn life skills on top of their subjects. (Girls, DEIS)*

It would also facilitate the development of personal and interpersonal skills that would enhance young people's wellbeing and ability to cope with challenges.

*Wellbeing should be available to all to help students acquire coping life skills. ... Mental, emotional and physical health should be taught to all students in order to develop students' resilience and improve their levels of engagement and motivation. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

Several teachers highlighted the need to have work experience opportunities for all students, regardless of the programme they take.

*Presently, not all senior cycle students have access to work experience, they should. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*Work experience should be mandatory for all students and assessed as part of certification. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

In keeping with their views that senior cycle did not cater for all students (see Section 2.8), many teachers wanted to see more diverse pathways open within senior cycle, including vocational as well as academic components.

*A mixture of academic and vocational courses/ apprenticeships should be available to all. A modular approach would allow students to try different areas of study/training or to specialise in a smaller number of subjects. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*The overall focus is on third level. However, not all our students will progress to third level and more focus needs to be put on the other pathways. Vocational paths need to be incorporated throughout senior cycle. Opportunities are needed for students to complete certificates throughout senior cycle. For example: driver theory test, safe pass, safe food. More focus on the world of work for all. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

### **2.9.2 Assessment and reporting**

Perhaps not surprisingly, much of the discussion on potential change to senior cycle centred on assessment. There was a consensus across schools that assessment should be spread throughout senior cycle and involve a broader range of assessment approaches than is currently the case. Support for these measures was stronger in DEIS than in non-DEIS schools. Many teachers highlighted the potential to have exam-based assessment at different points during senior cycle; for example, at the end of fifth year and sixth year or at the end of particular modules.

*Perhaps students should be allowed to complete exams in a modular basis like some of the university models being used. For example, students could complete exams in December and May/June in fifth year – if you don't get what you need, repeat those exams in sixth year with their other assessments. This offers an opportunity to complete work at a different pace. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*Formal assessments at end of fifth year, which are corrected externally would allow learning at a different pace. ... An option to have some externally assessed exams in fifth year to relieve pressure and to reduce content-heavy course. It would also provide the students with some feedback about their progress, which would give them more realistic expectations to students going into sixth year. (Girls, non-DEIS)*



It was felt that staggering assessment in this way would reduce the pressure and stress associated with a set of high-stakes exams taken over a very short period of time.

*Some summative assessments could be completed at the end of fifth year. This would alleviate the pressure that is currently concentrated at the end of sixth year. A semesterised system could also offer an opportunity to lessen the pressure that currently exists around the terminal exam. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

Others focused more on the need for a diversity of assessment methods, including project work, practical work, orals and aurals. Such diversity was seen as crucial in recognising the broader skills and capacities of senior cycle students.

*[There should be] a greater amount of project work available across subjects, but to count for Leaving Cert marks, not just school assessment (like in JCT). Staff feel that when students engage in a project over which a student has some control (like choosing the focus) and experiencing the process of taking it from idea to finished product that the learning is deeper. Also, there is scope for presentation skills to be utilised in this. (Boys, DEIS)*

*Teachers would like to see an introduction of [an] oral aspect to all subjects. This will give students the opportunity to discuss project work or other aspects of their learning or possibly cross-curricular learning. For example, with [the subject] politics and society, so much more of the learning experience of the project could be expressed by one-to-one assessment and engagement by an examiner, rather than a sole written report. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

Many schools grounded their desire for a broader range of assessment methods in the need to extend the classroom-based assessment approach used in junior cycle into senior cycle.

*LC should have a model of ongoing assessment similar to classroom-based assessment and assessment task at junior cycle level to provide a reflection of students learning over two years instead of one exam. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

Given the gap between junior and senior cycle discussed above, several teachers indicated the need for a greater alignment in standards and approaches across the two phases.

*Junior cycle does not prepare students for senior cycle, as the gap between both are too large; more emphasis on linking the subjects between junior cycle and Leaving Cert. needs to be made.*

*(Girls, non-DEIS)*

*LCE needs to follow on the same type of experiential learning as has been introduced at Junior Cert level ... programmes need to match as the gap/void between the two are going to be far too wide in the present situation. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Even if the current timing of the Leaving Certificate exams was retained, many teachers emphasised the importance of students having the flexibility to repeat their exams at an early stage in cases of illness or bereavement.

*If someone is sick or has suffered a bereavement during the exams, they should be able to re-sit them in August. (Girls, DEIS)*

*There is also no contingency plan in place for students who experience trauma. There is no option to repeat. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

Since the school-based consultation was conducted, the SEC has introduced, on a pilot basis, a scheme to allow candidates who experience a family bereavement during, or two days prior to, their exam to sit their exams on specified dates in July.

There was a strong consensus among teachers that any changes to the timing of or approach to assessment for LCE/LCVP should still involve external assessment, which was seen as a central component of a fair and transparent system.

*We need to maintain all assessment as externally done. It is not feasible to have teachers assess their own subjects. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*SEC assessment must remain external to be impartial to maintain the integrity of the exam system. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Teachers were asked about both assessment and reporting at senior cycle level. Across schools, teachers felt that reporting should capture broader skills and activities, along the lines of a Senior Cycle Profile of Achievement, though not all teachers used this term. While mentioned by all school types, support for this approach was particularly strong in DEIS schools.

[It should involve a] *Senior Cycle Profile of Achievement, using school input and other areas of learning. These can be within the school or include volunteer work, sports etc. They could also include a personal statement or a reference. The SCPA should have an emphasis on skills and suitability as well as academic results.* (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

*Record achievements. Example: Sporting or any extra-curricular, attendance to these. It gives importance to student involvement in school and reflects students' interpersonal skills and unique abilities.* (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

However, some teachers pointed to the challenges in ensuring that such an approach was equitable.

[It's a] *nice idea to record broad range of learning experiences but [it] would be difficult to ensure consistency of records and standards across all schools. Unfair from a socio-economic point of view.* (Girls, DEIS)

In discussing the need for change, teachers highlighted a number of challenges in implementing any reforms. A particular concern centred on a potential increase in workload for teachers, especially in a context where it was felt that some students did not take responsibility for their own learning.

*Project work can challenge the teachers – students not taking responsibility, teachers under ... pressure [to] do more work. The project work can sometimes become the teachers work e.g. draft + feedback + redraft of written projects. Even with final deadlines, it can be difficult to get work completed ... [it] always seems far away to teenagers!* (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

*If CBAs come in for senior cycle, the responsibilities on teachers [are] unacceptable as teachers will then be responsible for the grade that decides their future career – [leading to] negative rapport.* (Girls, non-DEIS)

Many schools felt that changes in assessment at senior cycle would not be effective without accompanying changes in the higher education entry process, given the role of the 'points race' as a driver of student anxiety.

*Third-level points dictate the pace for LCE and nothing will really change until this does.* (Coeducational, DEIS)

*The fact that the senior cycle is used for third-level entry through the CAO points-based system results in a stranglehold on the education of our students. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

Additional resources, especially continuing professional development, were seen as crucial components of any changes to senior cycle, as was the time taken to secure teacher buy-in to the change process.

*[It will involve] increased workload on teachers. Fears about teachers correcting students' work at senior level and the implications for points system functioning. Teachers' reluctance to grade students. More CPD at JC is needed for teachers to have sufficient confidence with extending the model to SC. Staff training is essential. ... JC adjustment is already taxing for teachers and a second wave of adjustment may be a step too far. Teaching will suffer with change-related work. Collaboration time for teachers. (Girls, DEIS)*

Resources and funding were viewed as constraints in adapting senior cycle to promote inclusion, with many highlighting large class sizes as an impediment to adequately catering to the needs of students with learning difficulties.

## 2.10 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has presented teacher views on the current senior cycle and on how they would like senior cycle to develop. Teachers highlighted a number of positive features of the current system, particularly the choice of programmes and subjects open to students and the value of external assessment in ensuring a fair and transparent process. Teachers also emphasised the supportive context within which senior cycle was provided in their school. The TY programme was regarded as a particularly positive feature of senior cycle, providing students with a variety of learning experiences and the opportunity to take part in work experience placements. Many aspects of LCVP and LCA were regarded favourably by teachers, who highlighted the more continuous nature of assessment, skill development and greater preparation for the world of work.

Teachers pointed to some negative features of the current senior cycle. Overall, senior cycle was seen as being more oriented towards third-level entry and not inclusive of the full range of skills and capacities of students, especially those with a more practical or vocational orientation. The reliance on largely written terminal exams for the LCE was viewed as having a negative effect on the nature of teaching and learning, resulting in pressure on students and teachers and the encouragement of rote learning. Access to LCVP was viewed as unnecessarily restricted on the basis of the other subjects selected by students, while the LCA

was perceived as being a much less attractive option for young people by virtue of the fact that it is not possible progress directly to higher education.

Teachers generally favoured having greater flexibility in senior cycle, involving a modular approach and a range of academic and vocational options. They highlighted English/literacy, maths/numeracy and life skills as core components of any senior cycle programme. There was support for combining the benefits of the different senior cycle programmes rather than having distinct pathways, though views were mixed on whether or not TY should be mandatory. There was strong consensus on the value of spreading assessment over the course of senior cycle (at end of the year or on completion of modules) and for use of a greater variety of assessment approaches. There was also strong agreement that external assessment should remain for these new LCE components. In terms of reporting, teachers generally favoured something like a profile of achievement approach that took account of extra-curricular and non-exam subjects and activities, as well as academic grades.



## CHAPTER 3

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### Parent perspectives on senior cycle

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter draws on two rounds of focus groups conducted with parents in the schools involved in the consultation process to outline parent perspectives on the current senior cycle and potential changes to this phase of education. Section 3.2 looks at the main benefits and challenges of the current senior cycle from the perspective of parents, while Sections 3.3 and 3.4 look at parents' views on the Transition Year (TY) programme and the three Leaving Certificate programmes, respectively. Section 3.5 examines whether current senior cycle pathways and structures are seen as suitable for, and inclusive of, all students by parents. Finally, Section 3.6 outlines parents' views on potential changes to senior cycle, including content and assessment.

#### 3.2 THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF SENIOR CYCLE

Like teachers, parents in the case-study schools were asked to highlight the main benefits and challenges of the current senior cycle. Rather than focusing on senior cycle in general, parents were encouraged to reflect on the experiences of their own son(s) or daughter(s). The areas highlighted were broadly similar to those mentioned by teachers. Parents were positive about the variety of subjects from which students could choose, with some parents contrasting the Irish system with the UK and other systems with more specialised subject choice.

*Our school has a broad selection of subjects to offer, together with after-school study and great teacher encouragement.*  
(Coeducational, non-DEIS)

*The broad curriculum for Leaving Cert means they don't have to select a career path too early, as they do in the UK.* (Coeducational, DEIS)

*Parents felt their children were exposed to a very broad curriculum in selected subjects and they could achieve a high standard of knowledge in these areas.* (Boys, non-DEIS)

Parents valued the approach to assessment used at senior cycle, emphasising the objective nature of grading and the inclusion of project work as well as exams.

*We have to remember that the LC is a totally fair exam, it may be brutally fair, but it is fair to all students no matter what their background.* (Girls, non-DEIS)

*Everybody sits the same exam under the same conditions – it is totally anonymous and fair. Who you are and who you know makes no difference. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*The exam (Leaving Certificate) process is clear, objective and fair. Parents have great confidence in the LC system. All students no matter where they go to school experience the same exam as each other. No favouritism or bias in how the exams are marked. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

Work experience was seen as a positive feature of senior cycle by many parents. Like teachers, parents valued the way in which senior cycle was offered in their child's school, highlighting the available support systems, such as guidance and pastoral care, and the quality of teaching.

*Many parents referred to supports and strengths of their own school, with strong praise for a strong principal and the high-quality teachers. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

As with the benefits of senior cycle, there was a lot of common ground between teachers and parents in relation to the challenges involved; like teachers, parents' comments largely related to LCE rather than the other Leaving Certificate programmes. Parents' main concern centred on what was seen as an excessive workload and exam focus, with negative effects on their children's wellbeing.

*The idea that a student's entire school career is determined by their ability to perform well in two three-hour exams, back to back, was considered grossly unfair ... This is an entirely unacceptable way to assess an individual's entire school career. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

They noted that it was difficult for their children to maintain personal interests, leisure activities and, in particular, sports participation, under the current system, which for many entails a very long school day.

*Extra-curricular activities are very limited in senior cycle. Many drop sport and often students cannot start new sports in senior cycle, i.e. if they are not already on school teams it is too late to try. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

One focus group commented 'their lives shouldn't stop because they are in sixth year' (Coeducational, DEIS).



Feelings of pressure among students were seen as being heightened by the media attention given to the exam. However, the major driver of stress was the points race, with several parents wanting a change to the higher education entry process.

*Students are under pressure from all corners – Parental pressure, peer pressure, personal pressure, points pressure. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

As a result, parents felt that students did not always make the best subject (or level) choices, in some cases opting for what is seen as an ‘easier’ subject, but in which they had perhaps little interest or aptitude. Some parents also suggested that the points system should be examined, and the difference in points between higher- and ordinary-level subjects reviewed (as also highlighted in recent research by McCoy et al., 2019).

Parents highlighted what they saw as rigidities in the Leaving Certificate system, in particular noting that there were no allowances made or alternatives offered where young people experience a critical personal or health issue during the exams. Parents also noted that the current system presumes a lot of young people, in the sense that it expects them to make decisions that will impact the rest of their lives. This has been highlighted by previous research, which has shown how decision making about post-school choices places a considerable amount of pressure on young people (see McCoy et al., 2014). Finally, parents noted the changes that are ongoing in junior cycle education, and highlighted that their experiences were largely limited to the reforms in English, as that was the first subject revised under the new junior cycle. Several felt they were still unclear about the nature of changes in the junior cycle curriculum and approach to assessment.

### **3.3 THE TRANSITION YEAR PROGRAMME**

Like teachers, the parents consulted mentioned the TY programme as one of the most positive features of senior cycle. They particularly valued the effect of participation on the maturity and personal development of their children.

*Transition Year is a great start to senior cycle – it helps so much with personal development, maturity and confidence. Students have a wide range of interactions and the work experience module is very beneficial. They have tasters in all subjects offered for the Leaving Cert and that makes it easier to choose their subjects in fifth year. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*Our Transition Year is an excellent programme. ... Having put our sons through TY, they are now in Leaving Cert – the level of maturity and the ability to make good decisions for themselves is invaluable. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

*The Transition Year was seen as a great opportunity for students to experience different aspects of life, learn new and varied skills and avail of a taster of each of the senior cycle subjects to make better and more informed choices. It also gives them the time to mature and be more prepared for fifth year. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

Parents also referred to the variety of learning experiences on offer to students in the schools attended by their children.

*Opportunities in TY for developing life skills, group work skills, social skills, assertiveness, confidence building, educational trips, maturity into senior cycle, opportunity to think about [the] future through work experience elements. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

The opportunity to take part in a work experience placement was seen by parents as a particularly positive feature of the programme.

*Work experience – it gives the student an opportunity to sample what life is like in the workplace and if they are interested in pursuing a particular career it gives them an opportunity to ‘try it out’.*  
(Coeducational, non-DEIS)

*TY work experience and community placement over a month in total makes for a realistic real world experience where relationships with adults outside school have to be established, leading to self-awareness and resilience. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

The TY programme was perceived as involving a range of assessment approaches, which better captured the variety of skills developed by students over the course of the year.

*The TY portfolio assessment and an interview at the end of the year is widely perceived by teachers, students and parents as a true reflection of the experience and achievements of their year.*  
(Coeducational, non-DEIS)

Some parents pointed to more negative features of the programme; in particular, it was noted that some students become less motivated during TY, which then can cause difficulties when adjusting to fifth year.

*Due to lack of formal assessments throughout the year, it does not prepare the students for fifth and sixth year when they must sit school exams and state exams again. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

Some parents also highlighted a disconnect between TY and the rest of senior cycle, with the skills developed during the programme not recognised subsequently.

*TY assessments are detailed in this school but all for nothing in the end as [they are] not recognised outside of the school setting.*  
(Coeducational, non-DEIS)

A smaller number of parents referred to the costs involved in programme participation and to the potential for there to be a greater array of subjects and activities offered in the school their children attended.

*The high cost is also a factor and means that some students can't afford to do TY.* (Coeducational, DEIS)

*Transition Year is very expensive here. Money is required throughout the year for trips etc., e.g. TY tour.* (Boys, non-DEIS)

### **3.4 THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE PROGRAMMES**

Most of the parents consulted focused on the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) programme in their discussions of senior cycle programmes. However, some did comment on the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). The student-centred focus of the LCA programme, along with the use of continuous assessment, were commented on favourably by several parents.

*The way LCA is structured suits students very well; they work from session to session and don't have the burden of everything depending on exams at the end of two years. Also, students know where they stand as they get results at the end of each session.*  
(Coeducational, DEIS)

This approach was seen to provide a valuable pathway for students who were less academically oriented and to facilitate a sense of achievement among young people.

*Leaving Cert Applied allows for students of different learning styles/strengths to achieve and receive recognition for their learning.*  
(Girls, non-DEIS)

*The continuous assessment and modular aspects of the LCA are preferable to the rigid structure of the LCE. Rewarding attendance and giving students immediate positive feedback gives them a sense of progress and achievement.* (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

The LCA programme was also seen to provide greater preparation for the world of work for participants, through the work experience placement and broader skill development.

*They [students] see it as being very geared to their needs as they can acquire skills for the world of work. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

However, as with teachers, many parents expressed concern about the lack of progression opportunities open to those who have taken the LCA programme and the resultant stigma for students.

*The LCA course is still treated as 'the poor relation' by some in the academic world, which can be very disheartening for students. Often these students have struggled all through their school lives with academia. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*This is a major disconnect between the programme and the LCE. The pupils feel discriminated against as they are so separate from the LCE programme. They are treated differently in many areas of senior cycle at present. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*LCA is a good programme but it does not have the same status as the Leaving Cert and a lot of students who would do well in LCA won't do this course, their parents won't let them do the course. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

In relation to LCVP, parents tended to comment on its impact on skill development, especially in preparing for the world of work, and on the greater use of continuous assessment as positive features of the programme.

*The LCVP class is one that is practical and students can gain work experience and real life experience undertaking this class. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*This promotes new skills within the LCE such as teamwork and ICT skills during the preparation of the portfolio. Work experience as part of the programme in fifth year is a very positive experience for students. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

There were few negative comments on LCVP, though some parents did draw attention to how access is restricted to those who took particular subjects and to the lower points awarded to the highest grade in the link modules. Some parents also referred to a lack of awareness of the programme among parents.

*There remains a misconception among parents as to what LCVP is. There is a reluctance to sign up because parents associate the word 'vocational' with a different type of learning experience.*

(Boys, non-DEIS)

For most of the parents consulted, LCE was seen as *the* dominant aspect of senior cycle. Parents were particularly positive about the range of subjects open to students in their children's school.

*The breadth of subjects in Leaving Cert has its benefits – the variety of subjects means you don't have to make career choices at such an early age. The Irish system is not closing doors too early for the students.*

(Coeducational, DEIS)

They were also positive about the objective and fair nature of the assessment process, though parents were somewhat less likely to emphasise this feature than teachers.

*All strongly agreed that the exam system is seen as fair and impartial. A big plus is that students sit the same exam no matter what school they attend. The grade awarded is recognised the same everywhere.*

(Coeducational, DEIS)

Many parents highlighted the use of a variety of assessment approaches (including projects or oral/aural tests) in many subjects.

*The project elements of the practical subjects are good; the students enjoy them and it is helpful to have acquired some marks before the written exams. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*Parents are very happy that some subjects contain components that are examined before the June state exams. There is a general consensus among parents that a 'terminal exam only approach' adds to pressure at an already very stressful time. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Several parents highlighted the way in which exposure to a challenging curriculum provided young people with valuable skills, especially responsibility, motivation to work hard and resilience.

When asked about the negative features of the LCE programme, the dominant concern was its impact on student wellbeing. Not surprisingly, given their role, parents were more likely to mention the issue of pressure and stress among students than teachers. Parents expressed concern regarding the impact of preparing for the Leaving Certificate exam on their child's mental health.

*There is a negative impact on mental health because of the pressure of the final exams. Students are putting this pressure on themselves. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*There is huge pressure on students, which causes stress and anxiety. The workload is too big. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

The key perceived drivers of such pressure were the workload involved and the concentration of exam-based assessment over a short period of time. Parents saw course content as being long and detailed, which they felt made it difficult for their children to keep up with the pace of work.

*The course content is so long for some subjects, e.g. biology and HL English. Many students are overwhelmed by the sheer amount of material they have to cover. A lot of courses are not completed in enough time (or at all) to give students an opportunity to revise properly for the exams. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*The dense curricula does not allow for reflection on learning or time for exploring areas of the subject that interest them. It is working for the exam and not skills or even lasting knowledge-based. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

The timing of the exams was seen as providing an ‘all or nothing’ opportunity to demonstrate skills and knowledge, neglecting the recognition of other skills that could not be well captured in a written summative exam.

*The future of a young person is all down to the final result and how you perform on the day of the exam. (Girls, DEIS)*

*One size fits all – the same exam for everyone means many do not get the opportunity to show their skills and strengths in ways that suit them. Everything depends on two weeks and if you are ill, anxious or suffering from a loss, it is not fair. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Exam pressure was seen to reduce the time available for young people to engage in more stress-relieving pursuits, such as sports and other extracurricular activities.

*Pressure is too much for a ‘once off’ exam at the end of two years. It is very hard to maintain a balanced life while studying for the exams. Sport and extracurricular activities are affected, which does not help with the mental health of our young people. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

Regarding the impact of being ill or experiencing a bereavement during exams, parents felt that greater flexibility should be provided, with students given the opportunity to resit the exam rather than repeat the whole year.<sup>7</sup>

*If some incident occurs during the state examinations (illness, death), the student should have the opportunity to take the exams at another time.*

[Má tharlaíonn eachtra eigin i rith na scrudaithe stáit, (tinneas, bás) ba cheart go mbeadh deis ag an scoláire na scrudaithe a thógáil ag am eile.]

(Coeducational, non-DEIS)

Parents discussed the implications of the current system not only for the wellbeing of their children but also for the kinds of learning they experienced. Around one-third of the parent groups expressed particular concern about the rote learning approach taken by students in preparing for the exam, which they felt led to the neglect of more critical thinking skills.

*All participants felt this [rote learning] dominated the students' supposed learning experience for the two years after TY. None saw any benefit to it and felt it meant the current Leaving Cert was more of a memory test than a test of knowledge or comprehension.*

(Boys, non-DEIS)

*Too much memorising means that if a student has the advantageous skills of essay writing and a method to remember facts and quotes, they can achieve high grades. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

The consequence was that students became very instrumental about exam preparation, often taking grinds (private tuition) to improve their performance.

*It's all about the 'points', not about the 'learning'. The value of all learning at senior cycle is equated to points. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*Many students are getting grinds and this just adds to the workload and the pressure, but they believe they have to do it as they need the points for their course. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

Such an approach to learning and exam preparation was seen as providing inadequate preparation for the transition into further/higher education.

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<sup>7</sup> As noted earlier, since the school-based consultation was conducted, the SEC has introduced, on a pilot basis, a scheme to allow candidates who experience a family bereavement during, or two days prior to, their exam to sit their exams on specified dates in July.

*The nature of assessment may allow a student to do well due to rote learning rather than comprehension. This can then feed into poor retention rates at third level, where students drop out as they are not suited to, or able for, their chosen course. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

As with the teachers, several parents referred to a discontinuity between junior and senior cycles, with very different standards expected of young people over the transition.

*The transition in English from JC to LCE is huge. Students are not prepared for the standard of writing required for LCE. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*The English and maths courses in the Junior Certificate are not preparing the students for the Leaving Certificate courses. There is too much discontinuity, they are like different subjects. The marking system between the two exams is different.*

[Níl na cúrsaí Béarla ná Mata in san Teastas Sóisearach ag ullmhú na scolairí do na cúrsaí ins an Árdteist. Tá an iomarca dífriochtaí eatarthu, tá said ar nós ábháir difriúil ar fad. Tá an córas marcála idir an dá scrúdú difriúil.]

(Coeducational, non-DEIS)

*For students coming straight from junior cycle to leaving cycle, the gap is huge. There is no time to destress. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

While many felt that the new approaches used in junior cycle provide a more authentic form of learning, they highlighted the challenge faced by young people when these new methodologies were not mirrored at senior cycle level.

*It is very difficult for the student to revert back to the old system of learning and assessment having come through the new junior cycle. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*Continue with the communication, presentation, creative skills because if they stop for two years it is very daunting to have to start over again in third level or in the work place.*

(Coeducational, non-DEIS)

*A parent felt that students are going backwards, not forwards. The junior cycle is about 'learning for life' yet the senior cycle is 'just learning for exams'. At junior cycle, students retain knowledge because they're enjoying it. Yet they don't remember what they've learned during the senior cycle. (Coeducational, DEIS)*



### 3.5 INCLUSION

Parents' views on the extent to which current senior cycle pathways are suitable for, and inclusive of, all students were somewhat more mixed than those of teachers. On the one hand, around six in ten of the groups consulted viewed the system as being suitable for their own children, who were happy with the choices they had made.

*This school offers a wide range of subjects and I know my child is happy with the choice that they have made. The subjects my child is doing are required for what they want to study at third level.*  
(Coeducational, non-DEIS)

*My son seems to be thriving.* (Boys, non-DEIS)

On the other hand, around half of the groups felt that the current senior cycle was not suitable for young people who are less academically oriented. Firstly, the system was seen to pose challenges for those who preferred more practical subjects and who had skills that were not well reflected in written assessments.

*Senior cycle is almost completely classroom based compared to junior cycle where they do things such as practicals.* (Girls, non-DEIS)

*Subjects are still very academic and don't have much needed emphasis on the practical and vocational side.* (Boys, non-DEIS)

*I think that the senior cycle suits the needs of the academic child who is able to balance study and life.* (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

Secondly, the current system was seen to reward young people who find rote learning easy and to place disproportionate pressure on those who have difficulties in coping with pressure.

*Although some changes through technology have been made (using iPads/whiteboards and multimedia in teaching), the actual testing method has not changed at all – learn by rote, regurgitate. So there is a disconnect – how are aural, visual, kinesthetic, interpersonal/ intrapersonal learners accommodated in the final tests?*  
(Girls, non-DEIS)

*The exam system is very good for students with good memories who are comfortable with rote learning.* (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

*On the surface, it would appear to be fair. However, students that do not cope well in pressured situations are inclined to fall at the final hurdle. An over reliance on writing vast amounts in a short space of time often excludes many of the more applied learners. (Girls, DEIS)*

In the two special schools involved in the consultation process, parents highlighted the lack of suitable provision for their children within current senior cycle structures.

*[There is] no senior cycle in place and their learning is not recognised. They are not getting a recognition of achievements based on their level, the same as their peers. After our Level 1 and 2 are completed, our children are expected to go back to primary education as we are a special school. [There is a] huge lack of options for our children. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*Schools need a curriculum that provides post-junior cycle education that is age appropriate and tailored to the particular abilities of each group of children. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

The need for more project and practical work and a combination of academic and vocational learning were also mentioned by many parents across the case-study schools; these parents felt that there were insufficient routes for those with a more technical orientation.

*All parents agreed that there were not enough different pathways for the young person who was not suited for university or college. They questioned why there was not enough 'apprentice type' places in industry or business for young people who may be more 'techie' or mechanically minded. (Girls, DEIS)*

### **3.6 PERSPECTIVES ON THE FUTURE OF SENIOR CYCLE**

#### **3.6.1 The content of senior cycle**

As with teachers, there was little consensus among parents regarding the appropriate length of senior cycle. Some indicated that having a longer senior cycle was likely to enhance student maturity and readiness to embark on post-school pathways.

*Senior cycle could easily be three or four years long – some of the young people are coming out of school not prepared for the world. Parents were surprised how ill equipped and socially naïve young people are about life outside of secondary school. (Girls, DEIS)*

*TY was seen to provide students with the chance to find out a little bit more about who they are and to try new things. All parents present felt it had been good for their sons and so should be compulsory rather than optional in future. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Other parents emphasised the need for senior cycle to be flexible in length to accommodate the differing needs and intended pathways of young people.

*Some parents expressed three years as optimal and others felt that the option to extend the length from two–three years is preferable to allow for varying level of maturity/subject choice/level of ability/alternative career path etc. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

Over half of the parent groups favoured the use of modules or subjects combined with modules, which would enhance flexibility for students.

*Parents liked the idea of flexibility in being able to do short courses or modules, being able to combine or transfer components within a SC programme. They felt that the young person would be able to demonstrate a broader range of talents, skills and capabilities that does not happen in the LCE. (Girls, DEIS)*

*Using a modular approach, it was felt that modules can be completed at a student's own pace within the three years.  
(Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

While parents made positive comments on various aspects of existing senior cycle programmes (see above), several parent groups mentioned the potential to combine the benefits of the different programmes. Some parents felt that the benefits of the TY programme could be extended and integrated into the rest of senior cycle.

*The feeling was that TY is a very positive experience in this school but acts in isolation from the other two years of senior cycle. TY should be part of the three-year programme and count for something in final certification. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*Development in TY is not followed through, creativity [is] pushed away in LC – replaced by rote learning. Similarly, work experience in TY [is] discontinued in LCE. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*The best aspects of TY are forgotten about in fifth year, e.g. group work, problem solving, critical skills, presentation skills etc. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Others suggested having less fixed boundaries between LCA and LCE, allowing students to combine areas of learning from the two programmes.

*There is too much of a divide between the LCE and LCA programmes ...  
Could there be elements of both in the new senior cycle?  
(Coeducational, DEIS)*

*A mixture or overlap of LCA and LCE modules would be excellent. Some LCA students would be capable of studying, for example, LCE engineering. Having an overlap with students on both programmes would go a long way towards dealing with the stigma associated to any vocational-oriented programme. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

In relation to areas of learning for senior cycle, the majority – around eight in ten – of the parent groups wanted to see life skills and wellbeing embedded in the senior cycle curriculum. Parents wanted to see the promotion of both practical skills (such as financial management) and personal/interpersonal skills in order to better prepare young people for life after school.

*Life skills such as driving, cooking, paying bills, money management, budgeting, conflict resolution, how to deal with people, nutrition, living away from home, health and wellbeing, resilience interview skills, study techniques were all mentioned. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*I would love that there would be more practical skills taught throughout the cycle, such as personal finance management, basic DIY, basic cooking and housekeeping skills and anything else related to leaving home and living independently. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*They need more life skills – driving, first aid, how to study correctly.  
[Teastaíonn níos mó ‘life skills’ uathu – tiomáint, garchabhair, cén chaoi ceart le staidéar a dhéanamh.]  
(Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*A wellness programme should extend into senior cycle incorporating coping skills, mental health, resilience, mindfulness and self-esteem building. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Such an emphasis on life skills and personal qualities was seen as facilitating better preparation for further/higher education and employment.

*Workers need to be innovative, creative, people focused, good communicators, inventive and entrepreneurial. Languages need to be taught in vernacular and real conversation formats so they can be applied quickly and easily in vivo. Project based, collaborative working, critical thinking and flexibility are all real world requirements, yet are often actively discouraged by the education system, second and third level. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Life skills was the only area of learning mentioned by the majority of parent groups, though around four in ten schools wanted English/literacy and maths/numeracy to be compulsory for all students.

*English and maths should remain as core subjects/mandatory – [they are] essential for so many other academic areas. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Other parents highlighted a variety of other domains, including ICT skills, work experience placements and physical education, but these subjects were mentioned in a minority of schools.

Several parents were critical of the idea of having any mandatory subjects, as students could be required to take subjects in which they had little interest.

*The student needs to have an interest in their subject, which unfortunately at present is often not the case because the student is forced to do subjects that they have no interest in. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*Compulsory subjects can add to the pressure being felt by students, with many forming a very negative feeling towards studying in those fields. E.g. students forced to study English, Irish and a modern language. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

Some parents also shared the view that it might be beneficial to reduce the number of subjects students have to take, or to reduce course content.

*While some parents felt that the number of subjects at LC is too many, others felt that it is very young to limit subjects – there was agreement that the range of subjects on offer is good – specialising in three (like UK) is too few, seven–eight (as is now) is too many – the group concluded that if the compulsory nature of subjects was removed that the optimal number of subjects would then be five. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*Less subjects to be taken at LCE: six subjects is too much for some students. [They should] concentrate more on the subjects students want to pursue in third level and do these in more detail. I think having students study subjects that they have no interest in (apart from core subjects) is not productive. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

### 3.6.2 Assessment and reporting

Like teachers, parents highlighted the need for assessment to be spread out over the course of senior cycle and for a greater variety of approaches to assessment to be used. More regular assessment throughout senior cycle was viewed as a way of reducing the stress attached to a single set of terminal exams and as a means of better preparing young people for life after school.

*Some form of continuous assessment, similar to what happens in LCA, would help students to manage their learning more efficiently and result in less stress in sixth year. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*More continuous assessment in some subjects could prove beneficial to reduce stress. Subjects could be studied in six-week modules and assessed at the end of each module. This would reduce the pressure on students. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

*[There should be] continuous assessment in senior cycle. Not only would this take the pressure off students but prepare them for life after school. They would have to learn to manage themselves. Deadlines of continuous assessments would make students more autonomous as a learner. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*Break up the subject – class work/study certain modules of the subject until Christmas. Examine what has been done and cover the rest of the material up to Summer and then do Paper 2.*

*[An ábhar a bhriseadh suas – staidéar/obair ranga ar modúil áirithe den ábhar a dhéanamh go dtí an Nollaig. Scrúdú a dhéanamh ar an méid atá déanta agus an chuid eile den ábhar a chlúdú suas go dtí an tSamhradh agus Páipéar 2 a dhéanamh ansin.]*

*(Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

The view was held that a wider variety of skills could be captured – including those currently not reflected in exam performance – if a wider range of assessment methods were used. In particular, many parents highlighted the value of project work and presentations.

*There should be scope for project work and examinations that allow the young person to show off other skills and talents; for example, young people should be examined by interviews and presentations, project work, even work placements etc. (Girls, DEIS)*

*[There should be a] change from [the] terminal exam being almost the sole assessment to a range of assessment techniques, including portfolio interviews, projects, presentations, group projects, self/peer assessment etc. The main reason for these changes is to make assessment more accurate and fair by giving each student opportunities to show what they are capable of. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*Students get excited about learning if it is project based. Presently, not all subjects have projects. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Parents were less likely than teachers to emphasise external assessment when asked about changes needed in relation to assessment. However, several did discuss the advantages and disadvantages of external and class-based assessment and there was a consensus that the value and currency of the current Leaving Certificate should be retained in the context of any reform.

*There was concern that teachers may be biased in favour of certain students, which could be unfair. However, some felt that perhaps class teachers are best equipped to assess class work and we should trust them as professionals to be fair. This is the case in third level where assessment is completed by lecturers so perhaps it can also work at second level. (Boys, non-DEIS)*

*Whatever is put in place, it cannot weaken our LC – they have to be able to compete on a world stage and be of the same standard as their peers. (Girls, non-DEIS)*

Several groups of parents highlighted the need to adapt higher education entry processes in order to facilitate or reflect changes at senior cycle level.

*The general consensus is that there can never be any major change in senior cycle while the points system remains in place in its present format. To bring about real change would involve reviewing third-level colleges and their requirements and indeed what employers want/expect from a student who may be coming straight from a second level school into the workplace. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*Revision of LC is not a standalone activity – change needed to happen across a number of fronts – at CAO level, at college level and amongst parents and society as to how they value student learning and achievement, noting that parent place pressure on students as well. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

Like teachers, parents pointed to the potential for a more holistic view of skill development to be reflected in school reports.

*I would like to get a report on the child as a person at the end of the senior cycle, i.e. how they have participated over their time in the school – have they taken part in activities, have a good rounded personality etc.? (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

*Their social/extracurricular interests and achievements, what they have contributed to the school by participating on committees or sports/debating teams etc., anything unusual they have done, like travelling the world. [It should] include feedback that speaks of them as a person, not just a grade. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

### **3.7 CONCLUSIONS**

This chapter has presented the views of the parents of children attending the schools involved in the consultation process. In each school, the number of parents involved was small so their responses cannot be taken as representative of the total parent population in the case-study schools. Nonetheless, the discussions provided interesting insights into the parental perspective. Like teachers, parents emphasised the choices open to students, the transparency of the assessment process and the quality of provision in the school attended by their children as positive features of senior cycle. In discussing challenges, parents largely focused on LCE, highlighting the consequences of a heavy workload in preparing for a high-stakes exam for the socio-emotional wellbeing of their children.

Parents were very positive about the TY programme, highlighting its positive impact on their children's personal development and maturity and emphasising the variety of learning experiences provided. The continuous assessment approach of the LCA programme was viewed as a way of providing a route to achievement for less academically oriented students, though parents expressed concern about the lack of progression opportunities and the resultant stigma attached to participation. LCVP was seen as enhancing preparation for the world of work by providing work experience placements and interview skills coaching.

Not surprisingly, much of the discussion among parents centred on the LCE programme. Parents valued the variety of subjects on offer and the objective



nature of assessment. However, they expressed concern about the impact of the high stakes, exam-based assessment on their children's mental wellbeing, pointing to the volume of work involved and the focus on memorisation rather than authentic understanding. Many viewed current senior cycle structures as less suited for those who were not academically oriented, especially those with special educational needs.

In discussing potential changes to senior cycle, parents' suggestions largely centred on the approach to assessment, with a consensus on the need to spread assessment throughout senior cycle and to have a greater variety of assessment approaches, especially project and practical work. The view was held that such changes would help prepare students for life after school and would also reduce stress among students. Similarly, in discussing the areas of learning for senior cycle, parents emphasised the importance of preparing their children for the future by embedding practical life skills and personal/social development within the senior cycle curriculum.



## CHAPTER 4

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### Student perspectives on senior cycle

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter draws on focus group interviews conducted with students of the case-study schools involved in the consultation process. The discussions focused on student views of senior cycle more generally, though some students did comment on specific senior cycle programmes. Section 4.2 assesses the approaches that help students to learn, drawing on the accounts of both junior and senior cycle learners. Section 4.3 looks at student perspectives regarding current senior cycle programmes, while Section 4.4 examines their views on the suitability of current structures for all students. Section 4.5 presents student views on the kind of senior cycle experience they would like to have.

#### 4.2 WHAT HELPS STUDENTS LEARN?

##### 4.2.1 A preference for more active teaching and learning approaches

During the focus group interviews, students were asked to discuss what they felt helps them most to learn in school. Both junior and senior cycle students tended to favour being exposed to a variety of teaching methods, especially those that were more interactive, highlighting group work, project work and hands-on activities.

*When it comes to learning, it's good that we learn a variety of ways to be able to figure out one thing, because that helps us think outside the box. That's really important when it comes to learning, to be able to understand the question and be able to solve it different ways, because not everything will be able to be done one certain way every single time. (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)*

Practical work was seen as a preferred way of understanding material and learning it more thoroughly.

*Doing practicals and actually doing stuff out instead [of] just reading it from the book or the board. Like in business, if you do the money graph and see how much money you have and how much money you're spending, you will remember that instead of just looking at the book. (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)*

Group work and peer learning were valued as more effective ways of learning by the young people consulted, a move away from 'just sitting there all day and taking

notes' (Coeducational, non-DEIS). For many, the main attraction of group work was the opportunity to learn from their peers, clarify issues and ask questions.

*In the projects, if you're doing it with your friends ... you'll probably learn more from your friends, what they're saying, than with the teachers explaining to you. (Boys, non-DEIS, SC)*

*Working in groups with my friends ... It gives ideas to people that you might not have had yourself, so you see the point from another point of view, rather than just from your own side.*

(Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)

In general, students favoured interactive classes where they were involved in the discussion and allowed to voice their own opinions.

*Getting into discussions in class is better than just having a teacher write it down and then you write it down into your notes because then you're actually, like, learning it rather than just memorising it. (Boys, non-DEIS, SC)*

*Say you do a little project with a few people, every subject or topic you cover in class, it helps it stay in your head, because you're doing it with people that you enjoy being with, so you're learning together, which helps with learning. (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)*

However, many students commented that approaches like group work were much less commonly used in senior cycle than they had been in junior cycle.

*The team work in third year, you got to like work with all of your friends. Like you just had a lot of fun when you can all like put your points out. Like in senior cycle, you don't really get that much time to do team work. (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)*

More practical and interactive approaches were seen as having benefits not only in relation to learning but also in providing better preparation for the future.

*Like working in groups ... most of the time when you're in a job, when you're older, you won't be working on your own, you have to work with other people and you have to be able to listen to others and to use their opinions, not just to be listening to yourself.*

[An chuid is mó den am nuair a bhíonn tú i jab, nuair a bhíonn tú níos sine, ní bheidh tú ag obair i do aonar, bíonn tú ag obair le daoine eile agus caithfidh tú a bheith in ann éisteach le daoine eile agus a dtuairimí a úsáid freisin, ní just éisteach leat féin.]

(Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)

*That's not what we'll be doing in life ahead, we won't be just writing, we'll be doing more practical things with our lives.  
(Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)*

Activities such as giving speeches or writing poems in class were also highlighted by students, many of whom spoke about the importance of having 'fun' while learning.

*I like when we do speeches and, like, debates in English and get to, like, us talk more than listen. I like when you actually do things than ... not just write and listen, and, like, look at what they have on the board. I like when you actually write, like, poems or, like, do speeches, it's like more fun. (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)*

*And if you get a laugh out of it, like, something funny happens, you'll remember that and you'll get taken back to what you were doing. And then, you'll remember it easier. (Boys, non-DEIS, SC)*

Some students referred to the use of digital media and technology in the classroom to help them learn and to go over course material.

*Videos help because you, like, learn more because you see it and ... everyone is learning the same thing, it's not, like, from a teacher. And you can look back on it. (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)*

However, in keeping with previous research (McCoy et al., 2016), students saw technology as part of a battery of learning approaches, rather than their single favoured way of learning.

Students also felt there was a need for more visual material in class, which would help them learn.

*Maybe, like, more visual learning because ... it's easier to understand and interpret it. And it keeps you interested more in class than just reading or writing...maybe for CSPE, maybe, like, videos and – educational videos and the documentaries. (Boys, non-DEIS, SC)*

Students felt that during junior cycle they learned from more active methods of learning where teaching went beyond the textbook.

*I really prefer when the teachers don't just stick to the books and, like, read it from the book. I prefer it when it's more of an interactive way of learning. (Girls, non-DEIS, SC)*

These interactive approaches were contrasted against more didactic methods, such as reading from a book or note taking, which they experienced in some classes. Such approaches were considered less engaging, making it difficult to remember the material.

*Reading from the board, you might get actually bored and just look around or mess with your friends while your teacher still goes on. You space off and all ... so reading is not good. (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)*

*It would be better if we were talking and discussing things more in class rather than just writing notes. There are some double classes where we're doing nothing but taking notes for the 80 minutes and we don't even discuss the notes, and we're not going to learn anything from that.*

[Bheadh sé níos fearr má bhí muid ag caint agus ag plé níos mó sa rang seachas díreach nótaí a scríobh. Bíonn roinnt ranganna dúbailte a mbíonn muid go léir díreach ag scríobh i gcomhair an 80 agus ní bhímid ag plé nó aon rud faoi na nótaí agus níl muid chun aon rud a fhoghlaim as sin.]

(Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)

#### 4.2.2 The importance of teacher qualities

Teacher qualities were mentioned as another key feature of good teaching, with students pointing to teachers who expressed enthusiasm for their subject areas and made the subject interesting.

*Teachers that are enthusiastic and passionate about the subject they're teaching. They just help you learn more because they actually seem interested and they make good notes and they're trying to get you involved in the subject. ... Playing fun games and when the teachers really enjoy the subject and like it. (Girls, non-DEIS, JC)*

They felt that teachers who are able to relate the subject they are teaching to the lives of students are far more effective in helping them to understand.

*The best teachers are the ones that relate it to real life and they gave, like, real life examples, like, rather than just learning for the sake of learning, learning for the sake of having something to examine you on. (Girls, non-DEIS, SC)*

Teachers who used real-life examples were also seen as helpful.

*I do business, and the teacher does tell us events that have happen[ed] in the world, and it is easier to remember it then after that. (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)*

In contrast, students found it more difficult to learn in cases where the teacher was frequently reprimanding them and/or where other students were acting out in class.

*If the teacher is unpleasant, and if the teacher doesn't resonate with the students, then you're not really going to listen and pay attention. (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)*

*Q. Are there things that don't help you learn in class right now?*

*A. Teachers shouting at you and people like in your class that don't want to be there ... who don't want to learn. (Coeducational, DEIS, JC)*

### 4.2.3 Junior and senior cycle

Overall, students were much more positive about the teaching and learning they experienced in junior cycle than in senior cycle, highlighting the variety of methods and assessment approaches as well as the absence of pressure at junior cycle level.

*I enjoyed that there was a lot of classroom-based assessments and projects ... We had 20 per cent completed before we got to the exam. ... It felt a lot less serious, now it's like the weight of the world is on top of you. (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)*

In commenting on how they best learned, many students commented positively on the class-based assessments (CBAs) at junior cycle level, which were seen as providing them with the presentation and communication skills they would need for the future.

*I'm [a] person who loves talking, so the CBAs that we're doing, like English and like science and subjects like that, I find it easier because I love projects and I find it easier to learn through that than having to sit there and just like memorise loads of stuff. (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)*

*Group CBAs, or just normal group projects, can help you or your employer maybe reflect on how well you work with others, in certain circumstances. (Boys, non-DEIS, JC)*

Others spoke about the importance of CBAs in improving their confidence and students could identify the elements of this approach to learning that would be useful in the future.

*Well, CBAs can instil confidence in somebody so that they can do better while trying to do, say, a job interview. (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)*

*With the CBAs it helps you be in front of a crowd and if you're going for a job without having had that practice ahead of time, it won't go as well as it might have done. (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)*

However, several student groups commented on the gap in standards and expectations between junior and senior cycle, a gap some attributed to changes at junior cycle level (though discontinuity was also evident as a theme in student accounts prior to junior cycle reform; see Smyth and Calvert, 2011).

*That's where the problem with the new Junior Cert is, is that they've made it so much easier that it makes the jump massive to go onto Leaving Cert. ... It makes it impossible, because you're told on the first day you've got to write a six-page essay. We've never, in an exam, written more than a page. ... 12 lines was the average question you were writing, less perhaps. So ... we were just not experienced in how to write essays. (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)*

Other students pointed to the contrast between Transition Year (TY) and the remainder of senior cycle, highlighting a rapid escalation in the demands being placed on students on entry to fifth year.

*It's a big wake-up call. Like in fourth year, as you've said, it's kind of relaxed, it's more easing into the workload, but as soon as you reach into fifth year you're almost slammed in the face with the work. It's nothing like they said it was going to be, it's just too much; too much, too fast. (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)*

This view was even echoed in the comments of the junior cycle students, who anticipated the volume of work facing them in fifth year.

*TY is kind of the year where you can relax, but then you're straight in head first. There's no relaxing. You just have to go straight through it. That's what I was told. And they said if you're laid back for a short amount of time, you fall behind, and you're taking weeks to get back up to the point where the rest of the class are. (Boys, non-DEIS, JC)*

From a positive perspective, many student groups noted that the transition to senior cycle was accompanied by their teachers treating them increasingly as adults and being less likely to reprimand them for not doing their schoolwork.

*And the way teachers treat us now in senior cycle compared to junior cycle; we're treated more like equals, adults, not just as children being told what to do. (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)*



*The level of responsibility that's handed over to us. In junior cycle, a lot of it is the teachers that are on to you and they are pushing you to do the work. In senior cycle, it's here's the tools, you do it yourself, if you want help we'll give it to you, but you're going to have to ask and play by my rules. (Boys, DEIS, SC)*

This shift in the nature of teacher–student relationships was seen to facilitate them to become more independent as learners and to ease the direct pressure from teachers to work hard.

*Now I don't feel pressurised by my teachers. ... They're kind of, like, different people, literally, because they can joke around with us and all now. ... We can talk to them a lot easier. (Coeducational, DEIS)*

*I think, in particular, when you are in sixth year, that the teachers are kind of talking to you as though you weren't a child anymore. The teachers have more respect for you and they can have a conversation with you... I think it helps with the teaching if you have a good relationship with the teacher and you're on good terms with them. [Ceapaim go háirithe, nuair atá tú i mbliain a sé, go bhfuil na múinteoirí saghas ag labhairt leat mar níl tú páiste níos mó. Tá níos mó meas ag na múinteoir ort agus tá siad in ann comhrá a bheith acu leat. ... Cabhraíonn sé ceapaim leis an múineadh má tá gaol maith agat leis an múinteoir agus bíonn tú ar good terms leo.] (Coeducational, non-DEIS)*

### 4.3 SENIOR CYCLE PROGRAMMES

#### 4.3.1 The Transition Year programme

Senior cycle students were very positive about the TY programme. TY was also mentioned by junior cycle students as a positive feature of senior cycle.

*TY in this school's incredible. You do so much. You do, like, work experience and then you do all the different modules and you actually – like, there's so many clubs and things you get the option to participate in and it's so amazing. (Girls, non-DEIS, JC)*

*I think it was probably the most valuable year in the school. Like, when I finish school and look back ... pretty much the only memories I'll have are from Transition Year. Transition Year helps you actually grow as a person whereas pretty much all of the other years do nothing in that aspect. (Boys, non-DEIS, SC)*

Students referred to the variety of experiences they had during their TY and their acquisition of a range of skills, which they felt helped prepare them for life after school.

*That's the best thing in the school. It's a bit of craic. A break from work and study and things and kind of a bit of fun. ... Well, you learn a lot of skills around career and things. So that it's easier to find a job and things.*

[Sin an rud is fearr sa scoil. Píosa craic atá ann. Sos ón obair agus ón staidéar agus rudaí, cineál píosa spraoi atá ann. ... Bhuel tá tú in ann scileanna a fhoghlaim ó thaobh slí bheatha agus rudaí. So beidh sé n níos éasca jab a fháil agus rudaí.]

(Coeducational, non-DEIS, JC)

*TY is a really good learning experience for life skills ... as much as you learn about communicating with people in junior cycle, you learn a lot more in TY, because ... you're doing musicals and you're communicating with your group. (Coeducational, DEIS, JC)*

Work experience was also highlighted as a positive feature of TY, allowing students to investigate different careers and gain a greater understanding of the world of work.

*Work experience in Transition Year, I thought that was really good for us because it gives us, like, an eye opener of, 'Do we actually want to work with that?' Like, when I did childcare – I wanted to, like, work with kids and stuff and then I worked in a playschool for a week in Transition Year and then I second-guessed it completely. I was like, 'I don't actually think I want to do this anymore'.*

(Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)

*I think there's no better way for knowing what you want to do than actually doing it first-hand. (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)*

Some negative aspects of the TY programme were identified, however; for example, some felt it involved fewer activities than they had anticipated, while some had wanted a more sustained involvement in work experience. In addition, reflecting back on the programme, a number of Leaving Certificate students felt that they would have preferred to have done more academic work during TY in order to reduce the pressure and workload in sixth year.

### 4.3.2 Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and Leaving Certificate Applied

Although students were not asked directly about the different Leaving Certificate programmes, some did comment on the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). Work experience was viewed as a particularly positive feature of the LCA programme. Other students commented favourably on the use of continuous assessment, feeling it enhanced their self-confidence and reduced the pressure on them.

*I also think it's good that once you get credits for every bit of work you're doing, you know you've passed before you go into the actual exam in June. I think that helps a lot of students because you feel more confident then when you're going in. (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)*

*I like the way that we're continuously assessed and it's not all just down to a couple of exams, that we've already earned a certain amount of credits before we even go in, because I feel like, if I had done the Leaving Cert [Established], the pressure of it I wouldn't have been able to handle. (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)*

LCA was also seen by participants as providing better preparation for the transition to further education.

*I quite like LCA, because the way that we're given it is how you'll do it in college, so at least when we go to college or further education we have a fair idea how it all works, because it's not all just dependent on the teachers giving us stuff; we have to have the cop on to do it all ourselves. (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)*

*It sets you for college, so you're basically doing your assignments, your tasks, interviews, and it gets you ready for college, so it's giving you a taste of college before you even go to do your PLC. (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)*

One group of junior cycle students spoke about negative perceptions of LCA in their school.

*But the culture, it's kinda like, oh if you don't do the Established Leaving Cert, if you do the LCA or something, oh you're dumb, you're stupid, you should be doing that like and all. ... It's kind of like they're saying, oh you want to do good in life, don't do this because you can't get into college and it's going to mess up your whole life. (Coeducational, DEIS, JC)*

Another group, including LCA students, felt that LCA students were treated differently within the school.

*I think LCAs are very, very discriminated against and very set aside. I don't think we're treated as fairly as, say, other ones like regular fifth years or regular sixth years would be. (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)*

Another student in a senior cycle group felt that LCA was geared towards direct labour market entry rather than further or higher education, so was therefore unsuited to many students.

*I feel like the LCA is very based around people who want jobs, like working in the supermarket or like things like that. They're not really based around people who want to go onto further education. (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)*

Later in the same interview, some students pointed to a lack of challenge in LCA.

*We get kind of bored very quickly and there's not — the curriculum is kind of short so there's not much we can build on really after we have that kind of done and that there's no chances. There's no like opportunity to do something harder. (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)*

These students were attending a special school and did not have access to Leaving Certificate Established (LCE), which they felt was not 'really fair' as 'everyone wouldn't be able for it but there could be one or two or three people that really would like to do that'.

In sum, the student views echo those of earlier research (Banks et al., 2010) in highlighting the positive nature of the learning process in LCA but indicating challenges around stigma and progression pathways.

Fewer students commented directly on LCVP. However, some highlighted the benefits of its approach to assessment, especially the interview, as 'I don't want my first time ever being interviewed to be the actual thing' (Girls, non-DEIS, SC), and the work experience placement.

*LCVP gives you the opportunity to do work experience outside of school. You're also doing a portfolio and so you have the majority of the marks already. (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)*

The programme was also seen as contributing to skill development among students.

*There's all the group work that you do for different events that you plan and stuff so you really know how to work with people more than just sit around by yourself and do study. (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)*

*I think you learn, basically, just once you leave school, this is basically what you have to do to make yourself like a person in this world. I think you learn all about how to set up an account for like different credit cards or like how to set up a savings account. If like you want to join a union, like a trade union, it kind of helps you and then like it gives you all then the kind of necessary things you don't learn from all your subjects like. (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)*

Some young people pointed to the restrictions around taking LCVP without particular subject combinations.

*I wanted to do LCVP but there was a criteria of how you have to do it. (Girls, non-DEIS, SC)*

*I don't do French so I can't do LCVP. You've got to have French to do LCVP. (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)*

### **4.3.3 Leaving Certificate Established**

For most of the young people interviewed, LCE was synonymous with senior cycle and much of the discussion in the groups centred on LCE. In terms of positive features, students tended to emphasise the variety of subjects on offer and the fact that they could select a subset of subjects in which they were more interested.

*You can choose your favourite subjects: like, you enjoy learning it because it's something that you quite like, and it makes it easier when you get to pick your subjects and enjoy them. (Girls, DEIS, SC)*

*Say you weren't particularly good at, say, history, you could drop that and pick up a subject that you actually enjoy. So you're not dragged down by a subject that you're not good at. So you can focus more into the subject that you actually enjoy and are good at. (Coeducational, DEIS, JC)*

Being able to select subjects in which they had an interest was viewed as enhancing engagement in school and as giving them a more in-depth understanding of different areas of learning.

*You kind of just focus on those that you kind of have an interest in ... (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)*

*And you get a more focused learning on what you want to maybe do after school, or what you want to do in college, because you've chosen these subjects and you learn more in detail about them than you did at junior cycle. (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)*

However, despite some degree of subject choice, many of the student groups criticised the lack of relevance of many of the subjects they studied for their future lives.

*How are we going to use 36 poems in the future when out living my life? I would have thought maybe I'd be working with sports or something in that area, and I'm not going to be reading poetry to the lads, or Macbeth.*

[Cén chaoi a bhfuil muid ag gabháil 36 dán a úsáid amach anseo nuair atá amuigh i mo shaol. Cheapfainnse go mb'fhéidir go mbeidh mé ag obair le spóirt nó rud éigin, níl mé ag gabháil a bheith léamh filíocht do na leaids, nó Macbeth.]

(Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)

*They should teach us things we're gonna need outside of school.*

(Boys, non-DEIS, SC)

Much of the student discussion focused on the impact of the current approach to assessment on the nature of teaching and learning, with pressure and stress being recurrent motifs in the interviews. Even junior cycle students were acutely aware of the high stakes attached to the Leaving Certificate exam and the workload expected of them ('*You hear a lot of bad things about it. It's all like stressful*' – Girls, non-DEIS, JC). Many of those interviewed were apprehensive or even fearful of senior cycle, with one student describing how all that he had heard so far was '*all bad stuff*' (Coeducational, non-DEIS, JC). For many junior cycle students interviewed, the increased workload and associated stress was a key part of their perceptions of senior cycle overall.

*You're more under pressure to get, like, a good grade because it's for your future and ... you're gonna be so stressed and it's not really gonna help at all. (Coeducational, non-DEIS, JC)*

Among LCE students, the high-stakes nature of the exam placed what was seen as an undue emphasis on performance over a very short timeframe.

*The Leaving Cert like defines kind of where you go after school. It all leads up to the final exam, so anything you learn over the two years you've put that all into the one exam and then that will define whether you go to college or what you do, and then that impacts you down the line, so it's really important that you focus on the Leaving Cert. ... [I]t's one week, and if you mess up that one week, then it's like your whole future is basically ruined. It's all like on this one Leaving Cert exam.*  
(Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)

The young people interviewed were acutely aware of the competitive nature of the higher education entry process and the implications of exam performance for their longer-term life chances.

*To put someone's future down to 500 points, it's very cruel. ... You don't know what's going on in people's lives. It could be the worst year maybe of their lives and they haven't got the points and that's their dream or something going away.* (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)

*You're competing against children all over the country. In Junior Cert, you could compete against the people that you know, or just friends, but in the Leaving Cert you want the best for you, so it's the whole country that you're fighting against for the best score.*  
(Coeducational, DEIS, SC)

The volume of material to be covered in many subjects was seen as adding to this pressure.

*I think that the syllabus is just way too long, or just way too big, like it's not realistic at all. ... You're literally just cramming for a test, and then straight away afterwards, you just almost forget about it.*  
(Girls, non-DEIS, SC)

*It's an awful, awful stress like, you know, and obviously it's going to be stressful. That's to be expected but ... there's a huge workload that I just don't think is always fully necessary.*  
(Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)

The amount of material was seen to shape teaching approaches in senior cycle classes, with teachers and students under pressure to 'cover' the course in the time available, thus reducing the variety of methods used in the classroom.

*In senior cycle there's so much to learn but we only have two years to do it ... So the teachers are more focused on getting the work done, following the curriculum ... because we don't have as much time, they don't want to go into other ways that can distract us from the main things we need to get done for the exam.*

(Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)

*They're [teachers are] more down to the book, not open to any other learning methods ... they're not open to watching as many videos, class discussions, anything because there's such a big workload.*

(Coeducational, DEIS, SC)

Several student groups mentioned the negative impact of Leaving Certificate preparation on the mental health of young people.

*I think I would just like to see a lot less depressed teenagers. .... [T]here's people that have personal issues and stuff like that but nine out of ten times it will come down to school work like and the pressure of school and it just doesn't help.* (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)

As with their parents, students reported that the amount of time required for homework and study has led to them reducing the amount of time they spend on sports and other social activities, further contributing to feelings of stress and pressure.

*Leaving Cert takes over your life completely, and I mean completely, there's nothing else to do, there's nothing else to think about, you don't have a life until you finish your Leaving Cert.*

(Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)

*There's six subjects and the teachers recommend to do, like, an hour study or an hour's homework each night but that's like – you come home at, like, let's say 4.00 pm, then six hours, that's 10 o'clock already, like. You have no free time if you, like, sports or something or anything like that.* (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)

Many students talked about the lack of flexibility in cases where a young person becomes ill; in such instances, the young person might be required to repeat a full year of school if they did not get the desired grade in a particular subject.



*If on that day maybe you had a loss, or if you had something happen, and you don't perform the way you know can perform, that's it, that's all you get, there's no going back. ... Yeah, you should be able to repeat the exam the way colleges do in the summer.*

(Coeducational, DEIS, SC)

*What if you like have a bad day or something and like you can't re-sit it? You have to do like an extra year of work then it's just too much pressure.* (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)

The largely exam-based assessment approach was viewed as facilitating an emphasis on rote learning rather than authentic understanding.

*It feels like you're just learning off books and then just writing down in an exam, it doesn't really show intelligence.* (Boys, non-DEIS, SC)

*We're not actually learning the information. It's all about passing, so the teachers aren't putting in time to make us understand it, and, like, to be able to process the information that we're taking in. It's like we're not being taught, we're just being told that this is the information, go remember it.* (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)

*It's more of a memory test than a knowledge test, I think, the Leaving Cert, the more you can remember, the more you can write down on the page, the more marks you'll get.* (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)

The pressure to achieve valued 'points' was seen to drive student choices, with the gap in points between higher and ordinary levels resulting in many students choosing to stay in higher level and 'struggle' rather than risk losing points (see McCoy et al., 2019).

Students highlighted the way in which exam-based assessment did not accurately reflect their skills.

*Even in Irish like your orals, there's 20 sraith pictiúrs. It's not even like testing your skill at Irish, it's just a memory test. ... It's not the best use of your time because later on in your life, you'll never have to learn off something word for word.* (Girls, non-DEIS, SC)

Young people also pointed to the mismatch between the approach to teaching and learning they encounter in second level and the greater emphasis on critical thinking that will be required of them on transition to further/higher education or employment.

*In college we will have to think independently ... but we're not doing that now. We're not thinking about how it works and why it works, we're thinking about what's on the page and what we'll write on the paper.* (Girls, non-DEIS, SC)

*I don't really feel that secondary school prepares you for college because of the way that we're taught to learn things. Like for the Leaving Cert you're given certain things that you're to learn and a specific way that you have to learn them compared to when you go to college, you have to do more projects and you're left on your own.* (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)

Several students talked about the way in which the rigidity of the marking scheme led to them being assessed in very narrow terms.

*The marking schemes are very, like, set. Like, there's one answer to every question, pretty much, and like, if you don't get that right, there's not really any other interpretations that they take, it's just you don't get the marks.* (Girls, non-DEIS, SC)

*You kind of almost write what you think the examiner wants you to think.* (Girls, non-DEIS, SC)

This approach was contrasted with young people's desires to express their creativity and to develop their love of learning beyond the syllabus.

*We're learning outside the school because there's the internet and maybe other books and we want to come into school and learn more about those things. But sometimes you can't because there's a syllabus laid out and they have to stick with that, so we're left with half-knowledge of things and we want to know more, but we can't.* [Tá muid ag foghlaim taobh amuigh den scoil mar tá an idirlíon ann agus b'fhéidir leabhair eile, agus bíonn muid ag iarraidh teacht isteach chuig an scoil agus níos mó a fhoghlaim faoi na rudaí sin. Ach uaireanta ní féidir mar gheall tá siollabas leagtha amach a gcaithfeadh siad cloí leis, so táimid fágtha le leath-eolas ar rudaí agus táimid ag iarraidh tuilleadh a fháil amach ach ní féidir linn.] (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)

*History, you have 40 minutes to write an essay, and you don't have time to think about it, you just have to read the title then straight away, like, write.* (Girls, non-DEIS, SC)

At the same time, many students felt that being exposed to a high-stakes exam did contribute to their personal and social development, fostering a sense of resilience and the ability to manage their time and organise their work.

*Being put out of your comfort zone, to help you when you go to college, which is completely out of your comfort zone. ... You learn time management skills and you learn how to study. ... You learn how to deal with pressure. (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)*

In discussing LCE assessment, students were more positive about the fact that, in some practical subjects, they had already been awarded marks on the basis of their project, which relieved some of the exam-related stress.

*You've a project done since Christmas to the end of school, so you've that and you can send that in and then have time to tackle the theory of it then. So if you don't do so well in the theory, you have a few points already.*

[Chabhraigh sé liomsa leis an eolaíocht, mar ní raibh scrúdú chomh maith sin agam sa teastas sóisearach ach mar go raibh an leabhrán déanta amach agam, thug sé pointí.]

(Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)

#### 4.4 INCLUSION

There was a strong consensus among the young people interviewed that the current structure is not suitable for all students. When asked 'do you think that the current senior cycle is suited to all students?', the typical responses were 'no' or 'not a chance'. Many students commented on the focus on academic subjects to the detriment of other subject areas and skills.

*Some people might not be as academic, and the Leaving Cert does go towards a lot of things, so if someone can't learn as well, it shouldn't affect their whole life forever. (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)*

*There's a lot more ways of examining someone than, like, pen and paper; there's plenty of people out there who might not be good at writing, but are very good at construction or joinery.*

(Coeducational, DEIS, SC)

Several students decried the absence of pathways or accreditation for those who were more vocationally oriented.

*It should be like different paths to take within school for like people who want to go to college, people who want to do apprenticeships or people who are just, you know, you said creative or want to paint or music or any of that kind of thing. Because it's not fair to push everyone through the exact same system because everyone is different and have their own talents and strengths. (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)*

The current approach to assessment in LCE was seen as rewarding those who could memorise large volumes of material rather than assessing other skills, such as communication and presentation.

*I'm a confident speaker, so if in English I was able to speak and give a presentation or give something, I'd probably get more marks than I would now, like, with the Leaving Cert we're doing now where everything is just memorizing and writing. (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)*

## 4.5 STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON THE FUTURE OF SENIOR CYCLE

### 4.5.1 Learning content

Several students expressed a preference for having fewer subjects or reduced subject content in order to ease the pressure.

*I just think there should be less because there's more pressure on you if you have more subjects. (Boys, DEIS, SC)*

*I think if you have five, you can kind of choose more what you want and every class you have some sort of interest in, instead of being left in a class where you just don't want to be there. (Boys, DEIS, SC)*

Some referred to the possibility of having greater choice within subject areas, for example by having a range of modules from which they could select.

*They're so broad, like American history, it's so broad, like, and like Irish history ... I think they should break it down into smaller subjects, that way you get more of a choice on what you actually want to do ... which would end result give you better marks, because you're studying the part that you're interested in. (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)*

Many students felt that they should be able to specialise in the subjects in which they were interested, rather than be obliged to take subjects they felt were less relevant to their future.

*I don't think that ... subjects that you don't have an interest in should have such an effect on the rest of your life, especially if you don't plan on using them in the future. (Boys, non-DEIS, SC)*

However, some students felt that early specialisation might be risky if they changed their minds about their career direction.

*The person that you are at the end of third year is not the person that you will be at the end of sixth year, and if you picked five subjects that you were interested in in third year, they might be five subjects that you absolutely hate. Now, if you pick seven, the chances of error, error as in picking a wrong subject, go down drastically. (Boys, DEIS, SC)*

In addition, many students expressed the desire to have a greater variety of subjects in senior cycle, including subjects linked to third-level courses (such as psychology or law), more creative subjects (such as drama) and more vocational/practical subjects.

*There are just so many other subjects that could be used, such as speech and drama ... subjects that people could be really good at and get marks that way and go to college. (Girls, non-DEIS, SC)*

*I'd like to see maybe new subjects coming in, like, if drama was to come in as a subject, it's done in Australia, it's done in England, if that was brought in as a subject then I think more people would ... express themselves through theatre in a way. (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)*

Others felt that while they could study a broad range of subjects, not all of them should count towards their points if they wanted to take a particular field of study within higher education.

*Suppose someone wants to do medicine ... they should look at the scientific subjects like chemistry, biology or physics or whatever it is. If it's engineering, they shouldn't look at, like, art, geography, history and things like that. ... Someone would be doing those things just to get the points, but it's not something that they're really good at, so they might realise that their highest points are in the sciences, and then in those other subjects they're like, maybe getting, like, H3s and H4s and as a result, they don't get enough points to do, you know, to get their course. (Girls, non-DEIS, SC)*

Like teachers and parents, students were asked whether there should be some areas of learning that all senior cycle students should experience. A consensus was

evident across the student groups on the need for life skills to be embedded in the senior cycle curriculum.

*They should teach more like life skills. A lot of the stuff that we do learn in school is aimed towards getting you into a college, where I think they should teach us a lot more practical things: how to pay your bills, how to drive a car – stuff that you're actually going to use.*

(Boys, DEIS, SC)

*In Junior Cert there's an SPHE class so, that was kind of, that kind of vanished when we went into the Leaving Cert curriculum. So if they brought that class forward and made it into kind of like a life skills thing, where we learn banking and kind of how to apply for a mortgage and things like that that we need to know but won't necessarily know going into the real world. (Boys, non-DEIS, SC)*

*Sexual education, we should have it ... we should know how to do certain things, we should know how to be safe. If we don't, we'll go out into this world clueless. (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)*

*I think that wellbeing should be taken more seriously. ... Because I think your self-acceptance and confidence and all is, like, a big part for your Leaving Cert and your career after school. So, I think it should be taken more as a serious subject, like, English and maths is.*

(Coeducational, DEIS, SC)

Students felt there was a mismatch between the skills they developed in the school context and their preparedness for life after school.

*At the moment, I have to put my hand up to go to the toilet. Like six months' time I have to get a loan from the bank and stuff like that.*

(Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)

*In school, you don't learn how to deal with all your bills and all that, like you need to know that, but you don't learn any of that in school, I think you should start learning how to do all like proper housework and all. (Boys, DEIS, SC)*

Several students highlighted the need for all students to do work experience, regardless of the programme they take.

*And about work experience, maybe they could try integrating it into the Leaving Cert, so that if you want to do the Established Leaving Cert, you can also do work experience, so that you don't have to stay back another year, just to do that. (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)*

Many young people felt that English and maths should remain compulsory areas of learning, but it was suggested that it might be beneficial to sub-divide these subjects into different components.

*I think everyone should have to do English and maths, because they are what's going to help you in life, but I don't think it should be as much as it is. Like, you're never going to recite off poetry again, you're never going to recite Shakespeare, and with maths you're probably never going to use algebra unless you're doing something that algebra is involved with. (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)*

Many students felt that Irish should be an optional subject, highlighting its lack of relevance for their future lives.

*I don't think it's [Irish is] essential like. You're not going to use it after you leave school realistically. (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)*

Other students argued that there should be a distinction between conversational Irish, something which they could enjoy, and learning poetry through Irish, which they found much more difficult.

*It [poetry in Irish], kind of, makes you hate the language, like. Like, it would actually be nice to be able to speak your own language, like, rather than learning poetry about it, and if there was more on that, I think it would be better and easier. (Boys, non-DEIS, SC)*

*There's so much pressure put on it in, like, you're learning poetry and essays and stuff like that whereas, it should be – enjoy it, like, you should be enjoying the subject because it's, like, part of who we are. (Girls, non-DEIS, SC)*

However, others highlighted the importance of retaining at least some exposure to the Irish language for students.

*I think it's really important for Irish students. ... The culture of Ireland. ... I think people should be able to speak Irish fluently. (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)*

Other suggestions centred on the importance of having more frequent physical education classes, as *'it would reduce the levels of obesity'* (Boys, DEIS) or placing a greater emphasis on ICT.

Some students suggested that not all subjects should have to be assessed through exams; another suggestion was that subjects could be taken at varying levels of detail (for example, through having a combination of major and minor subjects).

*You might not be interested in geography at all, you should still do it, but like a lower level ... and then, if you want to have a career with something that's like related to geography, you can pick like a higher geography thing. (Coeducational, DEIS, JC)*

*We might enjoy it [Irish] more if it wasn't an exam subject. ... [Irish] is nice to know because it's your culture and stuff but it's just so stressful for exams for people who aren't good at it. (Girls, non-DEIS, JC)*

Cross-cutting the areas of learning, many students felt that there needs to be a greater level of critical thinking embedded in teaching and learning (see also the discussion of rote learning above).

*Otherwise you're teaching people to be robots, to repeat what other people have said, and that's not what we want in the world. We want people to be able to think independently, and I don't think there's enough emphasis on that in a school. (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)*

#### **4.5.2 Assessment and reporting**

Much of the student discussion regarding what senior cycle should be like centred on the approach to assessment. There was consensus, across schools and school types, on the need for a greater variety of assessment approaches, using, for example, project or practical work to reduce exam-related stress and to provide a more accurate reflection of the range of skills they had developed.

*How we have the projects in history or geography, more things like that should be added to it, which would make the exams not so stressful. (Boys, DEIS, SC)*

These approaches were seen to be more relevant to the future, by preparing students for the world of work.



*I think project-based assessment is really, really good because when you get into the world of work, you're not constantly going to be like sitting at home researching one specific topic for a week. You're going to be collaborating with other people and putting things together to make one final idea. (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)*

There was also consensus, again across schools and school types, that assessment should be spread out over the course of senior cycle rather than being focused on one intensive period at the end of their schooling. This was framed in different ways by different groups, with some suggesting that exams could be split between fifth and sixth year, in order to reduce pressure and give more time for interactive teaching and learning.

*I'd go and break that examination in half because that way you broaden out what people are going to get examined on, you can introduce new things, and the error percentage that you have decreases drastically; it's a longer time. So, if you have one year to study the history course, you get more time studying history, you get more time listening to your teacher speak about the things to you, you get more time to study on your own. (Boys, DEIS, SC)*

*Bringing some of these continuous things, like, if you had a project, like, 40 or 50 per cent that you done in fifth year, it'll take a lot of pressure off the sixth year, if you have all the projects on the fifth year. But, like, have every subject which is some sort of project or something. (Boys, non-DEIS, SC)*

Others suggested semesterisation, whereby some subjects or modules within subjects would be studied for a specific period during senior cycle with assessment taking place at the end of that period.

*If the Leaving Cert thing was divided into two different exams. ... At the end of fifth year, you and go do, say, your exams for three of those subjects, and then at sixth year, you only study another three subjects, and at the end of sixth year, you do an exam on those three subjects. Now, that gives space for more practical [subjects], ... life skills, and things like that. (Boys, DEIS, SC)*

*Imagine if you could do that for all of the subjects, you could do half of it, done, and then the pressure, the immense pressure, would be taken off you straight away for next year. ... And you'd be able to concentrate more and do better. (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)*

Introducing CBAs at senior cycle would alleviate the pressure to perform in a single exam, thereby allowing the process to be more representative of the student's ability.

*I just think that they should have more classroom-based assessments because, everything is down to one day and I don't think that's fair... The amount of work that you do over the two years, like, shouldn't just come down to one day and one piece of paper and that piece of paper's there for life and that's not right. (Girls, non-DEIS, SC)*

*I'd say the Leaving Cert should probably start to include CBAs because it, kind of, helps shorten the papers a small bit and relieve just a bit more stress on the exam day. And it just helps spread out the work and some people will excel at say public speaking with their CBAs. (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)*

An alternative approach was mooted: to embed regular assessment, involving for example class tests or pop quizzes, throughout senior cycle, with these marks counting towards a final grade.

*A better way to learn, personally ... would be randomly dropping out pop quizzes along the way to make sure we understand the material, because it's more important that we understand what we're being taught instead of memorising what we're being taught. (Coeducational, DEIS, SC)*

*You should be having maybe smaller tests so that you can embed the knowledge into your long-term memory ... rather than ... having to go over pretty much everything near the end, because you don't have a solid knowledge of what it is. (Coeducational, DEIS, JC)*

Most students discussed assessment in terms of the 'points' awarded through the Central Applications Office (CAO) system. Many highlighted the unfairness of awarding bonus points to higher-level maths.

*I think the fact that there's 25 extra marks for maths and like, no other subject, is kind of unfair. (Girls, non-DEIS, SC)*

Others suggested that additional points should be awarded for subjects that are more relevant to the course being applied for.

*If you want to do history and maths in college, then you should get more points for those [subjects]. (Girls, non-DEIS, SC)*

Some students said they would like more detailed feedback on their performance across different assessment components.

*There's no way then we can know what we did wrong and what needs more work. There should be something written about the parts where we lost points. (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)*

Student discussion of reporting often blurred with their views on assessment. As discussed above, LCE results were seen as a very narrow metric for assessing skills and were seen to ignore a range of important activities and learning experiences.

*We are a holistic school and we are encouraged to be involved but the system doesn't care because it doesn't matter at the end of the day. (Girls, non-DEIS, SC)*

*If you're involved in school clubs or have done extra things above academics, this should be rewarded. I'm on the students' council and that takes time out of my time but it doesn't mean anything on paper. Same for sports. (Girls, non-DEIS, SC)*

Like their parents, students felt that a variety of components, including work experience, extracurricular activities (including sports) and personal qualities, should all be recorded for reporting purposes. They favoured a fuller account of the skills and knowledge they had developed over their time in school.

*You shouldn't just be judged on academically. You should get credit for stuff you did outside of school and stuff you do inside of school, just like help out, just volunteering and stuff like that. (Girls, non-DEIS, SC)*

*They could even a section of your Leaving Cert points where they, kind of, give a summary of your personality and, like, the way you performed and behaved in the school. ... I think that would be a good reflection on your Leaving Cert because it would show your future employers that you actually are a good person. (Boys, non-DEIS, SC)*

Such an approach was seen as providing a more relevant depiction of the skills students would bring to the labour market.

*When you go into a job, they're not just looking at your results, they're looking at what work experience you've done, what sports you've achieved, what other activities you've done. (Coeducational, non-DEIS, SC)*

## 4.6 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has drawn on group interviews with students to outline their views on the current senior cycle and the kinds of learning experiences they would like to have. The inclusion of young people in the consultation process was informed by the view that they should be regarded as experts in their own learning and that their views can usefully inform the development of an approach to curriculum and assessment that is engaging (see, for example, Lumby and Morrison, 2009). Young people emphasised a number of positive features of the current senior cycle, with the TY programme commented on favourably by most groups. TY was seen as providing a variety of learning experiences, as well as a space in which students can mature and get a chance to reflect on their future pathways. Work experience was highlighted as a positive feature of TY, LCA and LCVP, enhancing student skills and assisting with career choices. More continuous assessment was viewed positively by those taking LCA and LCVP, though young people pointed to rigidities around access to LCVP and some stigma attached to taking part in LCA.

For most students, senior cycle was synonymous with the LCE programme. Young people welcomed the reduction in the number of subjects from junior to senior cycle and the chance to take subjects in which they are interested. They also valued the fact that their teachers increasingly treated them as adults during senior cycle, facilitating them to take greater responsibility for their own learning. However, students were critical of the volume of material in many LCE subjects and of the concentration of assessment in a very intensive period at the end of their school career. The high-stakes nature of the exam alongside the workload involved were seen as leading to a focus on ‘covering’ the course, leading to rote learning and feelings of stress and pressure rather than authentic understanding. As in previous international and Irish research (Duffy and Elwood, 2013; Gorard and See, 2011; Lumby, 2011; Smyth, 2016), young people favoured more interactive approaches to teaching and learning, valuing group- and project-work as a means of reaching a better understanding of course material. However, on transition to fifth year, they reported a narrowing of the teaching methods used and less use of the more interactive approaches that had enhanced their learning during junior cycle.

In discussing the kinds of senior cycle experience they would like, discussion again focused on assessment, with a consensus among students on the need for a greater variety of assessment methods (including practical and project work and presentations) and for assessment to be spread over senior cycle. Fewer subjects and/or reduced subject content were viewed as potential ways of reducing pressure and providing more space for deeper engagement with learning. Views differed on which subjects, if any, should be compulsory at senior cycle but a consensus emerged on the need to embed life skills within the curriculum. Young people also pointed to the need for greater provision for those with more vocationally-oriented interests. In relation to reporting, students felt the current system did not capture many of their learning experiences during senior cycle.

Instead, they favoured an approach that would document their extracurricular activities and personal qualities, as well as their academic results.



## CHAPTER 5

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### Conclusions

#### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

Recent decades have seen considerable debate about senior cycle education, particularly the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) programme, with recent policy efforts centred on improving the transition from second-level to further/higher education (Department of Education and Skills, 2015). In response to these issues, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) initiated a consultation about the nature of senior cycle education. A central pillar of this was two rounds of consultation with teachers, parents and students, across 41 case-study schools, the findings of which have been presented in this report.

Given that these schools volunteered to take part in the process, it is not possible to conclude that they are fully representative of the broader population of school communities, though they do capture diversity in terms of Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) status, gender mix, school type, size, language medium and geographical spread. Nonetheless, the information gathered provides important insights into the perspectives of young people, their parents and their teachers across diverse settings. Furthermore, the comments of these stakeholders are highly consistent with the views on senior cycle that have emerged from previous Irish research on the topic.

Section 5.2 summarises the main themes emerging from the school consultation process, while Section 5.3 discusses the implications for policy development in relation to senior cycle.

#### 5.2 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Students, parents and teachers in the case-study schools highlighted several positive aspects of senior cycle. In keeping with previous research (Smyth et al., 2004; Jeffers, 2007), the Transition Year (TY) programme was seen as a positive feature by all groups, with the year perceived as enhancing maturity and personal development among students, providing them with a variety of learning experiences and allowing them to reflect on their pathways for the future. Teachers and parents were positive about the different pathways open to students in the form of the three Leaving Certificate programmes, a feature that was more strongly emphasised in DEIS schools. Most attention focused on the LCE. Positive features of the LCE included the degree of subject choice open to students and the objective and fair nature of external assessment, a feature that was most strongly emphasised by teachers. Work experience placements in TY, Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational programme (LCVP) were

viewed favourably as enhancing student skills and providing an opportunity to explore potential career options. The greater use of continuous assessment in LCA and LCVP was seen as enhancing the engagement of students and better reflecting the skills they had developed. The use of non-exam approaches to assessment (such as orals and project work) in LCE was viewed as a way of assessing and rewarding differing sets of skills. There was a good deal of commonality in the comments of stakeholders on senior cycle across different school contexts. However, teachers in DEIS schools were more likely to emphasise the importance of diverse pathways and the use of non-exam-based assessment to cater for the variety of needs and skills among their student population.

In discussing the challenges relating to the current senior cycle, much of the discussion centred on the issue of assessment, especially within the LCE programme. The issues raised echo those found in previous Irish research (Smyth et al., 2011; McCoy et al., 2014; O’Leary and Scully, 2018; McCoy et al., 2019). There was widespread concern among students, parents and teachers about the reliance on a terminal exam in many LCE subjects and the concentration of exam-based assessment over a very intensive period at the end of sixth year. More broadly, there was a consensus that the current senior cycle is better suited to those with an academic orientation and who possess the ability to memorise material, with a neglect of those with more vocational interests and those with special educational needs. While this issue was highlighted across schools, it was emphasised to a greater extent among teachers in DEIS schools. Exam-based assessment – especially in the context of substantial volumes of work in many subjects and the high-stakes nature of the Leaving Certificate exam – was seen to have a negative backwash effect on teaching and learning, as well as the skills acquired by young people. Students contrasted their classroom experiences in senior cycle, where they felt under pressure to cover the course, with that in junior cycle, where they enjoyed more time and space to engage in a variety of approaches to learning and to have more interactive classes. The exam-focused approach within LCE was seen to facilitate rote learning, with a focus on memorising material at the expense of authentic understanding and a neglect of the development and assessment of broader skills. Students, in particular, pointed to the mismatch between their current approach to learning and what would be expected of them on transition to further/higher education or employment.

Challenges relating to the other senior cycle programme were mainly framed in terms of how they were located within senior cycle as a whole and in relation to awareness of the programmes among stakeholders. Many expressed concerns about the lack of continuity in teaching and assessment approaches between TY and the rest of senior cycle, and the ring-fenced nature of existing programmes. In keeping with previous research (Banks et al., 2010; Smyth and Calvert, 2011), a lack of awareness and recognition of LCA and, to some extent, LCVP were seen to reduce take-up among students.



Teachers, students and parents in the case-study schools were asked about changes that might be made to senior cycle in order to address these challenges. Many called for greater flexibility in senior cycle provision, which could take several forms. Some suggested greater permeability between existing programmes, with the teaching methods used in LCA, for example, adopted more broadly to benefit all students. In order to reduce the current workload and related pressure, others argued for the potential for students to take fewer subjects, to take subjects at differing levels of detail and/or to take specific modules within subjects to better reflect their interests and intended pathways.

Previous research indicates that students and their parents highlight many benefits of second-level education, particularly for friendship formation and social development, but point to gaps in terms of preparedness for employment and adult life (Byrne and Smyth, 2010), a pattern also evident in data from the Growing Up in Ireland study (see Chapter 1). In discussing learning content, a firm consensus emerged across teachers, parents and students that life skills should be embedded within the senior cycle curriculum, in order to foster greater preparedness for the world of work and for adult life among young people. Views were more mixed on other areas of learning, with most teachers favouring the retention of English/literacy and maths/numeracy as core components of the curriculum.

In relation to assessment, a consensus was evident among students, parents and teachers on the need for a greater variety of assessment approaches for final certification, including project and practical work, and for assessment to be spread over senior cycle rather than confined to a short period. Suggestions included exams taking place in fifth year as well as sixth year or more regular tests contributing to the final grade. These changes were seen as ways of reducing exam-related stress and providing a more authentic measure of student skills across a range of domains. Teachers placed a very strong emphasis on external assessment as a positive feature of the current senior cycle and very much wanted any new assessment components to be marked externally. Many parents valued the role of external assessment but did not always emphasise its importance to the same degree as teachers. Students rarely commented on who should do the assessment but were not asked directly about this issue in the group interviews. Support is also evident among students, parents and teachers for a more complete documentation of student learning experiences and skills, to include non-exam subjects, extracurricular activities and personal/social development, as well as academic grades.

Stakeholders, particularly teachers, highlighted a number of necessary conditions for change to occur. Many teachers and several parents felt that junior cycle had been introduced without consultation and were still unsure of the implications of these changes for student experiences and outcomes. As a result, many teachers emphasised the need for any reform process to be gradual and consultative in

nature and, along with many parents, cautioned against devaluing the strong currency of the Leaving Certificate. Resources, particularly continuous professional development, were seen as crucial in any change process.

### 5.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Significant variation is found across countries in the nature of upper secondary (senior cycle) education, in particular regarding the extent to which young people take academic or vocational tracks, the degree of choice of subjects and courses open to them, and the number of subjects they take (Le Métais, 2003; Dufaux, 2012; O'Donnell, 2018). Differences are found too in the kinds of certification offered to young people on completion of upper secondary education, the approach to assessment and the consequences of certification for young people's post-school pathways. Not surprisingly, the approach to assessment has often proved controversial, with variation across countries in whether exams and/or coursework are assessed by the school (with or without external moderation) or externally set and marked (O'Donnell, 2018). Some systems, most notably that in England, have seen substantial policy shifts over time from external exam-based assessment to a combination of school-based and external assessment and, finally, to a renewed emphasis on external exams (Torrance, 2017).

Research studies do not suggest 'one best way' of conducting assessment for certification purposes. Proponents of external assessment suggest that it ensures reliability – that is, a greater consistency in standards across schools – but others argue that reliability has been privileged over validity and that valid assessment requires the use of a suite of assessment types at different time-points to better capture student skills (Torrance, 2017). Interviews with students indicate they tend to favour having access to different types of assessment, including exams and coursework as well as more modular structures, with assessment spread out over the course (Barrance and Elwood, 2018; Elwood, 2012). There is consensus in the research literature that the form of assessment has a strong effect on the nature of teaching and learning (Baird et al., 2017). Thus, particular forms of exam-based testing alter the behaviour of students and teachers and are found to result in more superficial, fragmented knowledge, especially where the exam results are 'high stakes', having significant consequences for students and/or schools (Daly et al., 2012; Stobart and Eggen, 2012).

Upper secondary education in Ireland has a number of distinctive features in international perspective. Rates of school completion are now very high (Department of Education and Skills, 2019b), with the vast majority of young people in Ireland completing senior cycle. It is largely undifferentiated, with most young people taking the same qualification, except for the small group who take the LCA programme. There is some flexibility in terms of subject and subject level choice, but no flexibility in terms of combining different subjects or modules at

different phases of senior cycle. Although some LCE subjects have non-exam assessment components (such as orals or project work), exam-based assessment retains a dominant role and the results are very high stakes in determining entry to higher education and influencing employment access. The results of the current report and previous studies indicate the strong 'backwash' effect of the Leaving Certificate exam. As in other systems with high-stakes testing (see, for example, Au, 2010), the consequences tend to manifest in an escalation of workload, a significant investment of time in homework and study, a focus on exam preparation in class and high levels of stress among students.

Findings of the consultation process with the case-study schools indicate that senior cycle is not seen as fully inclusive of those who are less academically oriented or those with special educational needs. Stakeholders, especially students and their parents, point to the neglect of vocational and practical subjects within the current curriculum. Many, particularly teachers in DEIS schools, value the existence of diverse pathways within senior cycle, though there appears little support for moving towards a highly tracked system (with students taking academic or vocational routes from an early stage) and a widespread recognition of the stigmatisation of the LCA pathway. International experience has shown how vocational education and training may enhance the transition to employment among young people, but at the same time early tracking results in social inequalities in skills and post-school outcomes (Müller and Gangl, 2003; Lavrijsen and Nicaise, 2015). In Ireland, for legacy reasons, vocational education has been relatively underdeveloped and fragmented, leading to a challenge in creating vocational pathways that are afforded parity of esteem with academic routes (McGuinness et al., 2016; 2018). Nonetheless, there appears to be potential for broadening the range of areas of learning and skills offered in senior cycle in order to cater for those with a more practical orientation. A move away from ring-fenced programmes might assist in removing stigma from practical options and providing more diversified learning experiences for all students.

While responses from stakeholders did not vary markedly by school size, the smaller case-study schools were less likely to currently offer all of the senior cycle programmes. Providing more diversified courses and expanding the range of subjects or areas of learnings is likely to be more challenging for smaller schools. There may be greater potential for schools to cooperate at local level to provide a variety of learning opportunities (see McCoy et al., 2019, for a parallel suggestion in relation to the provision of access to higher-level subjects).

A more specific issue relates to young people with special educational needs. The introduction of Level 1 and 2 programmes at junior cycle has provided new routes to recognition for young people with special educational needs, though these programmes have not yet been subject to evaluation. However, teachers and parents in the special schools involved in the study highlight the lack of a suitable

programme at senior cycle, suggesting the need to develop new programmes that build upon the skills developed at Levels 1 and 2.

The study findings highlight the strong currency of the Leaving Certificate exam in the minds of teachers, parents and students, but suggest an appetite for change to respond to the challenges recognised. Lack of preparedness for the world of work and adult life among school leavers has been highlighted in previous research (Byrne and Smyth, 2010; McCoy et al., 2014). A strong consensus is evident among students, their parents and teachers on the resulting need to integrate life skills into the senior cycle curriculum. There is a case too for all young people having the opportunity to engage in work experience, regardless of the programme they take, and for this work experience to be used to foster career exploration and skill development. The experience of junior cycle reform indicates that assessment will be the thorniest issue in any discussion of change. Students, parents and teachers see the need to spread out LCE assessment during senior cycle and to adopt a broader variety of approaches to assessment to better reflect student skills. Teachers are clear that such assessment should be set and assessed externally and the response to junior cycle change would indicate that school-based assessment for LCE certification purposes would not be accepted by the teacher unions. Nonetheless, moving away from exams in a very intensive short period at the end of second-level education and using a broader variety of assessment approaches would seem likely to reduce student anxiety and stress over 'the exam' and permit the development of different kinds of skills. However, this may also require change in subject specifications, as some 'content-heavy' subjects are seen as reducing the opportunities to use the kinds of interactive approaches that students find engaging.

Senior cycle cannot be seen in isolation from other stages of the education system. Previous research (Smyth and Calvert, 2011) highlighted the gap in standards and workload between junior and senior cycle, leading to an escalation of demands on students over the transition. Changes at junior cycle may feed an impetus for change at senior cycle but, in the interim, the findings of the current study and McCoy et al. (2019) indicate that this issue is seen as potentially more pressing by students, teachers and parents in the wake of junior cycle reform. The dominance of assessment in the discussion on junior cycle reform meant that other important aspects of the change did not receive much attention. Junior cycle reform means that students will be assessed on the basis of fewer subjects. Given that schools often limit access to particular subjects to those who have taken related subjects at junior cycle (Smyth and Calvert, 2011), this may have the unintended consequence of reducing student subject choice for the Leaving Certificate and beyond. Furthermore, there is a need for evidence on how schools are determining access to higher-level Leaving Certificate subjects, given the previous role of junior cycle level take-up in influencing this process. Finally, it is challenging to pursue senior cycle reform in the absence of any changes in the system of higher education

entry, given the dominance of the 'points race' in student discourses of exam preparation.

In conclusion, the study findings raise important issues about how policy consultation occurs. Increasing attention has been given to the potential for children and young people to have a greater say in matters that affect their lives. The accounts of students in the case-study schools, and indeed their input at the national consultation seminars, provide rich insights into their day-to-day experience of teaching and learning and reinforce the value of 'student voice' in informing policy development. In keeping with previous research, the students interviewed pointed to the way in which the LCE exam narrowed the kinds of learning they experienced, contrasting the interactive methods used in junior cycle with the exam-focused approach in senior cycle. In critiquing the current system, many provided a clear vision of the kinds of learning which would help develop them to their potential and prepare them for the changing world ahead of them.



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