



Towards
**A FRAMEWORK
FOR JUNIOR CYCLE**

**Innovation
& Identity**
Schools developing Junior Cycle





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1. Innovation and Identity – the Big Ideas About Change

Arguably, generating a new junior cycle curriculum and different assessment arrangements is not that challenging, *on paper*. The development of the unified three-year junior cycle in the 1980s is testament to the fact that it can be done. But that development also points to one of the most consistent and universal ironies of the change process in education, namely, that change can happen, but the student experience can remain largely the same. Educational change is one of those processes which has a habit of resetting itself back to how things have always been done.

That's not just an Irish phenomenon. The power of the status quo has been well documented in educational reforms across the world. It's easier to do change *on paper* than in real classrooms. The message from real junior cycle classrooms and those who work in them, from research and through the recent consultation is clear. It is time for real change.

At the launch of the consultation over a year ago, NCCA flagged the two 'big ideas', as *innovation* and *identity*. We wanted to focus attention on the school as the site of innovation, and on teachers and school leaders as the agents of any change process. Equally, we wanted to focus attention on young people and their experience and expectations of those three years of junior cycle. Their identity as young adolescents needed to be front and centre in our deliberations, but we also needed to be mindful of the seemingly perpetual identity crisis of lower secondary education. Should lower secondary education be a continuation of primary school, or a preparation for senior cycle? Could education at this level contribute to both while at the same time retaining its own identity?

We proposed the idea of a *Framework for Junior Cycle* within which schools might organise junior cycle, with some elements being for all students and all schools,

and others being school designed. This, we suggested, would allow for schools to offer their students a junior cycle experience that was **both** a follow-on from primary education **and** a preparation for senior cycle but that was first and foremost connected to the lives and learning of 12–15 year olds. The Framework would give schools more choice in what they offered their students, and flexibility in how the learning could be organised.

How far and how fast should we move – the debate

We began the debate with the two big ideas and the Framework. The submissions and responses presented in *Innovation and Identity: Report of the Consultation Findings* tell the full story or rather the many stories of many potential futures for junior cycle proposed in the course of that debate. They make for interesting reading. They tell of genuine interest in the issues at a time when the education system and schooling in particular was coming under considerable pressure. They also tell of a concern for the wellbeing of young people at this critical stage of their journey from childhood to adulthood in a complex and challenging environment.

Participants in the consultation were encouraged to position their ideas along a number of thematic pathways from small change to major reform. For those positioned towards the 'more of the same' side of the continuum the debates focused on the need to establish the number and nature of compulsory subjects, concern for the readiness of those entering post-primary education to engage with the post-primary curriculum, and for the allocation of time to some subjects. The need to add more components to

the Junior Certificate examination in a range of subjects so that the examination might better match the aims and objectives of the syllabuses also featured at this end of the debate.

For those at the opposite end of the continuum, the debates tended to focus more on the need to describe the essential learning that would be common to all students, on the quality of their learning, on the need to make greater use of new technologies in the home and at school, on the right balance to be achieved between control from the centre and school autonomy, and on the future of an examination that had become a dress-rehearsal for the Leaving Certificate instead of a support for learning in junior cycle.

How far and how fast should we move – the evidence

The submissions and other consultation items – right across the continuum – also show that the findings from research commissioned by the NCCA into the experiences of a group of students as they moved from primary into post-primary education have had a real impact both inside and outside the education system. The evidence from that study has served to confirm what many had already believed about the experience of junior cycle education for students – that it has three distinct phases – a first year about settling in, a third year dominated by the examination, and a second year where students either become more, or less connected to school. The research also showed that the quality of engagement – with the schools, with teachers and with learning – is central to this phase of education. Disengagement with any of these in junior cycle is not a phase, or a glitch, but a process that will deepen in senior cycle and have consequences well beyond schooling. The disengagement is more acutely marked in boys, and in students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

That theme of engagement was a constant in the responses to the NCCA consultation. Evidence from classrooms, as reported by teachers, and sometimes by students themselves, indicated that while students were present in class, their creative energies were often lacking, with teachers increasingly feeling that they were the ones doing the hard work in schools!

Recently, we got more evidence about the quality of that engagement, when the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results for Irish 15 year olds were published. While we might contest the scale of the deterioration it is, nonetheless, likely to be the case that significant numbers of junior cycle students are not developing the skills they need to learn, to live and to work.

This evidence presents an urgent challenge to the status quo. If the last decade has seen a decline in literacy and numeracy standards of 15 year olds relative to other countries, then unless we take steps to address it, the decline will continue. If the second year of junior cycle remains as it is, it will continue to be the point of disengagement for a significant proportion of students who never fully reconnect with schooling again. And if the third year of junior cycle continues to be dominated by the prospect of the Junior Certificate examination and preparation for it continues to be focused on rehearsing questions and answers, then students, and their teachers and their parents will continue to believe that this approach is all that is required for success in this examination, in the subsequent Leaving Certificate, and in learning beyond post-primary schooling.

What we have learned from our research, our consultations and our PISA scores is that, on close inspection, what we currently offer at junior cycle is falling short of what students need. Ironically, the evidence is that continuing as we are will not keep things the same. It will probably make things worse for our young people.

But when we do move nothing happens – the history

A number of the submissions received by the NCCA as part of the consultation noted that Ireland had experienced waves of junior cycle reform rhetoric on two previous occasions in recent times, each a decade or so apart.

Twenty years ago, the first reports on the new unified Junior Certificate programme introduced in 1990 suggested that the mismatch between the re-designed curriculum and the terminal examination had resulted in the lower secondary system resetting itself back to

the status quo despite the new labelling. Why? Because, for the most part, the assessment reforms associated with the new curriculum were not delivered, leading to a new curriculum being strangled by an old examination system.

Ten years ago, the NCCA and the Department of Education and Science (as it was then) jointly led a series of nationwide debates on the future of junior cycle curriculum and assessment. As part of its junior cycle review at that time, the NCCA published a *Progress Report: Issues and Options for Development* (1999) and the then Minister launched a DES document on reforming the Junior Certificate examination called *The Junior Certificate: Issues for Discussion* (1999).

As a result of the discussions that took place at that time, the NCCA began a process of re-balancing Junior Certificate subject syllabuses in an effort to address what was widely seen as an overcrowded curriculum, and with a view to creating more space for the active learning and student engagement originally envisaged for junior cycle. That work is almost complete, but the overwhelming feedback from the committees undertaking the work was that unless the examination changes, nothing else will.

This was also a message from the consultation this time around – unless the examination at the end of junior cycle changes, what happens in the three years before it will simply stay the same. While there was recognition that over the period since its introduction, contestation around the Junior Certificate examination had been considerable, at best it had resulted in minor tweaking but no real change. As a consequence, little had changed for students. The evidence from the ESRI research is similarly unequivocal. The path though junior cycle is a path towards the examination. The closer the terminal written examination becomes, the greater its influence on how and what students learn, and how teachers plan and teach.

The implication is clear. The rhetoric for change at junior cycle has emerged from research evidence, public and political consensus, and professional concern. The reality of change will emerge from changing the examination. A new Framework for Junior Cycle must include curriculum **and** assessment change.

Local flexibility, but system change...

Innovation and Identity highlighted the importance of the change process for the reform of junior cycle. Drawing on the NCCA's strategic paper *Leading and Supporting Change in Schools*, it suggested that unless schools led the change, meaningful change would never find its way into the classrooms. It suggested that our traditional model of change – that viewed schools and classrooms (and sometimes, teachers) as the objects of the change, had run its course. This set of ideas was the focus of lots of comment and discussion in the course of the consultation process, with strong support for placing schools, teachers and students at the centre of the change process. But in the course of the debates, a concern was expressed that flexibility might lead to further polarisation in the school system.

While *Innovation and Identity* proposed a national *Framework for Junior Cycle* within which all schools would plan their junior cycle and engage with the change process, reservations were expressed that this approach would provide an 'out' for some schools to engage with change at a minimal level. A number of submissions speculated that this might lead to a scenario where some schools, serving particular kinds of communities would have a 'new' junior cycle, while others, serving different groups of students would largely retain a 'traditional' junior cycle. Local school-led change was welcomed but it was suggested that it needed to be balanced with leadership from the centre. The balance achieved between the two had to be an effective one if junior cycle development was to contribute to addressing current inequalities in Irish education.

In this context, the proposals that follow are based on the premise of all schools moving at the same time, all schools moving in the same direction and all schools arriving at the same end point. But the degree of 'movement in the same direction' will be where schools will have flexibility. In this way, we can have that balance between school-led change and system-wide change that will deliver a new junior cycle and a real difference in the learning experiences of young people at this stage of their education. Such flexibility and creativity are key conditions for making schools places where young people learn risk-taking and

innovation, but such conditions cannot emerge piecemeal – they must be system wide. (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009, OECD, 2008, OECD, 2009, McKinsey, 2010, Sahlberg, 2011).

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“Unless the examination changes,
nothing else will...”

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That system wide change has to begin with the examination. Unless it does, attempts to renew teaching and learning, to build school and professional capacity, and support student engagement will absorb resources, time and energy but deliver little. ‘Real’ change across junior cycle will begin by changing what happens at the end of junior cycle. The changes proposed are not radical by international standards; the new qualifications and the assessment arrangements proposed will still include externally set and marked examinations, and a national qualification for all students. But by Irish standards, for a post-primary system so focused on examinations, they represent a radical departure. The challenges lie not

only in supporting and quality assuring the new assessment arrangements. A further challenge lies in changing system and public expectations of assessment and qualifications at junior cycle. They cannot continue to be a ‘Leaving Certificate light’.

Engagement with parents, at both local and system level, is key to making this change. A junior cycle programme with greater connections to local communities, dialogue with parents on the progress of their children in key skills as well as in subjects, and school-home encouragement of greater learner responsibility will also help in shifting the emphasis away from the terminal examination.

To support this new perspective on junior cycle assessment and qualifications, a new name for the qualification at the end of this phase of education is proposed – the National Certificate of Junior Cycle Education. A change of label and name is often dismissed as cosmetic. And the changes to the examination are not radical – much will remain. But the power of those changes to lever the other ‘real changes’ is beyond question, and is the basis for a new name, and a new symbolic value. These ‘real’ changes are summarised in Table 1.

Figure 1.
The New Junior Cycle – Main Features





02

2. Vision, Values and Principles

The vision, values and principles of junior cycle are set out below. They are designed to assist schools in reflecting on junior cycle education and in planning junior cycle programmes.

Vision

Junior cycle education places students at the centre of the educational experience, enabling them to actively participate in their communities and in society and to be resourceful and confident learners in all aspects and stages of their lives.

Values

The development of values is a personal and social process that continues throughout 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 junior cycle education. They guide decision making on the curriculum and, when reflected in the educational experience of students, should have an impact on the formation of their values.

Principles

Principles inform the school's thinking about the intended curriculum (what we want students to learn), the enacted curriculum (how teachers teach and students engage with the intended curriculum), and the experienced curriculum (how individual students experience the curriculum). These principles inform the planning for and development of junior cycle programmes, but schools may wish to add other principles, including those that reflect a particular ethos or strong connection to place.

Table 1.
Curriculum Principles for Junior Cycle Education

<p>QUALITY</p> <p>All students experience a high quality education, characterised by high expectations of learners and the pursuit of excellence.</p>	<p>WELLBEING</p> <p>The curriculum contributes directly to the physical, mental and social wellbeing of students.</p>
<p>CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION</p> <p>The curriculum provides opportunities for students to develop their abilities and talents in the areas of creativity, innovation and enterprise.</p>	<p>CHOICE AND FLEXIBILITY</p> <p>The curriculum, while broad in nature, offers sufficient choice and flexibility to meet the needs of students.</p>
<p>ENGAGEMENT, RELEVANCE AND ENJOYMENT</p> <p>The experience of the curriculum encourages participation, is engaging and enjoyable for students, and relevant to their lives.</p>	<p>INCLUSIVE EDUCATION</p> <p>The educational experience is inclusive of all students and contributes to equality of opportunity, participation and outcome for all.</p>
<p>CONTINUITY</p> <p>The curriculum enables students to build on their learning to date and actively supports their progress in learning.</p>	<p>LIFELONG LEARNING</p> <p>The curriculum supports students in developing the learning skills that will assist them in meeting the challenges of life beyond school, of further education, and of working life.</p>



03

3. Learning in the Junior Cycle

The orientation of the new junior cycle – the rationale for change – is to place a greater emphasis on student learning, on the quality of that learning, and on the respective roles of teachers and students in that process. That's not to say that learning does not happen in the junior cycle we have now. Of course it does. But the evidence from research (ESRI 2004, 2006, 2007), and the feedback from the consultation indicates that each year of junior cycle is associated with a particular learning challenge. In first year the challenge is one of *progress*. While schools make considerable efforts to help students to settle in to post-primary school, they are less successful on connecting learning in primary school with the learning in post-primary classrooms. As a result, research shows that most students make little progress in the key areas of reading and mathematics in first year and some even regress.

In second year, the learning challenge is different. Here, the issue is the question *purpose*. Students are not sure of the purpose of second year and some drift into disengagement that will become more acute in the years ahead. As students move into third year the challenge is all about *product*. Student learning narrows and becomes more and more focused on preparing for the examination. During this time, an over-emphasis by teachers, with the support of their students, on the structure of lessons and covering the course at the expense of deep learning emerges. The key to addressing these challenges lies in a different approach to assessment and the examination. These proposed changes are outlined in the next chapter but some development will also be needed in how learning is organised across the junior cycle.

A Framework for Junior Cycle

To support schools in developing a high quality junior cycle programme that meets the needs of their students and that provides a close fit with the context, environment and community of the school, a *Framework for Junior Cycle* will be introduced.

The Framework describes what all junior cycle students should learn. It provides for the national qualifications associated with learning in junior cycle. But it also gives school management and teachers the professional space and flexibility to decide how best to organise the learning and adjust it to meet the learning needs of their students. In this sense, the primary focus of the framework is to ensure that all aspects of the curriculum and its organisation are focused on improving the learning and teaching that takes place every day in every classroom and site of learning. Recent research into educational change in improving education systems worldwide shows that while structural change and resources are still important, the vast majority of interventions now focus on learning and teaching and '*spend more of their activity on improving how instruction is delivered than on changing the content of what is delivered*' (McKinsey, 2010).

The framework will combine statements of purpose and intent relating to junior cycle education with information designed to guide schools in planning and developing their junior cycle programme. It sets the parameters for schools and supports schools engaged in planning for the development of their junior cycle.

How will the Framework support better learning in junior cycle?

The *Framework for Junior Cycle* will provide schools with greater autonomy and more flexibility than they have at present as they plan and organise junior cycle programmes that focus on the learning taking place in classrooms in each year of junior cycle. The framework is designed to encourage innovation in schooling and teaching and creative learning in the classroom. It will also facilitate the school in ensuring that literacy, numeracy and key skills are embedded in the learning.

The framework will have a clear and concise description of what it is that students should learn. This is expressed, in 24 **statements of learning**. The statements do not set out *everything* the student can learn in junior cycle, but their introduction does reflect the view that it is inadequate to describe what students should learn in terms of subjects alone. The statements will provide the basis for schools planning and evaluating their junior cycle programmes. That process of planning will involve thinking about the combination of curriculum components (subjects and short courses) and learning experiences that will ensure that all statements of learning, along with key skills and literacy and numeracy skills, are addressed in the programmes of all junior cycle students. The combination of these statements of learning and skills will effectively represent the learning with which *all* students in junior cycle will be expected to engage. The statements are also useful for students and their parents as a guide to what they should expect from the junior cycle experience.

The junior cycle statements of learning describe what it is essential for students to know, understand, value and be able to do as a result of their time in junior cycle. Given that schools will be planning their own programmes, these statements provide the basis for consistency between schools and for the monitoring and evaluation of the work of schools. They set out the focus of teaching and learning across all areas of learning. The statements of learning are set out in Table 2.

Table 2.
Statements of Learning

The student	
1	communicates effectively using a variety of means in a range of contexts in L1 ¹
2	reaches a level of personal proficiency in L2 and one other language in reading, writing, speaking and listening
3	creates, appreciates and critically interprets texts (including written, oral, visual and other texts)
4	recognises the potential uses of mathematical knowledge, skills, and understanding in all areas of learning
5	uses mathematical knowledge, reasoning and skills in devising strategies for investigating and solving problems
6	describes, illustrates, interprets, predicts and explains patterns and relationships
7	improves their observation, inquiry, and critical-thinking skills
8	develops an understanding of the natural world
9	values what it means to be an active citizen, with rights and responsibilities in local and wider contexts
10	learns how to think and act sustainably
11	understands the distribution of social, economic, and environmental phenomena
12	values local and national heritage and recognises the relevance of the past to current national and international issues and events
13	makes informed financial decisions and develops good consumer skills
14	takes initiative, is innovative and develops entrepreneurial skills
15	uses appropriate technologies in meeting a design challenge
16	applies practical skills as they develop models and products using a variety of materials and technologies
17	creates, presents and appreciates artistic works
18	brings an idea from conception to realisation
19	uses ICT effectively and ethically in learning and in life
20	takes action to safeguard and promote their wellbeing and that of others
21	appreciates and respects how diverse values, beliefs and traditions have contributed to the communities and culture in which they live
22	develops moral, ethical and responsible decision making and a sense of personal values
23	understands the importance of food and diet in making healthy lifestyle choices
24	participates in physical activity confidently and competently

¹ L1 is the language medium of the school (Irish in Irish-medium schools). L2 is the second language (English in Irish-medium schools).

Curriculum components

Engagement with the statements of learning will be built around three curriculum components; subjects, short courses, and for the small group of students working towards a Level 2 qualification, Priority Learning Units (PLUs).

The NCCA will develop and publish the specifications (syllabus documents) for all subjects and PLUs and some short courses. The new subject specifications will represent more than a tweaking of what's already there or a new edition with learning outcomes replacing topic lists or objectives. As discussed in section 1, the framework is the essential connection between curriculum *and* assessment. With the new assessment arrangements in place, the subject specifications take on a role they have not had so far in post-primary education. They become the tools for planning, the means by which learning is supported, and progress monitored, and the resource for reporting to parents. The course is no longer an entity to be 'covered'. Rather it becomes the focus of and resource for learning.

To assist in the planning for learning and teaching, the specifications will indicate the time to be spent on assessment activity and homework. The specifications will also establish how the learning in a subject or short course links to particular statements of learning.

The key skills of junior cycle will be embedded in the learning outcomes of the subject. Throughout the specifications, there will be a strong focus on learning and teaching in the subject, and the section on assessment and evidence of learning will reflect the changed approach to assessment at junior cycle and indicate how evidence of learning in the subject can contribute towards junior cycle qualifications.

Through the use of exemplification, the curriculum specifications for subjects will ensure that schools, students, and parents are clear about the level of achievement or standard expected of students as they engage with the curriculum. The list of current junior cycle subjects is presented in Table 4 (page 30) and new curriculum specifications will be developed in these subjects.

Subjects

The NCCA will provide the curriculum specifications for subjects and these will be outcomes-based and in most cases at a common level. English, Irish and Mathematics will be specified at two levels.

The learning outcomes in these specifications will be less extensive and detailed than at present and will be designed for approximately 200 hours of learner engagement. The term 'approximately' is used here in recognition of the fact that the amount of time devoted to the learning in a specification will vary from school to school according to the priority given to, among other things, its time allocation, the learning and teaching approaches and activities used, and the particular cohort of students involved. The 200 hours should be viewed as a minimum and does not preclude a school devoting more time where it's needed or desired. To promote the development of literacy and numeracy skills, English, Irish, and Mathematics will be designed for a minimum of 240 hours of engagement. The increased focus on literacy and numeracy across the curriculum will also contribute significantly to learning in these areas.

Short courses

Why short courses? Because schools asked for opportunities to connect to their communities, to consolidate and strengthen aspects of student learning, to include new and different learning experiences and ICT in the junior cycle experience. Short courses will be designed for approximately 100 hours of learner engagement.

The range of potential short courses presented in Table 3 indicates the scope for school innovation offered by this component. In the first instance, NCCA will produce specifications for six short courses for use by schools. These will offer schools examples of short courses of different types at a standard aligned with Level 3 of the National Framework of Qualifications. However in many cases, schools will develop their own short courses to a template designed by the NCCA. To support them in this developmental activity, and in addition to the exemplification offered by NCCA short courses, NCCA will provide materials to guide schools through the developmental process and assist them in ensuring the courses are at an appropriate standard.

Some short courses may look quite like shorter versions of subjects based around a particular learning focus or a particular area of competence, such as *Chinese language and culture* or *Mathematics for living and work*. Others may focus on themes that span a number of domains, for example *Sustainable living and resource management* or *Being innovative; product design*. Personalised learning skills can also be developed by means of short courses that focus on enquiry based learning or ICT based learning around a topic or theme of interest to students. From a whole school perspective, the format of short courses is flexible enough to encompass specific learning activities, initiatives and events organised by the school, such as school musicals or book clubs.

As in the case of subjects, the specifications will set out the aims and learning outcomes of the course (including embedded key skills), how evidence of learning will be generated, gathered, judged and reported on, and how that evidence can contribute towards junior cycle qualifications.

It is envisaged that short courses will be introduced at an early stage in the junior cycle developments. They will be distinctive features of the new junior cycle and though there will be a limit on the number of short courses that can be used in the qualifications, their introduction offers schools opportunities to engage in curriculum development on their own, with other schools, with community organisations or with external agencies. Supports will be provided to assist those involved in this process and experiences gathered as the development of short courses progresses will be shared widely.

To ensure the quality of short courses and the standard of outcomes for learners, short courses will need to be delivered by teachers. While community or external agency involvement is to be encouraged, the leadership of the education professional in the development, support and evaluation of these courses is essential.

Priority Learning Units (PLUs)

For the small group of students working towards a Level 2 qualification, much of their programme at junior cycle will centre on *Priority Learning Units (PLUs)*, the main curriculum component of that qualification. The PLUs encompass the learning that is most important, relevant and beneficial to the students in question. There are five *PLUs* – *Communicating and literacy, Numeracy, Looking after myself, Living in a community, and Preparing for work*.

Curriculum specifications for each *PLU* will be developed by the NCCA. Each unit is designed for approximately 250 hours of student engagement.

Figure 2.
 Junior Cycle Curriculum



Key skills of junior cycle

Key skills have become the focus of developments at all levels of education systems around the world. Ireland has also been active in this regard leading to the consolidation of a skills emphasis in early childhood education, the primary school curriculum and senior cycle. In junior cycle, while specific skills are encountered in subjects and short courses, key skills have a role to play in deepening the students' learning and in making them more self-aware as learners. This will contribute to equipping them to take up the challenges of further study in senior cycle and beyond.

This new focus on key skills is also significant for the changes proposed in assessment at junior cycle. Helping students to become more aware of *how* they learn, alongside *what* they are learning will enable them to generate evidence of that learning as they progress.

The key skills of junior cycle are grounded in both national and international research and practice. The starting point was the OECD DeSeCo—the definition and selection of key competencies—framework (DeSeCo Executive Summary, 2005) which sets out three broad categories for key skills/competencies: using tools interactively; interacting with heterogeneous groups; and acting autonomously. The approach to key competencies in a number of other countries such as New Zealand, Queensland, Australia and Canada were also influential in developing this set of key skills.

The selection of key skills at junior cycle also reflects also reflects the importance of making and maintaining connections with skill development in the other phases of education in Ireland. Early childhood and primary education emphasises self-help skills, communication skills, thinking skills, skills of co-operation, creative thinking, problem-solving skills, inquiry skills. Increasingly, at senior cycle skills such as critical and creative thinking, communicating, information processing, being personally effective and working with others are being introduced. While the key skills of junior cycle have been developed with the junior cycle learner as the main focus, they are also

connected to the skills at senior cycle and the skills already developed in early childhood and primary education. The choice of key skills was also informed by interactions with schools, in particular those schools who had experience of working with key skills at senior cycle. The main messages from the schools were: keep the language of the skills appropriate to the age of the learners; provide details of each key skill with elements and outcomes that help teachers to relate the key skills to their subject curriculum; provide tools that help teachers to integrate the key skills into their planning and classwork. Junior cycle students will engage with skills appropriate to their stage of development while at the same time experiencing continuity with previous and future learning.

The skills have a particular value for first year students, allowing them to consolidate what they have learned in primary school and to develop skills that will give them a strong foundation for second and third year. In this way they act as a vehicle to smooth the transition from primary to post-primary school. Learners can begin developing responsibility for their own learning and can use the key skills to help them navigate the new learning environment of junior cycle.

The key skills of junior cycle are *Managing Myself, Staying Well, Communicating, Being Creative, Working with Others, Managing Information and Thinking*. As learners develop their competence in each of the six key skills, they also develop their competence in learning by using the skills to constantly improve how they learn. Working with new technologies also forms part of each of the skills.

The key skills will be embedded in the learning outcomes of all curriculum specifications and teachers will be encouraged to build them into their class planning, their teaching approaches and into assessment. The elements of the skills are set out in Table 5, describing what the learner is expected to know and be able to do in respect of each one. The key skills are expressed in learner-friendly language so that learners can use them to support, monitor and evaluate their own progress.

Table 3.
Key Skills of Junior Cycle

MANAGING MYSELF

- Knowing myself
- Making personal decisions
- Setting and achieving personal goals
- Being flexible and being assertive
- Learning how to direct my own learning
- Using ICT to manage myself

STAYING WELL

- Being healthy, physical and active
- Being social and safe
- Being spiritual
- Being confident
- Being positive about learning
- Using ICT safely and ethically

BEING CREATIVE

- Imagining
- Exploring options and alternatives
- Implementing ideas and taking action
- Changing and taking risks
- Learning creatively
- Being creative through ICT

COMMUNICATING

- Listening and expressing myself
- Using language
- Using number
- Discussing and debating
- Communicating my learning
- Using ICT to confidently communicate

WORKING WITH OTHERS

- Relating effectively and resolving conflict
- Co-operating
- Respecting difference
- Contributing
- Learning with others
- Using ICT to work with others

MANAGING INFORMATION AND THINKING

- Being curious
- Gathering, recording, organising, and evaluating information
- Using information to solve problems and create new ideas
- Thinking creatively and critically
- Reflecting on and evaluating my learning
- Using ICT to access, manage and share knowledge

How are key skills included in learning and teaching?

Developing these skills in a variety of contexts and in a way that will lead to action requires a creative approach to teaching and learning. Learners need to encounter each of the skills frequently throughout the curriculum and experience many opportunities to work with others, to reflect on their learning and to try new ways of doing things. A range of design tools and other support materials will be made available to support teachers in including key skills in their junior cycle teaching. Students will also be provided with self-assessment material to monitor their own engagement with and progress in the key skills.

When incorporated imaginatively and energetically, and when supported by assessment processes, the role of key skills in bringing about a renewal of learning and teaching cannot be underestimated. The experience of their integration in other levels in our education system (evidenced for example by the NCCA's work at senior cycle) and of the emerging trends in other countries points to their significance as a means of deepening the quality of engagement across the curriculum and in other aspects of the lives of young people. In progressing to senior cycle and preparing for the Leaving Certificate, students who are skilled in learning will be able to make the most of the various programmes on offer.

Linking literacy and numeracy to the key skills

The key skills also support the development of literacy and numeracy, which are crucial for learners in accessing the curriculum and in their future life chances. For example, skills in communication, problem-solving, accessing and selecting information will contribute to literacy and numeracy development in all of the areas of the learning. The subjects and short courses related to language and mathematics in particular will contribute directly to the development of literacy and numeracy skills. On a broader front, learning outcomes related to all curriculum components promote the integrated development of literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum as well as promoting key skills learning.

Reference was made earlier to the challenges faced by learners in making progress in areas such as mathematics and reading and by schools in providing opportunities for them to develop these skills. The planning and design flexibility provided by the Framework for Junior Cycle will allow schools to put programmes in place that focus on the consolidation of literacy and numeracy skills in the first year. As well as enabling students to make progress in the skills themselves, such a focused programme will give them a strong foundation for second and third year work. For this to happen effectively, the development of the skills must form part of the school's vision for junior cycle.

In post-primary schools it is not just teachers of English, Irish and mathematics who have the responsibility for developing literacy and numeracy skills; teachers of all subjects have an important role to play. All teachers must be conscious of improving the learners' capacity to communicate meaning—from speaker to listener, from writer to reader, from creator to viewer—and to use number with confidence in all areas; they should seek opportunities in their own subjects for the development of the skills. The new subject specifications should give teachers and students the space for this engagement, and the new short courses offer the chance, for the first time, for schools to offer skill-specific courses to students as part of junior cycle if they believe that such an approach is needed.

Junior cycle programmes

Schools will design their own junior cycle programmes and each programme will be made up of the particular combination of subjects, short courses, key skills (or PLUs) with which the student will engage during their junior cycle. The programme has to be consistent with the Framework but, beyond that, schools will be free to decide what should be included in their junior cycle and how it should be organised.

To comply with the Framework a school's programme must;

- subscribe to and fully reflect the vision, values and principles of junior cycle education
- address the statements of learning

- emphasise the development of the key skills of junior cycle – Managing myself, Staying well, Communicating, Being creative, Working with others, and Managing information and thinking
- facilitate assessment and the process by which evidence of learning is generated, gathered, judged and reported
- contribute towards to a junior cycle qualification
- ensure continuity with primary education and offer progression opportunities towards senior cycle education

How will the programme be organised?

The junior cycle programme will last for the three years of junior cycle. They may be planned and structured on a year-by-year basis or in a different way. Many schools favour a first year of junior cycle which concentrates on students making a successful transition from primary school, on consolidating skills and on putting in place a sound basis for learning later in junior cycle. These schools see first year as somewhat separate from the following two years when student learning turns to a broad experience across the areas of learning, leading to a junior cycle qualification. Regardless of the decisions schools make on structuring the junior cycle, the framework will make explicit that evidence of learning from first year will not feature in the assessment for qualification.

To a certain extent, the junior cycle programme of a school will be influenced by the qualification/s pursued. For example, schools with students who are pursuing the Level 2 junior cycle qualification will have to devote considerable time to Priority Learning Units (PLUs), the main curriculum component involved in that qualification. But schools will find that the demands that the qualification places on the programme will be less than in the case of the current Junior Certificate because the overall number of curriculum components involved in the qualification will be fewer. This means that schools will have considerable flexibility in planning and organising the programme.

How will schools develop their junior cycle programme?

Schools can build on their existing junior cycle programme, adapt it and augment it. They can feature elements of programmes such as the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) as part of their overall junior cycle programme. Schools with students working towards the Level 2 junior cycle qualification will have extensive guidelines available to them, including examples of programmes already developed by schools.

In a broader context, some schools will work with the NCCA over a period of time on planning and developing their junior cycle programme and sample programmes from these schools will become available online for others to use as a resource. Other schools will form small networks and collaborate in developing a range of programmes. Work with these schools will also indicate the scale of time for collaboration needed and show how schools can deploy current allocations, and make best use of the additional ones to be made available to schools to support this work. Planning tools and templates will be developed and made available to contribute to the planning and development work of schools. Building on the experience of the Primary Curriculum Planning Tool the NCCA will develop an online tool that links the learning outcomes in subjects and the statements of learning while also providing exemplification of the standard expected.

The flexibility available in designing and planning the programme will present schools with the possibility to involve students and their parents as well as staff in discussions about the kind of programme that will best serve the learning interests and needs of the students, while at the same supporting the particular mission and goals of the school.

Programme evaluation

The extent to which a school's programme supports students in developing key skills, improving literacy and numeracy, and in learning relevant to all the statements of learning will be evaluated in the first instance by the school itself through an on-going process of self-evaluation. In this process, assessment information gathered throughout junior cycle will undoubtedly be useful. This internal evaluation will be supported and supplemented by the evaluation carried out by the Department of Education and Skills through the work of its Inspectorate.

The statements of learning, key skills, subjects, short courses and PLUs will signal the new focus on learning discussed at the opening of this section. But the degree to which this focus will make a real difference for students depends on changing how that learning is assessed. The proposals in the next chapter outline those changes.

In conclusion

The main focus of the *Framework for Junior Cycle* will be on learning. The focus of that learning is clearly set out in the Statements of Learning and in the Key Skills of Junior Cycle. The vehicle for the learning will be programmes that use newly specified subjects, new short courses and, in some cases, PLUs. The aim is for all these to contribute to connecting the learner to the experience of junior cycle education from start to finish.

The image features a white background with large, overlapping green geometric shapes on the left side. These shapes include a large triangle pointing right and a larger shape below it. Two clusters of green circles of varying sizes are positioned near the top and bottom left corners. The number '04' is centered in the middle of the page.

04

4. Assessment and Evidence of Learning in Junior Cycle

Assessment is part of the everyday work of teachers and students. It is the process of generating evidence of learning, of making and sharing judgements about that learning, and in some instances, reporting assessment outcomes to a wider audience. Teachers engage with evidence to plan for learning and to exercise sound interpretation of student progress whether that is for the purpose of formative assessment of student learning on an ongoing basis, or for more summative purposes at the end of a period or sequence of learning.

The process of teachers and students working with evidence of learning:

- is an ongoing part of teaching and learning
- involves students and teachers in identifying learning goals and next steps
- generates feedback that encourages student progress and gives students greater understanding and ownership of their learning
- orientates the teacher and student towards future improvements in learning, allowing them to evaluate the learning process, to identify what has been understood and what has not, and to adjust the learning and teaching accordingly
- assures the teacher, the school and the wider education system that the student's learning is progressing in line with expectations
- is an effective basis for communication with parents in a way that helps them to support their children's learning.
- provides the material for the acknowledgement and recognition (via qualifications and certification) that learning has taken place.

The process is part of what is commonly accepted as 'good teaching'. Research has indicated that, typically, teachers spend between a third and a half of their class time engaged in one or another type of assessment or evaluation activity (Stiggins and Conklin, 1992). A lesson focused on generating evidence from an investigation of a local history topic, for example, contains both the learning AND the assessment activity. Generating the evidence of learning in this case is part of the learning process. A defining feature of a high quality assessment system is that assessment is as close as possible to learning, and focuses not on a 'performance' for the sole purpose of assessment, but is integrated into the process of learning (OECD, 2009; Tierney, 2006).

Good assessment, good teaching and good learning are very closely related and are part of everyday classroom practice. What has happened in junior cycle over the years is that this good practice tends to be consigned to the sidelines by practice for examinations, which is often seen by teachers, students and their parents as the *best practice*. In the new junior cycle, teachers will continue to assess and report on their students' progress and achievement in the subjects, short courses and key skills that make up the programme of the school. This will involve them and their students in the process of **generating, gathering, judging and reporting** on evidence of learning as has always been the case. But in the new junior cycle a closer relationship between assessment and learning is envisaged, a relationship supported by a reduced focus on assessment in terminal examinations.

Generating and gathering evidence of learning

The kind of evidence currently used in classrooms and the ways in which it is generated can vary. Much depends on what the evidence is being gathered for. In most cases, the purpose is to discuss and identify what has been learned and to work out how to progress the learning to the next stage or level. The methods currently used to generate and gather evidence vary:

- the student can review their progress themselves or in discussion with their peers
- a group of students and/or teachers can compare and discuss samples of different students' work
- samples of student work can be assembled in a portfolio and discussed periodically on an individual basis
- the teacher can ask questions about and discuss the student's work and ideas in a variety of ways
- the work of students can be observed and discussed
- the teacher can design tasks, projects, practical tests and examinations for the student to take
- the student can undertake an examination prepared or set by a source external to the school.

These are just some of the possibilities, among many, for generating and gathering evidence of learning and bringing it to the point of discussion or judgement.

In the new junior cycle, the subjects and some of the short courses taken by the student will be specified by the NCCA. That specification will describe the full range of assessment activity in the subject or short course. In general terms, the aim is that assessment will:

- be balanced between what happens in classrooms and schools, and what happens towards the end of junior cycle for qualification
- be ongoing and progressive, it won't all happen at the end of a sequence of learning, allowing the incremental progress of student learning to be seen and built upon
- use a variety of methods, tasks and strategies so that enough evidence is gathered to make sound judgements about learning

- be valid, in keeping with the aims and learning outcomes of the subject or short course, and with the planned learning goals for the student
- promote a high quality learning environment through the tasks and methods involved
- be fair to students, enabling them to demonstrate their learning achievements over time and in a range of learning contexts

Judging and reporting on evidence of learning

Those involved in making judgements based on evidence of learning include students themselves, their teachers and sources external to the school. Equally, reporting on evidence of learning happens with various audiences in mind. Students are the most important audience for feedback on their learning and their progress. Parents too need reports on the progress of their children. Schools need information on how their students are progressing. Lastly, the education system needs evidence of learning to ensure that curriculum aims are being met and that system quality is being maintained and improved.

Of course, it's also true that not all learning and not all evidence of learning needs to be judged or reported on. The challenge at junior cycle is to put in place a useful and proportionate system of reporting that isn't unduly onerous for those involved, and that places a firm focus on the learning taking place.

In the new junior cycle, there will be two particular supports for judging and reporting on evidence of learning. New Report Card Templates, building on the Report Card Templates used by primary schools to support reporting to parents will be made available. In addition to these reporting tools, and to support teacher judgement of student learning, the specifications will include examples of student work that illustrate the standard of work expected from different kinds of students at different stages of junior cycle. These will be generated with teachers and include their commentary on student work. Parents, students and the general public will also have access to these.

The student and evidence of learning in the new junior cycle

Students also have an important role to play. They need to be more actively involved in generating evidence of learning, with the support of teachers. The ESRI Longitudinal Study, when it looked at the student experience of the Junior Certificate examination, noted the extent to which the experience of students led them to link most of the responsibility for preparing for the examination with the teacher (ESRI, 2009). This is an inevitable consequence of placing the emphasis on 'performance' in the examination rather than on the process of learning. Classrooms become rehearsal spaces for the examination and students focus on learning the script for the performance rather than on the learning itself.

The focus on evidence of learning in the new junior cycle aims to restore the balance and build on the experience of other education systems which have moved to place the student at the centre of the assessment process (Absolum et al, 2009). It will stress the generating and gathering of evidence of learning as a central part of the process of learning, and encourage the student's involvement in this, with the guidance and support of the teacher. This level of active participation by the student is particularly valid in junior cycle, where the assessment stakes are lower than at Leaving Certificate level.

Evidence of learning for the new qualifications

In the new junior cycle the Junior Certificate will be replaced by two new qualifications. The assessment arrangements for these will combine the familiar and the new. The challenge involved for the system in moving away from current practice is not underestimated, but the changes in assessment and qualifications will not be rushed and will be aligned with the greater emphasis on connecting assessment to learning throughout junior cycle. They will happen to a timescale where schools and teachers can familiarise themselves, prepare well and feel comfortable and fully engaged with the change. Essentially, qualifications in junior cycle will move from the current situation where terminal examinations are

the primary method of assessment, to one where the work of students in schools is also included. This will bring junior cycle in Ireland more in line with what's accepted as good practice at lower secondary level internationally. In countries such as Australia, Canada and Scotland, assessment for qualification includes an externally moderated school-based element. Such moderation provides assurance to all that where school-based assessment is used, there is consistency of standard across schools.

Supporting assessment change for the qualifications will be critical to the success of the new junior cycle. The supports for schools and teachers will prepare the ground for change, contribute to quality assurance and build professional capacity. They will also contribute to advancing the new relationship between assessment and learning across junior cycle.

Support 1: Teacher professional development and support for schools and parents

To introduce the new junior cycle successfully, teachers will require professional development and schools will need to be supported. Educational assessment and the process of engaging with evidence of learning will be a major focus of the professional development of teachers. A limited engagement with assessment theories and practices has long been recognised as a system weakness in initial and ongoing teacher education and the junior cycle developments are an opportunity to address this. This is not just an Irish problem. Researchers elsewhere have expressed concern that scant attention is paid to this area in teacher education programmes (Cumming and Wyatt-Smith, 2009).

Assisting schools in planning for the new junior cycle and in the management and administration of assessment activity related to qualifications will also be a major focus for professional support and resourcing. In addition, information for parents and students on the *Framework for Junior Cycle*, on new assessment arrangements, and on the potential junior cycle programmes in schools will also be essential.

Support 2: The assessment specifications for curriculum components will be set out centrally to support quality assurance

Specifications for subjects, PLUs, and NCCA short courses will be published and will encompass ongoing classroom assessment and assessment for qualifications. In the case of assessment for qualifications, they will outline the assessment methods involved, how evidence of learning is to be generated, and information on how the evidence is to be judged and submitted as part of the relevant junior cycle qualification.

In general terms, the development of assessment specifications in subjects, short courses and PLUs will take full account of the need for assessment to be manageable for the system, the student and the teacher, to be administration-light, and to arise easily out of regular learning and classroom activity.

Support 3: Assessment exemplification will be an important reference point for schools and teachers in assuring quality

As the new junior cycle is introduced and schools and teachers engage with new arrangements for assessment and qualifications, the NCCA and SEC will provide a range of material exemplifying the approach to assessment including sample examination papers and guidelines on the range of assessment methods involved including how to generate portfolios of student work. These, together with the examples of student work provided to teachers and students by the NCCA should act as reference points, assisting teachers and schools in fully engaging with evidence of learning and helping to clarify the level of achievement and standards expected of students.

Support 4: External moderation of school based assessment for standard setting and fairness

The process of external moderation applied to assessment for qualifications will be a further support for schools and teachers in their engagement with assessment and evidence of learning. The process will help to ensure that all assessment arrangements are consistent across schools and fair to students. Participation and engagement with these processes will also offer teachers opportunities for developing their own professional expertise in assessing

student work and contributing to the development of shared understanding of standards with colleagues. Moderation will serve a further important purpose in an Irish context. Teachers have expressed concern about the impact that 'judging' their own students' work for a national qualification might have on the teacher-student relationship. External moderation ensures that teachers can offer a professional interpretation of student achievement that is subject to a process of moderation.

Support 5: Resourcing capacity in schools

In the school, because processes of internal assessment depend on teacher involvement, teachers will need time to engage with new assessment and qualifications arrangements. Schools will need administrative and technological capacity to gather the relevant assessment information and engage with the SEC. In general, the requirements of greater school flexibility and a greater focus on assessment will need to be fully supported.

A move from a reliance on external assessment to a system that combines external assessment with assessment in schools at a time when schools are subject to the pressures of working with reduced resources is challenging for all concerned. These pressures are widely felt across the education system, but can, ironically, generate greater support for changes in practice that have a direct impact on learning. Perhaps this is because, for teachers, engagement with these kinds of changes presents the opportunity to work differently with their students and their subjects, and to build their professional capacity and competence. Nevertheless, delivering on the assessment proposals will require imaginative thinking on the part of those who allocate resources, and increased flexibility for those who deploy them at school level.

Assessment and evidence of learning for the new junior cycle qualifications – what might it look like?

The specification for curriculum components, prepared by the NCCA, will include the details of assessment for qualification purposes. There will be **two** assessment components for each **subject** – a **portfolio** based on school work completed during the junior cycle (with a weighting of 40% of the marks) and an **examination**

completed in Year 3 (with a weighting of 60% of the marks). The student must present evidence of learning for both components. In the case of all **short courses** and **PLUs**, there will be a single assessment component – a **portfolio** based on school work.

The **examination** will be set by the SEC in line with the specification for the subject. The school will be responsible for running the examinations to a schedule set out by the SEC. In general, examinations will comprise a single paper or assignment and be shorter than at present (maximum of 1½–2 hours). Sample examination material will be available for students and teachers in advance of the first examination.

Discussions are taking place on the form of examination that will differentiate most effectively for the wide range of ability among students taking an examination that will, with the exception of English, Irish and Mathematics, be based on a common level subject specification. All options and possibilities are being considered, including the use of tiered examination papers, separate papers, different marking schemes, differently structured questions, and optional parts of the exam.

The **portfolio** will be compiled in line with specifications generated by the NCCA/SEC. The specifications will set out the assessment methods that can be used, the types of evidence that can be included for a given subject, short course or PLU, and information on how the evidence is to be judged and submitted as part of the relevant qualification. Examples of assessment material for the portfolio and how it is to be presented will also be available. The assessment methods and evidence included in the portfolio is likely to vary across subjects and short courses, reflecting their different nature and content. But, across the full range of subjects and short courses, the range of portfolio evidence involved is likely to include assignments, projects, case studies, performances, practical activities and tests/tasks of different kinds.

So, in English it might include a collection of creative writing and an investigation of the language of social media. In Science, it could include practical work and investigations. Although the term ‘portfolio’ tends to be associated with a physical, often paper-based artefact, it is used here to describe the outcomes of the ongoing activity of generating evidence of learning as much as a collection of work. That collection may

be digital, or a digital capture of a process. While initially, portfolio assessment will be connected to each subject and short course, the possibility for the same portfolio to be counted for more than one subject may arise as teachers and students become more familiar with the process over time. Work produced in the first year of junior cycle is excluded from the portfolio. This is to facilitate a much needed focus for second year and for second year students.

In preparation for external moderation schools will review and verify the portfolio assessment process. They will be supported in this activity by guidance on how to organise review and verification so that a consistent approach to standard is achieved within each subject, using the examples of student work provided. Where there is only one teacher of a subject, this can be done between schools. Results from the schools will be provisional and subject to external moderation of the subject portfolio, conducted by the SEC on a sample basis across a number of schools annually. The purpose of the process will be to ensure consistency of standards across schools and fairness to students. It will contribute to assuring the quality of school-based assessment. Finally, the SEC will certify the achievements of students.

All short courses will be assessed internally and will be subject to review and verification at school level. The school will issue the results to the SEC for inclusion on the certificate.

In the assessment components related to subjects and short courses, an approach to **grading** broader than the current A-NG system is envisaged. The system will include five grading points.

Introducing the assessment arrangements and qualifications

A separate *Implementation Plan* is in preparation addressing how the new junior cycle will be introduced and supported in all its aspects. Here, particular attention is given to features relevant to the introduction of change in assessment and qualifications and how they might be introduced in schools and across the system. The importance of these changes as the lever for all other change at junior cycle cannot be overstated. As discussed in the opening section, if the examination does not change, nothing else will.

Table 4.

Summary of Assessment Arrangements for Junior Cycle Curriculum Components

Curriculum component	Assessment by	Weighting	Moderation
Subjects	Examination	60%	External by SEC
	Portfolio	40%	Internal by school External moderation by SEC
Short Courses	Portfolio	100%	Internal by school
Priority Learning Units (PLUs)	Portfolio	100%	Internal by school External moderation

September 2012: Preparing for a new junior cycle

From 2012 schools will start planning for the introduction of the *Framework for Junior Cycle* in 2014. In the NCCA, work is already underway on establishing networks of schools to support the preparation of guidelines on how schools can plan for their junior cycle programmes in this period before the new Framework is introduced. Of note is that a number of schools have already volunteered for participation in such a network.

A starting point for a new junior cycle in schools, and a lead-in to the introduction of the two new qualifications, could be a decision by the school to reduce the number of subjects a student takes in the existing Junior Certificate examination. This reduction could start with those students who commence junior cycle in 2012 and sit the Junior Certificate examination in 2015. The reduction would not imply any restriction on what is studied as part of the student's junior cycle programme.

During the period leading to the introduction of the Framework, student learning and achievement across all aspects of the curriculum will continue to be recorded and reported, including those subjects that may not be taken for examination. NCCA will develop **Report Card Templates** in a variety of formats for use by all schools in this context. At the end of junior cycle, as well as the certificate provided by SEC of the grades achieved in the Junior Certificate examinations taken, students could have a report of their

achievement across all areas and subjects of their junior cycle programmes, including reporting, for the first time, on literacy and numeracy in junior cycle.

September 2014: the new Junior Cycle commences

It is envisaged that the new Junior Cycle will commence in all schools in September 2014, with the new qualifications available for the completion of junior cycle in 2017. The introduction of revised specifications for subjects will take place on a phased basis from 2014. At that point, the subject English (and possibly Art, Craft, Design), will be introduced, followed each school year by a number of other subjects. The phasing in of subjects is intended to support schools, teachers and the education system in becoming accustomed to using the *Framework for Junior Cycle* and the changed assessment and qualifications arrangements and to allow for the generation of monitoring data to support evaluation of the impact of the changes as they are introduced.

2014–2017: the new assessment and qualifications arrangements are introduced

The move to new arrangements for assessment and qualifications in the junior cycle will commence in 2014 in the relevant subjects, short courses and PLUs. From that date, the rolling out of some externally moderated school-based assessment in junior cycle will commence, with the portfolio component being assessed by schools and the examination being assessed externally.

In 2017, the first cohort of students will complete the new junior cycle and gain the new qualifications.

As the first cohorts of students complete the new junior cycle, feedback and data will be collected from teachers, schools and the education system on the progress, impact, effectiveness and manageability of the new assessment arrangements. The evidence emerging from this review will inform any future development of assessment at junior cycle.

In conclusion

Assessment in the new junior cycle will see those daily, classroom assessment activities already familiar to teachers increasingly move centre stage and become part of a wider assessment landscape where the focus on generating, gathering, judging and reporting on evidence of learning with the close involvement of students, teachers, schools and the relevant national bodies brings learning at junior cycle and assessment into closer relationship.

Figure 3.

The Timescale for Key Developments in Assessment and Qualifications

2012

- Report Card Templates available for use by schools
- School can opt to reduce the number of Junior Cert subjects taken

2014

- New *Framework for Junior Cycle* introduced
- Phased introduction of subjects commences
- Assessment combines external and school-based elements

2017

- Students complete new junior cycle
- New qualifications awarded for first time

2014–2019

- Data gathering and review of assessment arrangements completed by the end of this period



05

5. Qualifications in Junior Cycle

The new junior cycle qualifications will be more than just examinations. They will be at the service of the school's junior cycle programme and of learning, not the driver of it. This will be achieved, in part, by the qualification being smaller in size than the Junior Certificate: to gain the qualification students will be assessed in fewer curriculum components than at present. This will help to create the space for real flexibility in the curriculum choices schools can offer within their programme and will contribute to addressing the perception of curriculum overload in the junior cycle. With increased flexibility and choice, schools should be better placed to create the space and time for focusing on learning in the classroom and on literacy, numeracy and key skills.

For the small number of students who leave school after junior cycle, the new qualifications will contain important information for potential employers and for access to training and further education. For the vast majority, the qualifications are designed to serve and reflect the learning, teaching and the junior cycle programme being followed by students in their school. To this end, they will draw on evidence of learning generated both through external examinations and by the school. The qualifications will be underpinned by processes and procedures set out to assure their quality, in line with good international practice in countries such as Scotland, New Zealand, Australia and others.

There will be two qualifications available, one at Level 2 and the other at Level 3 of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). They will be national qualifications approved by the Department of Education and Skills. Their working titles are the *National Certificate of Junior Cycle Education (Level 2)* and the *National Certificate of Junior Cycle Education (Level 3)*.

How the two qualifications are described

The main features of the two qualifications are presented on the following tables that summarise:

- the curriculum components, and the number of them in which a student will present evidence of learning
- who will decide and describe the curriculum content and assessment arrangements for the components
- what roles the NCCA, the SEC and the school will play in supporting and implementing the proposed assessment and certification arrangements
- the proposed timescale for the introduction of the qualification in schools.

Table 5.
An Overview of the National Certificate of Junior Cycle Education (Level 3)

	Key questions	Curriculum Components Subjects and Short Courses
	What components can be included in the qualification?	All current subjects Any NCCA short courses Any school developed short courses
	How many components make up the qualification?	Students present evidence of learning in: Eight subjects OR Seven subjects and two short courses OR Six subjects and four short courses Evidence of learning must be presented in the subjects English, Irish ² and Mathematics.
34	What time should be allocated to the component on the school timetable?	In general, 200 hours for each subject and 100 hours for each short course. In English, Irish and Mathematics the time allocation should be 240 hours.
	Who specifies the curriculum and assessment arrangements to be followed?	NCCA provides specifications for all subjects. The school or the NCCA or another source provides specifications for short courses. NCCA will also provide guidelines and templates to assist schools in developing short courses.
	What role will the SEC and NCCA play in assessment for the qualification?	For subjects, SEC/NCCA will specify the assessment arrangements and provide schools with sample assessment materials for the components involved. The examination component of subjects will be marked externally by the SEC. The portfolio component of subjects will be subject to external moderation by the SEC.
	What role will schools play in assessment for the qualification?	Schools will carry out the assessment of the portfolio component in subjects and short courses, issue the results to the SEC, and participate in the moderation process.
	How will the components be graded?	Grading of subjects, NCCA short courses and school developed short courses will be on the basis of five grading points.

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2 Where a student has an exemption from Irish, evidence of learning in English and Mathematics must be presented.

Note that: The SEC will be the awarding body for the qualification.

Students will receive a certificate stating their results in all curriculum components taken.

The new junior cycle curriculum specifications for subjects and short courses will be introduced in schools on a phased basis. Because of this, there will be a period where students receive certificates containing results in Junior Certificate subjects as well as results in subjects and short courses for the new junior cycle qualification. This will happen for the first time in 2017, for those students who start junior cycle in 2014.

Background to the National Certificate of Junior Cycle Education (Level 2)

The Level 2 Certificate is designed to support post-primary schools and special schools in developing programmes to meet the specific learning needs of a group of students who are participating in junior cycle, but are usually unable to achieve the learning outcomes involved in subjects leading to the Junior Certificate examination. The students in question have learning difficulties from the lower functioning mild to higher functioning moderate categories of general learning disability. As such, they are small in number and represent the target group for this qualification. At present they participate in a range of settings: in mixed-ability classes and special classes in post-primary schools, and in various types of classes and groups in special schools. The Level 2 qualification is designed for this target group, so that their learning achievements in junior cycle are fully recognised. It is a qualification that will be taken on an exceptional basis.

Students working towards this qualification will have completed Level 2 Learning Programmes. There are two curriculum components that are central to these programmes – Priority Learning Units (PLUs) and short courses. The five PLUs have been outlined earlier in the Framework. Schools and students can also include evidence of learning in two short courses as part of the qualification. The short courses will be similar in type to those at Level 3: they will be developed by schools and the NCCA while some could also be sourced from outside the school. As with PLUs, the content of short courses will be aligned with the learning indicators at Level 2 of the National Framework of Qualifications.

This does not mean that students following a programme leading to the Level 2 Certificate are completely confined to learning associated with Level 2. Many will be in classrooms where learning leading to the Level 3 qualification will be taking place. Where it is suitable for the student involved, she/he could take a subject or short course at Level 3 and also receive a certificate at that level.

Table 6.
An Overview of the National Certificate of Junior Cycle Education (Level 2)

Key questions	Curriculum Components Priority Learning Units and Short Courses
What components can be included in the qualification?	Priority Learning Units <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Communicating and literacy ■ Numeracy ■ Personal care ■ Living in a community ■ Preparing for working life Any NCCA or school developed short courses
How many components make up the qualification?	Students present evidence of learning in All elements of all five PLUs AND Two short courses
36 What time should be allocated to the component on the school timetable?	Approximately 250 hours for each PLU and 100 hours for each short course.
Who specifies the curriculum and assessment arrangements to be followed?	The NCCA will provide specifications for the PLUs and guidelines in the form of a <i>Toolkit</i> for their use in schools. The school or the NCCA or another source will provide specifications for short courses. NCCA will also provide guidelines and templates to assist schools in developing short courses.
What role will the NCCA play in assessment for the qualification?	The NCCA, through the <i>Toolkit</i> , will provide schools with sample assessment materials for the PLUs. The NCCA, through sample short courses, will also provide schools with sample assessment materials for short courses.
What role will schools play in assessment for the qualification?	Schools will carry out the assessments and issue the results for all curriculum components to the body responsible for awarding the Certificate. They will also participate in any moderation process put in place.
How will the components be graded?	Grading related to the PLUs will be on the basis of Successful or Referral ³ . Grading of short courses will be as determined by the school or other source of the short course.

.....
3 The grade *Successful* indicates that the student has passed. The grade *Referral* indicates that the student needs to address the outcomes they were unsuccessful in and re-present evidence of learning related to these outcomes.

Note that: The awarding body for the qualification has yet to be decided. The decision will be taken in consultation with the new Qualifications and Quality Authority of Ireland (QQAI), which is the body emerging from the proposed amalgamation of the agencies – NQAI, FETAC, HETAC and the IUQB.

Students will receive a certificate stating their results in all curriculum components taken.

The qualification will be awarded for the first time in 2017 for students from the target group in question, who started their junior cycle in 2014.

The background is a vibrant red with large, sweeping, curved shapes that create a sense of movement. Two clusters of red bubbles of various sizes are positioned in the upper left and lower right corners, adding a textured, organic feel to the design.

06

6. References

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