



National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta

Junior Cycle Curriculum Framework for students with General Learning Disabilities

Towards a discussion paper

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1. Introduction

Since the introduction of the Junior Certificate in 1989, and subsequent developments in the curriculum at junior cycle such as the introduction of the JCSP, many significant changes have occurred within Irish society. The profile of junior cycle students has changed, reflecting a greater diversity of learning needs. Legislative and policy change in the area of special education has served as the foundation for the drive towards inclusion and given rise to the issue of equality and entitlement for students with special educational needs.

The entitlement of students with special educational needs to have access to, participate in and benefit from education is internationally and nationally recognised. In an Irish context this right of entitlement has its statutory grounding within a legislative framework provided by the Education Act 1998, the Education (Welfare) Act 2000, the Equal Status Acts 2000 and 2004, and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004. The NCCA in its Strategic Plan 2006-2008, highlights its commitment to promoting inclusive education

*to continue to provide for the education of **all** learners to enhance quality of access and participation, and attainment of outcome for **all**.¹*

In support of this objective the development of the curriculum framework discussed in this paper aims to support access to, participation in and attainment of outcome for students with general learning disabilities.

Under the terms of the Education Act,² the NCCA has the function of advising the Minister for Education and Science on curriculum and assessment for students with a disability or other special educational needs. Although there are many different types of special educational needs, the NCCA's initial work under this remit focused on students with general learning disabilities. In 2002, the NCCA developed and published *Draft Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities*. This was followed by a consultation process where the partners in education were invited to give

¹ *Strategic Plan 2006-2009*, NCCA, Higher Level Objective 4:3

² Education Act (1998):Section 41 (2)

their feedback and comments on the draft guidelines. This feedback informed the final publication of the *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with Mild General Learning Disabilities* (2007). However, that feedback also flagged a gap in curriculum, assessment and certification provision at junior cycle for students within the mild to moderate range of general learning disabilities. The view emerged during the consultations that there existed a group of students who, even with the support of teachers using the most sophisticated approaches to differentiation – including the JCSP - would never access the mainstream junior cycle curriculum. A further and more significant point was also made – the mainstream curriculum was not appropriate for this group of students who needed concerted support in personal, social and vocational development.

The students in question with difficulties from the lower functioning mild to moderate categories would find it impossible to attain the learning outcomes associated with Junior Certificate subjects and examinations. While students within the mild to moderate range of general learning disabilities may follow the same developmental path as others in the various aspects of human development, the rate of progress may be slower and the level reached is generally lower than that attained by their peers. As outlined in the NCCA *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities, Overview* (2007:17) challenges that such students may face include the following

- limited concentration
- passivity
- delayed oral language development
- difficulty in adapting to their environment
- limited ability to generalise
- difficulties in problem solving.

Many students with these difficulties of junior cycle age are enrolled in special schools, others have placements in special classes in mainstream post-primary schools and some have placements in mixed-ability classes in post-primary schools. The provision of Individual Education Plans (IEPs), when fully implemented, would apply to many of them. The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) estimates that 18% of all

children in Ireland have special educational needs (Implementation Report:³ 2006:75). From this 18% the NCSE estimates that the prevalence of students with mild general learning disabilities is 1.5% and students with moderate, severe and profound disabilities is 0.41% (Implementation Report: 2006:72). Not all students with mild general learning disabilities are included in the group of students under discussion here, so the target group in question represents a very small percentage of all students with special educational needs.

What may be needed, and what is discussed in this background paper, is a curriculum framework which would assist post-primary and special schools in designing learning programmes to meet the specific needs of the students in question. This background paper sets out current thinking in the NCCA on the development of a curriculum framework. It also explores the idea of establishing a qualification at Level 2 of the NFQ that would recognise the learning associated with such programmes.

To date, work on the framework has been developmental in nature and informed by engagement with the range of schools and settings in which this group of students are enrolled. This engagement has highlighted many of the issues and challenges experienced by these settings in meeting the needs of the students in the areas of curriculum, assessment and certification. While it has also provided the opportunity to identify and explore examples of current good practice in teaching and learning in this area, the engagement has confirmed the need for a different, more concerted approach to curriculum, assessment and certification to meet the learning needs of this group of students.

2. Rationale – flexibility and progression

The junior cycle of post-primary education constitutes the final phase of compulsory education and it covers a critically important period in the lives of all young people. It is a time of change, of growth and development as they move from childhood towards early adulthood. While recognising that young people in junior cycle can display

³ Implementation Report, Plan for the Phased Implementation of the EPSEN Act 2004. Dublin: Brunswick Press Ltd.

different degrees of maturity and rates of progress, preparation for adult living often occurs implicitly for them.

For some students with general learning disabilities however, this may not be the case. These young people require learning programmes that explicitly identify and develop the knowledge, skills and competencies needed for adult living. The thinking behind the curriculum framework is that the personal development of students with general learning disabilities plays a significant part in their ability to learn and achieve. For these students their priority learning needs are focused on personal, social and vocational skills which will prepare them for adult living and lifelong learning.

The curriculum framework would offer schools and teachers a structure within which they can review and develop learning programmes relevant to the needs of these students and consistent with the general aims of this stage of education. The framework would endeavour to support schools and other settings in meeting the individual learning needs of the students. This personalised approach would ensure that learning could be tailored to the needs, interests, and aspirations of each individual student and enables each student to better achieve their potential. The framework would be enabling, allowing schools and settings the flexibility and autonomy to tailor and develop learning programmes in this context. The framework would emphasise the development and enhancement of skills that correspond to the strengths and special interests of the individual but also contribute to preparation for life after school, including further education, social life and working life.

The curriculum framework would encourage the development of learning programmes that achieve as feasible a balance as possible between the student encountering a broad and balanced curriculum and a curriculum appropriate to their specific needs. Achieving and sustaining this balance would be a significant challenge in the *development* of a framework. Sustaining this balance in the delivery of the learning programmes would be even more challenging. While special schools are well-placed to support the degree of flexibility proposed (as evidenced in NCCA research into the JCSP for example), mainstream post-primary schools are structured, scheduled and organised to support the needs of groups of students rather than individuals. This is particularly the case in junior cycle where flexibility and choice is limited.

For many students in the group in question transition to adulthood is particularly critical and they will need opportunities to progress to programmes of study that focus on this transition and prepare them for lifelong learning in general. This raises the question of the progression opportunities that would be available to students whose learning, in the junior cycle stage, was based on the curriculum framework alone? Would they progress to study some Junior Certificate subjects, to the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), to alternative senior cycle learning programmes similar to the one they have followed in junior cycle?

Clearly, providing a more flexible approach to curriculum, assessment and certification at senior cycle would be important for those students who proceed to that stage of education. The notion of a more flexible approach is currently being explored as part of the NCCA review of senior cycle education.⁴ The work on the initiative exploring the development and introduction of *Flexible Learning Profiles* is of particular relevance to the curriculum framework at junior cycle. A *Flexible Learning Profile*, as currently being discussed, would facilitate students in choosing from a variety of curriculum components. For example, the students in question might follow a small number of components selected from LCA modules, work-based learning, FETAC modules at appropriate levels, transition units, Leaving Certificate subjects etc. Other NCCA work relevant to the curriculum framework is the current research and review into the LCA. The research is looking at the experiences of the LCA graduate during the course of and after leaving the programme and the NCCA review is considering a range of ongoing curriculum, assessment and certification issues.

A key element in establishing progression opportunities is that of certification. How will the learning outcomes associated with learning programmes based on the framework be recognised and valued? Would a new qualification be needed for this purpose? This question is explored in the next section which also considers what the framework would look like and include.

⁴ For further details please see <http://www.ncca.ie/index.asp?docID=80>

3. The potential of a Framework – learning and achievement

In recent times, the NCCA has developed several different types of frameworks such as *the Framework for Early Learning* (2007), *the Draft Curriculum Framework for Guidance* (2007) and *the Curriculum Framework for Children Detention Schools, High Support Units and Special Care Units* (2008). While these frameworks have different contexts, purposes and structures, they share many common elements that are relevant to this SEN curriculum framework. A key feature of them all is that they are a support for planning, for local development, and for ensuring, that where local, or school-based development occurs there are some consistent elements to support quality and equity.

Two features of the curriculum framework under consideration here are the learning programmes it would support and the award or qualification that would be associated with the framework. These are discussed in more detail below.

Learning programmes

For many schools the need to cater for a diversity of learning needs and to offer a variety of curriculum and learning experiences poses a range of challenges. The framework would offer schools and teachers support in addressing the particular learning needs of the group of students in question. Using the framework, some sample learning programmes would be developed by the NCCA working with a group of schools and teachers. Individual schools and settings would also be free to adapt these programmes to their needs or to devise their own programmes based on the framework. The learning programmes would focus on areas of learning such as communications, literacy, numeracy, personal effectiveness, social skills, vocational skills. In other words, an important focus of the learning programmes would be on those areas that have been identified as critical for the group of students in question as they make the transition to adulthood.

The relationship between the contents of these programmes and that of junior cycle subjects will need to be considered carefully and highlighted as, in some cases, the programmes may be operating in tandem with junior cycle subject classes. The

learning programmes associated with the framework will be more easily introduced if the relationship between the programmes and the contents of junior cycle subjects are clarified for and with schools and teachers. Linking and relating learning outcomes of the programmes with learning outcomes of the subject syllabuses would contribute to achieving this clarity.

Other elements that could influence the contents of a learning programme would be the contribution that the programme might make to addressing aspects of a student's Individual Educational Plan (IEP),⁵ where applicable. Relating the learning programme to the IEP would achieve a better fit between the programme and the student's prior knowledge, learning and achievements, special interests, and future aspirations.

Rewarding achievement

At present, the qualification associated with learning achievement at junior cycle is the Junior Certificate. It is a recognised national qualification placed at Level 3 of the NFQ. Where students participate in junior cycle education but do not, for whatever reason, take Junior Certificate examinations there is no other qualification available to them.

It has been stated earlier that, for the group of students under discussion in this paper, the learning outcomes associated with the Junior Certificate, are viewed as in large part unattainable. Therefore the question arises of how the learning achievements of the students will be recognised and valued? Initial discussions have emphasised the importance of the curriculum framework providing the opportunity for students to access a qualification that would be nationally recognised, placed on the NFQ, and designed to offer progression. But this view gives rise to a further series of questions about what learning would be recognised (current and/or prior), what learning outcomes would be assessed and what mode of assessment would apply, what level of the NFQ any potential qualification would be placed at (presumably Level 2 if Junior Certificate Level 3 outcomes are unattainable)?

Thinking in this area also needs to take account of other developments in the area of qualifications that could offer possibilities for students taking learning programmes associated with the framework. The introduction of FETAC awards at Levels 1 and 2 in

⁵ The NCCA recognises that IEPs are not currently implemented as outlined by the EPSEN Act, 2004.

2007 may have potential to contribute to the introduction of a new school qualification in this context. Some initial work has taken place between the NCCA and FETAC to explore the common ground between the development of a school qualification that would be associated with the curriculum framework and the FETAC Level 2 award. While it must be noted that there are considerable practical and policy-related issues involved in introducing a new school qualification at Level 2, it would seem that something similar to or along the lines of the FETAC Level 2 award offers possibilities in this context.

Any potential qualification at Level 2 would recognise students' basic knowledge, skill and competence across a number of areas of learning such as those listed previously. For reference purposes, the NFQ Level 2 learning indicators are summarised below and displayed in greater detail in Table 1. It should be noted that these are indicative of the kind of learning taking place but do not set out the particular learning outcomes of learning programmes at this level.

- Key outcomes at this level are basic literacy and numeracy and the introduction to systematic learning.
- Learning outcomes relate to the ability to learn new skills and knowledge in a supervised environment and to carry out routine work under direction.
- Learning outcomes at this level are typically developmental rather than geared towards a specific occupation.⁶

⁶ http://www.nfq.ie/nfq/en/frame_action/documents/DeterminationsfortheOutlineNFQ.pdf
Accessed 28.04.08

Table 1. National Framework of Qualifications Grid of Level indicators⁷

Level 2	
Knowledge <i>Breadth</i>	Knowledge that is narrow in its range.
Knowledge <i>Kind</i>	Concrete in reference and basic in comprehension.
Know-How & Skill <i>Range</i>	Demonstrate limited range of basic practical skills, including the use of relevant tools.
Know-How & Skills <i>Selectivity</i>	Perform a sequence of routine tasks given clear direction.
Competence <i>Context</i>	Act in a limited range of predictable and structured contexts.
Competence <i>Role</i>	Act in a range of roles, under direction.
Competence <i>Learning to Learn</i>	Learn to learn in a disciplined manner in a well-structured and supervised environment.
Competence <i>Insight</i>	Demonstrate awareness of independent role for self.

4. The challenges involved and next steps

From a policy perspective, the development and introduction of the framework would make a significant contribution to inclusive education. In the process it would introduce a model of curriculum provision, a curriculum framework, that would be enabling and capable of flexible use by schools and settings charged with meeting the needs of the students involved. Furthermore, for the students in question, it would offer a nationally recognised qualification at junior cycle for the first time. In so doing, it would contribute to the implementation of the EPSEN Act and, for example, provide a meaningful linkage with the implementation of IEPs.

However, the introduction of a framework would represent a movement away from the idea of a single junior cycle school qualification. Concerns related to the emergence of a two-tier junior cycle would be raised. These could be addressed somewhat by establishing a close relationship between the learning outcomes of the framework and those of the Junior Certificate but, nonetheless, in the current thinking, there would be

⁷ Adapted from *A framework for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in Ireland*, National Framework of Qualifications, 2003:16

two different qualifications involved. Related questions would also need to be considered and addressed such as

- Would all schools offer the framework or some?
- Would access to the framework by schools and students be confined to students with IEP's, or would it be open to a wider group of student?
- On what basis would the inclusion of a student in learning programmes related to the framework be decided? When would it be decided? Who would be involved in the decision?
- How would issues related to pre-determined lines of progression that have emerged in programmes such as the JCSP and LCA be avoided in this case?

These are all questions that will require much further consideration and discussion. They have all arisen in contexts other than that of the framework, particularly in relation to any programmes and initiatives in the areas of inclusive education and educational disadvantage introduced over the years.

The introduction of a framework also raises many practical questions for schools. There are clearly resource implications associated with the framework and logistical issues associated with its management and operation in schools and other settings. For example, what combination of settings – class group, special group, individual tuition/mentoring/withdrawal - would be involved in operating the learning programmes? Most significantly, for teachers involved, the introduction of a framework of this kind represents a further challenge in differentiating teaching and learning to meet the needs of the full range of students in the class and this carries with it significant implications for resourcing the continuing professional development of teachers. For the NCCA, the experience of schools and settings already working at addressing these issues of provision, logistics and resourcing in meeting the needs of the students in question has been and will continue to be essential in informing thinking about the framework.

However, while the practical and policy implications are very significant so are the needs of the group of students in question and these are uppermost in the thinking surrounding the curriculum framework.

The next steps in this area of work involve working with the schools and settings involved to develop the ideas around, contents of, and sample learning programmes related to the curriculum framework. The NCCA will also continue to liaise with FETAC in the context of developing ideas on the qualification that would be associated with the framework.

It is envisaged that the next outcome of the work in this area will be a more extensive discussion paper setting out the framework in detail, outlining thinking on the associated qualification, and addressing the range of challenges involved in its implementation.