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Senior cycle review: analysis of discussions in schools on senior cycle pathways and structures in Ireland

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Abstract: This report is intended to inform the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) review of senior cycle and draws on the second cycle of the consultation process with 41 schools with different profiles and characteristics. Building on the first cycle which examined the purpose of senior cycle, the second cycle focused more specifically on pathways and structures within the senior cycle and on the kinds of learning experiences teachers, students and parents would like to see. The findings point to a consensus across all groups on the need to spread assessment over the course of senior cycle and adopt a greater variety of assessment approaches.

Keywords: upper secondary education; curriculum

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This report is intended to inform the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) review of senior cycle and draws on the second cycle of the consultation process with schools. The first cycle looked at teacher, parent and student perspectives on the purpose of senior cycle more generally and about the kinds of skills young people will require for the 21st century; this cycle was reported on in Banks et al. (2018). The second cycle explores teacher, student and parent perspectives on current pathways and structures within senior cycle and looks at the kinds of learning experiences they would like to see.

With the support of school management bodies, the NCCA invited schools to become involved in a consultation process. From among those who indicated a willingness to participate, 41 schools were selected to capture diversity in terms of DEIS status, gender mix, school type, size, language medium and geographical spread. These schools were provided with support materials to consult with teachers and parents about senior cycle and potential directions for the future. Schools generally involved the whole staff in the group discussion. In the case of parents, however, the numbers involved were smaller, typically between four and twelve in a school. Their responses cannot therefore be taken as representative of the total parent population in the case-study schools. In order to explore the perspective of young people themselves, NCCA staff conducted focus group interviews with junior and senior cycle students in the case-study schools. Group interviews with students were carried out in 20 schools in cycle one and in 21 schools in cycle two. Depending on school size and composition, this usually involved one group of junior cycle students and two groups of senior cycle students (with around 10-12 students per group).

The schools involved were diverse not only in profile but in the kinds of programmes they offered at senior cycle. The vast majority of the case-study schools offered Transition Year (TY), either on an optional or a compulsory basis. The vast majority offered the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) programme; the exception being the two special schools and newly established schools that did not yet have a Leaving Certificate cohort. Over half of the schools provided the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), with provision being slightly higher in the coeducational than the single-sex schools. Almost half of the case-study schools offered the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme, with higher levels of provision in DEIS schools and lower provision levels in small schools.

In cycle two, teachers were asked to reflect on the following questions:

- What are the three most positive features of each of the programmes offered in your school?
- What are the three most negative features of each of the programmes offered in your school?
- How should senior cycle be structured in terms of length, flexibility, and subjects or modules?
- Are there some areas of learning that should be studied by all senior cycle students?
- To what extent do all senior cycle students have access to suitable pathways and learning experiences?
- What are the positive features of current approaches to senior cycle assessment and reporting?
- What are the negative features of current approaches to senior cycle assessment and reporting?
- Would you like to see any changes to senior cycle assessment and reporting?
- What have we missed?

The material from teachers was fed back in the form of written templates and analysed to identify the main themes identified across different kinds of schools.

Parents were asked to reflect on the following questions:

- What are the three most positive features of each of the programmes your children are following?
- What are the three most negative features of each of the programmes your children are following?
- How should senior cycle be structured in terms of length, flexibility, and subjects or modules?
- Are there some areas of learning that should be studied by all senior cycle students?
- To what extent is your child following a senior cycle pathway and accessing learning experiences that best suit their needs?
- What are the positive features of current approaches to senior cycle assessment?

- What are the negative features of current approaches to senior cycle assessment?
- Would you like to see any changes to senior cycle assessment?
- What do you think is important to be included in your child's report at the end of senior cycle?
- What have we missed?

The material from parents was fed back in the form of written templates and analysed to identify the main themes identified across different kinds of schools.

Reflecting the different experiences of the two groups of students, junior and senior cycle students were asked a different set of questions. To capture views from all schools included in the consultation process, questions for cycle one and two were the same. Junior cycle students were asked the following:

- What helps you learn in class just now?
- How do you think these things that help you learn will be useful in the future?
- What are the best things that you have heard about senior cycle from other students, your teachers or family members?
- What do you see as the differences between junior and senior cycle?
- What are the most important things you think you will gain from your time in senior cycle?
- Do you think the current senior cycle is suited to all students?
- What are the things that you would like to change about senior cycle?
- Think about your experience in the new junior cycle, how should a new senior cycle build on this experience?
- Is there anything you would like to bring forward from junior cycle into senior cycle – e.g. different reporting such as the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA) or Classroom Based Assessments (CBAs)?

Senior cycle students were asked the following questions:

- What did you most enjoy about junior cycle?
- What are the best things about senior cycle in your school?
- How do you think this experience and learning will help you in the future?
- What are the most important things you gain from your time in senior cycle?

- Do you think the current senior cycle is suited to all students?
- What are the things that you would like to change about senior cycle?
- What plans do you have for when you leave school?
- At the end of your time in school you receive a certificate of results, do you think this will fairly represent all your achievements throughout senior cycle?

Notes were prepared on each focus group interview and a selection of interviews was transcribed for analysis. The transcripts and notes were analysed to identify the main themes raised by junior and senior cycle students.

Chapter 2 examines the perspectives of teachers on senior cycle, Chapter 3 explores the parent perspective while Chapter 4 looks at the views of students. Chapter 5 offers some concluding remarks.

CHAPTER 2

Teacher perspectives on senior cycle pathways and structures

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter draws on the consultation with schools to outline teacher perspectives on senior cycle programmes, structures and approaches to assessment. Sections two to five examine the different senior cycle programmes in turn: the Transition Year programme, Leaving Certificate Established, Leaving Certificate Applied and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme. 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 six examines whether current senior cycle pathways and structures are seen as suitable for, and inclusive of, all students. Section seven outlines teacher views on potential changes to senior cycle, focusing on key areas of learning and structures (for example, subjects or modules) as well as approaches to assessment and reporting.

2.2 THE TRANSITION YEAR PROGRAMME

In Cycle 1 of the consultation process, teachers had highlighted the Transition Year (TY) programme as a particularly positive feature of senior cycle in their school. It is not surprising then that when asked specifically about their views on the programme, the majority of schools were very positive about it. In particular, teachers highlighted the variety of learning experiences to which students were exposed in the course of the year, discussing the chance they had to sample different subject areas, to take part in varied activities and to explore their broader skills.

[TY] gives students several opportunities to learn a variety of life skills, self-directed learning, maturity in education and in their interaction towards their peers while learning new subjects. TY allows students to achieve a foundation in subjects they will be choosing for Leaving Cert and get the opportunity to experience the world of work. It also gives students the opportunity to be their own teachers through the various projects they undertake. TY gives students great opportunities to get involved in their parish or local community ... There are lots of opportunities in TY for students to improve their self-confidence. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

The vast majority of teachers praised the range and variety of subjects on offer as some of the most positive aspects of the programme overall. Many subjects are offered as modules, which was seen as very positive overall. (Girls, non-DEIS)

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)

The opportunity to take part in work experience placements was seen as valuable in promoting skill development and giving students the chance to reflect on potential future careers. The value of work experience and the role of the programme in facilitating later student choice was emphasised to a somewhat greater degree in DEIS than in non-DEIS schools.

Work experience allows TY students to envisage their future more accurately and set goals accordingly. (Boys, DEIS)

Work experience is very beneficial to the students who engage in it properly. Students can learn about the different career options that are available, but most of all they learn about the working life, for those who haven't had the experience of summer jobs etc. (Boys, non-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)

Participation in TY was seen as enhancing the personal and social development of young people, with many teachers highlighting the greater maturity of students on completion of the programme. Single-sex boys' schools placed particular emphasis on the role of TY in enhancing maturity. The benefits of the programme in terms of personal and social development were attributed to the variety of learning experiences and approaches, which allowed students who were not traditionally academic to demonstrate their skills.

Transition Year is inclusive and equitable; everyone gets a chance to try something based on their strengths and interests. Value is placed on a much broader range of skills and abilities. The modular approach in TY provides students with a 'taste' for each subject. This enables experience-based choice for Leaving Certificate subjects. (Coeducational, DEIS)

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. (Girls, non-DEIS)

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

Despite the positive views of TY overall, several schools highlighted potential challenges in delivering the programme. Around two-thirds of the schools reported some difficulties around student motivation during the year, with perceived higher rates of absenteeism from school. Interestingly, single-sex and non-DEIS schools were more likely to mention motivation issues than coeducational and DEIS schools, perhaps because of the strong academic emphasis in the other years.

Students' approach to TY can sometimes be poor. They are unmotivated to work and treat the academic side of the year as an inconvenience. (Boys, non-DEIS)

In some schools, the lack of motivation was explicitly attributed to the absence of formal assessment in the programme and the related student absenteeism was seen as creating challenges in maintaining continuity in teaching and learning.

The lack of formal assessment in Transition Year resulted in students feeling less motivated. 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)

The issue of lack of continuity was raised by around four in ten of the schools, where the range of outings and activities in which students took part was seen as creating challenges in providing continuity in teaching and learning in other classes.

With the amount of outings, it can be difficult to have regular classes planned over the course of a term without interruptions to the flow. (Boys, DEIS)

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)

Absenteeism from classes through participating in non-timetabled extracurricular activities leads to a loss of focus in academic courses. (Coeducational, DEIS)

Around a third of the schools expressed some concern about student preparedness for the transition to a Leaving Certificate programme having taken part in TY. It was seen as difficult for students to adjust to 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 5th year. They find it hard to adapt to the change in learning. (Coeducational, DEIS)

Some schools also raised the issue of the costs of the programme. This related both to the costs to the school of running the various activities and to the costs involved for students and their families in paying for trips and outings.

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)

Schools were specifically asked their views on the use of assessment and reporting within TY. Almost all highlighted the variety of assessment approaches used in TY as a positive feature. Schools pointed to their use of portfolio-based assessment and interviews at the end of the year as a way of documenting 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)

We have a credit-based approach to assessment in our school. Students [are] given credits per module (3) on completion of work. Four reports [are] sent out per school year at the end of each module changeover. This works well as students want to maintain ongoing high credit scores. (Coeducational, DEIS)

TY is good because they are given marks for projects and reflections on modules they have done. There is ongoing assessment which is more related to project work etc. (Girls, DEIS)

This diversity of assessment approaches was viewed as providing a better way of fully capturing and reporting on student learning and achievements.

[The] modular approach to learning is conducive to continuous assessment. Focus is not on end of year exams. Students are given opportunities to manage themselves as they have a chance to improve for [the] next task. Allows for opportunities to assess different skills e.g. practical, project work, creativity etc. (Coeducational, 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)

Several schools also highlighted the benefit of the approach to reporting used in their school, with frequent feedback to students and their parents about progress:

Reporting is statement based, students attend parent-teacher meetings to allow for responsibility of their own learning, assessment is mainly project based with a final exam at the end of each term, reports are given three times a year. [This] leads to maturity and an easy transition. (Boys, non-DEIS)

However, many schools highlighted some challenges related to assessment and reporting for TY students. Over half of the schools felt that lack of certification in the programme meant that student achievements were not fully recognised and valued. DEIS schools were somewhat more likely to raise this issue than non-DEIS schools, though it was a common concern across all school types.

No formal assessment from the SEC 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, 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)

Around four in ten schools pointed to there being insufficient assessment during the programme. Some indicated too the diversity of approaches and a lack of coordination across classes and activities in relation to assessment.

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 5th and 6th year was negative. Some teachers were dissatisfied that the current reporting arrangements in place do not adequately reflect the variety of the skills being developed. These teachers lamented the lack of a standardised, uniform reporting system from the DES offering 'guidance in how or what to measure'. (Girls, non-DEIS)

A similar proportion reported that lack of student motivation meant that they did not really try their best when assessed.

Without formal assessments, students can become demotivated. Credits which are awarded as part of the efolio assessment or for any other reason, do not lead to any qualification. (Girls, non-DEIS)

2.3 THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE ESTABLISHED PROGRAMME

Almost all schools highlighted the variety of subjects on offer to students taking the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) programme as a positive feature. Many were highly satisfied with the range of subjects provided in their own school and felt that the degree of choice open to students meant that they could select subjects that matched their needs and interests. Many schools also emphasised the provision of different subject levels as facilitating achievement for students of varying ability levels.

LCE subjects are offered at different levels allowing students to take the level appropriate for them if they're struggling. We offer a wide selection of subjects at LCE and so students can choose subjects that they are best (or better) suited for. (Boys, DEIS)

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 lack of over-specialisation in subject selection was also seen as an advantage in keeping options open to students for the future:

Students study a broad range of subjects which gives them room to change their mind about their third level course or profession even at a late stage of study. (Girls, 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. When asked more specifically about LCE assessment, the vast majority of schools described it in highly favourable terms. Discussion centred on the integrity of the external exam process, the anonymised nature of correcting and the transparency of the system, with LCE certification seen as being held in high regard by teachers, students and their parents.

Exams are marked anonymously. This ensures a level playing field for all students. It is also the most transparent method of ensuring impartiality. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

Examinations being compiled and corrected externally, with all students in a subject level completing the same exam, with anonymity of students and examiners, leads to a transparent, fair and highly regarded exam system. (Nationally and internationally). (Coeducational, DEIS)

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)

There is respect for the Leaving Certificate. It is recognized. [Tá meas ann don Teastas AT. – tugtar aitheantas de.] (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

The structure of the programme and the standards expected of students were seen as clear and providing a framework to which students could work.

It is a safe option as student know what they need to do to get the points they want for college courses. Subject content is similar to the Junior Certificate so they are building on previous knowledge. (Coeducational, DEIS)

The majority of schools saw the variety of assessment approaches, at least in some subjects, as a positive feature of LCE. 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. DEIS schools were somewhat more likely than non-DEIS schools to highlight the variety of assessment approaches as a positive feature and somewhat less likely to focus on the objective nature of assessment.

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)

All agreed that practical subjects suit students as they have achieved marks before [the] final written exam which they have worked on over a period of time. This gives the students a greater insight into their subject as they have to research/develop their project. (Coeducational, DEIS)

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)

When asked about the negative features of LCE, the dominant theme emerging related to workload and pressure. Students and teachers were seen as under pressure to 'cover the course', with many subjects viewed as involving a large volume of material. The volume of material to be covered was seen as shaping the nature of teaching and learning, with less space for 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)

Curriculum content is very large - workload for pupils is heavy and arduous. (Girls, non-DEIS)

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

With the huge amount of topics to be taught, there is never enough time to have in-depth conversations on topics that they students find very interesting. [We are] always having to move on to ensure that the course is covered. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

[There is] insufficient time to effectively cover content in each course as part of a comprehensive programme of study (LCE). Concurrent co-curricular and practical elements in courses increases stress on students and staff (orals, field work, science practicals etc.) (Girls, non-DEIS)

The level of workload and the focus on achieving the points needed to secure valued higher education places were seen 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 the girls' schools in the group.

The pressure of one final exam to determine their future is often too much for students – many different circumstances can affect them on the day, e.g. anxiety, sickness, stress. ... All strongly agree that the pressure/stress around achieving adequate points is detrimental to the wellbeing of students, parents and teachers. (Coeducational, DEIS)

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)

Too much content, far too much focus on the single exam, students experiencing extremely high stress levels and becoming anxious over the exams and the implications of being unsuccessful. ... There is far too much emphasis on the final exams which, as mentioned already, causes undue stress and anxiety. (Coeducational, non-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)

Even where assessment in the subject was not solely exam-based, it was felt that the timing of coursework and practical assessments could lead to stress among students and their teachers:

Most staff felt that not having continuous assessment during the two years of LC puts too much pressure on students. Coursework is available in a lot of subjects; however, deadlines for these subjects are mostly between March and May in 6th year, putting too much pressure on students. (Coeducational, DEIS)

To a large extent, the LCE assessment process rests on one final exam which puts students under enormous pressure; this viewpoint was widely supported. Specific criticism was levelled at the time allocated for certain subjects often being inadequate and therefore unfair. It was expressed also that dates for completion of projects are poorly planned, often coinciding with each other at the end of the year. (Boys, non-DEIS)

The exam-based nature of much of the assessment was seen as encouraging 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)

So much relies on the written exams in June. Two/three years of work and study is examined over such a short time slot. This encourages rote learning rather than independent learning. (Coeducational, DEIS)

The Leaving Cert currently serves only one purpose and that is access to 3rd level. There is no reward for completing this in 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)

Current structures were also seen as facilitating an emphasis on 'notes' and 'grinds' (private tuition) as a way of preparing for exams.

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)

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% of 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 practical implications of students being ill or suffering from a bereavement 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 1 day (100% 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)

In relation to reporting, some teachers indicated a preference for more detailed feedback to students, that is, providing them with the marks for the different assessment components (project work, orals, exams etc.).

Teachers strongly agree that Leaving Cert results should show marks awarded for all elements of the exam, project, fieldwork, oral, aural etc. (Coeducational, DEIS)

Reporting is fine but breakdown of marks and grades achieved should be on the report. Example project work, written exam. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

The present system of reporting does not provide students with enough information to equip them to improve. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

2.4 THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED PROGRAMME

The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme was not offered in all of the schools involved in the consultation process so the comments on the programme relate to a smaller subset of schools. The approach to assessment was singled out as the most positive feature of the LCA, with the use of more continuous assessment seen as enhancing student self-confidence and contributing to a sense of achievement.

Use of continuous assessment in LCA gives a sense of achievement to the less academic students and helps with retention. (Coeducational, DEIS)

Task based assessments carried out over 2 years period benefits students. They gain confidence going into the final exam with having their tasks completed and marked beforehand. (Coeducational, DEIS)

All agreed that certification after every session, i.e. 4 times over the two years, allows for growth and reflection. It works very well for task orientated students. It helps them to engage in the work, pay attention to attendance, and get key assignments finished. (Coeducational, DEIS)

Continuous assessment is a positive element for students which means less pressure for written exams. Attendance is a positive and ensures retention in school as part of DEIS planning. The use of interviews and oral communication language is effective ... Students complete a personal reflection task which has a positive impact. (Coeducational, DEIS)

As with Transition Year, work experience was seen as a particularly positive feature of the programme, helping to inform student career choices and providing them with the skills to prepare them for the world of work. Both the approach to

assessment and the work experience placements were more strongly emphasised by DEIS than by non-DEIS schools.

Regular work experience gives students the opportunity to explore the world of work. ... Students can see the relevance of most modules to career pathways they will be following when they leave school. ... The task interviews are a great opportunity for students to prepare for interviews that they will be attending when seeking employment. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

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 work of work. (Coeducational, DEIS)

The approach to learning and assessment, in conjunction with smaller class sizes, was viewed as facilitating engagement with learning for students who may previously have struggled with schoolwork:

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

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)

Small class size results in students getting more one to one attention. As a result, the course structure can be more individualised. (Coeducational, DEIS)

Other positive features included the emphasis on developing life skills through, for example, the social education module, the use of a greater variety of methodologies in the classroom and the provision of an alternative certificate pathway to young people who would have had difficulties with the LCE.

In relation to assessment and reporting, again the value of more continuous assessment and project and practical work was highlighted by teachers. DEIS schools, in particular, saw LCA reporting as better capturing broader learning experiences and the skills acquired.

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 2 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)

In addition, several schools emphasised the frequent feedback to students and their parents provided during the course of the LCA programme.

Reporting in LCA is regular and provides parents with essential feedback on their child's progress. (Boys, non-DEIS)

In terms of negative features, the dominant concern was about the stigma (unfairly) attached to the programme, given its lack of recognition for direct higher education entry.

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)

Students feel segregated from the rest of their year group. (Coeducational, DEIS)

The resultant labelling of the programme meant that some schools were reluctant to offer the programme and, even where they did so, had relatively low levels of take-up, even among students who were 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)

Another school related their decision not to offer LCA to a conscious desire to encourage students to take the LCE and thus broaden their options:

LCA is not offered in the school because it can cause students who would otherwise stick with mainstream Leaving Cert to lower their expectations of themselves and take an easier option of LCA. LCA doesn't have the same currency with employers and further education institutions. LCA doesn't have a sufficiently tight structure to address the needs of students who take it up. While it may suit some students in our cohort, it could have the opposite effect on some of our students who may not push themselves to achieve the traditional LC. (Girls, DEIS)

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)

Some content of modules is out of date, e.g. Office and Administration module students need to know how to use [a] fax. (Coeducational, DEIS)

Some described difficulties in terms of overlap and repetition between different aspects of the programme.

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% cut off. (Girls, DEIS)

[The] attendance component is unrealistic and particularly for the typical student who takes the LCA programme. (Coeducational, DEIS)

A student can have failed LCA before they get into 6th year therefore no incentive to work hard in 6th year. (Coeducational, DEIS)

Some of the schools also described the pressure on teachers and students from the timing of some of the assessment tasks.

In terms of reporting within LCA, lack of awareness of the programme as a whole was echoed in perceived difficulties among stakeholders in interpreting LCA results:

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

The final result sheet shows all credits; however, [it] is a very complex document and hard for students and parents to understand. (Coeducational, DEIS)

2.5 THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE VOCATIONAL PROGRAMME

Like LCA, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) was not provided in all of the schools involved in the consultation so the comments in this section relate to a smaller subset of schools. The positive features of LCVP centred on its focus on preparation for the world of work and providing opportunities for work experience placements.

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)

Content relevant to work and real life situations, preparation for the world of work with a practical and relevant tasks. Opportunity to organise various enterprise projects which teach student a host of life skills. Getting advice and support in the preparation of CVs is a great help to students when they leave school regardless if they follow the college route or not. LCVP is also a great opportunity for students to spend time investigating the career path they hope to follow. Mock interviews are also an important feature of LCVP and one that we would be hoping to continue with. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

The approach to LCVP assessment was seen as a positive feature of the programme, combining as it does more continuous assessment with an earlier exam.

Scheduling of May exams means one exam is 'out of the way' and it can contribute to CAO points (Girls, non-DEIS)

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

The LCVP exam takes place in early May – well in advance of other exams which helps to alleviate pressure for the June written exams. (Coeducational, DEIS)

The portfolio is completed over the 2 years and reduces the pressure of the written exam, the written exam being in May is positive as it lessens the pressure in June. (Coeducational, DEIS)

Like the LCE, assessment and reporting for the LCVP was seen as fair and objective.

Some features of LCVP were seen as more negative. In particular, access to the programme being limited to students who had chosen particular groups of (LCE) subjects was viewed as unnecessarily restricting 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)

If students don't have the correct combination of subjects then they are unable to study the LCVP module. LCVP poses difficulty for students who have an Irish exemption, they end up having to study a foreign language which they really struggle with. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

The fact that the maximum points awarded to the link modules were set at a lower level than for the highest grade on a higher level paper was seen as a deterrent to take-up 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)

An increasing number of students will opt to specialise across subjects which offer the max no of points. (Coeducational, non-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)

Why not make this a stand-alone subject? It is not working as a programme. (Coeducational, DEIS)

A lack of flexibility in being able to resubmit the portfolio if a student was repeating the year was also mentioned:

If an LCVP student is repeating the Leaving Cert, they cannot submit another portfolio – this does not give them an opportunity to improve if the first portfolio is not up to standard. This should change. (Coeducational, DEIS)

2.6 SENIOR CYCLE PATHWAYS AND INCLUSION

When asked about the extent to which senior cycle is currently suitable for all students, the majority of schools felt that it did not adequately cater for those who were less academically oriented. Overall, senior cycle was viewed as geared more towards higher education entry than other potential pathways.

Unless they have engaged fully in a very proactive TY programme, the pathways are very limited and tunneled. 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)

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)

Several schools mentioned particular gaps in provision for learners with a special educational need (SEN), with a lack of continuity highlighted for young people who had taken level one or two courses at junior cycle:

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

Many students do not have suitable pathways. Many students with ASD 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 ASDAN¹ qualifications, in order to cater for students with special educational needs at senior cycle level.

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. Gives students a chance to take part in senior cycle but at their own level. Life skills and personalised programme. (B21)

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. (B20)

Many of the schools felt that current provision was too narrowly focused on the academic and saw the need to integrate more vocational courses into senior cycle.

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. Apprenticeships could be offered to run alongside the more academic provision in a kind of dual track on the same site. Work experience and theory delivered together. (Coeducational, DEIS)

There are no technical/vocational subjects in this school. Broadening the range of subjects available in single-sex schools to include e.g.

¹ ASDAN is a UK-based education charity and awarding organisation.

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)

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)

A minority of schools felt that the current senior cycle is inclusive because it offers a variety of programmes tailored to student need and/or it offers a variety of subjects and subject levels.

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)

In other schools, there was a mixture of views among staff as to whether diverse pathways were currently available to students:

There were differing views amongst the staff with regard to the pathways available to students at the moment. For example, one teacher said, "At the moment, there aren't suitable pathways. Different sites for learning should be made available to students to create new pathways and allowing students access to different modules and experience of all areas – technical etc. Pathways should definitely not be ring-fenced." Another teacher had a slightly different view, however. "There are certainly pathways available but in reality the LCE is the one most people feel they need to go with. Some pathways, like the FETAC system, are seen as lower status in terms of progressing from school." (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

2.7 PERSPECTIVES ON THE FUTURE OF SENIOR CYCLE

Teachers were asked their views on how they would like senior cycle to be, including the preferred length, whether some areas of learning should be provided for all students, the way it is structured and how learning is assessed.

2.7.1 Senior cycle length

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

Transition Year experiences should be rolled out to all. Many never get to experience the invaluable community involvement, volunteerism, parish life, Gaisce, YSI, etc. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

TY should be made compulsory, with the fundamental principles of the TY Programme but subject specific tasters which are assessed with a view to students deciding strategically what subjects they would take in 5th and 6th Year. (Boys, non-DEIS)

Senior cycle should be 3 years in total. 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. TY should not be seen as a separate entity or a “doss” year - it may not cover curriculum but help build life skills, e.g. budgets, taxes, cooking, gardening, managing a home etc. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

In contrast, others discussed the value of having an optional Transition Year and the flexibility for students to complete senior cycle in two or three years depending on their preference.

A longer senior cycle (i.e. three years) was seen as having the potential to provide the space for students to fully engage with their courses and to reduce the pressure to rush.

Senior Cycle should be a three year programme which would allow for plenty of time to teach topics, fully explain them and plenty of time for revision. This would be of great assistance in the reduction of stress levels and anxiety. Year one of Senior Cycle would help to bridge the gap between Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

A number of teachers suggested the potential for students to complete senior cycle at their own pace so that some students could take two years and others three. This could be based on the difficulty level of courses and/or to the provision of academic or vocational offerings.

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)

However, some teachers pointed to logistical challenges in providing such flexibility to students and the difficulty of securing change in the context of the points system:

I do not see, structurally, how an option for students to work at different paces could be accommodated. Schools exist on the basis of collective teaching and learning. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

Learning experiences are restricted due to the length of courses and the centrality and necessity to ensure maximum opportunity for scoring as many points as possible. While this is not ideal, as a parent, the importance of obtaining the necessary points for 3rd level is the overriding concern. The idea of better learning experiences is good and laudable but gaining entry to the desired 3rd level option, in my experience, is the main concern for both students and parents. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

Flexibility in the length of senior cycle as well as in the components of the programme were seen as particularly important for students with SEN:

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)

2.7.2 Stand-alone programmes?

Despite differences in views about the appropriate length of senior cycle, a good deal of support was evident for having greater flexibility to combine the advantages of the existing programmes. Some teachers spoke about the potential to have a greater integration between TY-type learning experiences and the

remainder of senior cycle (see also above on the views of those who wish to make TY mandatory):

The lack of coherence / alignment through JC →TY →LC. TY too 'stand-alone' at present with no recognition in the final certification. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

More frequently, teachers talked about the value of integrating some of the benefits of the LCA approach into LCE and/or having less rigid separation between the two programmes:

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 1 yr?? 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)

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)

2.7.3 Senior cycle structures

Teachers were asked about their preferred structures for senior cycle, with reference being made to the role of subjects, modules and/or units of learning. In their responses, the meaning of 'modules' and 'units of learning' were sometimes blurred so the main contrast evident was between a focus on traditional subjects and wanting more flexible components of subject areas. Around half of the schools wanted a combination of subjects, modules and units of learning in order to provide more flexibility at student and, indeed, teacher level. This modular

approach was seen as facilitating students sampling different subject areas as a basis for career decision-making:

A modular design would allow students to dip in and out of different subjects at different levels. This would give those students who are unsure of what career pathway they want to pursue an opportunity to change direction if they are unhappy with the modules they have chosen in 5th year. (Coeducational, DEIS)

It should be structured in terms 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)

In this way, course content could be tailored to suit student interests, allowing for different levels of engagement with subject areas:

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, provide greater choice and flexibility – tailor-made to student needs and would allow for cross-curricular learning throughout. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

Having assessment of modules upon their completion was viewed as a potential way of reducing stress and pressure and allowing students to incrementally build upon their knowledge and skills:

Subjects should split into modules that are assessed on completion. The result of these assessments should go towards their overall leaving certificate. (Perhaps a credit system). If students can track their progress and know the requirements for future pathways, they could have more realistic expectations for themselves, thus easing stress. (Coeducational, DEIS)

A modular system within subjects would be fantastic for students to get accreditation for units of work completed. (Girls, non-DEIS)

I believe certain core subjects such as Irish and English should be supported with modules and units and learning to highlight certain skills that would be applicable outside the classroom or give a general overall insight into the subject (i.e. interview skills, Irish Culture and spoken word) that would be non-exam. (Boys, non-DEIS)

The potential for cross-curricular learning as part of a modular system was valued as a way of addressing the 21st century skills highlighted by schools in cycle one of the consultation process:

Should we continue to think in 'subject' blocks only? Could we look at and determine the key competencies required of senior cycle students and introduce some 'cross curricular' elements / themes and offer the programmes with staffing in teams across traditional subject divisions? (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

Only a 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)

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 4/5 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 5th and 6th year. The students should have access to a greater variety of both academic and vocational courses. (Coeducational, DEIS)

Core subjects should remain, but what are the cores needs to be reviewed. Perhaps there should be room for minor and major subjects, allowing for choice of subjects and keeping the "core" aspect. (Coeducational, 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 them 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)

A reduction in subjects (major and minor options) is advisable to reduce the volume of irrelevant work/stress for students. (Boys, non-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)

2.7.4 Areas of learning

In discussing compulsory areas of learning, 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 by 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: critical thinking, reading and writing skills are essential across so many career fields, as well as the study of literature is expansive to one's life experience and creates opportunities to connect with others. (Boys, DEIS)

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)

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. I believe there is a need for a subject or module which

caters for students to prepare for life after school and addressing application processes, life at home with regards to electronics and their understanding & healthy cooking etc. My rationale for this module is to provide students with the ability and confidence to look after themselves after they have received their education at school. (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.

It was strongly felt that subjects like physical education, sexual health education - subjects pertaining to students' physical and mental health and wellbeing - should be available to all students. (Girls, non-DEIS)

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)

Some teachers argued against having any compulsory subjects at senior cycle:

There should be no compulsory examinable subjects. Some students hate being forced to study subjects that they have no aptitude for or interest in. (Coeducational, DEIS)

In keeping with their views that senior cycle did not cater for all students (see above), 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 3rd level. However, not all our students will progress to 3rd 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)

2.7.5 Approach to assessment

In discussing the appropriate approach to assessment, there was a consensus across schools that assessment should be spread throughout senior cycle and involve a broader range of assessment approaches. Support for these measures was even 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 5th year - if you don't get what you need, repeat those exams in 6th year with their other assessments. This offers an opportunity to complete work at a different pace. (Coeducational, DEIS)

Formal assessments at end of 5th year, which are corrected externally would allow learning at a different pace. ... An option to have some externally assessed exams in 5th 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 5th year. This would alleviate the pressure that is currently concentrated at the end of 6th year. A semesterised system could also offer an opportunity to lessen the pressure that currently exists around the terminal exam. (Coeducational, DEIS)

A considerable number of teachers felt that some type of continuous assessment within clearly defined parameters and units of learning should be considered. A system of external moderation would have to be in place to ensure consistency/fairness at national level. Reasons – this would be a fairer system, and result in less exam pressure for students. It would also encourage student engagement over 2 years

and ensure that students would take more responsibility for their learning. It would also foster confidence/personal growth/progress. (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.

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 Politics & 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)

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 utilized in this. (Boys, DEIS)

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. The only choice is a RACE [Reasonable Accommodations at the Certificate Examinations] application. The student has only two options, to continue with exams or to wait until the following June to repeat. This is no longer acceptable and teachers feel strongly that this should be addressed with the SEC. (Coeducational, DEIS)

Many schools pointed to the gap between junior and senior cycle in terms of standards and expectations, with some highlighting the need for some of the changes in junior cycle to be brought forward into senior cycle:

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)

There is a growing mismatch between Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle with not enough time in LCE for active learning, investigation and skills development. The Leaving Certificate favours one type of learner. The emphasis is on rote learning across the board with too much focus on the terminal exam. (Coeducational, DEIS)

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)

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.

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

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

Some teachers are hesitant to mention continuous assessment as they are worried about how it would be marked and who would be responsible for the marking. (Coeducational, DEIS)

In discussing the need for change, teachers were cognisant of a number of challenges in implementing these reforms. They referred to logistical constraints around timetabling and staffing levels as well as broader cultural changes.

Potentially this could be good but the impact on staffing levels, timetabling etc. could be extraordinary. Huge cultural change would be necessary. (Girls, non-DEIS)

They highlighted the potential for project work and more staggered assessment to result in a heavy workload for students and teachers, unless it was carefully managed:

There were mixed views on this – many felt that it would be beneficial to have a modular system with credit at the end. Others felt that students might struggle with regular deadlines and that we shouldn't try to be 'like' universities. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

Ensuring that students took ownership of their own learning and carried out their own project work was also mentioned as a potential challenge:

Project work can challenge the teachers – students not taking responsibility, teachers under grade pressure 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)

A challenge is that students could crib this more easily—there could be copying across years or project work completed by someone other than the student. (Boys, DEIS)

A major concern related to the backwash effect of the points system on teaching and learning in senior cycle, with many schools feeling that changes in assessment at senior cycle would not be effective without accompanying changes in the higher education entry process:

The high-stakes exam and pressure is a result of the current CAO entry system. This entry system needs to be overhauled. (Girls, non-DEIS)

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 3rd level entry through the CAO points based system results in a stranglehold on the education of our students. (Coeducational, DEIS)

2.7.6 Approach to reporting

When teachers were asked specifically about potential reporting at senior cycle level, a consensus emerged 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.

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:

Nice idea to record broad range of learning experiences but would be difficult to ensure consistency of records and standards across all schools. Unfair from a socio-economic point of view. (Girls, DEIS)

Others felt that it was important that the profile should be presented in a transparent way that truly reflected student achievement and skills:

The current statements used in Junior Cycle are not specific enough. We use them for 3rd year and some 2nd year reports. Parents don't know what they mean. They want to hear about actual work done and progress made. (Coeducational, DEIS)

2.8 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has outlined teacher views on current senior cycle programmes and structures and on how they would like senior cycle to develop. Teachers mentioned a number of positive features of the current system. There was a strong consensus around the value of external assessment in the current senior cycle, with Leaving Certificate Established certification seen as reflecting a fair and transparent process and having considerable currency with key stakeholders. Teachers also valued the range of LCE subjects that students could take. The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme was viewed as enhancing student skills and preparation for the world of work while using a variety of assessment approaches that reflected student learning. Teachers felt that the Leaving Certificate Applied programme provided a valuable way of re-engaging less academically oriented students and fostering and recognising their achievements. Transition Year was viewed as providing access to a wide variety of learning experiences, thus enhancing student maturity and personal and social skill development.

Teachers pointed to some negative features of the current senior cycle. Overall, senior cycle was seen as more oriented towards third-level entry and not inclusive of the full range of skills and capacities, especially of those with a more practical or vocational orientation. The reliance on largely exam-based assessment 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 not being able to progress directly to

higher education was seen as making LCA a much less attractive option for young people.

Teachers had mixed views on the appropriate length of senior cycle but favoured having greater flexibility, involving a modular approach and a range of academic and vocational options. There was support for combining the benefits of the different senior cycle programmes rather than having distinct pathways, though views were more mixed on whether Transition Year should be mandatory or not. There was a strong consensus for moving away from a reliance on a terminal exam in LCE towards spreading assessment over the course of senior cycle (at end of the year or on completion of modules) and using a greater variety of assessment approaches. There was strong agreement too that external assessment should remain for these new LCE components. In terms of reporting, teachers generally favoured something like a profile of achievement which took account of extra-curricular and non-exam subjects and activities as well as academic grades.

CHAPTER 3

Parent perspectives on senior cycle pathways and structures

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter draws on focus groups conducted with parents in the schools involved in the consultation process to outline parent perspectives on senior cycle programmes, structures and approaches to assessment. Section two examines their views on the Transition Year programme while section three looks at parental opinions on the three Leaving Certificate programmes. Because of between-school differences in the provision of the three programmes and differing take-up among families, parents were much more likely to comment on Leaving Certificate Established but did have something to say about LCA and LCVP. Section four examines whether current senior cycle pathways and structures are seen as suitable for, and inclusive of, all students by parents. Section five outlines parental views on potential changes to senior cycle, including assessment and reporting.

3.2 THE TRANSITION YEAR PROGRAMME

Like teachers, the parents consulted were very positive about the Transition Year programme. They most strongly emphasised the effect of participation on the maturity and personal development of their children.

Our Transition Year is an excellent programme. It offers a huge variety of opportunities for all our students – work experience, first aid, ECDL, modular programmes, involvement in the community, volunteering, Gaisce, mental health programme. It is a challenging programme – a level of expectation is set, constant reflection and evaluation of what the student is doing or not doing. 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)

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

A great programme that gives students an opportunity to sample new subjects and do work experience. Assessment takes all aspects of their involvement into account. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

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)

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

Freedom to explore new interests and gain independence through work experience and community placement - practical skills, e.g. interpersonal skills through engaging with adults outside [the] school community. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

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)

Assessment and reporting in TY were viewed positively by the groups of parents; in particular, they mentioned the range of assessment approaches used and the way in which they better captured the span of learning.

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)

There are a range of assessments. Some subjects are project-based. Putting together an eportfolio for assessment keeps the students engaged. (Girls, non-DEIS)

However, some parents expressed concern about the lack of recognition for TY certification.

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)

The assessments in TY should have recognition at a national level so that the young person can bring those achievements into 5th year of the Senior Cycle. 'TY is not always taken seriously because it does not have a national recognition or award.' (Girls, DEIS)

From the parental perspective, the negative features of the TY programme centred on the perceived impact of participation on the transition to fifth year and on the potential for some students to become demotivated during the year.

[It is] less useful for the academic student, they can struggle with the lack of structure. (Girls, non-DEIS)

The programme is 'great but there were times when my daughter seemed not to do much in classes and there was a lot of messing in those classes.' (Girls, DEIS)

It is very difficult to settle back into LCE after the year. There needs to be more of a connection and the gap bridged if it is to remain the same. (Coeducational, DEIS)

Due to lack of formal assessments throughout the year, it does not prepare the students for 5th and 6th year when they must sit school exams and state exams again. (Coeducational, 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)

3.3 THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE PROGRAMMES

Most of the parents consulted focused on the Leaving Certificate Established programme in their discussions of senior cycle. However, some did comment on LCA and LCVP. The student-centred focus of the LCA programme along with the use of continuous assessment were highlighted by parents.

The way that students can 'build upon' their Leaving Cert by 'doing projects and assignments and the marks go toward their exam - that is very good.' (Girls, DEIS)

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 as providing a valuable pathway for students who were less academically oriented and as facilitating a sense of achievement among young people.

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)

LCA suits students who are not academically minded and who don't like school or who are not suited to school. (Coeducational, DEIS)

The LCA programme was also seen as providing greater preparation for the world of work for participants, through the work experience placement and broader skill development:

Building up credits towards the final result of the Leaving Certificate – this is good for the student – she is able to see how she's progressing. Preparation with CVs, presentation skills for interviews, [these are] good skills to have for college interviews and the world of work. (Girls, DEIS)

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

At the same time, 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. Similarly, the lack of recognition of the qualification was mentioned in relation to programme assessment.

The LCA is a brilliant programme that is not promoted enough, I feel. There should be more awareness of it in the media and promote it as a different rather than a lower qualification. However, it needs updating and needs to be seen by parents and students as an 'alternative route' not something for 'stupid' students as I feel that's the view that is out there. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

The programme does not have the same reputation as the LCE. Its perception is seen as 'inferior'. (Girls, DEIS)

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)

In relation to LCVP, parents tended to comment on the impact of participation on skill development, especially preparation 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)

The LCVP class is a huge benefit to the senior cycle, it is much more practical than their traditional courses – but can get them the equivalent to a H4 if they get a distinction and doing something that will be of benefit to them once complete. (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 5th year is a very positive experience for students. (Coeducational, DEIS)

There were few negative comments on LCVP but some parents commented on the way access was restricted to those who took particular subjects and on the lower points awarded to the highest grade in the link modules.

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 LCE has a wide variety of subjects which offers the student many options. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

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.

Transparency. Each student is equally assessed, examination number only ensures fairness. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

The exam is fair and the system is meritocratic. (Girls, non-DEIS)

Several parents highlighted the way in which exposure to a challenging curriculum provided young people with valuable life skills for the future:

It 'sets you up for life' and gives you a sense of responsibility as it is all down to you to do well. It provides a good, solid education. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

Assessment motivates student to work consistently. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

When asked specifically about LCE assessment, two main themes emerged from the discussion. Firstly, parents reiterated their praise for the objective nature of assessment, describing the system as fair and transparent.

It's a fair system in that all the preparation is tested at the same time for all students – standards of correcting all maintained and monitored, we believe. (Boys, non-DEIS)

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)

Secondly, many parents highlighted the use of a variety of assessment approaches (including projects and orals/aurals) in many subjects.

History and Geography projects, practicals and orals are all great examples of established continuous assessment. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

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)

When asked about the negative features of the LCE programme, the majority of parents emphasised the adverse impact on students in terms of pressure and stress. Not surprisingly, given their role, parents were more likely to mention this issue than teachers. Parents expressed concern about the stress and anxiety experienced by their children in preparing for the Leaving Certificate exam.

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. There are too many subjects each with too much content. There is too great an emphasis on the CAO points and

the spoon feeding which teachers do in preparing students for the exams is not a preparation for how to work in college. (Girls, non-DEIS)

Stress levels can be very high as in the current system there is huge emphasis on points. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

Exam pressure was seen as reducing 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)

Parents viewed this pressure and stress as arising from two sets of factors. The first set of factors related to the volume of material to be covered in senior cycle, with parents expressing concern over the ability of their children to be able to keep up with the pace of work.

[They are] expected to do too many subjects in too much detail. [It is] hard to manage all competently. [There is] too much focus or emphasis on points/competition. ... [The] volume of work attached to some subjects is completely unrealistic, given the fact my son must do a minimum of 6. (Boys, non-DEIS)

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 second set of factors related to the dominance of exam-based assessment and the concentration of these exams over a short period of time.

Everything coming down to a 2-hour exam is ridiculous. So much of current assessment mode is almost Victorian in format. And current available pathways don't offer modes of assessing which suit every student. This fuels a decision to disconnect from education - a separation for life is some rare cases. (Boys, non-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)

The second most negative was the dependence on a single summative exam in over 50% of subjects. This puts excessive pressure on students and is not considered to be a fair or accurate assessment of students' knowledge or achievement. Also the timetabling of exams over a very short period of time and the need to sit two subjects in a single day further adds to this stress. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

The issue of the impact of students being ill or experiencing a bereavement during the exams was also raised by parents, who felt that there should be greater flexibility to resit the exam rather than repeat the whole year:

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)

Missed exams should be repeatable for students who, due to exceptional circumstances, could not sit their exam(s). (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

The view that the approach to assessment encouraged an emphasis on rote learning among students was mentioned by around a third of the parent groups, who felt that exam-based assessment rewarded memorising material rather than fully understanding it.

It promotes rote learning and rewards those who regurgitate information given to them rather than encouraging the student to think for himself. (Boys, non-DEIS)

The fact that the course work is so theory based – and the better your memory is the better you can do – therefore the children just relay the answers rather than understand them. (Coeducational, 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)

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)

The upshot 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 and higher education:

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)

Like teachers, several parents referred to discontinuity between junior and senior cycle, 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 difríochtaí eatarthu, tá said ar nós ábháir difriúil ar fad. Tá an córas marcála idir an dá scrúdú difriúil.] (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

The change in depth of work required from Junior Cert to Senior Cycle is very high and many students are under pressure to make this leap. Parents are even more worried about this now as they fear that the new Junior Cycle will make the gap even wider. (Coeducational, DEIS)

While many felt that the new approaches used in junior cycle provided a more authentic form of learning, they highlighted the challenge for young people where these changed methodologies were not mirrored at senior cycle level:

New JC methodologies such as group work, presenting work are very positive developments – LC as it is now does not match this – [there is a] concern that grades in LC will be lower for students experiencing new JC. ‘New system in JC is brilliant but then going back to old system for LC’. (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)

There is already major concern as to how the benefits of New JC (CBA / AT / assessment.... Presentation...research) can be valued at LC while the current LC curriculum now does not allow for these changes ... LC teachers/students are concerned about how the areas no longer covered in New JC can be ‘caught up on’ for old LC... Are students able to cope with the demands? (Girls, non-DEIS)

When asked specifically about assessment, parents were even more likely to criticise the generally exam-based nature of current assessment approaches and the pressure and stress to which this leads.

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)

The time constraints of the course cause some students to give up extracurricular activities to allow for more study. Extracurricular activities are important for maintaining a healthy lifestyle and wellbeing. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

Others commented on the neglect of broader skills and capabilities, leading to a narrow metric by which to assess young people.

3.4 SENIOR CYCLE PATHWAYS AND INCLUSION

Like teachers, parents were asked about the extent to which current senior cycle pathways were suitable for, and inclusive of, all students. In around six in ten schools, parents discussed how the current system was broadly suitable for their own children.

There are a lot of pathways in the school our children attend which allows them the choice to follow the pathway that suits them best. The parents surveyed felt that the students were following the right pathway for them. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

“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 3rd level.”
(Coeducational, non-DEIS)

At the same time, around half of the groups felt that the current senior cycle was not suitable for young people who were less academically oriented.

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

Having one path for students with different skills, plans and ways of learning doesn't make sense. Many then gave examples of their children becoming frustrated at the lack of flexibility in the present system - mainly to do with restricted subject choice. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

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

The system was not seen by parents as catering adequately for the needs of young people with special educational needs:

It is not inclusive. Students with SEN, in particular those who have writing difficulties, struggle with the terminal written exam. The system therefore is discriminatory against them. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

In the special schools involved in the consultation process, parents pointed to 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)

Other parents instanced specific difficulties their children were having in their current programme:

Some parents [are] worried that their daughters were not following a pathway at SC that best suited their (daughter's) needs. Some felt that

their daughters were unable to keep up with the pace of the course at LCE. One parent felt that her daughter found LCA not challenging enough and now was unable to do LCE. (Girls, DEIS)

In discussing whether their child had access to appropriate learning experiences, parents were similarly equally divided between feeling that provision suited their child and highlighting the neglect of broader skills in current structures.

The need for more project and practical work and a combination of academic and vocational learning was also mentioned in this respect.

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)

3.5 PERSPECTIVES ON THE FUTURE OF SENIOR CYCLE

3.5.1 Senior cycle length and structures

There was little consensus among parents on the appropriate length of senior cycle. Some of the parents consulted indicated that having a longer senior cycle was likely to enhance student maturity and readiness to embark on post-school pathways.

[There is] no great problem with the length of the Senior Cycle, in fact we believe the older the student is moving on to 3rd level or into the work place, the better prepared he/she is for the variety of issues he will inevitably encounter. (Boys, non-DEIS)

Senior Cycle could easily be 3 or 4 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)

We felt that 18 years or 19 years is a good age for students to leave school. Anything younger than that was considered to be too young. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

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

There was general consensus that 3 years was enough with three parents adding that it could be flexible, ranging from 2-4 years for students with extra needs/seeking more learning opportunities. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

Some parents expressed 3 years as optimal and others felt that the option to extend the length from 2-3 years is preferable to allow for varying level of maturity/subject choice/level of ability/alternative career path etc. (Girls, non-DEIS)

Different learning styles require differing time limits. Individuals have varied requirements when it comes to processing and acquiring knowledge and skills and this needs to be recognised. Students may finish a course he has a lot of knowledge in – faster than one he needs to acquire knowledge in. (Coeducational, DEIS)

There was less discussion of senior cycle structures among parents than among teachers, though over half of the groups favoured the use of modules or subjects combined with modules.

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 3 years. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

More bite sized modules of university subjects throughout the senior cycle to help them get a sense of options for study. ... You would essentially cover a range of subjects, expand young people's education and facilitate enhanced subject choice at university possibly even increase the rate of school completion and continuance to third level as young people see the relevance and can visualize their futures much better. (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 Transition Year 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)

3.5.2 Areas of learning

Around a third of the parent groups suggested changing the existing compulsory subject offering or placing a greater emphasis on non-exam subjects.

A broader range of non-exam subjects to include things such as Social Media, IT skills, Public Speaking, Politics and modules in languages such as Latin or Spanish which the school doesn't offer for examination. (Girls, 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)

One parent said, 'I don't want my daughter to only come out with straight A's in the LC, I want her to be well rounded ; to be able to communicate with people – polite and respectful, work in a team be flexible and organised and to have staying power when the going gets tough. Those skills are so important to get on in life or to be successfully promoted within your career/ job. ' (Girls, DEIS)

Senior cycle education should be a holistic experience – it is too academic at present. All students should learn life skills, coping skills, citizenship, aspects of the LCVP programmes (work experience, interview skills, CV, etc.), basic cooking skills to prepare for life in college. Parents worry that currently students don't have any general knowledge or knowledge of life leaving school and many lack common sense. (Coeducational, 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 the need to include ICT skills, work experience placements and Physical Education as core components of the senior cycle curriculum.

PE should be [a] mandatory part of the week and a fitness programme for all ... some students are very good to keep this going ... others neither have the money nor facilities to accommodate this. (Boys, non-DEIS)

I think work experience is a valuable experience for all students as they get to sample different jobs and while TY students and LCA students experience this, the traditional LC does not offer this. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

Students should have the opportunity to do some work experience at senior cycle. This would develop their social skills and social conscience. (Coeducational, DEIS)

Digital studies. Everyone felt that in this digital age that students should be taught IT as a subject. Although in ways students are very "tuned into" computers, they might be limited in the areas of IT expertise. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

Some parents felt that there should be fewer or no mandatory subjects, allowing young people to select subjects that better suit their interests:

[The] duty to attempt some compulsory subjects (of no use post-LC) is unfair, unrealistic and futile. [It] helps student get lost in an unhealthy whirlwind of stress and frustration. (Boys, non-DEIS)

The group felt that students were required to do too many compulsory subjects (4 out of 7 are compulsory) and that the choice of subjects should be wider. (Boys, non-DEIS)

3.5.3 Assessment and reporting

In relation to assessment, almost all of the parent groups mentioned two sets of changes. The first related to spreading assessment out through the course of senior cycle. 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.

More continuous assessment in some subjects could prove beneficial to reduce stress. Subjects could be studied in 6 week modules and assessed at the end of each module. This would reduce the pressure on students. (Girls, non-DEIS)

Continual assessment should be brought in for Senior Cycle and it should count towards the student's final marks and points so that if students are sick or absent at exam time it won't mean they have an entire year to repeat. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

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)

The second set of (interrelated) changes centred on the desire to have greater integration of project and practical work components in particular and a greater variety of assessment methods more generally.

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)

Assessments of projects to be done in 5th year rather than 6th year. This would spread out the workload and hopefully reduce the stress levels for the student. At the moment, all oral and written exams are in 6th year in LCE as well as the practical examinations. The assessments could cover the individual's work but may also incorporate teamwork. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

More continuous assessment and project assessment could engage students with their learning rather than being bored or discouraged by exam-style assessment or turned off careers in subjects perceived as difficult or "boring". (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

Change from 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)

Some parents also mentioned the potential to reduce the number of subjects or 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 3 (like UK) is too few, 7/8 (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 5. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

Less subjects to be taken at LCE: 6 subjects is too much for some students. [They should] concentrate more on the subjects students want to pursue in 3rd 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)

In comparison to the pattern for teachers, only a few parents spontaneously mentioned the retention of external assessment when asked about the changes needed to assessment.

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)

Discussion of reporting among parents often focused on assessment but several parents expressed the view that school reports should document broader skills rather than academic results alone:

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.? – Some students will just not perform under the pressure of the exams so maybe we need to look for additional information that will help them move onto further education or into the working world. In addition to this, I think the students that may not be high achievers academically but socially very capable would benefit from a report such as this. (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)

This should be holistically based, reporting on the whole person and his/her journey, rather than reporting a series of grades. It should give the opportunity for students and parents to focus on the development of the person, their skills, academic achievement and contribution to the school and wider community. It should take account of: skills development; academic achievement; personal achievement. (Boys, non-DEIS)

3.6 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. In the focus groups, parents were asked to comment on the existing senior cycle programmes. They were very positive about the Transition Year 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 but 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. These changes were viewed as facilitating preparation for life after school and reducing 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 in the senior cycle curriculum.

CHAPTER 4

Student perspectives on the senior cycle

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter draws on focus group interviews conducted with students in 21 of the schools involved in the consultation process. As in cycle one, the discussion focused on student views of senior cycle more generally, though some students did comment on specific senior cycle programmes. Section two assesses what helps students learn, drawing on the accounts of both junior and senior cycle learners.² Section three looks at student perspectives on current senior cycle programmes while section four examines their views on the suitability of current structures for all students. Section five presents student views on the kind of senior cycle experience they would like to have.

4.2 WHAT HELPS STUDENTS LEARN?

As in cycle one, both junior and senior cycle students tended to favour being exposed to a variety of teaching methods, especially those that were more interactive:

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)

Practical work was seen as preferable as a 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, it gets really confusing. So actually doing stuff out in projects and CBAs are really good. (Coeducational, DEIS)

Groupwork and peer learning were valued as more effective ways of learning by

² The quotes are taken from the focus group interviews with senior cycle students, unless otherwise stated.

the young people consulted:

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)

You're interacting with the class, so the class will join in, and it helps you learn, because you're speaking it out, instead of writing it down. So you're speaking out and you're remembering it. (Boys, non-DEIS, JC)

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)

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)

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:

Usually, the things you do with your hands, you use it and you do it, and it stays with you. And then when you're older, you can use those skills, they'll come back to you and you'll be able to do them. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

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)

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)

These interactive approaches were contrasted against more didactic methods involving reading from the book or note taking, which were viewed as less engaging and making it difficult to remember material:

If you are just writing notes, there are a lot of notes, they don't all go in, so if you're trying to learn something and memorise it, when you draw a picture of it, it comes back to you more quickly. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

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)

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 ... I liked that we had the whole year to prepare for it. 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, there are big decisions to make ... whereas in the Junior Cert you just felt there was a lot less pressure. ... In Home Ec [Home Economics], we hadn't just a written exam, we had a cookery exam and we had a project and that added up to the percentage so the final exam wasn't worth as much as the other two. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

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

I find it's easy when the teacher has passion, because it teaches you in the class, so you don't really have to go home and learn it. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

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)

In contrast, students found it more difficult to learn 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)

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)

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

I do Business, and the teacher does tell us events that have happens in the world, and it is easier to remember it then after that. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

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 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, because during tests, I usually go blank and I'd know a lot of stuff, then the minute the test would come around I'd forget all of it. Whereas, if I was talking, I'll find it easier to remember stuff, because it's coming from myself. (Coeducational, DEIS)

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)

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)

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)

Other students pointed to the contrast between Transition Year and the remainder of senior cycle, with 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)

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. This shift in the nature of teacher-student relationships was viewed as facilitating them becoming more independent as learners.

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)

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)

You feel more respected like. You feel like if the teachers are respecting you, you will respect them more if you're older. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

4.3 SENIOR CYCLE PROGRAMMES

4.3.1 The Transition Year programme

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

TY would probably be the best thing about Leaving Cert. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

As in cycle one, students referred to the variety of experiences during the year and the acquisition of a range of skills which would better 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, you have bigger groups than just your one class or you're like split up and it's like really good for communicating with people, and it's also a break in your exams. So you're not finishing your junior cycle and going straight back into learning off stuff for your Leaving Cert, you're taking a year for yourself and you're learning stuff for yourself and also going for work experience, which is another thing that you'll use when you're older. (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, because like it kind of helps you get an idea of the subjects, maybe, that you want to pick, and what you don't want to pick for Senior Cycle, and what you want to pursue, maybe, after. (Girls, no-DEIS)

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

I found it useful as well, because it was the first time I'd ever been in an office environment, and I realised how fresh and everything everywhere was, and that was really good as well. [It] also motivates you as well to work harder. You see yourself; that's where I will be in ten years' time, and it really makes you see to the future as well. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

Some students made more negative comments on Transition Year, including not having as many activities as anticipated or wanting a more sustained involvement in work experience. 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 LCVP and LCA

Students were not asked directly about the different senior cycle programmes. However, some did comment on LCVP and 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)

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)

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)

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)

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. So you get put down if you do something like that. ... We were like told, if you're not doing well in class, we're going to put you in LCA. We're going to drop you down to the lower classes. ... 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 they 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)

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)

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)

These students were attending a special school and did not have access to 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'.

Fewer students commented directly on LCVP. However, some highlighted the benefits of the 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), 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)

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)

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. ... They give you like all these notes and it's really easy to do because most of it is portfolio work and then there's like a written exam and you do like a work placement. ... You do all these different things. (Coeducational, DEIS)

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)

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

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)

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 ...

There's no subject that you're dreading going into really. Maybe you have to do Maths or you have to do English, but there are those four subjects that you've chosen and you enjoy, so therefore you're got a more positive experience of school, I find.

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)

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). The high stakes nature of the exam placed what was seen as an undue emphasis on performance over a very short time frame.

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. ... it'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)

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:

Junior cycle doesn't really matter but Leaving Cert defines your life. (Girls, non-DEIS, JC)

To put someone's future down to 500 points, it's very cruel. It is. It's very, 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)

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)

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)

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)

The amount of material was seen as shaping the kind of teaching taking place 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)

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)

Some students contrasted teaching and learning in LCE with the greater space allowed in junior cycle for classroom discussion and for exploring different ways of approaching course material:

There was time for like class discussion and stuff. And like, you could like, give your opinion, and like, kind of, find better ways of like, learning about a certain topic, whereas like, in Leaving Cycle, like, Senior Cycle, you [are] just like taught it and that's it, like, it's up to you to just learn that, and write it on a page. (Girls, non-DEIS)

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. there'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)

As in cycle one, students reported that the amount of time required for homework and study led to them reducing the time spent on sports and other social activities, further contributing to feelings of stress and pressure:

There's so much in each of those seven subjects that like you've to do all your stuff in English and all your stuff in Irish and so on and so on and so on and you've to learn them all off, and then you're expected to do sports and you're expected to extra-curricular things and have a life outside of school whilst doing your two hours of study on top of your homework, ... what days do they think you have? Like we only have a 24-hour day like everybody else. We're in school for eight of them. We have to do other things outside of school work to make sure that our mental health is stable and stays that way. (Coeducational, DEIS)

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. ... It's so heavy, the subjects are so heavy. The classes, everyone is stressed, trying to finish courses, a lot of the courses are very long. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

It's just you never actually get a break even when you're supposed to be relaxing you're always thinking about what you should be doing. (Coeducational, DEIS)

Even junior cycle students associated the transition to senior cycle with more work as well as pressure and stress, being aware of the high stakes associated with exam grades.

If you don't do good in the Leaving Cert like, yeah, you'd be able to get a job, but you might not be able to get your dream job. (Boys, non-DEIS, JC)

Many students talked about the lack of flexibility if young people were ill or suffered a bereavement during the exam period whereby they were required to repeat a full year 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)

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)

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

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)

The written exams, all it is, is learning things and throwing them out on the paper, ... you're just memorising stuff, you're not really learning it properly. But with things like projects and practical subject, you do have to learn the stuff and learn how to do it properly, rather than just memorising and throwing it out on the page. [Na scrúduithe scríofa, níl ann ach rudaí a fhoghlaim agus iad a chaitheamh amach ar an

bpáipéar, níl tú really... tá tú díreach á chur de ghlanmheabhair, níl tú really á fhoghlaim i gceart. Ach bheadh rudaí cosúil le tionscnamh agus ábhair praiticiúla, caithfidh tú an stuif sin a fhoghlaim agus foghlaim cén chaoi lena dhéanamh i gceart seachas a chur de ghlanmheabhair agus a chur amach ar an bpáipéar.] (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

It's like you have to learn to pass. You're not learning because you want to learn. (Coeducational, DEIS)

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. Like if they wanted to test our actual Irish, it would be unseen and that's how you test Irish rather than getting notes from your teacher and learning it off by heart. 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. ... If you forget something that you've learned off, you're going to panic. (Girls, non-DEIS)

Young people also pointed to the mismatch between the approach to teaching and learning in second-level and the greater emphasis on critical thinking 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)

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. So someone isn't always on your back, like telling you to do something and some students might find it hard because they've gone to being told when to do something and how to do it to just being told to do it and they're not really able to cope with that on their own. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

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)

In Home Economics, students were learning about vegetarianism but then when they compared their answer to the marking scheme, their learning was irrelevant: 'you are not learning to write, you are learning to get marks'. (Girls, non-DEIS)

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

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)

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 but like, you just have to like, know it, even if it's a kind of creative subject, like, you're writing an essay, you still have to just know what you're going to put down on the paper before you go in....you kind of almost write what you think the examiner wants you to think. (Girls, non-DEIS)

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 reliance and the ability to manage their time and organise their work:

Personal development, you know, by experiencing new things that you probably wouldn't have been prone to experience beforehand, and just throwing yourself in the deep end, and just making yourself do things you didn't think you could, or wanted. ... 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)

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)

Many of the student groups criticised the lack of relevance of many of the subjects they studied for their future lives:

I despise Maths. 70% of the stuff we do in algebra and things, we're not going to use. I want to get rid of algebra, it's pointless. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

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)

Some saw the division into ordinary and higher level as having had a negative impact on students:

Some people aren't able to learn properly, and they have them split into ordinary and higher, I find that very degrading for ... the person who's going lower. ... Some people, they just don't put in the work, but some people just can't. And it's kinda degrading where you see your friends going into a different class, you're going into another one. (Boys, non-DEIS, JC)

I feel a lot of pressure to make sure that I'm in higher level, because if I'm put in ordinary level I feel ... like, "Oh, I'm not as smart." And I feel when you divide it so drastically like that, it gets people the sense of well since I'm here, I shouldn't try as hard as them because I'm not as good as them ... So when you are put into a box you're like, "I guess this is how I am then," you know? And that kind of like lowers their self-confidence and say you're ordinary level, and you don't feel as good about yourself, that might affect your results, because you might think you're not good enough, so you're going to not study as hard and not try as hard. (Coeducational, DEIS)

However, others felt that it would not be possible to accommodate the range of abilities within a common level.

Having common level, rather than higher and ordinary, that's unfair for ordinary students, because the bar is increased, meaning an ordinary student, well, a student who would have been doing ordinary, rather than being able to get an A or B in ordinary level, they'd only be getting a C or a D in common level, where the higher students are still doing well. (Coeducational, DEIS)

Nonetheless, many students commented on the gap in points between higher and ordinary level, feeling that students often choose to stay in higher level and 'struggle' rather than risk losing points, especially in the context of the change in the grading system (see McCoy et al., 2019).

4.3 SENIOR CYCLE PATHWAYS AND INCLUSION

There was a strong consensus that the current structure is not suitable for all students, with the typical response when asked 'do you think that the current senior cycle is suited to all students?' being 'no' or 'not a chance'. Many students commented on the focus on academic subjects to the detriment of other subject areas and skills:

It is like testing your memory and testing how well you can learn, so people who aren't that academic, they don't really get a chance to shine or whatever, whatever they'd be good at like, you spend six years and then at the end of it, you just get a piece of paper that just shows how good you are at retaining information. Some people mightn't be that good at that but they might be much better at practical work, manual work, things like that but that's never tested and you never get to see that and you never get to develop that. (Boys, DEIS)

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)

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)

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

I think some people, too much pressure is put upon them to do well: "You have to get this many points", but sometimes some people just aren't able, and an apprenticeship and those doors just aren't available for everyone, people aren't pushing them to say, "Well, you'll be a really good -- I don't know -- builder". I think that's one thing that school lets you down in. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

The quote that Einstein said, like if you judge a fish on how it climbs a tree, it lives its life thinking it's stupid. Is that towards academics? People with skills, like there's a fish and it's like tests are the tree. It's just like they can't climb the tree but ... they're really good at other things and they could make a living out of that and they could be really useful to people providing a service. But just because they're not smart, they're looked down upon. (Girls, non-DEIS, JC)

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)

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)

4.5 STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON THE FUTURE OF SENIOR CYCLE

4.5.1 Senior cycle length and structures

Students were not asked explicitly about the preferred length of senior cycle but some spontaneously commented that a two-year programme contributed to the time pressure placed upon them:

We had three years for Junior Cycle, and the pressure is nothing compared to what it is in Senior Cycle, and we had an extra year for the Junior Cycle. And because of how long the syllabus is, I feel like two years is just a bit too short. (Girls, non-DEIS)

However, others expressed a reluctance to make Transition Year compulsory for all students:

Like I think if people were forced to do TY it wouldn't be the year that it is. It wouldn't be so good like because it does -- it pushes you out of your comfort zone but you have to be comfortable enough with yourself to do that. (Coeducational, non-DEIS)

In discussing the structure, 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)

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)

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, and that way, like, if you just, like, decide to do Irish history, you've time to focus on just the Irish history as well as your other subjects, which would end result give you better marks, because you're studying the part that you're interested in. (Coeducational, DEIS)

Many students felt that they should be able to specialise in the subjects in which they were interested and not have to take subjects seen as less relevant for 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)

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

You pick five subjects at the start of fifth year or even in some cases if people in my case who didn't do TY, you pick them at the end of third year. Now 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)

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 and that kind of -- subjects that people could be really good at and get marks that way and go to college. (Girls, non-DEIS)

Others felt that while they could study a broad range of subjects, not all of these 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)

4.5.2 Areas of learning

Like teachers and parents, students were asked whether there should be some areas of learning which 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 because a lot of the stuff that you learn in Leaving Cert, you're never going to use once you leave school. (Boys, DEIS)

Everyone should have like a life skills class. Like people that don't do Business like they don't know how to like pay taxes ... Like half the people that leave school won't know how to change a tyre like on their car. (Coeducational, DEIS)

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)

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)

At present, 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)

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)

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)

Many young people felt that English and Maths should remain as compulsory areas of learning but that perhaps the subjects could be sub-divided 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)

Many students felt that Irish should be an optional subject.

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

However, others highlighted the importance of retaining at least some exposure to the 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)

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 or that subjects could be taken in more or less detail than others (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)

[Irish] could be like a non-exam or people could pick it and it could be an exam. There should be an option. (Coeducational, DEIS, JC)

Cross-cutting the areas of learning, many students felt that there needed 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)

4.5.3 Assessment and reporting

Much of the student discussion of what senior cycle should be like centred on the approach to assessment. Consensus emerged across schools and school types on two features. Firstly, students wanted to see a greater variety of assessment approaches, using, for example, project or practical work to reduce exam-related stress and provide more accurate insights into 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)

These approaches were seen as more relevant for the future:

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)

Secondly, students wanted assessment to 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)

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.

Even in class if you had tests during the year ... like in English if you done your poetry from the beginning of the year 'til Christmas, the tests and all of this, to show that you actually learnt rather than waiting all year to get tested on something that you learnt two years ago. (Coeducational, DEIS)

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, like the two other guys said, life skills, and things like that, and I think it'd actually be better, because ... you'd be able to go and try and measure other things. (Boys, DEIS)

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)

An alternative approach was to embed regular assessment, 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, because then we're able to digest that information a lot better. (Coeducational, DEIS)

The homework and the in-class tests that we do, like, they should also contribute to the actual exams because sometimes someone may be actually really good at a particular subject, but then on the day of the exam, you're just shattered, you know, just forget everything. (Girls, non-DEIS)

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 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)

Others suggested that additional points should be awarded for subjects that were more relevant to the course applied for:

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

Some students 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)

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 viewed as ignoring a range of important activities and learning experiences.

The Leaving Cert, in my opinion, isn't a very accurate representation of what we have achieved. (Boys, DEIS)

If you're on the student council or you've done like college programmes or public speaking or debates, none of that matters. None of that's taken into account. It's all just like extra-curricular. It's called extra-curricular for a reason because it doesn't count. (Coeducational, DEIS)

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)

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)

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)

Such an approach was seen as providing a more relevant depiction of the skills they 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)

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. Young people emphasised a number of positive features of the current senior cycle, with the Transition Year programme commented on favourably by most groups. TY was seen as providing a variety of learning experiences, a space for students to mature and 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 but 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 Leaving Certificate Established 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 were interested. They also valued the fact that their teachers increasingly treated them as adults and facilitated them taking 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 coupled with the workload involved were seen as leading to a focus on 'covering' the course rather than authentic understanding, rote learning and feelings of stress and pressure. As in cycle one, and in previous international and Irish research (Duffy, 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 way of better understanding 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 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 in the curriculum. Young people also pointed to the need to have greater provision for those with more vocationally oriented interests. In relation to reporting, students felt the current system neglected many of their learning experiences over senior cycle and favoured an approach that documented their extracurricular activities and personal qualities as well as their academic results.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusions

This report has examined the main patterns emerging from the second cycle of the consultation process on senior cycle with teachers, parents and students in 41 case-study schools. In reflecting on the current senior cycle and the potential for change, a good deal of common ground was evident among teachers, students and their parents.

All three groups pointed to a number of positive aspects of senior cycle currently. The Transition Year programme was commented on favourably by all groups, with the year seen 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. Work experience in TY as well as placements in LCA and LCVP were viewed positively as enhancing student skills and 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. However, concerns were expressed about the existence of stand-alone programmes, especially where access could be restricted on the basis of subject choice (as in LCVP) or progression pathways could be curtailed (as in the case of LCA), with many favouring combining the benefits of existing programmes in a new senior cycle.

In looking at the appropriate length of senior cycle, no clear consensus was evident, with some favouring a three-year programme integrating elements of TY while others highlighted the need for flexibility to reflect programme take-up and/or student needs. In cycle one, teachers and parents had pointed to the need for young people to have a combination of learning, work-related, intrapersonal and life skills to equip them for the future (see Banks et al., 2018). It is not surprising, therefore, that a firm consensus emerged across teachers, parents and students that life skills should be embedded in the senior cycle curriculum, fostering 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.

Not surprisingly, much of the group discussion centred on the issue of assessment, especially within the LCE programme. There was widespread concern across 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. Exam-based

assessment, especially in the context of substantial volumes of work in many subjects as well as the high stakes nature of the Leaving Certificate exam, was seen as having a negative backwash effect on teaching and learning and the skills acquired by young people. Students contrasted their classroom experiences in senior cycle, where they felt under pressure to cover the course, with the greater time and space allowed in junior cycle to engage in a variety of approaches to learning and to have more interactive classes. The presence of the exam was viewed as facilitating rote learning, 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.

In discussing how to address these issues, 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 a way of reducing exam-related stress and providing a more authentic measure of student skills across a range of domains. In order to reduce the current workload and related pressure, many pointed to the potential for students to take fewer subjects, to take subjects at different levels of detail and/or to take specific modules within subjects to better reflect their interests and intended pathways. 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 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.

The discussion of assessment and reporting was often blurred. However, support is evident among students, parents and teachers for having 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.

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