



Written Submission to NCCA Senior Cycle Review

October 2019

The Union of Students in Ireland

The Union of Students in Ireland (Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn) is the national representative body for third-level Students' Unions in Ireland. Founded in 1959, USI now represents more than 374,000 students in over thirty colleges across the island of Ireland. The goal of USI is to work for the rights of students and a fair and equal third-level education system in Ireland.

USI is a full member of the European Students' Union (ESU) which represents students from 46 National Students' Unions in 39 countries.

USI Response to the NCCA Senior Cycle Review

The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Senior Cycle Review, being carried out by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), and was happy to participate in the stakeholder consultation event on Wednesday October 16.

In responding to the review, USI has broken its' thoughts down into a number of key areas as follows:

- **Senior Cycle Pathways and Programmes**
- **The Inclusion of the Irish Language at Senior Cycle**
- **Learning, Teaching and Assessment at Senior Cycle**
- **Wider Learning at Senior Cycle (Relationship and Sexual Education)**
- **Guidance Counselling and Progression**
- **Further Thoughts**

Senior Cycle Pathways and Programmes

- Pathways after Junior Cycle

USI notes the increase in school completion rates in Ireland with Ireland having the fourth lowest early school leavers among EU member states.¹ In noting the fact that a minority of students decide to complete their formal education at junior cycle, there are very few pathways available for these students. Therefore, USI would suggest introducing pathways for these students alongside YouthReach services.

- Subject combination requirements for LCVP

USI notes the variety of pathways at senior cycle including Leaving Certificate Established (LCE), Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), supporting students with diverse educational needs and abilities. USI believes all students no matter what their subject combination should have access to the LCVP programme. USI commends the LCVP curriculum outline which provides students with an opportunity to engage in work-based learning and to develop a critical understanding of future employment pathways. Within the LCVP link modules, students gain an understanding of the world of work and enterprise education which many students may not have engaged with through the course of their studies in the Junior Cycle. Therefore, USI would advocate for the removal of subject combination requirements to undertake the LCVP programme. This would allow all students to gain employment and enterprise based education from this programme.

- Provision of LCA programme within Ireland

USI commends the introduction of the LCA programme which provides vocational educational, vocational preparation and general education components to support students who do not desire to proceed to Higher Education or for whom the LCE and LCVP programmes are not suited to their educational needs. In saying this, USI notes the lack of availability of the programme across all second level educational providers in Ireland. Provision of the programme is at the discretion of the school and appears to be influenced by the 'perceived suitability of the programme' for the students attending the school.² With the provision of LCA mainly isolated to Community schools/Comprehensive schools or those with a DEIS status, USI

¹ Eurostat, *Early leavers from education and training by sex and labour status*

² Banks, J., Byrne, D., McCoy, S., & Smyth, E. (2010). *Engaging Young People? Student Experiences of the Leaving Certificate Applied* ESRI Research Series 15. Dublin: ESRI.

recommends the need for greater research into the provision of LCA in schools and a greater focus on the value of LCA for all schools.³

- Subject options within the LCA programme

USI notes the value of the modules offered within the LCA programme, but also notes the lack of subject choice within the LCA programme. Therefore, USI would recommend undertaking research on the subject combination offered in the LCA programme and develop further modules, working in close consultation with students and teachers.

- Pathways to Third-Level Education

USI recommends a review of the pathways available through the LCA programme, with a view to enhancing opportunities to progress to a range of third-level options, not only limiting students to vocational study. As the main aim of the LCA programme is to encourage vocational practice and skills which is vitally important, there are a small minority of students who would like to continue into the Higher Education system, after having completed the LCA programme.

USI notes that students who complete the LCA programme are unable to apply to third level through the CAO process, USI would recommend a change of the current CAO application system to include applications from those who have completed the LCA programme. This would allow for additional pathways for those who complete the LCA programme.

The Inclusion of the Irish Language at Senior Cycle

- USI believes that it is integral to students at second level that the Irish language remain a compulsory subject in the senior cycle curriculum. The status of Irish as a core subject in senior cycle is vital for the revitalisation of the Irish language and for the promotion of Irish heritage and culture amongst young people.
- Any changes made to the Irish curriculum at Senior Cycle should be in line with the Policy for Irish in the Education System from preschool to Third Level.
- The Common Framework for European Languages (CEFL) should be used as a model for teaching, assessment and reporting of Irish in the senior cycle.
- The new system of exemptions for students with learning difficulties is out of line with other systems for language learning in other European countries.

³ Banks, J., Smyth, E., and McCoy, S. *Leaving Certificate Applied Programme: Discussion Paper*, Economic and Social Research Institute, Whitaker Square, Sir John Rogerson's Quay, Dublin 2

- Based on the CFEL, USI believes that:
 - A student, with a recognised learning difficulty, and who is weak in writing Irish could focus on oral Irish and this could be taken into account in the leaving cert points awarded to that student
 - A student entering late into the system could achieve the first level on the framework rather than being excluded from the Irish class and the leaving certificate points could be based on the first stage of the framework for that student
- Similarly, support should be implemented for students with learning difficulties in Gaelscoileanna and Gaeltacht schools when undergoing assessment in English. Option of conducting assessment orally should also be given.
- Any expansion in the number of subjects or possibilities of different pathways and programs should not alter the status of Irish as a core leaving subject studied by all students. It is incumbent on the state to nurture our native language as a precious living language; The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages could be used to cater for a variety of pathways and programs.
- USI strongly believes that removing Irish as a core subject in senior cycle will have a detrimental effect on the number of speakers, as well as denying many students the opportunity to improve their employability within state agencies.
- When modern language learning was made optional in England at GCSE level, the number of students studying languages fell from 79% in 2001 in the age group to 41% in 2018. This number would be much lower but some private schools maintained compulsory learning of modern languages. Modern languages are no longer taught in 7% of schools from year 7 also as a result of this change.
- In the context of the Irish language, other Government policies and the importance (and legal requirements) placed on them with regard to Irish should be examined, and the policies of the Department of Education should be aligned with them – i. Irish language 20 Year Strategy goals, the constitutional status of Irish, the policy for Gaeltacht education.
- USI therefore urges the NCCA to ensure Irish is maintained as a compulsory subject at senior cycle and to implement appropriate supports for students so that the language may continue to flourish and so that our young people may continue to learn the importance of their national language and culture.

Learning, Teaching and Assessment at Senior Cycle

- USI would be in favour of moving away from the current model that focuses heavily on summative assessment, in favour of a more flexible model that includes a combination of ongoing classroom-based assessment, coursework and formative assessment that supports students in preparing for summative assessment. This would enable learners to develop a wider range of skills and competencies - including critical analysis, creative thinking and independent learning.
- In addition to the above, USI believes it is important that assessment is developed in line with the teaching & learning process for each subject, as opposed to the other way around, with assessment for specific subject areas being carried out closer to the time of learning and using an appropriate method of assessment. For example, for some subjects, open book assessment might be a more appropriate measure of learning than traditional closed book examination. Non-traditional assessment methods should be made available at senior cycle in order to enhance the overall experience.
- In reviewing current assessment practice, USI urges the NCCA and other key stakeholders to consider the rationale for the level of assessment applied to each subject with a view to, where applicable, reducing the amount of assessment in order to alleviate the pressure this places on both students and teachers.
- Research previously carried out by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning on the Transition from Secondary Level and Further Education to Higher Education⁴ has found that students would like more academic skills preparation at secondary level. Any future reviews of assessment practice at second-level should be held in collaboration with third-level stakeholders, including the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning
- In line with the above, USI would also recommend a reduction in the number of subjects that students are required to study at leaving cert, moving to a model of studying fewer subjects more in-depth, in line with typical learning practice at third-level.
- USI would also recommend a review of the subjects currently offered at leaving cert, with a view to expanding selection further, in line with learner needs and emerging industries.

⁴ 'Transition from Second Level and Further Education to Higher Education' - National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning
<<https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/publication/transition-from-second-level-and-further-education-to-higher-education/>>

- USI welcomes the introduction of bereavement deferral for leaving cert examinations, but would request that this mechanism be further expanded to include students undergoing medical emergencies.
- USI would recommend reforming the current practice of awarding 25 extra CAO points to those studying higher maths, with a view to expanding this to other subjects.

Wider Learning at Senior Cycle

USI would welcome the introduction of a module/subject area which would allow for greater preparation for life after senior cycle. Therefore, USI would welcome the inclusion of the following areas of study including but not limited to preparing for individual living, budgeting and Relationships and Sexual Education (RSE).

Guidance Counselling and Progression

- Indecon Review of Career Guidance Recommendations

USI welcomes the recommendations of the Indecon Review of Career Guidance⁵ in particular the availability of an online Career Guidance service including online tools with telephone and internet access to experienced guidance practitioners. Although, the provision of Career Guidance within schools needs to be returned to pre-2012 levels at a minimum.

- Career Guidance at Junior Cycle

USI notes the lack of Career Guidance at junior cycle, students often have their first experience of Career Guidance at Senior Cycle. Therefore, USI recommends Career Guidance provision at Junior Cycle to make students more aware of their subject choice at Junior Cycle and future career prospects.

- Focus on Higher Education progression

At present the Career Guidance provided to students in second level focuses greatly on progression to third level with little reference to Further Education and Training, Apprenticeships and Traineeships. Therefore, USI would recommend a greater emphasis placed on additional post Leaving Certificate pathways alongside Higher Education.

⁵ Indecon, *Review of Career Guidance* (2019)

- Career Guidance within Special Educational School Settings

USI would welcome the introduction of Career Guidance training for teachers within the Special Education system alongside specialised CPD for teachers teaching within the area. At present, there is very little Career Guidance for those who complete their formal education within a Special Educational setting.⁶

Further Thoughts

USI would welcome further opportunities to engage with the NCCA at future stages of the Senior Cycle review, and wishes to emphasize the need for greater engagement with students, particularly those currently at second level, as represented by the Irish Second-Level Students' Union (ISSU). It has been disappointing to see a lack of thorough engagement with ISSU representatives, and the wider student body as part of the consultation process so far, and USI would recommend that the NCCA works to improve this as it moves towards piloting and implementation of changes to senior cycle.

If you have any questions about this submission you can contact the Vice President for Academic Affairs, Kevin McStravock (academicaffairs@usi.ie / 086 8165498), Leas-Uachtarán don Gaeilge, Clíodhna Ní Dhufaigh (gaeilge@usi.ie / 086 208 1946) or Vice President for the Border, Midlands and Western region, Marie Lyons (bmw@usi.ie / 087 9268802)

⁶ USI, Written Submission to the Department of Education and Skills Career Guidance Review Public Consultation (2018)