



# **TOWARDS LEARNING**

**AN OVERVIEW OF SENIOR  
CYCLE EDUCATION**



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# Preamble

Senior cycle education is being reviewed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The development of new subjects and courses and the review of existing subjects are informed by a vision of creative, confident and actively involved young people who are prepared for a future of learning. *Towards Learning* sets out that vision, the values on which it is based and the principles that are shaping the review and development of senior cycle curriculum and assessment. It also provides information on the senior cycle curriculum, key skills, assessment and certification, and learning in senior cycle. While it is the subject of consultation at a time of economic recession in Ireland, *Towards Learning* is unapologetically imbued with the idea of education as essentially an act of hope, of optimism and of belief in the potential of each generation of learners to face and master the challenges of the future.

The values, vision and principles outlined have emerged from the review of senior cycle that has been ongoing since 2002. This review has been informed by extensive consultation, by working directly with teachers, students and management in schools, by research undertaken by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) on the experience of learners as they progress through their post-primary schooling, by international research and by other developments in senior cycle education. From the early stages of consultation there was strong support for building on the strengths of the current system towards a senior cycle where 'getting the Leaving' remained important but where greater emphasis was placed on an improved relationship between the acquisition of skills and knowledge, on learners taking more responsibility for their own learning, and on improving the learning culture and environment in schools. It was felt that these kinds of changes would assist in keeping students in school to complete senior cycle, keep them engaged while they are there and prepare them for future lives of learning.

*Directions for Development* (NCCA, 2003) set out a vision for senior cycle that pointed towards the development of

- a different learning experience and school culture for senior cycle students
- a rebalanced curriculum
- different assessment arrangements and a new certificate at senior cycle.

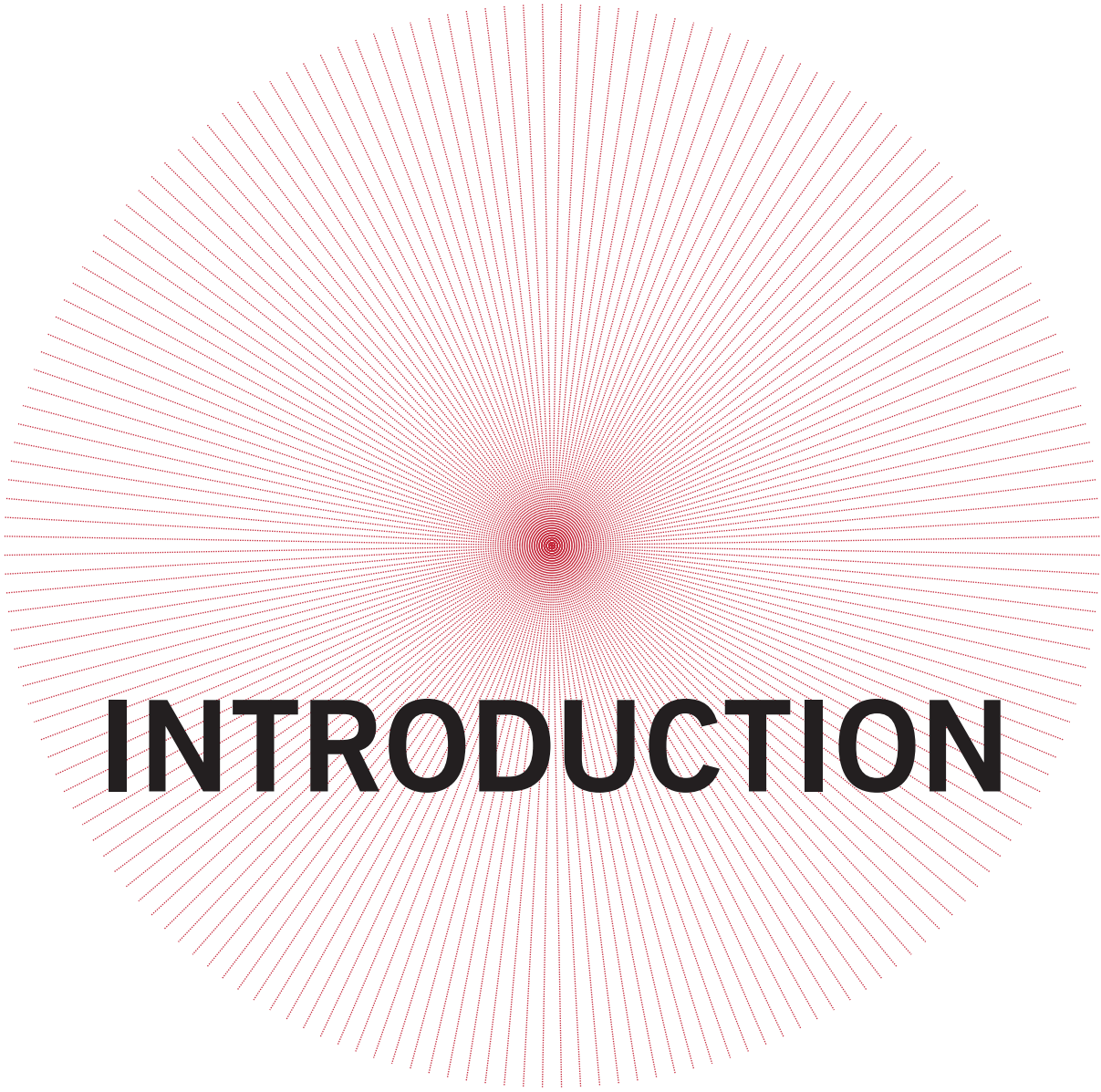
Since 2006 the focus of developments in curriculum and assessment has been on moving senior cycle in these

directions. The subjects under review at the moment emphasise *how* learners learn as well as *what* they learn. This opens up possibilities for new approaches to teaching and learning, and to assessment. The embedding of key skills in subjects and courses involves looking very carefully at the balance between knowledge and skills in the curriculum and in learning. The development of new subjects also contributes to re-balancing the curriculum on offer. Initial development of transition units, which are 45-hour units used in Transition Year programmes, and sample short courses, which are 90-hour courses proposed for study as part of the Leaving Certificate, are paving the way for a re-structured learning experience that would offer learners greater flexibility and choice across their senior cycle education. Proposals for new ways of assessing subjects and courses, for example in the area of science, that focus on alignment of assessment with syllabus aims and objectives are well underway. Work is also ongoing in the NCCA and with schools to explore what is involved in introducing more comprehensive and more flexible certification of learning achievement at senior cycle.

The needs and views of learners, teachers and schools are central to developments at senior cycle. Teachers and schools are at the heart of leading and supporting change that is deep and lasting. Much of the NCCA's work in consultation, in the development of key skills, in looking at new ideas on certification and in the development of new subjects has involved close collaboration with schools. This involvement will continue through the current consultation to achieve a closer understanding of the dynamics of change for the learner, for the teacher as a professional and for the school as an organisation.

*Towards Learning* presents an overview of senior cycle education. Its purpose is to provide learners, teachers, parents, educators and the general public with a broad understanding of what senior cycle education involves now and the lines along which it may develop in the future. The early sections set out the vision for the future, while Section 5 *The senior cycle curriculum* presents the curriculum as it is now, followed by a number of new developments under discussion. *Towards Learning* is a work in progress, being updated continually to reflect the changes taking place. More detailed material and information on particular aspects of senior cycle and its development is available in other documentation included in the consultation process.





# **INTRODUCTION**

# Introduction

## Post-primary education

Post-primary education is an important part of the lives of all young people. It involves significant transitions—from childhood to adulthood, from primary schooling to post-primary and from school to the world of further study and work. Learners meet many challenges as they make these transitions and schools and the curriculum have an important role to play in supporting them in their learning, in their acquisition of skills, in developing their creativity and contributing to the formation of values as they make their way through school and into adult life.

The first stage of post-primary schooling that learners encounter is junior cycle, a three-year programme that builds on the young person's educational experience at primary school by offering a broad, balanced and coherent programme of study across a wide range of curriculum areas. It is in junior cycle that the knowledge, understanding, attitudes and skills of learners—including the personal, social, moral and spiritual aspects—are extended and deepened with the aim of generating a love of learning in young people. In the process, junior cycle prepares learners for transition to senior cycle, for other further education opportunities, in some cases for employment and, in general, for the challenges involved in growing towards adulthood.

Senior cycle has a particular role to play in the preparation of learners for adult life in a changing economic and social context. A broad curriculum at senior cycle that allows for a degree of specialisation for learners continues to be viewed as the best means of achieving continuity and progression from junior cycle and assisting learners to prepare for the future. Senior cycle education seeks to provide learners with a high quality learning experience to prepare them for the world of work, for further and higher education and for successful personal lives, whatever that may entail for the individual learner.

## Towards a new senior cycle

While many factors shape the future of the individual, senior cycle has at its core a commitment to educational achievement of the highest standard for all learners, commensurate with their individual abilities. The review

and development of senior cycle curriculum components emphasise the development of knowledge and deep understanding; learners taking more responsibility for their own learning; an improved balance between the acquisition of skills and knowledge; and an enhanced focus on the learning and the learner. It sets out to meet the needs of a diverse group of learners with a range of learning interests, dispositions, aptitudes and talents, including learners with special educational needs.

The principles of senior cycle are situated in the context of broader education policy. Important elements of that policy include the contribution that education can make to the development of the learner as a person, as a citizen and as a learner, as well as to the promotion of social cohesion, the recovery and growth of the economy and the adoption of the principle of sustainability in all aspects of development. Learners should experience a high quality education, characterised by high expectations and the pursuit of excellence.

The range of curriculum components that will be offered at senior cycle—subjects, short courses, transition units—has been developed to allow for choice and flexibility, an appropriate balance between knowledge and skills, and the promotion of learning strategies that equip learners to participate in and contribute to a changing world.

## Key skills

Based on the Lisbon Strategy (2000), the European Framework for Key Competences (2007) presents eight key competences for lifelong learning that *all citizens should have for a successful life in a knowledge society*. This is in line with the international trend towards the development of skills in primary and post-primary education. The competences identified can be grouped around thinking skills, personal skills and lifelong learning skills and all are seen as essential in helping young people to cope with the changes brought about by globalisation and the knowledge society. The National Skills Strategy (2007) states that *employees in all jobs will be increasingly required to acquire a range of generic and transferable skills including people-related and conceptual/thinking skills ..... with a requirement for flexibility, continuous learning and individual initiative and judgement*.



These debates on skills needs and competence frameworks, combined with the outcomes of consultations on senior cycle, have resulted in the development of a key skills framework for senior cycle. While both terms, skills and competences, are used internationally, the term 'key skills' gained approval here during the consultation. The five key skills are information processing, being personally effective, communicating, critical and creative thinking and working with others. The embedding of these key skills in curriculum and assessment helps learners to think critically and creatively, to innovate and adapt to change, to work independently and in a team, and to reflect on their learning. In addition, they support mastery of the basic skills of literacy and numeracy which are crucial for learners to access the curriculum and for their future life chances.

## Teaching and learning

The development of knowledge, skills and values that will enable learners to become independent and to develop a lifelong commitment to improving their learning combined with the nurturing of positive beliefs about learning and a willingness to engage in new learning situations are central to senior cycle. Senior cycle syllabuses are developed with a view to allowing teachers and learners the flexibility to select a variety of rich learning activities that are engaging and provide opportunities for learners to become more self-directed in their learning as they progress through senior cycle. The embedding of key skills in the curriculum further enhances the development of learning skills.

The role of the teacher is very important in this respect and teachers will benefit from opportunities to analyse and reflect on their practice, to assess the effects of their teaching, and to refine and improve their classroom practices.

Appropriate guidance and support is necessary to enable learners to make wise and informed personal, educational and career choices. The *Draft Curriculum Framework for Guidance in Post-Primary Education* (NCCA, 2007) offers an outline of curricular experiences in the areas of personal and educational guidance and career development that are relevant in this context.

## Assessment

Formative assessment is an integral part of the educational process and is used to support and improve learning by helping learners and teachers to identify short and long term learning goals and the next steps in the teaching and learning process. Summative assessment also happens throughout senior cycle but it is generally associated with the context of national

examinations at the point of completion of post-primary schooling and selection for participation in further and higher education. Senior cycle subjects and short courses are characterised by clear alignment between their aims and objectives and how they are assessed at school level and in the Leaving Certificate examination and by improved access to a greater variety of assessment methods.

## Qualifications

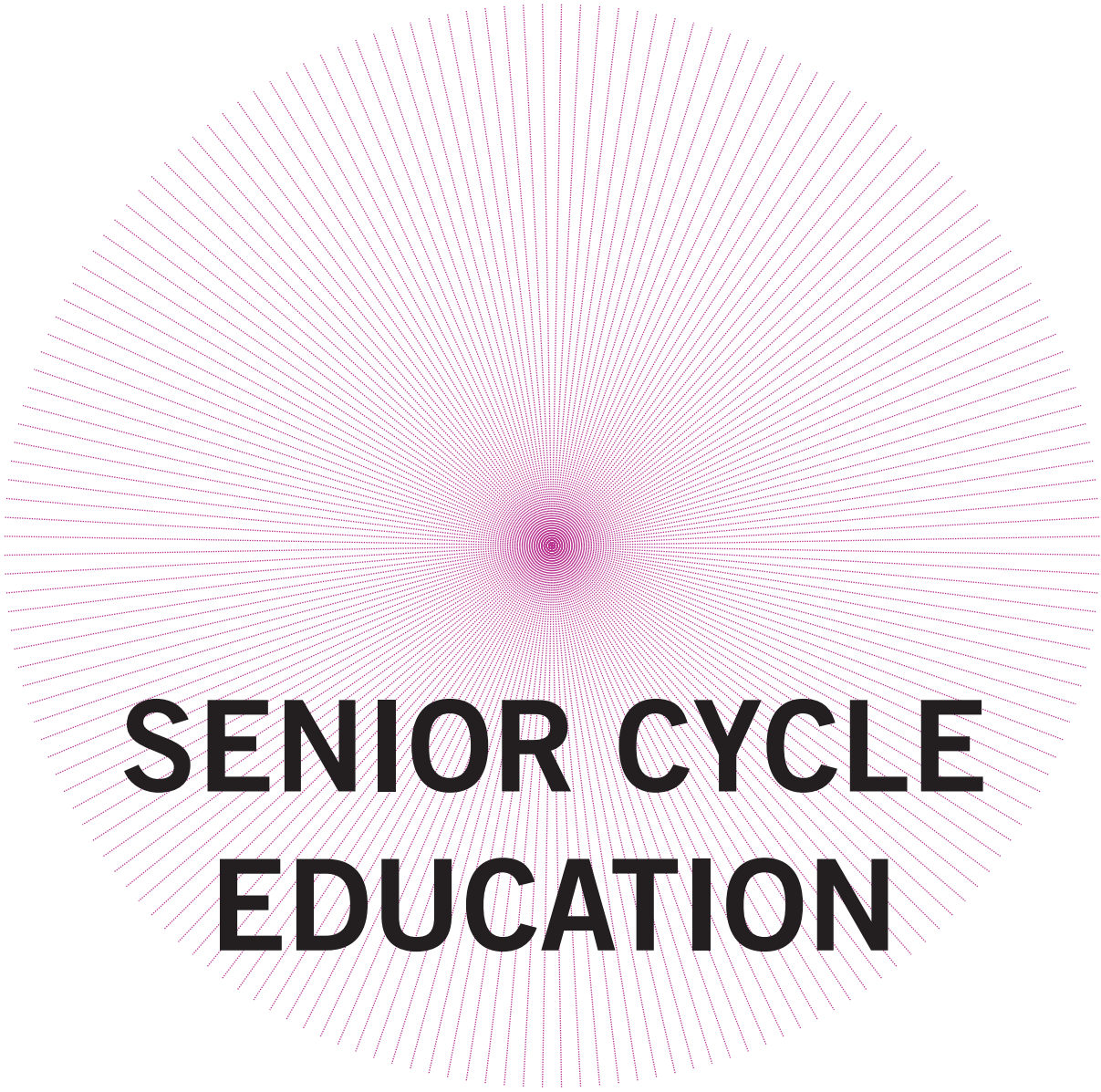
The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), introduced in Ireland in 2003, relates all education and training awards or qualifications made in Ireland to each other. It presents clearly defined standards for awards and outlines what a learner can be expected to achieve to gain an award. This helps learners to make informed choices about qualifications and to see the progression opportunities available to them. It also makes it easier for the learner to explain to others the qualifications he or she holds. The Leaving Certificate award is placed across Levels 4 and 5 of the framework.

## Supporting change

The vision of the senior cycle learner assumes a high quality learning experience for all. While the *designed* curriculum can provide opportunities for teachers and learners to experience quality learning, schools and classrooms are most often the places where the curriculum is *realised*. Significant support is required to assist those enacting the curriculum—teachers, support staff and school management—to make a real difference to the learning environment and learning experience.

Support for schools in planning and development of strategies in a range of areas is important in this context. Plans and strategies for leading and supporting curriculum change, for developing existing and new approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, for the professional development of teachers and for schools as sites of professional development, can all contribute to ensuring a high quality learning experience at senior cycle. The development of these plans and strategies must be facilitated through appropriate levels of resources being available to schools for this purpose. Investment in educational change on a realistic scale will contribute significantly to improving the educational experience of learners.





# **SENIOR CYCLE EDUCATION**

# Senior Cycle Education

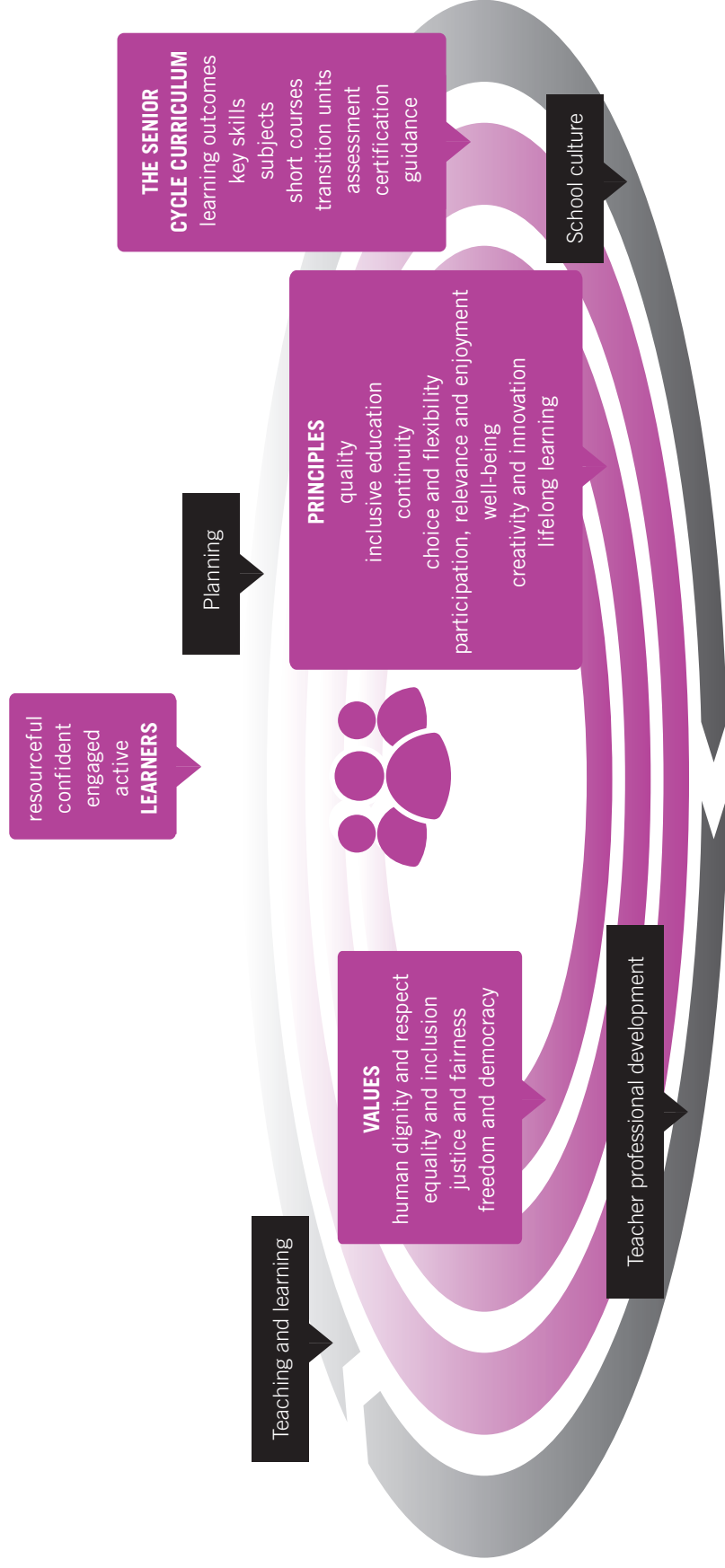
The vision of senior cycle education sees the learner at the centre of the educational experience. That experience will enable learners to be resourceful, to be confident, to participate actively in society, and to build an interest in and ability to learn throughout their future lives.

This vision of the learner is underpinned by the values on which senior cycle is based and it is realised through the principles that inform the curriculum as it is experienced by learners in schools. The curriculum, including subjects and courses, embedded key skills, clearly expressed learning outcomes, and a range of approaches to assessment is the vehicle through which the vision becomes a reality for the learner.

At a practical level, the provision of a high quality educational experience in senior cycle is supported by

- effective curriculum planning, development and organisation
- teaching, learning and assessment approaches that motivate and interest learners, that enable them to progress, deepen and apply their learning, and that develop their capacity to reflect on their learning
- professional development for teachers and school management that enables them to lead curriculum development and change in their schools
- a school culture that respects learners, that encourages them to take responsibility for their own learning over time, and that promotes a love of learning.

## Overview of senior cycle



**LEARNERS  
COMPLETING  
SENIOR  
CYCLE  
ARE**

**RESOURCEFUL**

they show their imagination, intelligence, intuition and other talents through

- curiosity
- enquiry
- open-mindedness
- reflection
- connecting learning
- innovation
- problem solving
- creativity

**CONFIDENT**

they develop their physical and mental well-being and become self-aware

- have high self-efficacy
- engage with ethics, values and beliefs
- welcome opportunities
- can cope with setbacks
- can effect positive change

**ENGAGED**

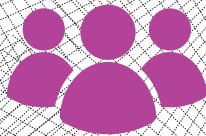
they participate in the social, community, national and international dimensions of their lives by showing respect for others

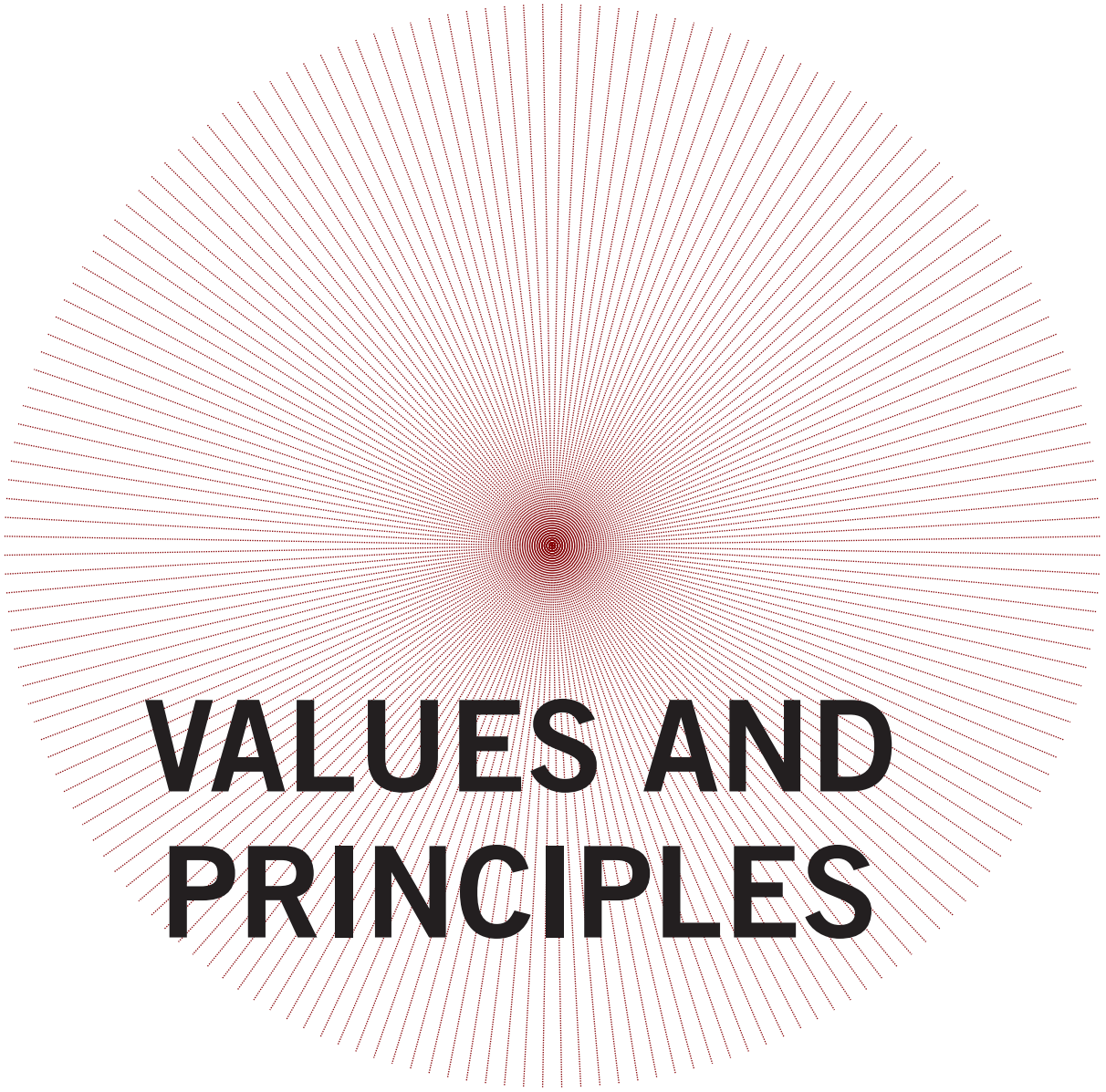
- forming and sustaining caring relationships
- making informed decisions
- building practical know-how
- taking interest in and responsibility for their social and physical environment
- developing moral/ethical and political understanding
- making lifestyle choices that are sustainable
- contributing to their own material well-being and the material well-being of society

**ACTIVE LEARNERS**

they pursue excellence in learning to the best of their ability and develop a love of learning by

- seeking and using knowledge, and understanding how knowledge is created
- experiencing passion for, rigour in and commitment to learning
- developing intellectual and critical thinking skills
- exercising autonomy and independence in learning
- managing their learning and making learning choices
- setting and achieving learning goals
- pursuing learning qualifications





# **VALUES AND PRINCIPLES**



# Values and principles

## Values

Values are deeply held beliefs about what is important in life. The values of equality and inclusion, justice and fairness, freedom and democracy, and respect for human dignity and identity are fundamental to the vision of senior cycle education. They are foundational to how we grow and what we do as human beings. Although they are articulated here in the context of senior cycle education, they apply beyond that to education in general and are values that have been traditionally accorded respect in society. In this sense, senior cycle education aims to foster an understanding and appreciation of moral, spiritual, aesthetic, social and cultural values that have been distinctive in shaping Irish society.

Values guide decision-making and action. The values underpinning senior cycle, if reflected in the experience of senior cycle, should have an impact on the formation of the young person's own values. At the level of the individual, the development of values is a social and personal process that progresses and changes through a lifetime. Through their educational experiences, students will learn to understand the values of their own communities, to express their own values, to develop empathy for the values of others, to critically analyse differences in values, and to make ethical decisions. They will also learn to acknowledge and reflect the values of a democratic society, respecting the diverse beliefs and ways of life of others.

## Principles

The principles of senior cycle education will inform curriculum planning, development, provision and implementation in schools. They set out the important underpinnings for the curriculum as it is realised in schools. As such, they are working principles and should inform the generation of senior cycle programmes in schools.

## The principles are:

### Quality

That all learners experience a high quality education, characterised by high expectations of the learner and the pursuit of excellence

### Inclusive education

That the experience of senior cycle is inclusive of all learners and contributes to the achievement of equality of opportunity, participation and outcome for all

### Continuity

That the curriculum enables learners to build on their learning to date, actively supports their progress in learning, and facilitates them in preparing and planning for future learning

### Choice and flexibility

That the curriculum, while broad in nature, offers sufficient choice and flexibility to meet the needs of learners

### Participation, relevance and enjoyment

That the experience of the curriculum encourages participation, is engaging and enjoyable for learners, and relevant to their lives

### Well-being

That the curriculum contributes directly to the physical, mental and social well-being of learners

### Creativity and innovation

That the curriculum provides opportunities for learners to develop their abilities and talents in the areas of creativity, innovation and enterprise

### Lifelong learning

That the curriculum supports learners in developing the skills of managing and directing their own learning that will assist them in meeting the challenges of life beyond school, in further and continuing education, and in working life.





# THE CURRICULUM

# The curriculum

This section sets out the senior cycle curriculum as it currently exists and later presents future developments that will offer a wider range of curriculum components.

## Senior cycle as it is now

Learners in senior cycle can currently follow a two or three-year programme of study, leading to the Leaving Certificate examination. They can take an initial Transition Year programme and proceed to choose from a number of options for the Leaving Certificate examination.

Alternatively, they can proceed directly to one of these Leaving Certificate options and take the final examination after two years. Performance in the Leaving Certificate examination is the main basis on which places in universities, institutes of technology and other further and higher education colleges are allocated.

### Transition Year

The Transition Year (TY) is a one-year programme that forms the first year of a three-year senior cycle in many schools. It is designed to act as a bridge between the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate. Transition Year offers learners an opportunity to mature and develop without the pressure of a formal examination. Its flexible structure allows for a broad range of learning experiences to be included, such as those related to personal and social awareness and development. It also provides an opportunity for learners to reflect on, and develop an appreciation of, the value of education and training in preparing them for the demands of the world of work and pays particular attention to fostering a spirit of enterprise.

Each school designs its own programme, within guidelines, to suit the needs and interests of its learners. Transition units are new units of study that can be selected or developed by teachers, as part of the programme. In establishing its own distinctive programme content, the school takes into account its own resources and the possibilities offered by local community interests.

### Leaving Certificate

The Leaving Certificate is studied over two years and aims to provide learners with a broad, balanced education while also offering some potential for specialisation

towards a particular career option. The Leaving Certificate is taken in almost all schools and students generally take six or more subjects for examination, one of which must be Irish. All subjects are offered at two levels, ordinary and higher. Irish and Mathematics are also available at foundation level. Over 30 Leaving Certificate subjects are available to schools.

### Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme

The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) is designed to enhance the vocational dimension of the Leaving Certificate. This two-year programme combines the academic strengths of the Leaving Certificate with a focus on self-directed learning, enterprise, work and the community. The defining features of the LCVP are that learners take

- some of their Leaving Certificate subjects from a specified set of vocational subjects
- a recognised course in a modern European language
- two additional courses, known as Link Modules, in the areas of Preparation for the World of Work and Enterprise Education.

### Leaving Certificate Applied

The Leaving Certificate Applied is a discrete programme designed for those learners whose aptitudes, learning interests and ways of learning are not fully catered for by the other two Leaving Certificate programmes and for those learners who are at risk of early school leaving. Participants in the Leaving Certificate Applied engage in work and study of an active, practical and task-centred nature and it prepares participants for transition from the world of the school/centre to that of adult and working life. The Leaving Certificate Applied is a two-year programme made up of a range of courses that are structured round three elements:

- vocational preparation
- vocational education
- general education.

For more information on the senior cycle curriculum visit [www.curriculumonline.ie](http://www.curriculumonline.ie).

## New developments

New arrangements arising out of ongoing developments at senior cycle will offer a wider range of curriculum components, including transition units, short courses and subjects, which can be combined by schools and learners to provide a two or three year programme of study. Programmes of study provided by schools will reflect a broad curriculum that can also allow for and incorporate a degree of specialisation. Programmes will be characterised by choice and flexibility and will be available to all senior cycle learners. The requirements associated with the composition of a programme of study will be limited, in order to retain flexibility for schools in how they design and construct their senior cycle curriculum and to ensure choice and flexibility for learners during their time in school and in the future.

### Flexible learning profiles

A flexible approach to providing programmes of study that suit particular learning needs and interests could be of benefit in engaging learners. To support the principle of a more flexible senior cycle for all, NCCA is working with a group of schools to develop models for flexible learning profiles that incorporate elements of a number of the existing programmes available at senior cycle, plus some other modules available from other awarding bodies. In this scenario, learners might combine senior cycle subjects, short courses, transition units, Leaving Certificate Applied modules, work-based learning and FETAC courses as part of their senior cycle education. This exploration of flexible learning profiles in senior cycle is ongoing in a number of schools.

For more information on this work visit [www.ncca.ie/seniorcycle](http://www.ncca.ie/seniorcycle) and follow the links for Flexible Learning Profiles.

### Curriculum components

As the developments at senior cycle are progressed and introduced it is envisaged that there will be three main types of curriculum component available to learners—subjects, short courses and transition units.

#### Subjects

Subjects are the most familiar of the curriculum components and are designed as 180-hour courses of study, usually taken on an optional basis. As existing subjects are revised or as new subjects are developed, a strong emphasis is placed on what is learned and how it is learned. All subjects are examined by the State Examinations Commission (SEC).

#### Short courses

Short courses are proposed as new 90-hour optional courses. The first two sample short courses being developed for consultation are in the areas of Enterprise and Psychology. These would also be examined by the State Examinations Commission.

#### Transition units

Transition units are 45-hour courses, developed and assessed by schools. They build on successful modules already provided by schools as part of Transition Year programmes. In developing transition units, schools may devise some ‘from scratch’ or they may decide to adapt some of the modules they already offer. They are developed to a common template and can be shared between schools.

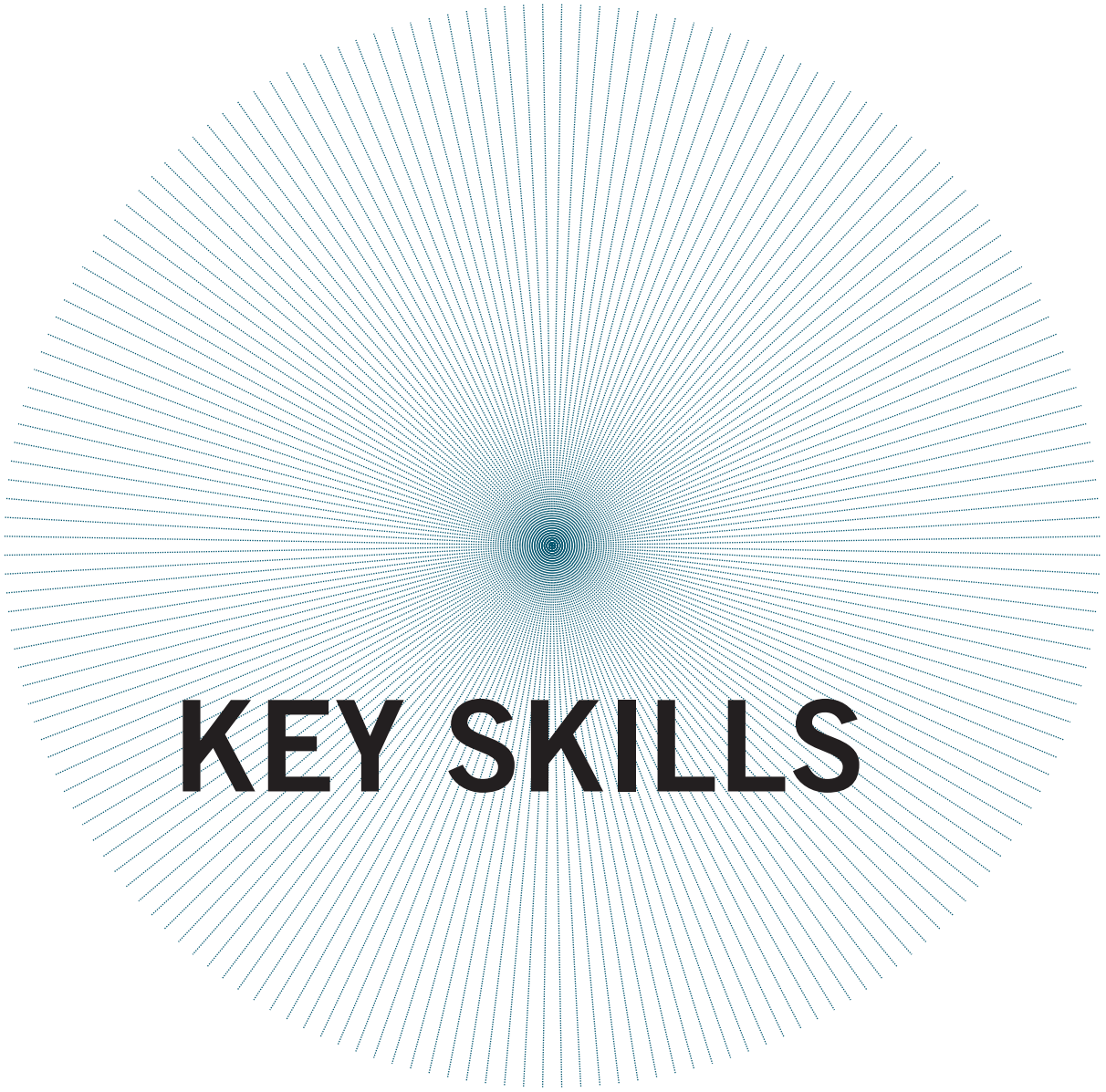
More information is available on subjects, short courses and transition units at [www.ncca.ie/seniorcycle](http://www.ncca.ie/seniorcycle).

### What curriculum documents look like

All revised and new senior cycle syllabuses for subjects and short courses follow a common format. This will help teachers, learners and parents to see similarities and differences between subjects. The syllabuses are firmly focused on the learner and facilitate teachers and students to engage in learner-centred activities to achieve the learning outcomes. Each syllabus follows this structure

- introduction to senior cycle
- the introduction, rationale, aim and objectives for the subject or short course
- a statement about the dispositions/capacities, competences/skills, types of understanding/intelligence which are considered important to experiencing and achieving success in the subject
- related learning
- syllabus overview
- statements on key skills, differentiation, teaching and learning and reasonable accommodations
- the syllabus material expressed as topics and learning outcomes
- the assessment arrangements and general assessment criteria that apply for the examination.





# **KEY SKILLS**

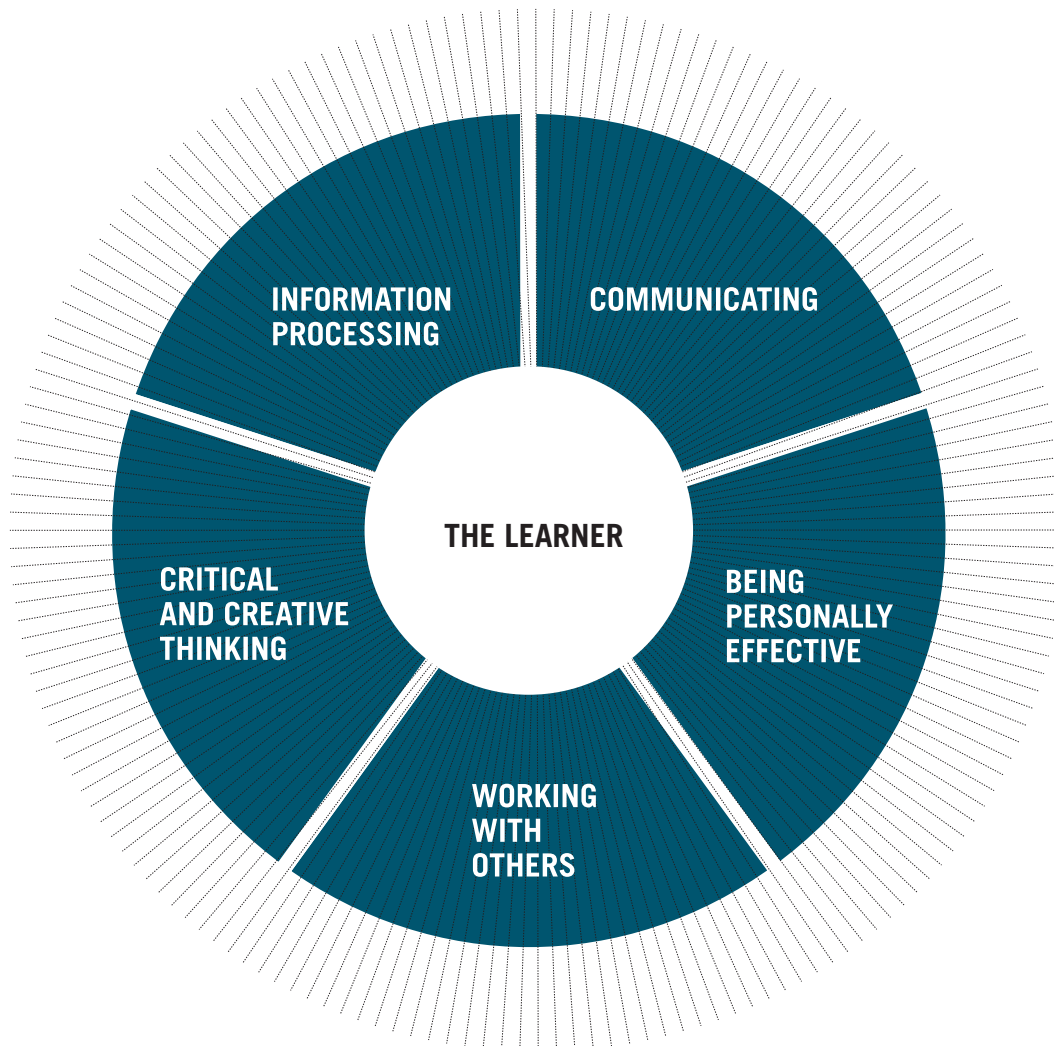
# Key skills

The ability to think critically and creatively, innovate and adapt to change, to work independently and in a team, and to be a reflective learner are prerequisites for life and for the workplace in the 21st century. In line with international trends, and influenced by the Lisbon strategy and the OECD DeSeCo (Defining and Selecting Key Competencies) initiative, a framework of key skills for senior cycle that is integrated with the curriculum, teaching and learning, has been developed. The key skills also support the development and enhancement of the basic skills of literacy and numeracy which are crucial for learners in accessing the curriculum and in their future life chances. Skills in communication, problem-solving, accessing and selecting information to mention just a few,

will contribute to literacy and numeracy mastery in all areas of the curriculum.

Following consultation, engagement with schools and research, five key skills have been identified as central to teaching and learning across the senior cycle curriculum. These are *information processing, being personally effective, communicating, critical and creative thinking* and *working with others*. These key skills play an important role in all learners achieving their potential, both during their time in school and in the future. They also enable learners to participate fully in society, including family and community life and the world of work.

## Key Skills



Many of the elements that make up these skills are already a feature of teaching and learning across subjects. The embedding of key skills in the curriculum will thus involve building on current practice and also on increasing attention to the skills and their potential for actively engaging learners. By embedding the key skills in the curriculum learners are presented with a range of learning experiences and outcomes that improve their present and future access to learning, their social interaction, their information and communication abilities and their experience to work collaboratively.

There are strong inter-relationships between each of the five key skills. As learners engage with each of the key skills they grow in their knowledge about learning and their skills of learning, both in general terms and in the particular context of their own learning. Therefore, as learners experience the five key skills they also learn how to learn.

### **The five key skills are:**

#### **Information processing**

This key skill helps learners become competent in an information-intensive environment. As well as developing the specific skills of accessing, selecting, evaluating and recording information, learners develop an appreciation of the differences between information and knowledge and the roles that both play in making decisions and judgements.

#### **Critical and creative thinking**

This key skill assists learners in being aware of different forms and patterns of thinking so that they become more skilled in higher order reasoning and problem solving. In engaging with this key skill, learners reflect critically on the forms of thinking and values that shape their own perceptions, opinions and knowledge.

#### **Communicating**

This key skill helps learners to appreciate how central communication is to human relationships of all kinds, and to become better communicators in both formal and informal situations. As well as developing specific skills in a variety of media they form a deeper understanding of the power of communication—particularly language and images—in the modern world. It also incorporates competence and confidence in literacy as an essential basic skill for all learners.

#### **Working with others**

This key skill highlights the role that working with others plays in learning and in reaching both collective and personal goals. It helps learners gain some appreciation of the dynamics of groups and the social skills needed

to engage in collaborative work. It contributes to an appreciation that working collectively can help motivation, release energy and capitalise on all the talents in a group. In a broader context, they come to recognise that working collectively is important for social cohesion and for engaging with diverse cultural, ethnic and religious groups.

#### **Being personally effective**

This key skill contributes to the personal growth of learners, to them becoming more self-aware and to their using that knowledge to develop personal goals and life plans. As well as giving learners specific strategies related to self appraisal, goal setting and action planning, an important dimension of this key skill is in building the know-how of learners in recognising how to get things done, how to garner and use resources effectively, and how to act autonomously according to personal identities and personal values.

For more information on key skills, including learning activities and video footage, visit [www.ncca.ie/seniorcycle](http://www.ncca.ie/seniorcycle) and follow the links for Key Skills.







# **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

# Teaching and learning

The development of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will enable learners to become independent and to develop a lifelong commitment to improving their learning combined with the nurturing of positive beliefs about learning and a willingness to engage in new learning situations are central to the development of the student as a learner.

Teaching and learning in senior cycle should enable learners to

- develop positive beliefs about learning
- develop focus and discipline in learning
- learn in ways that suit their own strengths and needs
- develop a range of learning strategies
- make connections across learning
- develop a commitment to improving learning
- be willing to engage in new learning situations
- develop reflective practices.

The promotion of an inclusive learning culture is in the first instance a decision for the school through a whole school approach to learning and the promotion of learning relationships involving the teacher/learner, learner/learner, teacher/teacher, learner/community, learner/parent, parent/teacher and other interested parties. School planning for learning provides for enhanced learning experiences when it also provides appropriate time, facilities, teaching and support resources. The school should also be familiar and welcoming for parents and the wider community, inviting and encouraging them into school and building links with learning opportunities outside school.

## Learning outcomes

The content of all revised and new senior cycle syllabuses is expressed in learning outcomes. The learning outcomes help to ensure that the objectives of the relevant curriculum component, the learning and teaching strategies adopted and the assessment approaches employed are consistent with each other and integrate the key skills effectively. In other words, they contribute to ensuring that the various elements of the curriculum are combined together to achieve the aims of the syllabus.

The use of clearly stated learning outcomes will help learners to

- be clear about what they are meant to be learning
- monitor and discuss their own progress
- take greater ownership and control of their own learning

and help teachers to

- choose the most appropriate teaching methods and learning tasks
- ensure assessment is authentic, by facilitating a close match between assessment approaches and the intended learning outcomes
- provide more focused feedback to learners
- select what to teach and the best way in which to teach it

and parents to

- become familiar with the learning taking place in each subject, short course and transition unit
- support learners in taking greater ownership and control of their learning.

The learning outcomes in each syllabus integrate the five key skills outlined in the previous section. The increased emphasis on the development of these skills should result in the learner having a central role in structured, well-managed, independent and reflective learning practices, thus creating an environment where learners become more involved in the management of their own learning over time. This can be further enhanced through the use of assessment approaches which involve the learner in setting the context for the assessment and in self assessment. Involving learners in this way will not only develop learning management skills and dispositions but will also provide occasions for further teacher/learner engagement and a focus for conversation about learning and progress.

For learners to develop, a number of dimensions of the learning experience have to be considered. While the knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes and values encountered through the curriculum are very important, these need to be complemented by meaningful learning activities and experiences in the classroom, school and other sites of learning, and by appropriate evaluation and assessment.

## Approaches to teaching and learning

A thoughtfully created, supportive learning environment is a powerful encouragement to the learner in the development of positive beliefs and high expectations. In this context the teaching and learning approaches employed are based on collaboration between learner and teacher to achieve the goal of fostering increased learner responsibility. Students can be supported to become more self-directed in their learning by helping them to develop skills like information processing, independent thinking, communicating, evaluating, reflecting and working in teams. This is a process that happens over time as learners build the skills to enable them to organise and manage their learning.

Learning activities that demonstrate learner-centred approaches will be provided across a number of subject areas on [www.ncca.ie/seniorcycle](http://www.ncca.ie/seniorcycle). The work on key skills also provides many examples of learning activities that encourage the development of learning skills.

These approaches to teaching and learning involve an enhanced role for the teacher as they are less involved in 'delivering' learning and more directly involved in facilitating learners and learning. The core of learning is still an interaction between teachers and learners but increasingly the role of the teacher is to encourage learners to become more self-directed in their learning as they progress through senior cycle. Teachers have an even more important role in learning as they empower learners with the tools for learning for the present and for the future. This also means that teachers require deep understanding of the subjects they are teaching as well as the knowledge and skills required to help their students to learn.

Technology has considerable potential to support teaching and learning when it is used purposefully and with appropriate resources. The use of ICT can be integrated with learning in all areas of the curriculum, supporting learners and learning in the process.

Schools can support learners in

- exploring the potential of ICT to create, communicate, and collaborate to produce and organise information
- using ICT for thinking and learning including managing enquiry, accessing information, solving problems, and expressing ideas across a range of curriculum areas
- developing a critical appreciation of the role of ICT in society and habits which reflect ethical and responsible use of ICT.

When teachers connect their students with sources of information and knowledge it allows them to explore

ideas, acquire and synthesise information and knowledge and frame and solve problems. Schools can encourage collaboration among students so that more powerful shared learning occurs, among teachers so that pedagogical knowledge can be shared and developed at local level and between school and parents so that school and home can support learning.

## Strategies for evaluating and improving learning

As learners move towards more autonomy in the management of their own learning through their experience of structured, well-managed and independent learning practices, they can also learn to reflect on and evaluate their learning. Reflective learners assimilate new learning, relate it to what they already know, adapt it for their own purposes and translate thought into action. Over time they develop their creativity, their ability to think critically about information and ideas and their metacognitive ability, that is, their ability to think about their own thinking.

Teachers and schools can assist learners to evaluate and improve their learning through supporting them to

- identify their strengths and weaknesses
- develop plans about their learning
- develop the knowledge and skills to explore how they learn and to evaluate and monitor their own learning
- gather and evaluate evidence of their learning against criteria, both individually and in groups
- make connections in learning and transfer learning to new contexts and situations
- use guidance tools that allow them to take responsibility for their own learning.

Teachers also need to be able to analyse and reflect on their practice, to assess the effects of their teaching, and to refine and improve their classroom practices.

## Guidance

As learners navigate their way through post-primary school and in particular through senior cycle they are faced with many choices and challenges. Appropriate guidance and support enables them to make wise and informed personal, educational and career choices. The *Draft Curriculum Framework for Guidance in Post-Primary Education* (NCCA, 2007) offers an outline of curricular experiences in the areas of personal and educational guidance and career development. In addition to this, it is planned to make curriculum and support materials available online that will provide learners with information that will help them to make informed choices.





# ASSESSMENT

*Towards Learning* promotes a high quality learning experience for all, and assessment plays a key role in shaping the nature of the learning experience.

Consideration of its role must begin by recognising that assessment takes different forms and can be used in a variety of ways. The vision for assessment in senior cycle is that, in whichever context it is used, assessment can and should be supportive of learning. A concern for equity and fairness is central to this. Most importantly, the vision reflects the conviction that equity and fairness in assessment are promoted by clear alignment between curricular aims and assessment approaches. This is so whether the teacher or student is using assessment in the classroom to inform the teaching and learning process or whether an externally administered examination is being employed to measure achievement for use ultimately on a certificate.

This section discusses the role of assessment and its impact upon the experience of the learner in two key ways:

- assessment as used to test and certify achievement
- assessment as part of teaching and learning.

## Assessment in the State examinations

Formal assessment, as used to test and certify achievement, will continue to be conducted by the State Examinations Commission. Yet here some significant changes are envisaged, the intention being to ensure that the examinations learners take are most closely aligned with the aims of the syllabus they have studied. In this context a broader range of assessment methods will be used so that, as fully as is possible, all dimensions of the learning outcomes in the syllabus are assessed. Central to this is the idea of revising and extending the range of second component assessments. The aim of second component assessment is to ensure continuity between the aims of the subject and the arrangements for assessment; to ensure that, where possible, the examination/s in a subject area are a more valid reflection of the teaching and learning approaches recommended in the syllabus.

Further clarity will be brought to the relationship between the syllabus and the examination by the inclusion of general criteria for assessment in the syllabus documents. These general criteria will throw additional light on the syllabus learning outcomes by describing in broad terms the features of performance of learners in examination components for high, moderate and low levels of success. The criteria will offer learners and teachers the opportunity to link learning outcomes with the assessment process—if the learning outcomes show learners what they should be able to do, the criteria for assessment show how well they should be able to do it.

## Assessment in the classroom

Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning and, as such, it is used to support and improve learning by helping learners and teachers to identify next steps in their learning. In this sense, the most valuable assessment takes place at the site of learning where learners receive support and guidance. Learning is best supported in the classroom context when clear goals are established between teacher and learner and when images of successful learning can be shared by reference to those goals. The process of providing effective feedback to learners is supported through the statements of learning outcomes in the syllabus documentation for subjects and short courses. Learning outcomes contribute directly to effective classroom assessment because they are helpful to teachers in establishing and sharing learning intentions and in helping learners to identify, in broad terms, the understanding they will need to demonstrate following each learning unit or topic.

## General principles underpinning assessment in senior cycle

The vision for assessment articulated above is underpinned by a number of general principles that support high quality assessment.

- Assessment for any purpose should improve learning by exerting a positive influence on the curriculum at all levels. It must, therefore, reflect the full range of curriculum goals, and all of the elements—cognitive, affective, and psychomotor—that it claims to evaluate.

- Assessment procedures should be decided on the basis of the purpose for which the assessment is being undertaken, ensuring that the assessment achieves a high degree of validity. This may well mean employing different assessment methods for formative, diagnostic, certification, and selection purposes.
- When the outcomes of assessment are used in high stakes contexts it is important that they are dependable and consistent, that they exhibit a high degree of reliability.
- Formative assessment (including assessment for learning) is a continuous part of the teaching and learning process, involving learners, wherever possible, as well as teachers, in identifying next steps. In the context of providing support for learning, the most valuable assessment takes place at the site of learning where learners receive support and guidance in their learning.
- Assessment should provide an effective basis for communication with parents and the other partners in the learning enterprise, in a way that helps them to support learning.
- Assessment that is equitable will provide a range of approaches that will offer learners multiple and appropriate opportunities to achieve.

These principles relate to how assessment is used in different contexts and purposes. They show how important assessment is in supporting learning, as a way of keeping learning focused and on track. They remind us of the importance of using assessment information to make sure that reports to parents and others are accessible and clear. They stress the necessity to ensure that assessment arrangements are fair and equitable when they apply across a whole range of learners, including those with diverse and special needs, those who are home educated, and those for whom reasonable accommodations are provided in State examinations.







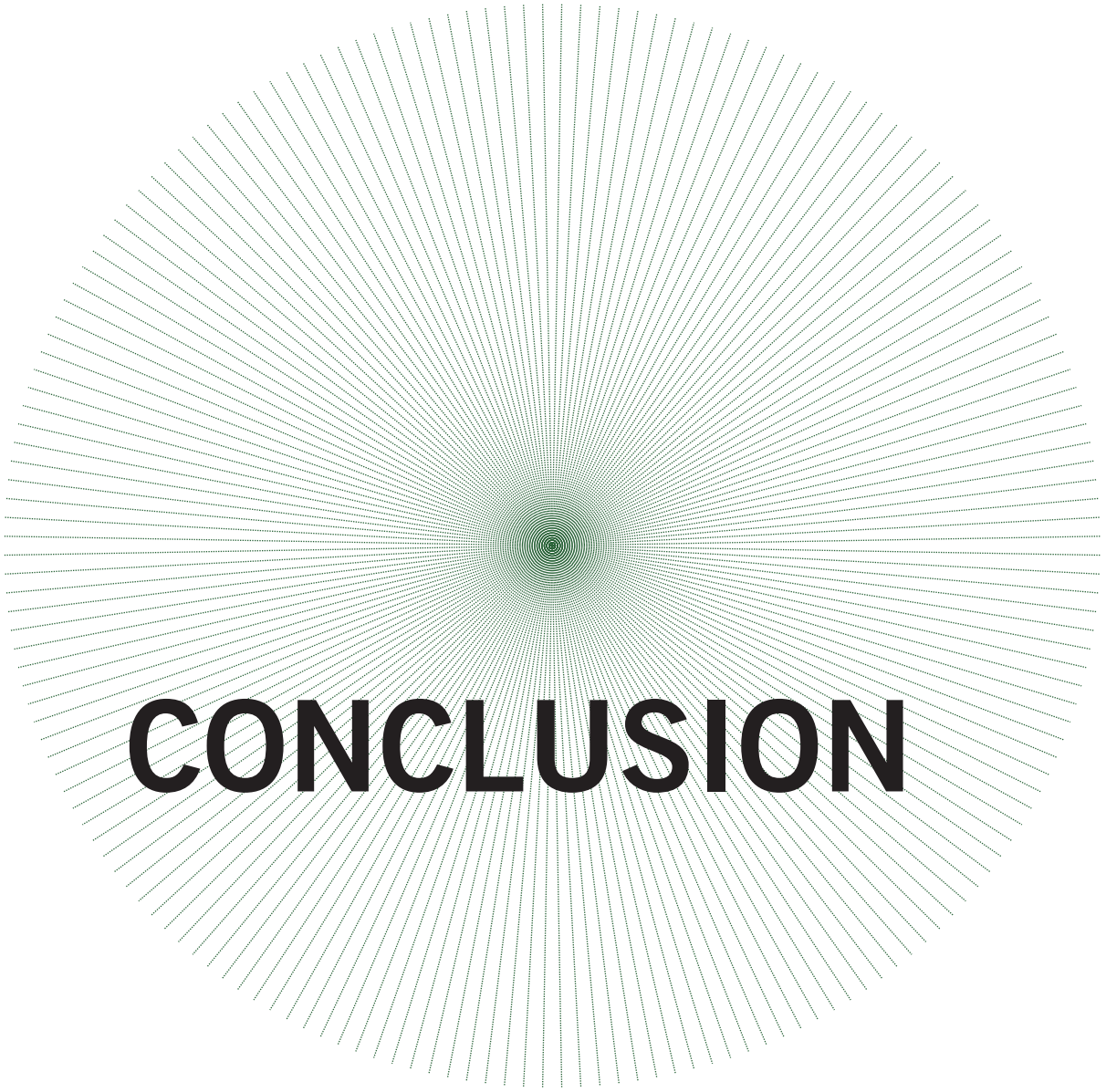
# CERTIFICATION

# Certification

Learners who take examinations in Leaving Certificate subjects, the curriculum components of the LCVP and the Leaving Certificate Applied all receive a Leaving Certificate. This certificate includes a list of the subjects (Leaving Certificate), subjects and link modules (LCVP) and courses (Leaving Certificate Applied) taken for examination and the grades achieved. The State Examinations Commission is the body that awards the certificate to learners. The Leaving Certificate is a recognised award which is placed at Levels 4/5 of the National Framework of Qualifications.

There is no national certification associated with the Transition Year at present. However, some schools include courses or modules as part of the curriculum for Transition Year that may be certificated by a range of awarding bodies in Ireland and/or abroad, or may be certificated locally by the school itself.

As senior cycle education comes to include a greater range of curriculum components in more flexible combinations, senior cycle certification could be broadened to provide every learner with a record of achievement in all the curriculum components taken as part of their senior cycle. The record of achievement may take the form of a portfolio that would include grades achieved in all Leaving Certificate curriculum components. But it might also include a record of the transition units completed and any certificates gained from awarding bodies other than the SEC, whose qualifications the learner had gained during the course of senior cycle.



# Conclusion

As stated in the preamble, *Towards Learning* is a work in progress that presents an overview of senior cycle education. It tackles the challenging task of positioning senior cycle as it is today and how it might be in the future. In the spirit of an emergent approach to curriculum and assessment change it will continue to be modified and added to as developments are introduced over a number of years. It is hoped that it will stimulate much discussion around senior cycle and invite comments from all of the education community as part of a number of consultation events over the coming months. More detailed material and information on particular aspects of senior cycle and its development are available in other documentation on the NCCA website at [www.ncca.ie/senior cycle](http://www.ncca.ie/senior%20cycle), along with opportunities to participate in the consultation on senior cycle.









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