

Policy Submission

**Submission to the
National Council for Curriculum
and Assessment
on Developing Senior Cycle Education:
consultation with the
Community & Voluntary Sector**

May 2003

SUBMISSION TO

**NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR CURRICULUM AND
ASSESSMENT**

ON

“DEVELOPING SENIOR CYCLE EDUCATION”

BASED ON

**CONSULTATION WITH COMMUNITY AND
VOLUNTARY SECTOR**

MAY 2003

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Foreword

In May 2003, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the Combat Poverty Agency co-hosted a consultation with community and voluntary organisations working on education issues from the perspective of poverty, inequality and social exclusion. The consultation sought to get views on the future of senior cycle post-primary education in Ireland, based on the NCCA -published discussion paper, *Developing Senior Cycle Education*.

Combat Poverty role

The Combat Poverty Agency is a statutory advisory body to the government on all aspects of economic and social planning in relation to poverty. One of Combat Poverty's statutory functions is to increase public awareness of the causes, nature and extent of poverty and solutions to it. In delivering on this duty, Combat Poverty runs a Curriculum Development / Schools Education Programme at post-primary education level. This programme supports the integration of poverty awareness as broadly as possible within second level education. In particular the programme supports student and teachers initiatives in Junior Cycle, Transition Year and Leaving Certificate Applied programmes.

Combat Poverty also has a statutory responsibility to support community development as an anti-poverty strategy. Arising from these two interests, Combat Poverty was very pleased to work with the NCCA in facilitating the inclusion of the voices of people and organisations working with people experiencing poverty on issues relating to the future of senior cycle education in Ireland. Two seminars were held: an information seminar in March and a consultative seminar in May.

On behalf of the participants at the consultation seminars, Combat Poverty undertook to author and submit to the NCCA the consultation findings. The views in the submission do not necessarily reflect the views of the Combat Poverty. Combat Poverty is currently finalising its own independent submission to the NCCA on the future of senior cycle education and the consultation with community interests will inform this.

Adopting an inclusive approach to developing senior cycle education

Participants at the consultation seminars overwhelmingly acknowledged and congratulated the NCCA on their pro-active approach to the inclusion of the perspective of community and anti-poverty groups in deliberations on the future of senior cycle education. There was strong endorsement and interest amongst participants to maintain an involvement in other aspects of the consultation process and in similar future policy developments of the NCCA. Seminar participants appreciated the consultation as a very worthwhile opportunity for a dialogue and exchange between community based and formal education interests. It was noted that the consultation facilitated the inclusion of the 'indirect' voice of learners from disadvantaged communities or backgrounds through organisations and people working with those who experience poverty. There was interest from some participants in supporting the NCCA to include the 'direct' voice of learners through contact with learners on community-based education initiatives.

Format of the submission

The consultation involved the dissemination of the NCCA consultative paper *Developing Senior Cycle Education* and a presentation on its key aspects. A number of facilitated workshops then considered in detail the following key questions:

1. How can senior cycle education be made more accessible to all learners?
2. How can a broader range of learners' achievements at senior cycle be recognised?
3. How can senior cycle education facilitate lifelong learning?
4. What is the best way to organise senior cycle provision in order to address to the needs of our young people into the future?

Each workshop was recorded and fed back to a plenary. The plenary prioritised a number of key issues and recommendations. This submission does not attempt to record every issue raised by participants at the consultation seminars. The priority list of recommendations is reported first. The details from the workshop discussions are then reported in response to the consultation questions above. The last section of the submission documents other issues relevant to the development of senior cycle education, which were raised outside of the above areas. An attendance list of seminar participants is provided in Appendix 1.

Combat Poverty Agency
May 2003

Section A: Priority issues and recommendations from plenary session

This section provides an overview on the priority issues agreed by the plenary at the consultation. This is not exhaustive and should be read in association with the other issues and recommendations relevant to the development of senior cycle education. These are detailed in Sections B and C.

Valuing senior cycle education for itself

There was a general view that senior cycle education appeared to be strongly and inappropriately dominated by its role as a pathway to third level education or employment. In any case, access to third level was not enjoyed by many people from disadvantaged or poor backgrounds. The plenary promoted the idea that senior cycle education has an intrinsic value as an educational experience for learners. This educational experience should be highly valued in its own right.

Valuing range of learning styles

The plenary agreed that a 'one size fits all' understanding of learning was inappropriate. It supported the recognition of a range of learning styles and recommends that this recognition should be acknowledged in the future development of senior cycle education. The plenary also promoted that recognition of a range of learning styles had implications for teacher development and teacher training. The range of learning styles need to be reflected in the incorporation of and resources necessary to adopt competencies in diverse teaching styles in professional teacher training and development.

Flexibility in senior cycle education

The inflexibility in undertaking the senior cycle education programme was generally perceived as an obstacle to educational achievement for learners (young people and adults) from disadvantaged backgrounds. The compulsory two-year cycle was an impediment to return to learning for people who may have to leave the course for economic, social or personal reasons. The plenary supported greater flexibility in the frequency of start times for Leaving Certificate courses, development of a range part-time options and part-time hours and flexibility in leaving and returning to courses.

Modular approach

The plenary agreed and recommends the adoption of a modular approach to delivering senior cycle education. The point was made that significant successful experience has been gained in the delivery of modular approaches by adult and third level education institutions and this could be drawn on by senior cycle education providers. A modular approach should incorporate core and elective modules.

Three year programme

There was some support for senior cycle education to be constituted as a three-year programme, capable of being delivered through a modular and part-time approach. Elements of Transition Year, LCA and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme could be incorporated into this three year programme. This should be broad programme for all learners with core and elective modules. Each module should be accredited. The programme should take into account different learning styles, learning needs and a diversity of accreditation mechanisms in response to learning styles. Support for this module was based on the need to address the status issues of Leaving Certificate. Several Leaving Certificates (Leaving Certificate Est., LCA and LCVP) currently appears to mean unequally perceived education qualifications. Concern was particularly expressed that a three-year course might make it hard to retain learners, particularly learners from low-income households. By staying in school, these learners would incur income foregone from employment.

Supporting learners

The plenary recommends that all modules, but particularly core modules, should incorporate basic skills support for learners. Literacy and mentor supported learning were highlighted as two particular areas where this might apply, particularly in support of learners who experience poverty and disadvantage. The development of future senior cycle education should recognise importance of teacher literacy awareness and resource teachers' access to literacy awareness programmes and teaching skills.

In addition there was recognition that schools were not the only education providers. The future of senior cycle education should build on stronger links between formal and non-formal and community based education providers and facilitate learners' ease of transition between them.

Learners should also be supported to participate in decision-making within the school and wider educational arenas on issues that effect them including curriculum and assessment.

Learning about life and society

The plenary recommends the content of senior cycle education should explicitly incorporate citizenship education and the teaching of life-skills. These could incorporate greater emphasis on communication skills, social skills, interpersonal skills, political skills, critical social analysis skills, learning to learn skills, skills that inculcate empathy and social solidarity, citizenship rights and responsibilities. Senior cycle education should also inculcate ethical values.

New forms of assessment

The rationale for the current format of terminal exams as the dominant form of assessment was questioned. There was sup for the extension of innovative assessments that are successfully employed in Leaving Certificate Applied, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and Access Programmes to third level education. The use of tapes, interviews, information technology, graphics and imaging were posited as possibilities to be examined. New forms of assessment were conditional on the adequate resources and training of teachers and assessors in these new methods. It is also important that new forms of assessment are not perceived as diminishing the status of the Leaving Certificate.

Access to third level education

Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) was perceived as having a secondary status. This was strongly perceived as an injustice. The secondary status of the course was viewed as reflecting beliefs on the status of learners who take LCA and not on the status of course which had a high educational value. LCA not being accredited for third level access was particularly referred to along with the need for the third level institutes to recognise more diverse pathways for access to graduate education. The future development of senior cycle education needed to work to remedy the injustice of these barriers.

Section B: Responses to consultation questions

This section reports in summary bullet form points made in response to the consultation questions below.

(i) How can senior cycle education be made more accessible to all learners?

- ◆ Introduction of modular curriculum
- ◆ Methodology of teacher training should be more engaging and creative
- ◆ More educational focus on life skills, political and social studies and preparation for further education
- ◆ Less emphasis on the Leaving Certificate as a placement for employment opportunities
- ◆ Flexibility for adult learners on starting times for undertaking the Leaving Certificate
- ◆ Need to recognise multiple learning styles and training of teachers and assessors in these methods
- ◆ Need for continuous guidance for learners to ensure progression paths through education.

(ii) How can a broader range of learners' achievements at senior cycle be recognised?

- ◆ Include Transition Year work in a portfolio and make it compulsory
- ◆ Combine written assessments with practical assessments
- ◆ Artistic, music, drama and community links activities should be included in achievements (behaviour such as timekeeping should not)
- ◆ Broaden range of forms of assessment in Leaving Certificate Established
- ◆ Learn from other recognised established models of assessment as prevail in Leaving Certificate Applied, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and third level Access Programmes
- ◆ Explore concept of reforming terminal examination - options include tapes, interviews, IT, graphics, imaging
- ◆ Recognise multi-sensory learning and reflect in assessment forms.

(iii) How can senior cycle education facilitate lifelong learning?

- ◆ Need for bridging from non-mainstream school setting to formal school settings. Bridging supports could include mentoring, literacy supports and smaller class sizes
- ◆ Address the issue of 'labelling' of the Leaving Certificate and re-brand to say Senior Cycle Learning. There is a stigma attached to 'Leaving Cert.' for return learners when they have 'left' formal education previously
- ◆ Provide certification for the completion of compulsory schooling
- ◆ Use learning facilitators to support learners to develop and understand their own learning style and to develop individual learning plans
- ◆ Develop flexible part-time options for senior cycle education for return learners
- ◆ Develop part-time modular education-in-work for learners in employment
- ◆ Remedy the differentiation in status between formal education providers and alternative providers
- ◆ Remedy the differential in status of professional teaching recognition for resource persons working with disadvantaged students in community based settings
- ◆ Develop and promote schools as community life-long learning centres
- ◆ Incorporate studies on citizenship, communication skills, social analysis skills and learning to learn skills.

(iv) What is the best way to organise senior cycle provision in order to address to the needs of our young people into the future?

- ◆ Remedy the inequality in status between the Leaving Certificate Established and the Leaving Certificate Applied
- ◆ Provide a means-tested income support for senior cycle learners to address the household income deficiency experienced by young people from disadvantaged background who opt to stay-in-education as opposed to paid work. Draw on the experience of Youthreach programmes where income support operates as a significant 'stay in education' incentive for learners from low-income households.
- ◆ Address the injustice of the current structure Leaving Certificate provision by developing a modular approach that embraces part-time and flexible options to address access and participation issues for people experiencing disadvantage and poverty
- ◆ Ensure programme content incorporates interpersonal and empathy skills and ethical values
- ◆ Involve learners in decision making that effects them
- ◆ A three year senior cycle programme supports more mature decision making by learners as regards their future, including third level education choices
- ◆ Key skills should be incorporated in core elements of future senior cycle education
- ◆ Explore accreditation of prior learning from older learners
- ◆ Third level institutions needs to look at addressing points based entry only for under23s
- ◆ Review what can be done to expand progression routes into education and work for LCA achievers.

Section C: Other issues

A number of supplementary issues arose in the workshops and the consultation evaluation. These are reported here.

Reconciling rhetoric and practice

Education objectives as currently put forward were progressive in their commitment to holistic education for learners. However a gap was perceived in the rhetoric of educational objectives and learners' experience of teaching and learning. The review of senior cycle education should work to remedy the gap between the rhetoric of education and educational practice with specific emphasis on prioritising education for the full participation of learners in society.

Inconsistency in Transition Year experiences

Inconsistency from school to school was reported on the educational experience of Transition Year. Lack of parental support for Transition Year was also raised. There was a need to remedy this and ensure the delivery and promotion of an important educational experience. The expense of learner participation in Transition Year activities was also raised as a concern for learners from low-income households.

Developing curriculum and assessment

Participants at the consultation seminars overwhelmingly acknowledged and congratulated the NCCA on their pro-active approach to the inclusion of the perspective of community and anti-poverty groups in deliberations on the future of senior cycle education. There was strong endorsement and interest amongst participants to maintain an involvement in other aspects of the consultation process and in similar future policy developments of the NCCA. Seminar participants appreciated the consultation as a very worthwhile opportunity for a dialogue and exchange between community based and formal education interests. It was noted that the consultation facilitated the inclusion of the 'indirect' voice of learners from disadvantaged communities or backgrounds through organisations and people working with those who experience poverty. There was interest from some participants in supporting the NCCA to include the 'direct,' voice of, learners through contact with learners on community-based education initiatives.

Appendix 1: List of attendees at 20/3/03 and 1/5/03 information and consultation seminars
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Athlone institute of Technology	Tommy Healy (Access Officer)
Youthreach Transition Centre	Paula Daly
Blanchardstown Youth Service	Eric O'Brien Catriona Clare
Darndale Belcamp Discovery Centre	Zara Rogers
National College of Ireland	Michele Ryan
Co. Laois VEC	Treasa Mc Evoy (Community Education Facilitator)
Co. Limerick VEC	Bernadette Cullen (Community Education Facilitator)
Carlow Youth Training	Avril Lynch
An Siol Community Development Project	Grainne Foy
Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice	Cathy Molloy
UCD	Maurice Murphy
City of Dublin VEC	Patricia Morrissey & Helen Geoghegan (Community Education Facilitators)
NUI Maynooth	Aidan Doyle (Access Officer)
Dublin Institute of Technology	Fiona Tuite (Access Officer)
KLEAR Adult Education Centre Kilbarrack	Rose Bronwen
Clondalkin Community Development Project	Margaret McGlynn
National Adult Literacy Agency	Blathnaid Ni Chinneide & Gemma Lynch
PACE	Kay Keating & Irene O'Reilly
The Larkin Centre	Anne Flannery
Amnesty International	Brian Ruane
Combat Poverty Agency	Joan O'Flynn, Liz Sullivan, Maureen Bassett, Leona Walker, Pdraig Carmody, Elaine Byrne, Melanie Wethey (in various facilitaton & notetaking roles)
NCCA	Peter Johnson, & Majella O'Shea.