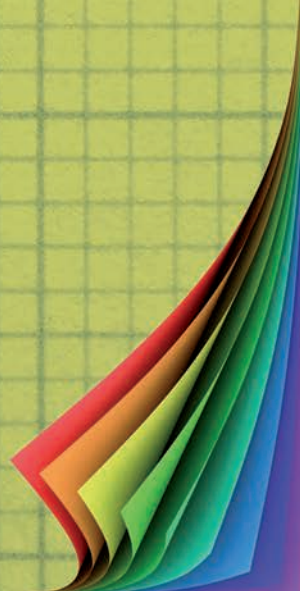
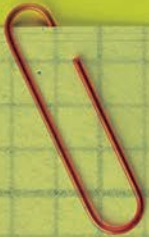




Implementing Education Policies

Education in Ireland

**AN OECD ASSESSMENT OF THE SENIOR CYCLE
REVIEW**



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REVIEW

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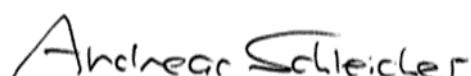
Foreword

Ireland, one of the high-performing education systems across OECD countries, is committed to high quality education and to adapting its system to the challenges that the future presents. Upper secondary is a key stage in the education trajectory of any individual, and holds a key role in Ireland's strategy to enhance an already robust education system. In a current effort to explore ways to adapt and improve in a rapidly changing world, Ireland embarked on a review of its senior cycle (upper secondary education).

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) led the review and invited the OECD to provide strategic advice to inform the process. To fulfil this role, the NCCA carried out an ambitious consultation process involving a large variety of participants across Ireland. Many students, parents, teachers, school leaders, and other stakeholders (such as unions, employers and higher education institutions) have expressed their views and contributed to a constructive debate about the present and future of senior cycle in the country. This was not an easy journey, but it demonstrated the value of engaging stakeholders in policy discussions and hearing their views about potential solutions. The consultative nature of this exercise should be considered a major success for the education community in Ireland.

In this process, the OECD has engaged with Ireland to provide analysis to support the review process as part of its Implementing Education Policies programme. The assessment presented in this document aims to take stock of Ireland's senior cycle review process, provide feedback on progress made and offer recommendations to inform next steps. As countries aim to achieve excellence, equity and efficiency in education, one of the aims for the OECD's Implementing Education Policies programme is to provide implementation support to close the gap between educational aspirations and performance by providing strategic advice, and ensuring the integration of different stakeholders in all stages of the policy implementation process.

This document is grounded on evidence and contextualised with the views of Irish education stakeholders. The OECD's assessment presented in this document aims at supporting the education community in Ireland to fulfil their aspirations and respond to their needs for this system to continue as a top performer and world reference in education.



Andreas Schleicher
Special Advisor on Education Policy to the Secretary-General
Director for Education and Skills

Note:

This report was completed in February 2020. The analysis presented does not consider any potential effects of the COVID-19 epidemic and how they may have affected education systems.

Acknowledgements

This report assessing the implementation strategy of the review of senior cycle in Ireland is informed by international experience and relevant practices from other OECD countries. The assessment process involved three country visits and has benefited from feedback and opinions from a large number of Irish education stakeholders, including: students, teachers, school leaders, parents, representatives from teacher unions, school board representatives, universities and further education institutions, officials from the Directorate of Education and Skills (DES), researchers from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), and officials from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The OECD review team, authors of the report, are grateful for their time and contributions.

The OECD review team is indebted to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), partner and national co-ordinator in this implementation support project, and with the Department of Education and Skills (DES) that also offered invaluable support to the exercise. Special thanks to John Hammond, Chief Executive, and Barry Slattery, Deputy Chief Executive, from the NCCA and to their team for their co-ordination role: Norman Emerson, Louise O'Reilly, Ben Murray, and Evelyn O'Connor. Special thanks to the rest of the steering committee of this project: Ruth Carmody, Assistant Secretary (DES), Harold Hislop, Chief Inspector, and Eamonn Moran, Principal Officer, Curriculum and Assessment Unit (DES).

This report was prepared as part of the OECD's Implementing Education Policies programme undertaken by the Policy Advice and Implementation Division within the Directorate for Education and Skills. The authors of the report are José-Luis Álvarez-Galván (project manager), Romane Viennet (policy consultant, OECD), and Beatriz Pont (leader of the Implementing Education Policies team).

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

ASTI	Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland
CAO	Central Applications Office
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETBI	Education and Training Boards Ireland
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEI	Higher education institutions
JCT	Junior Cycle for Teachers
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
LCE	Leaving Certificate Established
LCVP	Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
NAPD	National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
PACF	Project for Autonomy and Curriculum Flexibility
PDST	Professional Development Service for Teachers
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
SEC	State Examinations Commission
SOLAS	An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna (The Further Education and Training Authority)
TALIS	Teaching and Learning International Survey
TY	Transition Year
TUI	Teachers' Union of Ireland

Executive Summary

Ireland is undertaking a review of its senior cycle

Ireland, one of the high-performing education systems across OECD countries, is committed to high quality education and to adapting its system to the challenges that the future presents. Upper secondary is a key stage in the education trajectory of any individual, and holds a key role in Ireland's strategy to enhance an already robust education system. In a current effort to explore ways to adapt and improve in a rapidly changing world - like many other OECD countries - Ireland embarked on a review of its senior cycle (upper secondary education), which has not been structurally reformed for over 20 years. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) are leading the review and invited the OECD to provide strategic advice to inform the process.

OECD has engaged with Ireland to provide analysis to support the review process as part of its Implementing Education Policies programme. A policy assessment aims to take stock of Ireland's senior cycle review, provide feedback on progress made and offer recommendations to inform next steps. The OECD team has undertaken desk based research, three visits to Ireland (November 2018 to February 2019) and participated in review meetings. This document presents the findings of this assessment with the aim to support the analysis and development of next steps in the implementation of the senior cycle review.

Current senior cycle: perceived strengths and areas for development

An analysis of the current design of senior cycle education and results from the review process show a range of strengths. Senior cycle enjoys high levels of trust in the public, and its final assessment (the Leaving Certificate) is strongly rooted in the national culture. The four programmes offered in senior cycle, Leaving Certificate Established (LCE), Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and Transition Year (TY), aim to cater to the different needs and preferences of the student body. The Transition Year is highly valued by students and seems to provide a good transition from junior cycle into the more academic senior cycle. The aims, purposes and learning methodologies proposed in the curricular documentation aspire to align with international best practices. Content is also regularly updated in response to perceived needs to learn about emerging topics.

However, the same analysis and review process suggests some areas in which senior cycle could improve. Some stakeholders argue that the current vision and purpose of senior cycle education do not fully correspond to Ireland's aspirations. The impact of the final assessment and the system to access third-level education appear to drive senior cycle education, shaping the decisions of many stakeholders. This impact is such that any changes made to senior cycle will have limited possibilities to succeed if the current assessment approaches are not reviewed accordingly. Additionally, the recent reform of junior cycle would have implications for and result in challenges to achieve appropriate alignment between junior and senior cycles. Stakeholders also expressed their concern about not having a more rigorous and attractive vocational segment in senior cycle, one that gives real work-based experience to students and that is

delivered in close co-ordination with employers. Finally, two concerns for equity in senior cycle were raised, in particular, observing that students from a more modest socio-economic background might not benefit from the same support to prepare for their Leaving Certificate examinations, nor from the same opportunities to take a Transition Year, as their peers.

An inclusive review process that can be enriched

The tailored approach to engage stakeholders in the senior cycle review is an asset for the development of senior cycle. The NCCA succeeded in designing and carrying out an inclusive review process, collecting a range of perspectives that can enrich senior cycle. While school-level stakeholders held a central position in the review, the wider education community was also included. The review was led in coherence with the structures already in place for education policy advice, representation and consultation, in respect of Ireland's tradition of partnership policy making. The NCCA also conducted the review in a flexible manner, which could lead to strengthening public trust. The review has highlighted clear findings, as it confirmed for instance a widespread agreement on the need for change in senior cycle education.

Some issues concerning stakeholder engagement remain that, when tackled, could enrich senior cycle discussions and reinforce the impact of stakeholders' involvement. There is ambivalence in the support that some stakeholders manifest for change, which jeopardises the chance to settle some of the issues acknowledged. Even when convinced of the need for change in senior cycle education, stakeholders tend to disagree on the nature and scope of the change, which makes finding common solutions considerably more challenging. The OECD team also identified key players who were not strongly involved, such as post-secondary institutions, students who have completed senior cycle and employers. Finally, some reiterated the concern that the NCCA's review might fail to translate their propositions into a concrete policy or effective implementation process.

Adapting and shaping the context for the review

The current context is conducive to the review of senior cycle in some areas. There is a high level of trust in Ireland's education system, so the population might support concerted efforts to provide Irish learners with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to deal with the challenges of the 21st century. The engagement approach developed by the NCCA for phase 2 of the review is contributing to engaging and empowering many stakeholders successfully. This inclusive review process can be interpreted as a signal of institutional evolution with the Irish education system learning from the experience of reform in junior cycle and trying to respond to previous shortcomings. Also compared with the recent junior cycle reform, the current economic situation, with macroeconomic stability and relatively low unemployment, offer a more conducive terrain for collaboration from education professionals.

Contextual issues remain to be addressed if senior cycle is to evolve. Coherence with existing and planned education policies will need to be considered. There is consensus around the need to learn from junior cycle reform for a smooth process in the event of evolutions in senior cycle. Collaboration among schools can seemingly be improved in areas like sharing resources, staff and learning practices to facilitate potential senior cycle change. Providing school leaders and teachers with better support and training seems to be a concern in the system among stakeholders. Assessment approaches would need to be adapted to any potential changes, as evidence shows strong impact on the whole senior cycle. The implications for equity of any potential change to senior cycle should be considered more systematically in the discussion. Finally, both stakeholders and authorities need to factor in a very high level of public scrutiny in whichever path will be decided for senior cycle.

Suggestions for next steps in the implementation of the senior cycle review

In order to tackle the issues raised while building on Ireland's strengths, the OECD suggests the third phase of the review of senior cycle could be structured around three key points:

1. Disseminating the main conclusions of phase 2
2. Acknowledging the conclusions, as they are based on stakeholders' input
3. Defining the priorities and potential policy lines to tackle the main issues identified.

In addition, following the conclusion of the review, Ireland may consider the results in terms of their policy implications as follows:

- Refining the vision for senior cycle and reviewing its structure accordingly. The process should aim to define collaboratively a clear vision and specific objectives of senior cycle in Ireland, and defining whether or how the current structure of senior cycle can evolve to realise this vision.
- Reviewing complementary policies that need to align with senior cycle. Discussions during the next stages of the review process should aim to clarify the options for adjustment of assessment methods, needs for continuing professional development for teachers, and guidance services.
- Clarifying roles and responsibilities for different stakeholders. Discussions should aim to engage and clarify the views and contributions of relevant institutions/agents. This can be done with specific invitations to the relevant institutions to present and contribute actively to discussions during the next stages of the review process in their corresponding policy area(s).
- Defining a communication and engagement plan regarding potential changes. Discussions should focus on establishing a communication strategy to maintain inclusive stakeholder engagement for the next stages of the review process.
- Providing clarity about specific results and outcomes for stakeholders from the review of senior cycle specifically for phase 3 and beyond.
- Securing resources. To identify the resources needed to implement future steps in the review of senior cycle, discussions during phase 3 might consider establishing the specific objectives after the finalisation of phase 3 of the review process and which will be the main policy priorities to be followed.
- Clarifying expectations regarding timing and pace. To tackle the concerns about the timing and pace of the review and reform of senior cycle identified in phase 2, discussions during phase 3 in Ireland should aim to clarify what is the best timing for the introduction of adjustments in senior cycle and what are the pre-conditions needed.
- Gathering data and information for decision-making. To have solid information and data for the review process, discussions during phase 3 could aim to clarify the priority areas for lessons learnt in the reform of junior cycle and other relevant experiences as well as on what progress would look like.

1 Introduction

Ireland is undertaking a review of their senior cycle (upper secondary education), led by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). It aims at collecting the views of all relevant stakeholders to identify the strengths and challenges for senior cycle in its current form, and identify priority issues and actions to move forward.

As part of OECD's Implementing Education Policies programme, an OECD team was invited to support the review of Ireland's senior cycle. The team has carried out the assessment presented here and provided strategic advice based on four aspects of education policy implementation: smart policy design, inclusive stakeholder engagement, conducive context and a coherent implementation strategy for the next steps. Each one of these dimensions are important to ensure that the review of senior cycle can move forward based on evidence and supported by stakeholders.

This initial chapter presents the purpose of this OECD project with Ireland, its methodology, and sets out the structure for the chapters that follow.

A strong performer committed to improvement

One of the high-performing education systems across OECD countries, Ireland is committed to continued improvement and to adapting to the challenges that the future reserves for education.

Ireland has been among the top performers in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and generally been acknowledged for its education achievements. According to PISA 2018 results, Ireland scored among the highest in the OECD in reading with a mean score of 518 points compared to the OECD average of 487 points. In mathematics, Ireland scored 500 points, higher than the OECD average of 489 points. In science, Ireland scored 496 points compared to the OECD average of 489 points (OECD, 2019^[1]). In terms of the percentage of top performers in each category, about 12% of students in Ireland were top performers in reading (OECD average: 9%), about 6% of students were top performers in science (OECD average: 7%), and about 8% of students scored among the highest levels in mathematics (OECD average: 11%). Particularly satisfying is students' performance in the reading PISA test in Ireland in 2018 where the percentage of top performers increased to 12.1% (from 7% in 2009) and the percentage of low performers dropped to 11.8% (from 17.2% in 2009) (Figure 1.1) (OECD, 2019^[1]).

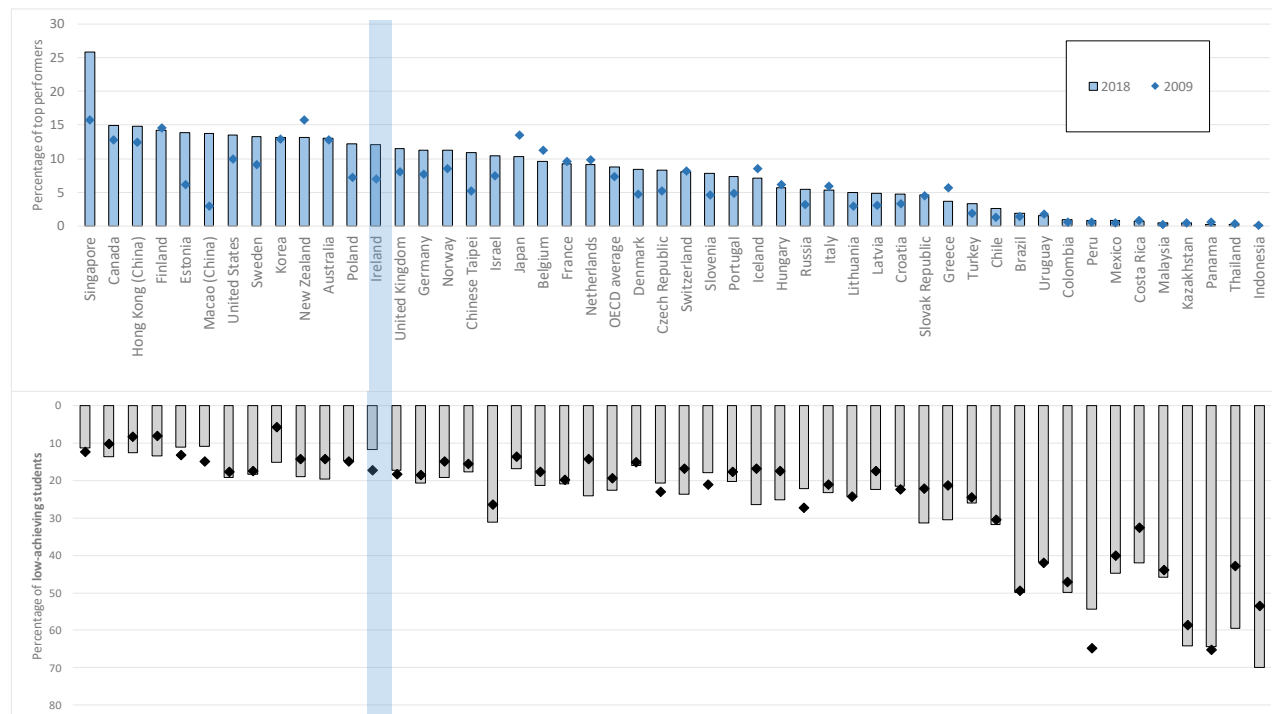
In the *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019* (DES, 2018^[2]) and its Statement of Strategy 2019-2021 (DES, 2019^[3]), the Irish Department of Education and Skills (DES) has countersigned its commitment to deliver a learning experience to the highest international standards. This implied, among other endeavours, to review and reform senior cycle programmes¹ (Ireland's upper secondary education). Upper secondary education is a key stage in the education trajectory of any individual, leading to completion of education (and then to entry into the labour market) or to transition into further education. Senior cycle currently consists of a two- to three-year school cycle ending with school-leaving examinations that award one of two different diploma (the Leaving Certificates). Upon completion, students usually enter higher education or join the labour market.

The review of senior cycle in Ireland

A review of this level of education was contemplated in the *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019*, sparked by the reform of junior cycle as well as by concerns about the need to update the content and delivery of senior cycle to ensure successful transitions into tertiary or the labour market, and to the requirements of our modern societies. More than 20 years have passed since the last time senior cycle was structurally reformed.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) - a statutory body of the DES responsible for producing advice to the Minister for Education and Skills on curriculum matters in early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools - is leading the review of senior cycle. Its aim is to engage all key senior cycle stakeholders early in the policy process, to gather their perspective and to report to the Minister based on their contributions. More specifically, the review aims to get a range of perspectives on the purpose, future, structure and functioning of senior cycle education. Through this review process, the question of whether and how senior cycle education needs to change has been approached collectively (NCCA, 2018^[4]).

Figure 1.1. Percentage of low-achieving students and top performers in reading 2009 and 2018 (selected countries)



Note: Only countries/economies that participated in both 2009 and 2018 PISA assessments are shown.

Source: OECD, PISA 2018 Database, Table I.B1.7.

StatLink  <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934118219>

The review was conceived around three phases. The first phase (2016/17) consisted of identifying topics to explore in relation to upper secondary education, exploring the various approaches to conduct the senior cycle review as well as conducting a comparative study with other jurisdictions. The second phase (2018/19) involved two full cycles of reviews at both school (through school-based reviews) and national levels (through national seminars). The NCCA selected 41 schools from the 80 that volunteered to participate in the school-based reviews. The selection of this sample used DES statistics to ensure representativeness in terms of the schools' type, DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools support programme) status, gender mix and language medium. It took place in two thematic cycles, the first one investigating the purpose, strengths and challenges of current senior cycle education while the second one focused on pathways, programmes and flexibility. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) served as a scientific adviser and contributed to the analysis of all the collected data throughout the process. Each cycle of the school-based reviews concluded with a series of national seminars (NCCA, 2018_[4]).

The first series of seminars was built mainly on the presentation of the results from cycle 1 school-based reviews. In response to participants' feedback on these first seminars, the NCCA re-designed the second series of seminars to include shorter presentation time and to give more time to discussions among the stakeholders participating. At the end of each series of seminars, the NCCA published a bulletin with the results and sent this to schools and stakeholders. In addition, all materials produced in this review and discussions are published online for the general public to consult (NCCA, 2018_[4]).

The third phase (2019) consists of a round of public debate and discussions around a consultation document produced by the NCCA from the information collected in the first and second phases. An advisory report will be prepared once the third phase of the review is completed, which will be presented to the Department for Education and Skills, to inform its decision about whether and how to change senior cycle curriculum.

Methodology of this assessment

This OECD report results from the invitation the NCCA extended to the OECD to provide strategic advice for the senior cycle review process. The OECD analysis presented in this document focuses on the process and results of phase 2 of the review with the aim of providing strategic input and support for the third and final phase of the review process. At the time of finalising this report, the review process was nearing the end of phase 3.

This report is part of the OECD's Implementing Education Policies programme which provides peer learning and tailored support to countries (Box 1.1).

Box 1.1. Implementing policies: supporting change in education

OECD's Implementing Education Policies programme offers peer learning and tailored support for countries and jurisdictions to help them achieve success in the implementation of their education policies and reforms. Tailored support is provided on topics on which the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills has comparative expertise, including (but not limited to): introducing new curriculum, developing schools as learning organisations, teacher policy, evaluation, assessment and accountability arrangements/education monitoring systems and building educational leadership capacity.

The tailored support consists of three complementary strands of work that aim to target countries' and jurisdictions' needs to introduce policy reforms and impactful changes:

- Policy assessments take stock of the selected policy and change strategy, analyse strengths and challenges and provide concrete recommendations for enhancing and ensuring effective implementation. It follows a concrete methodology: a desk study of policy documents, a three to five day assessment visit, in which an OECD team of experts interviews a range of key stakeholders from various levels of the education system, and additional exchanges with a project steering or reference group.
- Strategic advice is provided to education stakeholders and tailored to the needs of countries and jurisdictions. It can consist of reviewing policy documents (e.g. white papers or action plans), contributing to policy meetings, or facilitating the development of tools that support the implementation of specific policies.
- Implementation seminars can be organised to bring together education stakeholders involved in the reform or change process, for them to discuss, engage and shape the development of policies and implementation strategies.

Website: <http://www.oecd.org/education/implementing-policies/>

Brochure: <http://www.oecd.org/education/implementing-education-policies-flyer.pdf>

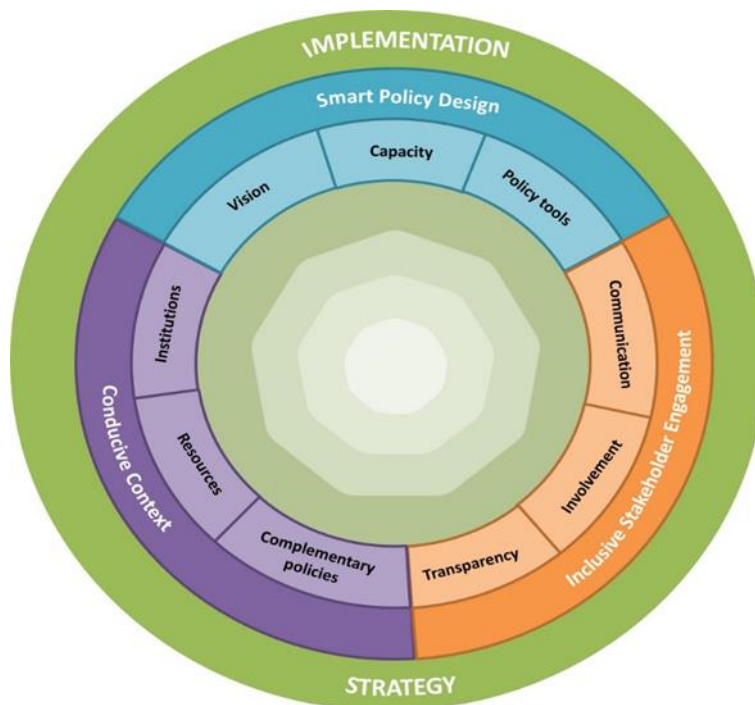
An OECD team (Annex A) has provided Ireland with this assessment and strategic advice on the senior cycle review and its next stages. The OECD team follows a methodology to support its analysis that combines research with fieldwork and education stakeholder contributions to ensure validity and ownership.

The OECD team has drawn on:

- analysis of qualitative and quantitative comparative data, research and policies from OECD education systems
- an assessment visit to Ireland (February 2019) to gather information (Annex B)
- regular exchanges with the national co-ordinator and a group of education stakeholders
- stakeholder perspectives from participation in national seminars in November 2018 (Dublin and Cork) and February 2019 (Dublin, Athlone and Limerick) and from findings from the consultations (NCCA, 2018^[4]).

To undertake the assessment, the team builds on the four dimensions of its implementing education policies analytical framework (Figure 1.2). For a full assessment of the effectiveness of a policy, it is important to consider not only the policy itself; the engagement of education stakeholders in the process is vital from the early stages, as is the consideration of the contextual factors that influence the policy.

Figure 1.2. The OECD implementation framework



Source: Viennet and Pont (Viennet and Pont, 2017^[5]). "Education policy implementation: a literature review and proposed framework", OECD Education Working Papers, No. 162, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/19939019>.

The framework has been adapted to analyse the review process of senior cycle in Ireland as follows:

- Smart policy design: how is the senior cycle review process analysing how to equip Irish learners effectively to face and shape the future of Ireland?
- Inclusive stakeholder engagement: are key education stakeholders involved in the review and what is their position on potential developments of senior cycle?
- Conducive context: are the external contextual conditions and policies aligned for a review of senior cycle?
- Coherent implementation strategy: can the different elements be brought together to ensure that the next steps of the senior cycle review successfully inform future decisions about senior cycle?

Building on the detailed methodology through the lens of the implementation of the senior cycle review, this assessment presents an overview of the main issues and challenges in the review and presents a set of issues to consider in the next steps of the review process.

Following this introduction, each chapter looks at specific dimensions of implementation, analysing Irish current conditions in relation to international data and evidence (when available), and qualitative data gathered from stakeholder consultation events and the OECD team visits:

- Chapter 2 focuses on senior cycle programmes in light of the aspirations for Irish education stated in the *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019* and other policy references to understand the review process. It looks at the **vision** and current structure of senior cycle programmes and concludes with issues for reflection for the next stages of the review process.
- Chapter 3 discusses **stakeholder engagement** as the central element of the review of senior cycle, key to drive any potential change forward. This chapter reflects on who the main players are in the system, how they have been involved in the process and how their contributions can be most effectively integrated for the (potential) challenges ahead.
- Chapter 4 explores how the review can adapt and be shaped to ensure a favourable **context**. In particular, this chapter highlights the importance of taking into account the experience of other reforms/changes, policies and contextual elements that might influence the implementation of the next stages of the review.
- Chapter 5 brings the different dimensions together to consider how to shape a **coherent implementation strategy** to complete the review of senior cycle. It presents questions and concrete issues for consideration to move forward in the review process and preparation for future (potential) changes.

Notes

¹ According to Oireachtas (2018^[6]) senior cycle curriculum has not experienced major revisions/modifications since 1972.

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2 Senior cycle in Ireland

This chapter introduces the characteristics of the current senior cycle in Ireland to understand the review process and its potential development. It identifies several strengths: senior cycle aims to cater to the needs of different types of students; its Transition Year is highly valued by students; in general terms, the formal aims and learning methodologies stated in senior cycle programmes seem to be aligned with international good practice; and the final assessment enjoys high levels of trust.

On the other hand, there are issues in the current senior cycle that require attention: the vision of senior cycle does not appear to be fully aligned with Ireland's future aspirations; the final Leaving Certificate assessment seems to drive (excessively) decisions that students, parents, teachers and schools make; there is perception of misalignment with the recent junior cycle reform among some stakeholders; and there is a perception that limited resources might jeopardise effective provision of a broad range of subject choices in disadvantaged schools.

Why a review of senior cycle?

In its *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019* (DES, 2018^[11]), Ireland committed to a review of its senior cycle and, more recently, in its *Statement of Strategy 2019-2021*, the country committed to “review and reform the curricula from Early Years to senior cycle level to enhance quality learning and support learners’ physical and intellectual development” (DES, 2019, p. 12^[2]).

Upper secondary education (senior cycle in Ireland), is a key stage in the education trajectory of any individual, leading to completion of education (and then to entry into the labour market) or to transition into further education (e.g. higher education, further education and training, and/or apprenticeships). The analysis of upper secondary education in nine jurisdictions, commissioned by the NCCA during phase 1 of the review, shows that the main purposes of this level of education is preparing students for employment, developing their adaptability to the future, and ensuring they have the skills to become lifelong learners, and to participate actively in society (O’Donnell, 2018^[3]). Given its key consolidation and transition role for students, upper secondary education needs to align with external contextual changes to be able to prepare its students effectively. To cater to these objectives, upper secondary education is shaped through a combination of academic and vocational programmes across countries (OECD, 2016^[4]).

Ireland has a holistic vision of the purpose of its education system: education must aim to contribute to the development of all aspects of the individual. “All aspects” refers to: aesthetic, creative, critical, cultural, emotional, expressive, intellectual, for personal and home life, for working life, for living in the community, and for leisure. In this respect, all senior cycle programmes in Ireland aim to contribute to this general objective, with particular emphasis on the preparation of students for further education or training, for employment and for their role as participative, enterprising citizens (NCCA, 2001^[5]). *The Action Plan for Education 2016-2019* (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2016), which gave rise to the review of senior cycle, included as its first goal to enhance learners’ experience and success. This implied developing critical skills, knowledge and competencies, well-being, greater subject choice, transitions, IT and language abilities.

Many OECD countries are seeking to respond to fundamental questions about the type of knowledge required in increasingly complex and changing environments. Globalisation, migration, changing labour markets, technology and the development of artificial technology, among others are aspects that raise the question of whether curricula based solely on academic subject study is sufficient. In recent years, many education systems have embarked on curriculum reforms. New curricula have been developed in countries such as Australia, Estonia, Japan, Norway, and Wales. In all cases, the focus of change has been on developing not only knowledge, but also those skills, values and attitudes required for fully engaging in the 21st century (OECD, 2018^[6]). In addition, some countries have established periodic cycles for curriculum review, such as Japan or Finland, who undergo this process every 10 years, while others do not have clear revision mandates (OECD, 2018^[7]).

The NCCA was asked to lead the senior cycle review¹. Results from the consultation process at school-level in phase 2 of the review show that Ireland’s current senior cycle is well perceived across the country (Smyth, Banks and McCoy, 2018^[8]). For example, stakeholders report that senior cycle education aims to cater for the needs of different learners with its four different programmes; that it offers a broad range of subject choices; that the Transition Year is an addition that allows students to extend their knowledge, skills and experiences beyond the traditional cognitive domains; and that the final assessment method is perceived as fair by students, their parents and society at large. From a comparative perspective, Irish upper secondary education appears to deliver high quality outcomes. Upper secondary completion rates are among the highest across OECD countries, as is the percentage of today’s young people expected to graduate from an upper secondary general programme (OECD, 2016^[4]). The latest edition of PISA results for 15-year-olds confirms that the mean score in reading performance of Ireland is one of the highest among PISA participating countries (OECD, 2019^[9]).

However, some aspects of senior cycle education deserve further attention. The *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019* suggested the need to:

- increase subject choice for upper secondary students to enhance student motivation and engagement
- equip students with the skills and knowledge to participate in a changing world
- ensure that curriculum development responds to the changing needs of learners, society and the economy
- improve transitions to the next stages of students' lives
- create a greater diversity of learning opportunities beyond school, such as apprenticeships and traineeships as alternative pathways
- enhance support for learners to make informed career choices
- create a focus on entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation to develop the national skills base and meet the challenges of growth in the modern world.

The consultation process raised a range of concerns: senior cycle is perceived to have a narrow focus, mainly as a filter to third level (higher) education; some programmes are not sufficiently developed to achieve their aims; the assessment method causes high levels of stress, even anxiety in students; doubts remain as to whether senior cycle is well-aligned with other education levels, especially the recently reformed junior cycle (Smyth, Banks and McCoy, 2018^[8]).

According to the discussions in phase 2 of the senior cycle review, these challenges have been translated to the need to help individuals to develop a solid set of basic cognitive skills (literacy and numeracy) enriched by transversal non-cognitive skills (Smyth, Banks and McCoy, 2018^[8]). This diversified set of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values are expected to support the Irish learners to develop their lifelong-learning capacities beyond school age, to exercise a responsible citizenship and contribute successfully to social cohesion and economic prosperity.

In order to assist Ireland in the completion of the review of senior cycle, this chapter analyses the characteristics of senior cycle, to identify areas for consideration by the Irish Government and relevant stakeholders in light of international evidence. To do so, this chapter is organised in two sections: the first section describes the four programmes offered in senior cycle. Based on this information, the second section makes observations and suggests issues to be considered during further discussions about senior cycle in Ireland.

An overview of the current senior cycle programmes

Ireland has comparatively high levels of education attainment among the OECD countries. The proportion of the population aged 25-34 with lower secondary education as the highest level of attainment in Ireland is lower than the OECD average, with an attainment rate of 9% in 2015, compared to the OECD average of 16%. The proportion of 25-34 year-olds whose highest level of attainment is upper secondary education is 39% in Ireland, 3 percentage points below the OECD average. On the other hand, 53.5% of 25-34 year-olds have attained tertiary education, which is among the highest in OECD countries in 2015, well above the OECD average of 42% (OECD, 2018^[10]).

Upper secondary education in Ireland consists of senior cycle, which is a two- to three-year programme. The age range is 15 to 17/18 (years 10 to 11/12) with compulsory participation until age 16. Junior cycle graduates may spend year 10 (age 15-16) in a Transition Year, or move directly to a two-year senior cycle programme. While the Transition Year is not formally part of the Leaving Certificate, it is included in this report because it makes an important contribution to senior cycle learning experiences as it allows students

to sample different subjects and undertake work experience and other projects, and helps guide them in choosing their upper secondary education subjects and future career path.

Senior cycle students may choose between three streams: the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) programme for those studying academic and general subjects; the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), which adds modules about the world of work to the regular Leaving Certificate; and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), a cross-curricular pre-vocational programme. All three upper secondary programmes award a Leaving Certificate, however the LCA does not afford direct entry to universities nor institutes of technology through the Central Applications Office (CAO).

In recent years, approximately 72% of students entering senior cycle take a Transition Year (TY). Then, 95% of students follow the Leaving Certificate Established programme (LCE) or the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) (69% and 26% respectively), with 5% following the Leaving Certificate Applied programme (LCA) (DES, 2019^[11]). At the end of senior cycle, students sit an exam that determines, in combination with other important criteria, their entry to higher education. This procedure is known as the “points system”².

Transition Year

The Transition Year is a one-year optional programme that forms the first of a three-year senior cycle in a number of schools, which students can choose to take before selecting the Leaving Certificate programme they will follow. This year is designed to provide students with skills beyond traditional academics, and might include work experience or social engagement as well. This programme is theoretically available to all secondary schools, and it is currently offered in about 93% of them (NCCA, 2019^[12]). Each school designs its own Transition Year programme within the guidelines set by the national authority, so they can address the needs and interests of their student intake (DES, 1994^[13]).

The Transition Year programme means to offer students a broad educational experience in order to acquire maturity before moving forward to further study and/or vocational preparation. Assessment is usually carried out on an ongoing basis and can include a variety of approaches such as school-based assessment of projects or portfolios, oral, practical and written activities (DES, 1994^[13]).

Leaving Certificate Established

The Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) is a two-year programme that aims to provide learners with a broad, balanced education while also offering them a chance to specialise towards particular higher education and career options. Students take at least five subjects (usually seven) for assessment, one of which must be Irish. Subjects are studied at either Ordinary or Higher Level. Two subjects, Irish and Mathematics, can be studied at Foundation Level as well. Syllabuses are available in 37 subjects. Each of these belongs to a subject group as shown in Table 2.1. Two subjects, Home Economics and Physics and Chemistry, belong to two groups. In addition to these subjects, the State Examinations Commission (SEC) will provide assessments in any of the recognised languages of the European Union, where the status of the applicant/candidate is seen as appropriate (NCCA, 2019^[12]). The certificate is used for selection into further education, employment, training and higher education (NCCA, 2001^[5]).

Table 2.1. Subject group in senior cycle Leaving Certificate Established

Group	Subject
Languages	English, French, German, Irish, Italian, Latin, Ancient Greek, Spanish, Arabic, Japanese, Russian, Classical Studies, Hebrew Studies.
Science	Applied Mathematics, Biology, Chemistry, Mathematics, Physics, Physics and Chemistry.
Business studies	Accounting, Business, Economics.
Applied science	Agricultural Science, Applied Mathematics, Computer Science, Construction Studies, Engineering, Home Economics, Physics and Chemistry, Design and Communication Graphics, Technology.
Social studies	Art, Geography, History, Home Economics, Music, Physical Education Framework, Physical Education Specification, Politics and Society, Religious Education.

Source: OECD adapted from NCCA (2019_[12]), Senior cycle, <https://curriculumonline.ie/Senior-cycle>.

Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme

The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) aims at combining the academic strengths of the LCE with a set of subjects and approaches focused on self-directed learning, enterprise, work and the community³ (NCCA, 2003_[14]). In 2018, 69% of students opted to take the LCE while 26.1% opted for the LCVP (DES, 2019_[11]). Students in the LCVP study a minimum of five subjects, including Irish and two subjects from specific vocational subject groupings, plus two more courses of study in work preparation and enterprise known as “link modules”. They are also required to take a recognised course in a modern European language, other than Irish or English (NCCA, 2003_[14]).

Vocational subject groupings, one of LCVP’s distinctive traits in relation to the LCE, aim at providing students with a focus on developing vocational skills and exploring their career options. The majority of students follow a Leaving Certificate Modern European Language Course but a small minority take a Vocational Language Module in order to fulfil the requirements of the programme (NCCA, 2003_[14]). Table 2.2 offers a sample of the subjects that are offered in LCVP.

Table 2.2. Sample of subject selections in Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme

Two example of subject selections during the two-year LCVP

Kind of subjects	Student A	Student B
At least five Leaving Certificate Subjects (at Higher, Ordinary or Foundation Level) including Irish	Irish English Maths Business	Irish English Maths Art
Two must be selected from one of the designated Vocational Subject Groupings	Biology Home Economics	Engineering Technical Drawing
Two Link Modules	Preparation for the World of Work Enterprise Education	Preparation for the World of Work Enterprise Education
A course in a Modern European Language (other than Irish or English)	German	French

Source: OECD adapted from NCCA (2003_[14]), Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme.

Leaving Certificate Applied

The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) is a distinct, self-contained pre-vocational programme. It is designed for those students who do not wish to proceed directly to third-level education or for those whose needs, aspirations and aptitudes are not adequately catered for by the other two programmes in senior cycle. The

LCA is structured around three inter-related and interdependent areas: vocational preparation, vocational education, and general education (NCCA, 2001^[5]).

The LCA programme consists of a range of courses designed on a modular basis. Each module lasts 30 hours and each one of the two years of the programme is divided into two sessions (September to January and from February to June) so the entire programme has four sessions. A module within a given course is usually completed within a session. During the two-year programme, participants are expected to complete 44 modules (e.g. 11 modules per session, on average). An overview of a two-year LCA can be seen in the Table 2.3.

Table 2.3. Course requirements of the Leaving Certificate Applied

Vocational Preparation	No. of modules
Vocational Preparation and Guidance	8
English and Communication	4
Vocational Education	No. of modules
Vocational Specialisms (two full courses)	8 (4x2)
Mathematical Applications	4
Introduction to Information and Communication Technology	2
General Education	No. of modules
Social Education	6
Languages:	
Gaeilge	2
Modern European Language or Sign Language for participants from the deaf community	2 (4)
Arts Education (Dance, Drama, Music, Visual Arts)	2
Leisure and Recreation (including Physical Education)	2
Elective Modules	No. of modules
Participants must complete four elective modules	4
TOTAL	44

Source: Adapted from NCCA (2001^[5]), Leaving Certificate Applied. Programme Statement & Outline of Student Tasks, https://www.ncca.ie/media/2554/lca_programme.pdf.

Access to higher education

Entry into higher education is determined by order of merit on the basis of the points obtained from the six best scores on a student's Leaving Certificate examinations. In addition, higher education institutions (HEI) at individual level might set minimum course entry requirements (known as basic matriculation requirements). The Central Applications Office (CAO) matches students' results with HEI's requirements and places available for each subject.

Commonly known in Ireland as the "points system", this approach is said to contribute to high levels of trust in public education in Ireland. As related during OECD meetings, it also acts as a strong social and inter-generational connection among individuals educated in Ireland, and as a symbol of identity of Irish education. At the same time, the points system is also commonly considered a stressful experience by most stakeholders. However, it should be noted that students choose their preferred course before the results/points are brought to bear or act as the determinant of whether they get the course they chose. As a result, the vast majority of students are offered one of the courses listed in their preferences.

Observations and issues

Overall remarks

The analysis of relevant documentation, interviews held during the OECD visit and results from the NCCA review process highlight a number of strengths in the current senior cycle. The four different programmes offered aim to cater to different needs and preferences of the student body. The Transition Year is highly valued by students and seems to provide a good transition from junior cycle into the more academic senior cycle. When looking into the curricular documentation related to the four programmes (LCE, LCVP, LCA and TY), the aims, purposes and learning methodologies proposed aspire to align with international best practices. In addition, there has been constant update of content, such as the inclusion of “Politics and Society”, and other subjects of transversal skills. In 2009, a key skills framework was integrated into senior cycle that included: information processing, communicating, being personally effective, working with others, critical and creative thinking (NCCA, 2009^[15]). Furthermore, senior cycle enjoys high levels of trust from the public in Ireland, and its final examination (the Leaving Certificates) seems to be strongly rooted in the national culture. Irish students are motivated and Ireland has among the highest levels of completion across OECD countries in upper secondary education. (OECD, 2018^[10]) (OECD, 2016^[4]).

Despite these strong elements, the consultations during the review process, and the OECD team views suggest that some issues in senior cycle still require attention. First, there is a perception among some stakeholders that the current vision and purpose of senior cycle education does not fully correspond to Ireland’s future aspirations. Second, the impact of the final assessment associated with the points system to access higher education is to a large extent driving and shaping many educational decisions and choices from stakeholders (students, parents, teachers and schools). This implies that any changes made to senior cycle will have limited possibilities to succeed if the current assessment approaches are not reviewed accordingly, as evidence suggests (OECD, 2013^[16]). Third, the recent reform of junior cycle may have resulted in the challenge to achieve alignment between junior and senior cycles. Fourth, during phase 2 of the review and meetings with the OECD, many stakeholders expressed their concern about not having a more rigorous and attractive vocational segment in senior cycle, one that gives real work-based experience to students and that is delivered in close co-ordination with employers (as part of the strategy to diversify pathways). Fifth, concerns for equity in senior cycle were raised in particular, observing that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds might not benefit from the same support to prepare for their Leaving Certificate examinations, nor from the same opportunities to take a Transition Year, as their peers. The remainder of this chapter briefly elaborates on these five issues.

Issues to consider

A narrow vision of the purpose of senior cycle

First, the purpose and the vision of senior cycle seem to be too narrow and rigid for Ireland’s aspirations. At the moment, senior cycle appears to be, in practice, a filter for higher education. With a robust emphasis on knowledge and testing, and the embedding of skills in the curriculum in 2009, it is not clear how senior cycle is at present preparing students for the future beyond sitting the Leaving Certificate.

According to the discussions that took place in phase 2 of the review process, the vision and purpose of senior cycle seem narrow for Ireland’s future aspirations as discussed by the *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019* (DES, 2018^[11]) and its *Statement of Strategy 2019-2021* (DES, 2019^[21]). In both pieces, the Irish Department of Education and Skills emphasises its commitment to deliver a learning experience to the highest international standards. In this sense, it is important that such a commitment is materialised into concrete actions to reinforce effective learning for students, especially in relation to non-cognitive skills. In the meetings and interviews with the OECD team, many stakeholders expressed their willingness for senior cycle to be enhanced to help equip Irish children and youth with the skills to face the challenges of the

21st century, succeed in higher education, enter and progress successfully in the labour market, access a range of alternative education pathways, and exercise a responsible global citizenship.

As part of this topic, during these meetings, another element identified was the need to increase the range of subject choices for students. For Irish authorities, the central goal would be to reinforce student motivation and engagement and ensure that the curriculum continues to respond to the needs of learners, the society and the economy. For this to happen, education authorities in the country are already developing new specifications for a range of subjects, STEM included (DES, 2018_[11]).

At the OECD, top-performing school systems often set clear and ambitious goals about what students should be able to do (Schleicher, 2018_[17]). Following this practice, in Mexico, for instance, the Ministry of Education developed the strategic document “*The Purpose of Education in Mexico*” (SEP, 2016_[18]), an innovative piece that establishes, with unprecedented clarity, the learning aims for students in Mexican society, covering a wide range of skills and purposes (OECD, 2019_[19]). Ireland might consider exploring this example.

The “points system” is associated with some undesirable effects

The “points system” generates high levels of stress and anxiety among senior cycle students. The high impact of the current points system in determining students’ entry into third-level education generates considerable stress and anxiety levels in students and their families. Irish media both document and to some extent contribute to this environment with an exhaustive coverage of Leaving Certificate assessments during the summer period each year. The issue is complex, however, as these high levels of stress may be also associated with other more positive attitudes. For example, according to PISA 2018 results, about 96% students in Ireland reported sometimes or always feeling happy and about 5% of students reported always feeling sad. In most countries and economies, students were more likely to report positive feelings when they reported a stronger sense of belonging at school and greater student co-operation (OECD, 2019_[9]).

Ireland could look outwards, to countries that seek to reduce stress levels while keeping student assessments fair. In Canada, for example, the *Principles for Fair Student Assessment Practices for Education* outline key elements for assessment practices that have served as foundation for teacher handbooks, board policies and departments of education policy documents on assessment and test development in Canadian jurisdictions. These principles and guidelines, intended for both assessment practitioners and policy makers, identify issues to be taken into account for assessments to be deemed fair and equitable. The text acts as a set of parameters and a handbook for assessment. The first part, directed towards practising teachers and the application of assessment in classroom settings deals with developing and choosing methods for assessment, collecting assessment information, judging and scoring student performance, summarising and interpreting results, and reporting assessment findings. The second part is aimed at developers of external assessments such as jurisdictional ministry/department personnel, school boards/districts, and commercial test developers. It looks into developing and selecting methods for assessment, collecting and interpreting assessment information, informing students being assessed, and implementing mandated assessment programs (OECD, 2013_[20]).

A potential need to align junior and senior cycles

As recognised by public officials, the recent reform of junior cycle would have implications for and result in challenges to achieve appropriate alignment between junior and senior cycles. This position is also shared by many stakeholders who indicated, during the meetings with the OECD team, that the transversal skills and critical thinking framework introduced with the reform of junior cycle might create challenges when students enter senior cycle, so there might be a problem of vertical integration in the system.

Education stakeholders also expressed concerns that the practical and project-based approach to pedagogy and assessment developed in junior cycle will clash with the more traditional approach in senior cycle, which may generate further issues for students. However, there is no consensus about how to tackle this misalignment: some stakeholders believe that a reform in senior cycle should take place immediately to correct these differences while others believe it is important to give time for the reform of junior cycle to mature and settle down in secondary schools before proceeding to another major reform.

Lower and upper secondary education are provided by the same institutions so creating synergies between the review and reform process of the two cycles seems reasonable and desirable. This might reduce transaction costs for schools, school leaders, teachers and the system as a whole. Within schools, many teachers work with classes in both junior and senior cycles which means that, in principle, they can be better prepared for a reform of similar characteristics and to shape the process in order to align the two cycles.

The vocational strand of senior cycle can be enhanced

Pre-vocational education is offered through the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and to some extent with the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). Both are presented and designed for students with more vocational preferences and use different learning approaches (especially in the case of the LCA). During phase 2 of the review process and meetings of the OECD team, several stakeholders questioned the extent to which the LCVP in particular is a real vocational option and not just an extended version of the LCE (since it “only” offers two vocational modules as add-ins).

Furthermore, students graduating from senior cycle and looking for a more vocational/technical post-secondary study option cannot apply through the CAO system (Central Applications Office) but need to apply individually to each further education institution, irrespective of which stream of the Leaving Certificate they took. This distinction reinforces the widespread idea that vocational education does not deserve the same considerations as more traditional academic options, creating a divide between programmes that are actually delivered in the same institutions.

Enhancing vocational education is not an easy task because such an effort requires collaboration and resources from employers and unions as well. In general, the OECD has identified four basic principles that can be helpful for countries (Ireland in this case): i) establish a clear definition of how the mix and content of vocational programmes will be determined; ii) enhance the quality of learning experiences and methods for vocational students; iii) develop mechanisms to better assess and certify the learning outcomes of vocational students in close collaboration with actors in the labour market; and iv) secure a solid basis for policy support among other parts of the education system, the public administration and other stakeholders (like employers and unions) (OECD, 2014_[21]).

Disadvantaged students in senior cycle may face more challenges

According to the meetings and interviews of the OECD team during its visits to Ireland, two important aspects seem to have a particularly adverse effect on disadvantaged students in senior cycle. First, students of less privileged backgrounds may not be able to have the support of private tutoring to prepare their exams, as is the case for students from a more affluent background. Second, the Transition Year offer seems to be largely determined by the financial capacity of each individual school, a situation that could restrict the benefits of this apparently highly beneficial programme to (only) those schools that can afford it (Burns et al., 2018_[22]).

These two challenges have already been identified by the senior cycle community. Furthermore, equity seems to be an important item on the Irish education policy agenda. Examples include the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Plan that offers support to the most disadvantaged schools, including additional funding and teaching posts, through tailored school support; and the School Excellence

Programme (2017) which funds pilots of innovative approaches to alleviate education disadvantage. At upper secondary level, the programme aims to improve retention rates up to Leaving Certificate examinations in DEIS schools. However, it remains uncertain the extent to which these programmes can provide specific support in relation to the issues identified (extra tutoring for students and support for schools to offer the whole range of provision conceived for the Transition Year).

Tackling inequality is one of the most complex and elusive challenges in public policy, not just in education. Some OECD countries have explored different approaches to tackle equity challenges. For example, Chile introduced formula-driven school grants with equity criteria that provide a transparent and predictable basis for school providers. The existence of a clearly defined and objectively measured formula as the basis for allocating resources imposes a hard budget constraint to providers and creates the conditions for basic spending discipline. The formula also accommodates the needs of a diverse network of service providers (OECD, 2016^[4]).

Notes

¹ The previous review of senior cycle was completed by the NCCA in 2009 (NCCA, 2009^[23]).

² The “points system” is a complex arrangement that cannot be explained in detail in this document. For more information about the “points system” in Ireland please visit: www.cao.ie.

³ In practice, most students, parents and teachers would not regard the LCVP as distinct separate track. Students enter LCE and make their subject choices. If they are eligible (have the correct combination of subjects and their school offers LCVP) they may take on the additional two modules that make up the LCVP. The certification received is the LCE and the LCVP module are noted on the certificate.

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3 Stakeholder engagement in the review of senior cycle

The senior cycle review led by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) aims at engaging all key stakeholders, gathering their perspective, and advising the Department for Education and Skills based on their contributions. Engaging stakeholders is crucial because it can help build ownership; help adjust the policy to ensure it reaches schools; inform on stakeholders' readiness, willingness and capacity to change their practice; and build trust between stakeholder and policymakers.

The senior cycle review is mobilising a considerable number of stakeholders to define the strengths, challenges and potential areas for improvement of senior cycle. To move the discussion forward and sustain this engagement, the NCCA should strengthen the process, for instance by clarifying with stakeholders how their contributions might influence the policy process and potential implementation.

Why does stakeholder engagement matter for the review of senior cycle?

Consulting stakeholders in the development and implementation of policies has become a common practice across the OECD for different reasons, even in those education systems where decision-making is centralised (OECD, 2018^[1]). For example, as traditional representative instances have eroded and technologies have expanded possibilities to participate, more actors have entered the public debate. In addition, awareness of the importance of the quality of education for the future of societies has expanded beyond education professionals and parents to occupy international and national policy agendas (OECD, 2015^[2]) (OECD, 2016^[3]). As a result, governments cannot rely on linear forms of participation only, but have to engage with a broader range of stakeholders (Rouw et al., 2016^[4]).

Viennet and Pont (2017^[5]) recognise the central role of stakeholders in education policy making and implementation. They suggest that when planning for implementation, policy makers should understand stakeholders' positions, interests and motivations on a proposed change in education policy; as well as take into account their readiness and capacity to implement a change. Acknowledging and engaging the wide range of education players and their perspectives on the policy is a crucial step towards the effective implementation of a policy.

In Ireland, engaging stakeholders is important for the review of senior cycle¹ because it facilitates ownership of the vision and trust in the process, which are key for design, implementation and eventually for sustainability of any policy in senior cycle in the medium and long terms. Stakeholder engagement is, in this sense, a self-reinforcing exercise, as education professionals who see their role valued in the policy process are more likely to make further contributions. Stakeholder engagement can also help adjust the policy design to make it more realistic to schools' needs by building on stakeholders' knowledge, experience and practical contributions.

For Ireland, the review process can help collect and systematise the experiences of reform in junior cycle from different stakeholders. This input can be essential for a finer understanding of the need for and practical implications of potential changes in senior cycle. Finally, stakeholder engagement efforts might provide essential information on stakeholders' readiness, willingness and capacity to implement by learning about their position regarding the proposed policy or reform; and about their capacity and resources.

This chapter reviews the main stakeholders and their connection with senior cycle education, and looks at the ways in which they have engaged in the review process so far.

Stakeholder engagement in the review of senior cycle

The Irish education system is nationally led, but has a tradition and culture of institutionalised organisations that engage in education at different levels. Table 3.1 shows the different players that have stakes in senior cycle, from national, to regional, local and school level. In comparison to other systems across OECD, the State Exam Commission (SEC) and the Central Applications Office (CAO) are institutional stakeholders that play a key role at this level.

There are different approaches to engagement across countries, from the creation of national educational advisory institutions, to general ad hoc consultative approaches that vary according to subjects. Ireland's approach to engagement is based on corporatist representation and consultation. Consultations, negotiations, and other processes engage a number of institutions in education policy. A number of them are represented in the Council of the NCCA and are already voicing their views. The review process described in the Introduction is designed to widen consultations and include perspectives of schools and practitioners.

Table 3.1. Institutions in senior cycle

Stakeholders	Characteristics, role and responsibilities in the review process (when clarified)
<i>Central authorities</i>	
Department of Education and Skills (DES)	The DES develops the National Action Plan for Education as guided by the Programme for Government; it guarantees the general coherence of education policy in Ireland and administers the education system accordingly. The DES is expected to use the outcomes of the NCCA review process to inform its decisions on the potential evolutions of senior cycle education.
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)	The NCCA advises the DES on developments in curriculum and assessments and supports their implementation. The NCCA started the large-scale review process with stakeholders that this chapter focuses on, and has conducted additional research to inform the advice it provides to the government.
State Examinations Commission (SEC)	The SEC develops, operates, accredits and certifies the Junior and Leaving Certificates. It prepares the examination material, recruits staff to draft and mark the exams, determines the examination processes and issues the results.
Teaching Council (TC)	The Teaching Council is the professional standards body for the teaching profession, which promotes and regulates professional standards and development in teaching.
DES Inspectorate	The inspectorate evaluates the quality of schooling. The inspectorate is the division of the Department of Education and Skills responsible for the evaluation of primary and post-primary schools and centres for education. Inspectors also provide advice on a range of educational issues to school communities, policy makers in the Department and to the wider educational system.
Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)	Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) maintains and develops the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), based on standards, skills or competencies acquired by learners. It is an independent State agency responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training services in Ireland.
<i>Institutions of tertiary education and related entities</i>	
SOLAS - An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna (Further Education and Training Authority)	SOLAS provides strategic direction and develops policy for further education and skills development. SOLAS was established in 2013 and it is an agency of the Department of Education and Skills governed by a Board. SOLAS' mission is to fund, co-ordinate and monitor a range of FET (further education and training) provision.
The Higher Education Authority (HEA)	The HEA is a funding and advisory body to the Minister for Education and Skills in relation to the higher education sector. The HEA leads the strategic development of the Irish higher education and research system with the objective of creating a coherent system of diverse institutions with distinct missions, which is responsive to the social, cultural and economic development of Ireland and its people and supports the achievement of national objectives.
The Central Applications Office (CAO)	The CAO processes applications to the first year of undergraduate studies, mostly based on senior cycle graduates' results on their Leaving Certificate.
Education and Training Boards (ETB)	The ETBs are the only regional administration of education and manage primary and secondary schools and further education institutions at the regional level. ETBs are statutory authorities that have responsibility for education and training, youth work and a range of other statutory functions.
<i>System and school-level stakeholder organisations</i>	
School principals	School principals manage schools' daily affairs alongside deputy principals and provide guidance to teachers and other staff members.
Teachers	Ireland's 28,000 post-primary teachers lead students' learning in senior cycle education. They prepare students to take the Leaving Certificate to enter higher or further education, or the labour market.
Boards of management	The board of management manages the school on behalf of the patron and is accountable to the patron and the Minister. The Board must uphold the characteristic spirit (ethos) of the school and is accountable to the patron for so doing.
Teacher unions	Ireland has two main teacher unions at post-primary level: the Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI) and the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI). Both are affiliated to the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. ASTI represents 16,800 teachers in community schools, community colleges, comprehensive schools and voluntary secondary schools. TUI represents over 19,000 teachers and lecturers in Ireland engaged in post-primary, higher and further education.
Students	Students have been active participants in the review process of senior cycle.
Parents	Parents support their children's learning and help them keep a balance between school obligations, strategies for the future and their development as teenagers. Parents can establish a parent association at their child's school, whose committee represents the interests of parents and aims to promote a good relationship with the school board of management, the principal and the school staff. The National Parents' Council Post-Primary (NPCpp) is an umbrella organisation for affiliated parents' associations in post-primary education of all ethos.

Stakeholders	Characteristics, role and responsibilities in the review process (when clarified)
School support services	School support services provide support to schools and continuing professional development (CPD) to teachers and principals. There are several school support providers, funded by the DES (mostly under Teacher Education Section). Two main providers are PDST (for primary and senior cycle) and the JCT (for implementation of the junior cycle reforms).

A tailored engagement approach for the senior cycle review

The NCCA review has been tailored specifically to engage all key senior cycle stakeholders early in the policy process, to gather their perspective and to report to the Minister for Education and Skills based on their contributions (NCCA, 2018^[6]). The review is focused on getting a range of perspectives about the purpose, future, structure and functioning of senior cycle education. The question of whether and how senior cycle education needed to change was therefore approached collectively. The review unfolded over its three phases, with stakeholder engagement as their core principle. The NCCA positions itself as a facilitator of the entire process.

The first phase (2016/2017) consisted of identifying topics to explore in relation to upper secondary education, as well as the various approaches to conducting a curriculum review. To this end, the NCCA carefully examined national and international literature, and consulted with national stakeholders and international experts on their experience with curriculum reforms and reviews. Lessons from the experience of Wales, the Netherlands, and of Ireland's own junior cycle reform were considered, as well as other examples from the OECD during a national seminar. The information collected served two purposes: i) designing the rest of the review process; and ii) setting Ireland's efforts to reflect on senior cycle education in an international perspective. This preparatory work concluded on some areas to discuss: the current senior cycle programmes, core experiences, skills, flexible programmes and pathways for learning, continuity and coherence with junior cycle, educational assessment, role of guidance, transition or bridging programmes, sites of learning, forms of reporting and certification, well-being, amongst others.

The second phase (2018/19) involved consultations at school level (through school-based reviews); these results were further discussed and enriched at national level (through national seminars) with a wider range of education professionals. The NCCA selected 41 schools from the 80 that volunteered to participate in the school-based reviews. The selection of this sample used DES statistics to ensure representativeness in terms of the schools' type, DEIS status, gender mix and language medium. Table 3.2 displays basic information about the sample's characteristics for school-based reviews.

Table 3.2. Sample for the school-based reviews

Type of school	Sample composition	Sample proportions (sample = 41)	General population proportions (population = 722)
Voluntary secondary	22	54%	52%
Education and Training Board (ETB)	15	37%	34%
Community and Comprehensive	5	12%	13%
Special schools	2	0.1%	nr
Mixed	25	61%	68%
Female	9	22%	18%
Male	7	17%	14%
DEIS schools	11	27%	27%
Irish (Lán Ghaeilge)	4	10%	10% ¹
Total	41 schools	100%	100%

nr indicates non-reported data.

Source: NCCA (2018^[6]) and DES (2019^[7]), Post-primary school list 2018/2019, <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Data-on-Individual-Schools/post-primary/> (accessed 3 April 2019).

The school-based reviews took place in two thematic cycles, the first one investigating the purpose, strengths and challenges of current senior cycle education while the second one focused on pathways, programmes and flexibility. Each school was provided with a grant, access to relevant material, and was assigned an NCCA mentor for support. Students, teachers and parents of the 41 schools were invited to focus groups conducted by the NCCA mentor (for students) or by the teacher or the parent link for each school. The ESRI served as a scientific adviser and analysed all the data collected throughout the process. The two cycles of school-based reviews each resulted in a working paper by ESRI to prepare for the subsequent national seminars.

Each cycle of the school-based reviews concluded with a series of national seminars in various parts of the country (Athlone, Cork, Dublin, Galway, Limerick, Sligo, and Waterford), in which a wider range of stakeholders were invited to participate. The first series of seminars was built mainly on the presentation of the results from cycle 1 school-based reviews. In response to participants' feedback on these first seminars, the NCCA re-designed the second series of seminars to include shorter presentation time and to give more time to discussions among participants. Members of the general public were also able to contribute to the discussions via email. At the end of each series of seminars, the NCCA published and sent to schools a bulletin about the cycle results. In addition, all materials produced in this review and discussions are published online for the general public to consult.

The third phase (2019) of the review consists of the presentation of a document prepared by the NCCA² to the public, for feedback. The document summarises the themes from the previous phases and identifies areas for further development. It is expected that these ideas can be explored further with stakeholders, teachers and the wider public during the review process. The results of this phase will inform the final advisory report to be presented to the Minister for Education and Skills with the NCCA advice on the future development of senior cycle.

Stakeholder engagement in the review process (phase 2)

The phase 2 of the review process mobilised a considerable number of stakeholders and produced a large number of suggestions regarding its challenges and potential evolution. At school level, these were the groups consulted: students, teachers, and parents. The DES participated in the NCCA's national seminars and received regular updates on the review process. Other central bodies such as the Teaching Council and the SEC took part in national seminars. Table 3.3 below offers some basic statistics about this process.

Table 3.3. Participation in phase 2

Number of submissions and/or origin of the submissions

	School-based reviews	National seminars	Email
Cycle 1	41 schools	Cork 6th November 2018: 83 participants Dublin 7th November 2018: 104 participants Galway 7th November: 118 participants	24 submissions
Cycle 2	41 schools	Limerick 5th February 2019: 97 participants Athlone 6th February 2019: 100 participants Waterford 12th February 2019: 64 participants Sligo 13th February 2019: 50 participants	
Total participants	41 schools	616 participants	24 submissions

Source: Communication with the NCCA team (April 2019).

Contributions from stakeholders took place through a range of different events and approaches. School-based reviews included submissions from parents, teachers and students. Stakeholder attendance at seminars included many different education professionals at national, regional and local level or schools:

DES inspectors, SEC, university lecturers, management bodies, union leaders, representatives from subject associations, National Parent Council, schools not involved in the school-based review, directors of schools from ETBI, Institute of Guidance Counsellors, JCT support service, PDST, and Irish Language groups. Emails were submitted by students, teachers and other bodies including 10 submissions from Irish language bodies.

School leaders engaged by co-ordinating the school reviews (in the case of the 41 participating schools). Teachers got involved in the review, responding to the school-based surveys and focus groups, and attending national seminars. This engagement, when sustained throughout the policy process, can contribute significantly to the quality of the curriculum since teachers inform its review, and help its development and implementation in the classroom. It is, therefore, crucial for government to continue to engage teachers to help design policy reviews and reforms (Schleicher, 2018^[8]).

Both ASTI and TUI took part in the NCCA discussions alongside teachers, to advise on potential evolutions for senior cycle and with respect to teachers' rights and work conditions. Both unions kept their members up to date on the progress made with the review. Each union has its own position on senior cycle issues and each remained open to discussing with the NCCA throughout the review process, resulting in a constructive dialogue.

Students were consulted through focus groups in the 41 schools involved in the NCCA review process and were invited to take part in the national seminars. As those most immediately concerned by senior cycle education, students in Ireland can bring a unique perspective on the changes to prioritise. Parents were also part of the school-based reviews. As reported by policy makers as well as other stakeholder groups, it is difficult for schools and education leaders to engage with parents (information reported during the OECD-IEP international seminar on education policy implementation, 25 March 2019). Yet parents can help raise students' voices and contribute to the discussions on senior cycle.

Finally, in line with Ireland's tradition of partnership policy making, the NCCA has made efforts to co-ordinate with the structures already in place for education policy advice, representation and consultation. Representative institutions – including parent associations, school management bodies, the National Association for Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD), teacher and student unions – were invited to participate in the different national events and in consultations (NCCA, 2018^[6]).

Observations and issues

Overall remarks

The NCCA's tailored approach to engage stakeholders in the senior cycle review is a strong asset for the potential development of a revised senior cycle. The NCCA succeeded in designing and carrying out an inclusive review process to provide a range of perspectives that can enrich senior cycle over the longer term. School-level stakeholders had a central position in the review, but the wider education community was also included. The NCCA co-ordinates the review in coherence with the structures already in place for education policy advice, representation and consultation, in line with Ireland's tradition of partnership policy making. The Council also conducted the review in a flexible manner, to respond to stakeholders' feedback. This could lead to strengthening public trust in education policy making. Leading a stakeholder engagement initiative is no easy task, and the NCCA and the senior cycle community should be acknowledged for these successes. It should finally be noted that the review process has gathered concrete results, as it, for instance, confirmed a widespread agreement on the need for change in senior cycle education.

Some issues remain that, when tackled, will significantly enrich the discussions about the potential of senior cycle and reinforce the impact of stakeholders' engagement. During interviews with the OECD team, a

range of issues were raised, that also appeared during the discussions. First, there is ambivalence in the support that some stakeholders manifest for change, which jeopardises the chance to settle some of the widely recognised issues in senior cycle. Even when convinced of the need for change in senior cycle education, stakeholders tend to disagree on the nature and scope of the change, which makes finding common solutions considerably more challenging. The OECD team also identified key players who were not as involved as expected considering how important they would be if senior cycle is to evolve. Finally, some stakeholders interviewed by the OECD team reiterated the concern that the NCCA's review might fail to translate their propositions into a concrete policy. The remainder of this chapter elaborates on these four issues.

Issues to consider

An ambivalent support for change might delay the review

There is ambivalence in the support that some stakeholders manifest for change in senior cycle. For instance, those who have gone through senior cycle education acknowledge its faults. Especially, most criticise the way preparation for the Leaving Certificate tends to shape the two years of upper secondary education. However, the same stakeholders also consider the Leaving Certificate is a rite of passage to be proud of. Similarly, students, teachers and parents tend to claim that presenting more than five subjects for the Leaving Certificate is challenging and too stressful, especially since all the exams are taken within a short period of time. Also, many stakeholders widely share the position that studying a larger number of subjects (i.e. more than five) is preferable than studying fewer in senior cycle.

Most of the individuals interviewed by the OECD team reported a strong aversion to risk in Ireland. The current senior cycle is therefore attractive because it is familiar and considered successful to the extent that it sorts most senior cycle leavers into higher or further education on a “fair” basis (qualifier used by stakeholders in both NCCA discussion and interviews with the OECD). As a result, stakeholders are undecided between their desire to solve the current challenges of senior cycle education and their fear of tackling unfamiliar issues. It would be important to clarify why the review is needed, and what would be the benefits of a potential change.

Generating consensus around specific policy changes or adjustments and getting support is always a difficult task, but not impossible. For example, in Denmark there was agreement on the need to work on the establishment of an evaluation culture of the system despite its multiple challenges. To that end, key interest groups got together to create the Council for Evaluation and Quality Development of Primary and Lower Secondary Education as the most prominent space to discuss and assess policies. This was the result of collaboration between municipalities (local government), teachers (unions included), school leaders (also with its own union), students, parents, researchers, and associations representing other stakeholders (Schleicher, 2011^[9]).

Lack of agreement on priorities and on possible solutions could hinder solving the issues identified

Even when convinced of the need for change in senior cycle education, stakeholders tend to disagree on the nature and scope of the change, which makes finding common solutions considerably more challenging. For instance, students, teachers and principals appear to agree that the high-stakes Leaving Certificate encourages drilling to the test rather than engaging in deep learning. The interviews of the OECD team with higher and further education institutions confirm the issue, suggesting that many Leaving Certificate graduates lack higher-order thinking skills. Yet a visible part of public opinion still sees the Leaving Certificate as the best possible alternative to transition from senior cycle to third level education, because it consists of the same external assessment for all students.

Among those who agree that senior cycle should change, some suggest that the exams could be split between years 5 and 6; others that the assessment technology itself should change to accommodate the various ways different students have to learn; others argue that higher and further education institutions should first change their selection processes. These multiple propositions and their implications are worth considering and discussing for the NCCA and the rest of the senior cycle community.

Insufficient involvement from some key players could limit the scope of the review

Inclusive and participatory stakeholder engagement is key for policy making and especially for implementation to succeed, not least because a process that is well designed and carried out can build trust among stakeholders (Schleicher, 2018^[8]). The OECD identified actors who were not as involved as expected considering how important they are for senior cycle.

While senior cycle and the Leaving Certificate are, in fact, focused on entry to higher education, it appeared that universities, colleges, institutes of technology and other post-secondary institutions were not strongly engaged in the discussions (although some higher education representatives were present during the national seminars). During their meeting with the OECD team, representatives of the higher and further education sectors admitted their institutions could be more involved. Their greater level of involvement could help discussions to move forward and reach specific proposals. For example, if admissions criteria for universities or institutes of technology changed (as a proposal to facilitate reform in senior cycle), then there would be more clarity in terms of the specific direction senior cycle education might take.

More attention should also be paid to the experience of the students who have already been through senior cycle and the Leaving Certificate assessment, in addition to the junior and senior students currently involved. Especially, the views of the students currently at third level and of students or professionals who did not perform well in the Leaving Certificate, could contribute to widening the perspective. Dublin City University faculty have conducted an exploratory study (under peer review at the time of writing) of first-year university students' views on what they learnt in senior cycle (O'Leary and Scully, 2018^[10]).

Although some employers' associations are present in the review (such as IBEC Irish Business), the participation of other major employers (such as administrations and companies) should be encouraged. Major employers could both benefit from a revised senior cycle and can contribute more to improve some specific aspects. Some stakeholders wonder how senior cycle could better help students develop practical skills, cater to a wider spectrum of learning needs and offer an attractive range of alternative pathways in education. These considerations follow the expectation that most stakeholders have that education should help students navigate the job market, for which companies should be key allies.

Making sure that all the relevant stakeholders are on board for both discussion and agreement, is an essential investment that pays off in the long run, or can erode policy efforts if not considered. For example, in the city of Hamburg (Germany), policy makers agreed on a school reform that would reduce stratification in the school system - a policy aiming at moderating the negative impact of stratification on student learning. The policy could have provided better and more equitable opportunities for all students. However, parents' associations were not sufficiently involved in the discussion of the merits and advantages of this policy and were never convinced, so the reform was reverted by referendum in 2010 (Schleicher, 2011^[9]).

Concerns about how the review process will translate into policy could limit the involvement of some stakeholders

Some stakeholders interviewed by the OECD team reiterated the concern that the NCCA's review might fail to translate their propositions into concrete policy mechanisms. More specifically, they asked that some guarantee be offered that the views expressed will be considered seriously when the NCCA produces its official advice to the DES. Some stakeholders indicated they expect that challenges faced by school-level agents will be recognised by valuing their input and effort.

In its role as policy advisor to the DES, the NCCA can have a significant influence in the decision-making process. However, the reports and frameworks it produces are considered advice, which the government might choose not to follow. Because of the advisory role of the NCCA, stakeholders might overestimate the final impact of the review process, in which case they need clarification about the extent to which their contributions to the NCCA exercise can influence policy making in the DES.

It is evident that not all the opinions from stakeholders can be taken on board despite their value. Ireland might consider, as future steps, some mechanisms to continue involving stakeholders in the discussion on senior cycle and give them the opportunity to see by themselves the results of this collaboration. One attractive opportunity is to develop collaboration with stakeholders through pilot programmes. In 2015, Portugal started a series of programmes and initiatives to enhance the quality of its students' learning. The "*Project for Autonomy and Curriculum Flexibility*" (PACF) (2017-2018) builds upon this effort and provides volunteer schools with the necessary conditions to manage the curriculum while also integrating practices that promote better learning. The PACF was being implemented in more than 200 schools as a pilot project during the 2017/18 school year. The pilot project enabled teachers to design and experience meaningful in-school professional development. They were also able to implement curricular and pedagogical changes that allowed them to engage with students with diverse needs and backgrounds. Because of this, the PACF has the potential to increase inclusion and equity in schools. Students also benefited directly from the pilot project, because they experienced innovative ways to learn, including with peers, by meeting professionals, learning outside the classroom and making their own choices about what they learnt (OECD, 2018_[11]).

Notes

¹ The literature points to a number of ways in which stakeholder engagement can enhance the policy process and its outcomes. However, there is a limit to the availability and the relevance of evidence of the exact effects of stakeholder engagement on implementation effectiveness. This chapter therefore builds on the literature on stakeholder engagement in policy-making, on comparative case studies, and on qualitative evidence collected from interviews conducted in Ireland with stakeholders throughout the project.

² For more details on the process and on the questionnaires proposed to each stakeholder group, see Smyth, Banks and McCoy (2018_[12]).

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4 A conducive context for the review of senior cycle

It is important to recognise that contextual factors play a major role in the implementation of a policy: the institutional settings; other relevant policies; capacity, societal trends and shocks might affect how the policy is implemented. For the senior cycle review in Ireland, a range of contextual factors needs to be taken into consideration. The combination of centralised policy with autonomy that Irish schools have in some key domains may influence any potential senior cycle change. Furthermore, it would be important to align the review and (potential) evolution of senior cycle with other relevant policies such as assessment and professional development for teachers.

Why is context important for the review of senior cycle?

Understanding the context in which a policy is implemented is as important as having an adequate policy design and inclusive stakeholder engagement. An effective implementation process needs to recognise the role and potential impact of contextual factors. According to the OECD framework (Figure 1.2), three major contextual factors should receive special attention: the institutional settings of the education policy; the interaction and coherence with other policies (inside and outside of the education policy domain); and the impact of more general societal trends and shocks on the implementation process.

It is important that policy implementation is aligned with the governance structure of the education system. In highly centralised systems, for example, a policy that assumes a high level of autonomy for schools to implement reforms can face challenges if there is no investment in their capacity and resources to take up the reform. In addition, the implementation process needs to recognise the interactions with other policies. There is otherwise a risk of unintended consequences or simply limited policy impact. For example, an excellent curriculum reform design cannot be implemented without supporting teachers and schools in this task. These conditions might include the alignment of professional development for teachers to the content and aspirations of the changes in the curriculum, the adaptation of assessment methods to the learning outcomes expected from the changes in the curriculum, or to support schools with the financial, physical and human resources needed for the practice of changes in the curriculum. In addition, external trends and context might have a significant impact on implementation. Education policies (like any other ones) do not happen in a social vacuum, and external factors such as the economic environment and the social momentum might shape the process significantly. For example, an economic downturn might restrict the resources needed for implementation in the same way that an election or an adverse social momentum might erode the support for a given policy. Societal trends are exogenous factors that need to be acknowledged when thinking about implementation strategies.

In Ireland, a range of contextual factors can be considered: in terms of the institutional settings, Ireland is a centralised system that grants a high level of autonomy to its schools, which have high responsibilities in curriculum and programme setting and delivery. In some key aspects, this combination has been named as “central with schools” by the OECD (see below). In terms of policy interactions, at least two major policies should be considered for a successful review: student assessment and professional development for teachers. In terms of the societal trends and shocks, Ireland faces a mixed scenario. The economic recovery offers a landscape of economic stability that should impact positively on people’s perceptions about their own wealth and employment opportunities, but the negative consequences of Brexit for the country are still unknown and this uncertainty is a source of considerable concern among citizens.

This chapter explains how these three major contextual factors operate in Ireland and what are the main observations and issues that require special attention.

Key contextual factors in Ireland

Governance: a centralised education system with school autonomy

The institutional setting comprises the formal and informal social arrangements that regulate the implementation process in a given education system. These can be considered as fairly stable parameters (Jenkins-Smith, 2014^[1]) and have an impact on the speed and extent to which a policy gets implemented, and drive daily activities at the local school level (Viennet and Pont, 2017^[2]). The institutional structures and governance arrangements of the decision-making and implementation levels have influence on the way education policies may be implemented (Fullan, 2015^[3]).

The governance model “refers to the dynamic process involved in the implementation and monitoring as well as decision-making in a system” (Burns, Köster and Fuster, 2016^[4]). The OECD (OECD, 2015^[5]) has distinguished five types of education governance arrangements summarised in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1. Five types of governance arrangements

Central	A central ministry of education defines, guides and delivers policy.
Central with local	A central ministry of education guides the education system, and municipalities or municipal level authorities deliver education.
Central with schools	A central ministry guides the education system, but a decentralised administration has relatively high levels of autonomy at school level.
Shared central in agreement with regional	A relatively decentralised system, in which the central government designs the legal framework and regulating principles, objectives and content while regional governments deliver education with different degrees of autonomy and with the support of co-ordinating institutions.
Decentralised	Different decentralised institutions support policy making, bringing together regional education institutions or ministries.

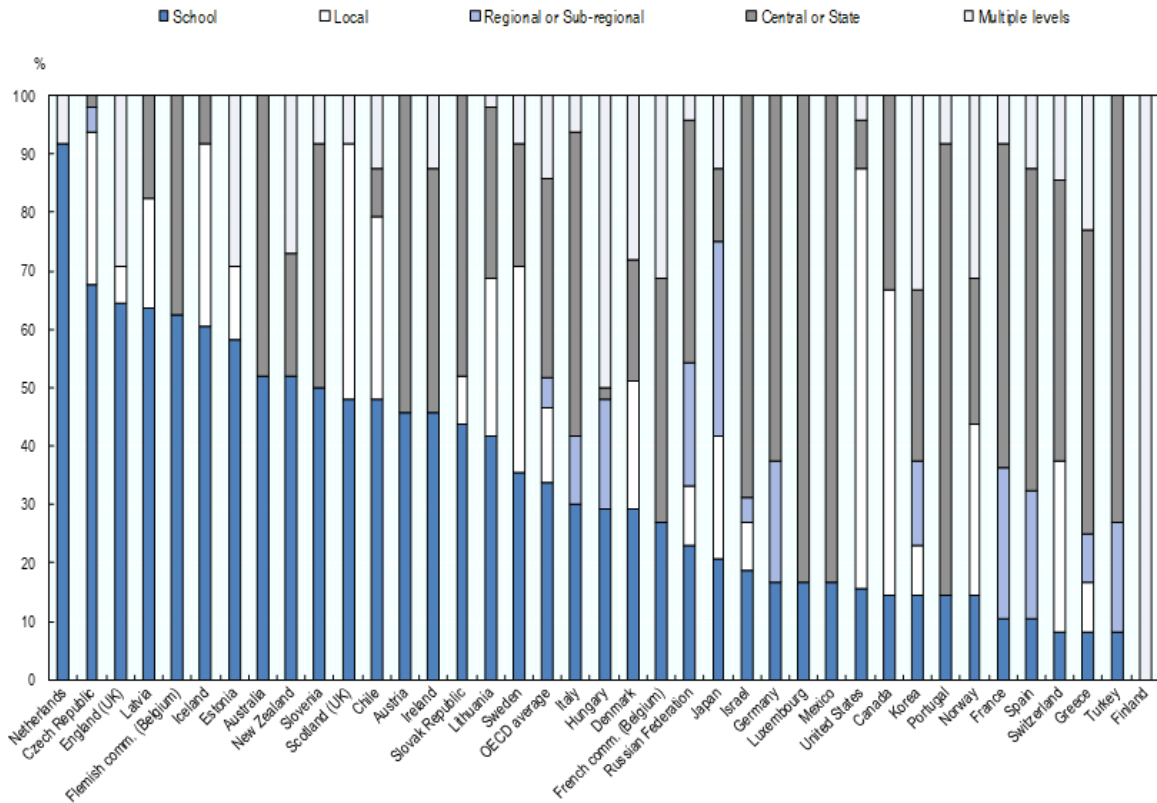
Source: OECD (2015^[5])

According to this typology, Ireland’s system belongs to the category of “Central with schools”, as it is a system in which the Department for Education and Skills has a steering role in this policy area but schools might exercise a relatively high level of autonomy in key aspects, such as teacher recruitment or admissions policy. In Ireland, administration of the education system is mostly centralised, to the extent that the Department for Education and Skills either makes the decisions or provides frameworks and guidelines that define decision-making at school level. Overall responsibility for education lies with the Minister for Education and Skills who is responsible before the National Parliament. In practice, the Department of Education and Skills administrates education. The Secretary General of the Department manages the Department, implementing and monitoring policy, delivering outputs, and providing advice to the Minister and the Government.

Secondary schools in Ireland fall under the responsibility of the State, but they are owned by a trustee and managed by a board of management. Private organisations play a key role in the provision of education: trustees of voluntary secondary schools include bishops, religious orders, boards of Governors, education trust companies and private individuals (Gleeson, 2010^[6]). Almost all primary and post-primary schools receive significant state-funding, but some of them are owned and managed by non-governmental organisations.

While the education system is centralised, many decisions are made at school level, in accordance with frameworks and guidelines provided centrally. According to OECD data, in public lower secondary education, schools make most of the decisions (almost 46%), followed by the central government (42%). The schools and the central government make decisions jointly in the remaining 12% of the cases (Figure 4.1). For example, the recruitment of teachers, the admissions policy of the school, the second-level subjects and programmes offered, the budgetary priorities for the school within the centrally allocated grant etc. are all determined at the school level (OECD, 2018^[7]).

Figure 4.1. Percentage of decisions made at each level of government in public lower secondary education (2017)



Source: OECD (2018^[7]) Education at a Glance 2018: OECD Indicators, OECD Publishing, Paris.

StatLink  <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934118238>

In terms of decisions about curriculum issues, according to OECD data, Irish schools make 17% of the decisions against 33% that are made at central level. The remaining decisions involve multiple participants. For instance, revisions to content of programmes of study or new subjects are subject to approval at Ministerial level following significant stakeholder engagement. In addition, the programmes of study offered in an individual school are contingent on factors such as the number of teachers allocated to the school which in turn is determined centrally by factors such as budget and teacher-pupil ratio. Factors such as school ethos, parents' perspective and the type of school (e.g. rural) may also influence the range of subjects offered.

Overall school curricula are set centrally, including some compulsory subjects. However, schools have a degree of flexibility in relation to the range of subjects that are taught in accordance with the context of the school, its resources, and the needs of the students (OECD, 2018^[7]). While this may support responding to local needs, these factors together also indicate that the socio-economic background of each school might have a considerable impact on the way changes in senior cycle can be implemented more generally and on the range of subjects that can be offered more particularly.

Articulation with other policies

Education policies may be introduced at any point in time without consideration to other policies already in place, leading to lack of coherence or misalignment (Viennet and Pont, 2017^[2]). During the review of senior cycle, it is essential that two complementary policies are also considered: evaluation and assessment practices (OECD, 2013^[8]), and teacher education and further professional development (OECD, 2018^[9]). Failing to consider these policies concomitantly could undermine the review of senior cycle, as teachers would need acknowledgement of support to teach the new curriculum and schools would need to have alignment between senior cycle curriculum and student assessment practices.

Student assessment

Assessment is a process that helps focus on what matters most in education systems: the learning outcomes of each student. Student assessment is essential to measure the learning progress of individual students and inform further steps in teaching and learning, as well as to share information with relevant stakeholders to support decision-making at classroom, school and system level. More specifically, the literature distinguishes between formative assessments, aimed to identify aspects of learning to shape subsequent learning; and summative assessments, aimed to summarise learning that has occurred to either record, mark or certify achievements (OECD, 2013^[8]).

Student assessment in senior cycle in Ireland includes both summative and formative approaches, and teachers are encouraged to use an array of assessment methods. The State Examination Commission (SEC) administers the main external assessment: the Leaving Certificate examination. Internal methods of assessment include: mock examinations and end-of-term school examinations; classroom tests administered at the end of topics or segments of the syllabus to assess students' knowledge and mastery of particular skills; informal observation by the teacher; evaluation of homework; and informal analysis of students' language and social development. Schools are entitled to define the nature and variety of assessment methods used for each subject, or to follow a similar framework as that used in the final examinations.

In fact, summative assessment for certification purposes has historically dominated in secondary education and especially in senior cycle, due to the influence of the Leaving Certificate examinations. According to OECD data, secondary schools in Ireland use standardised assessments to make decisions on student promotion or retention more than the OECD average (OECD, 2016^[10]). Schools have often been found to prioritise similar methods to those used for State examinations: evidence, and OECD interviews refer that a majority of students' assessment experiences during their senior cycle years replicate the type of tasks used for the final Leaving Certificate (LCE), which are mostly written tasks. The LCVF requires students to take a final exam as well as be assessed on their portfolio coursework completed during their studies. Students who follow the LCA programme accumulate credits for each of their modules over their two years of study, to complement final examinations.

Assessment for certification consists almost exclusively of external assessments carried out by the SEC. It carries out the marking, with written examination components making up the largest portion of LCE grades. Teachers are not required to allocate overall grades to any portion of a student's work for the LCE. For LCA validation, 31% of the credits are awarded internally, 35% are given based on externally assessed tasks, and 34% based on the final, external assessment (NCCA, 2018^[11]). The OECD team was further told this central, standardised approach to certification plays an important part in the credibility of the examinations system in Ireland.

As reviewed in Chapter 2, a high-stakes summative assessment, the LCE also plays a crucial role in determining entry to third-level institutions (higher-education institutions and institutes of technology). This merit based "points system", contributes to the high levels of trust in public education and has a strong social and cultural identity in Ireland, and is a symbol of Irish education. The points system was recently

reviewed: the Revised Leaving Certificate grading system and a new point calculation system for entry into third level education was implemented in 2017. It aims to streamline the process to award points, and to encourage students to study subjects at a higher level by awarding points on a broader scale.

Teacher professional development

Literature on education change, especially in the area of curriculum, discusses the role of teachers as the foremost implementers (Hytinen and Gouëdard, 2019^[12]) (Viennet and Pont, 2017^[2]). Their capacity to translate a change in education policy into the reality of education at school level is crucial, as is their professionalism as teachers. The latest results from the OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey TALIS (OECD, 2019^[13]), however, show that across participating countries many teachers express that they lack preparation in key areas in their profession, such as teaching cross-curricular skills or monitoring student development and learning. According to the conversations with the OECD team, some teachers in Ireland reported their concerns about feeling insufficiently prepared and supported to engage with further reform in the system. Although the review of senior cycle in the country is still in the early stages, it is important to consider the implications of potential developments for teachers' and school leaders' requirements in terms of capacity and training.

Post-primary teachers are well qualified in Ireland. Since 2014, teachers should either complete a Professional Masters in Education after their Bachelor's degree, or hold an equivalent qualification. A new integrated professional induction framework (*Droichead*) began in 2016, to provide induction and support to newly qualified teachers. Schools could opt in to the *Droichead* process from that year (2016) but full rollout in post-primary is expected to take place during the period 2020/21. This is positive, considering that in countries participating in TALIS, only 38% of new teachers participate in some kind of formal or informal induction in their first school, despite the positive impact of induction processes on novice teachers' transition to school and perceived efficacy.

Support initiatives for new teachers in Ireland include a website with information on induction processes, and a school support service that undertakes school visits and provides guidance and support on request to newly qualified teachers. The project *Action* aims to support teachers in the "how to" of teaching and learning, focusing on showing rather than telling what curriculum and assessment looks like in Irish classrooms. Resources on the website have been developed with teachers and other practitioners to provide useful ideas and helpful guidance on bringing the curriculum alive for students.

Beyond induction, professional development relies on teachers' willingness as they are not required to engage in any CPD. Box 4.1 introduces different types of professional development opportunities in Ireland.

Box 4.1. Continuing Professional Development for Teachers in Ireland

The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) provides continuing professional development (CPD) for primary and post-primary schools. As the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) administers CPD for junior cycle subjects, the PDST focuses on senior cycle provision along with other programmes provided in the system (Junior Certificate Schools Programme, TY, LCA, LCVP) as well as whole school support for leadership, health and well-being, technology and school self-evaluation. As new subject areas are introduced, the PDST provides CPD in those areas. The CPD usually consists of a day-long course, during school time, delivered by a seconded teacher in an education centre. Teachers' attendance is covered by paid substitution. In addition, the PDST run a number of day-long CPD courses at the beginning of each school year for new teachers of LCA. Many of the PDST courses offered are available after school hours in two-hour workshops in Education Centres. They also provide

resources and links via Scoilnet. There are no fees for attendance at the PDST workshops, they are funded by the Teacher Education Support section of the DES.

The Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) provides support for the implementation of the Junior Cycle Framework in schools. They follow different models of CPD: external workshops, in-school support, school clustering and webinars. They provide CPD to teachers of each of the new specifications as they are implemented. They also provide whole school support for areas such as well-being, assessment, planning and leadership. Most workshops occur during the school day and attendance is covered by paid substitution. There are no fees for attendance at JCT CPD events.

In terms of leadership, school principals in Ireland are responsible to the school board of management for the day-to-day management of the schools, with assistance of at least one deputy principal. Principals must have at least 5 years of professional teaching experience. Training is available at the Centre for School Leadership, which makes 300 places available for a diploma in school leadership and there is support for newly appointed principals through PDST. These supports are not compulsory but are available to all aspiring leaders and newly appointed principals.

Societal trends and shocks

The implementation process is also shaped by external elements that might have an impact on the education policy sector such as political, social, economic or demographic events. In this report, we refer to these events as societal trends and they play a role in shaping education policy and the way they are perceived by society (Viennet and Pont, 2017^[2]). In the case of Ireland, there are two major aspects that should be considered at the moment: on a positive side, the relatively good momentum of the Irish economy and, on a more uncertain side, the risks associated with Brexit. These two elements might play a role in securing stable and inclusive engagement from stakeholders like teacher unions or employers interested in supporting further development of the vocational segment of senior cycle.

Ireland's economy has recovered from the aftermath of the Great Recession displaying the strongest post-crisis output recovery in the OECD

Between 2014 and 2018, Ireland's real GDP has grown by 10.8% yearly on average, whereas the average growth rate over the same period was 2.3% for the OECD (OECD, 2020^[14]) (OECD, 2018^[15]). The unemployment rate has declined rapidly from above 11% in 2014 to 5.7% in 2018, and has stimulated wage growth in some sectors. Unemployment is almost at OECD average in 2018 (5.3%), after remaining above since 2008 (OECD, 2020^[16]). Average wages are comparable with the top tier of OECD countries, and income inequality decreases through the highly redistributive tax and transfer system (OECD, 2020^[17]; OECD, 2020^[18]). Overall, these economic conditions can be favourable for employers to support internships from LCVP and LCA students or can put less pressure on teacher unions to get involved in ambitious curriculum reforms with the extra effort needed from teachers.

Supported by a strong domestic demand, the Irish economy is expected to remain robust if other factors are favourable as well. Uncertainties are significant, however, especially regarding the future of Brexit negotiations. Ireland has considerable commercial and financial ties with the United Kingdom: in 2015, exports to the United Kingdom made up 14% of Ireland's total goods exports, and 17% of its total service exports, while imports from the United Kingdom represented 26% of total goods imports to Ireland. The direction taken by Brexit especially will affect the Irish economy, which could enter into recession if the negotiations were to come to a disorderly conclusion (OECD, 2018^[15]; OECD, 2019^[19]; OECD, 2019^[20]).

Observations and issues

Overall remarks

The current context may be conducive for the review of senior cycle in some areas. There is a high level of trust in the education system in Ireland, so it could be expected that the population could support concerted efforts that are oriented to provide Irish learners with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to deal with the challenges of the 21st century. Also, the consultative approach during phase 2 of the review of senior cycle engaged many stakeholders and empowering their voices in the process. This inclusive review process can be interpreted as a positive signal, with the Irish education system improving and using more varied and inclusive approaches towards consultation and more extensive communication than in previous occasions. The current economic situation, with macroeconomic stability and relatively low unemployment, offers a more conducive terrain for educational professionals to collaborate.

At the same time, any policy implementation effort requires a number of elements to be considered. Because of its central importance in the education system, the review of senior cycle requires the alignment and adjustment of a number of other policies in education. First, there is consensus about the need to learn from the experience of junior cycle reform; most secondary education level institutions in Ireland provide both senior and junior cycle so they need to be ready to use this experience to transition into a smoother adjustment process for the case of senior cycle. Second, while teacher quality appears to be high, the OECD team considered that collaboration among schools can be improved in areas like sharing resources, staff and learning practices so this collaboration might contribute to make the collective reflection on potential changes in senior cycle more inclusive and representative of their collective interests and reality. Third, providing school leaders and teachers with better support and training to reach higher levels of professionalisation in relation to any potential change seems to be also an important concern in the system among stakeholders. Fourth, evidence shows that the assessment approaches have considerable impact on the whole senior cycle so the assessment approach requires to be revised in light of potential changes. Fifth, it would be important to put equity in a more prominent place in the discussion given the concerns reported by schools in terms of the provision of different areas of senior cycle (e.g. Transition Year) given financial limitations of some schools. Sixth, whatever adjustment in policy is decided, both stakeholders and authorities need to factor in a high level of public scrutiny in the process, which calls for a good communication strategy. The remainder of this chapter briefly develops on these six issues.

Issues to consider

It is important to learn from previous reforms

The need to learn from the experience of junior cycle reform was a recurrent idea from stakeholders in phase 2 of the review as well as during meetings with the OECD team. In September 2014, a new framework for junior cycle started to be progressively introduced. As mentioned in Chapter 2 of this report, the alignment of current senior cycle with junior cycle reform is a major concern for teachers, students and parents. For the school year 2018/19 the full reform of the junior cycle was rolled out. In the same way that the lessons learnt from the reform of junior cycle can be an asset for the review of senior cycle, the difficulties experienced in the former might also have a negative effect on the latter.

The following argument was presented by some stakeholders when opposing an immediate reform in senior cycle: that there should be reasonable certainty that any senior cycle revision would avoid the shortcomings and pitfalls that occurred in junior cycle reform. This point was especially prominent in the opinion of both students and teachers at some of the tables of the national seminars attended by the OECD team. In this regard, the experience from the reform of the junior cycle should be taken into account for the review of senior cycle.

As the junior cycle reform is being implemented and discussions about senior cycle continue, Ireland could benefit from gathering information and learning from the junior cycle reform process to inform discussions about senior cycle. Ireland has already built on its experience with junior cycle reform to inform the current review of senior cycle, but a more rigorous evaluation of junior cycle reform was suggested and could be beneficial. It is estimated that only 1 in 10 of education policy reforms is actually subjected to evaluation in OECD countries (Schleicher, 2011^[21]). Very often, evaluations of the whole system or subsystem are challenging given the lack of resources, support, time or other factors, so alternative options can be explored. Although a full evaluation report might only be available in a number of years, getting rigorous and continuous information from monitoring the implementation of the junior cycle reform could indeed benefit developments in senior cycle. In New Zealand, for example, the implementation of the curriculum in English medium schools was monitored by the Education Review Office using samples of schools; this information was in turn complemented by survey data, other government reports and results from national and international assessments (Schleicher, 2011^[21]).

There is a perceived need to enhance collaboration across the system

Collaboration between schools could improve within senior cycle. According to the school visits of the OECD team and meetings with stakeholders, insufficient collaboration in some areas among secondary schools could be one of the most concerning consequences of a system driven by the points to be obtained in the Leaving Certificate. In the media, the success of individual schools is often measured by the proportion of their graduates admitted into higher education. Partly because of this model, secondary schools might hardly collaborate with each other in terms of sharing good practices, teaching resources and infrastructure. In that sense, Ireland's secondary schools are missing the opportunity of getting the benefits of collaboration with their peers. Box 4.2 below, outlines the general benefits of school networks for teacher support, professional development and innovation in OECD countries.

Box 4.2. School networks are a vital source of teacher support, professional development and innovation practices to be shared

The process of pedagogical innovation entails a process of learning for teachers. They need to be provided with an appropriate system of scaffolding to address several challenges - insecurity, wrong assumptions about innovation, or the weight of professional routines, among others - that hinder their capacity to innovate. Teachers in school networks are continuously in contact with a large community of practice and structures that support their professional development.

Strategic partnerships with universities and rigorous continuous professional development programmes provide teachers with opportunities to learn and reflect with their colleagues, and also to co-ordinate and improve their innovative practices.

Source: Paniagua and Instance (Paniagua and Instance, 2018^[22]).

Considering teacher and school leadership capacity for senior cycle review

During the NCCA review, stakeholders raised a concern to the OECD team that if changes were to occur in Ireland's senior cycle education, some targeted support to teachers and school leaders would be essential. Providing the right support for teachers in preparation and implementation of a policy reform is essential for success (Schleicher, 2018^[23]). As pointed out by Isaacs (2018, p. 10^[24]): "investing in teachers, both in pre-service education and through continuous professional development is universally acknowledged as a positive step"; and this argument is supported by Darling-Hammond (2013^[25]) who indicates that strong education performers such as Finland, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and

Japan, support teachers throughout their careers and invest in their development. This becomes even more important with any curriculum change.

According to discussions in national seminars, interviews and meetings with the OECD team, for most teachers, CPD efforts in Ireland are mainly focused on the implementation of a new specification or syllabus for their subject area. In future steps of the review of senior cycle, it would be essential to: i) assess if supply is aligned with the professional demands that changes in curriculum might require from teachers; and ii) make sure that these programmes can be delivered to all teachers. In particular, the Irish authorities might assess if the Junior Cycle for Teachers initiative (JCT) is having a positive impact and if this model can be replicated or improved for senior cycle. Perhaps recently introduced systems can be used to provide teachers with more support and guidance about the changes that can be implemented.

In addition, there seems to be a need to enhance school leadership in the pedagogical domain. Stakeholders consulted by the OECD team reported that schools in Ireland are having difficulties filling principal positions, reportedly because of perceived low salary incentives and a considerable workload. School leaders face many and diverse demands which require considerable administrative, managerial and pedagogical skills and competencies. They are asked to develop a vision, inspire, motivate and develop their staff; to be experts in the most recent teaching, learning and assessment practices; and human resource managers who are able to provide feedback to staff. Changes to a level of education or to a curriculum require their capacity to engage the school with the change effectively. In Ireland, only half of principals have received specialised training before taking up their post. This reinforces the idea, expressed to the OECD team at different meetings, that continuing professional development (CPD) and support for teachers and school principals can be improved in future stages of the senior cycle review.

At the moment, CPD for education professionals seems generally fragmented and dispersed across the country (as shown by a relatively long list of providers and related initiatives). Ireland might consider enhancing CPD in the context of future senior cycle developments. Box 4.3 presents three different types of professional development activities for teachers in the OECD.

Box 4.3. Professional development for teachers

Professional development activities contribute to develop capacity, new skills, and can facilitate the implementation of changes at the school level. For example, the introduction of new curricula require teachers to develop new skills and competencies. In general, three types of professional development activities for teachers can be identified:

- i) **Task-oriented professional development** aims to prepare staff for new functions. This kind of professional development, which may include courses and self-study, among others, is often taken by individuals or small groups of teachers.
- ii) **School-based professional development** serves the aim of school development and aims to respond to school needs. It often involves groups of teachers from the same school working jointly on a problem or developing a programme.
- iii) **Individual professional development** is chosen by individual participants for professional enrichment and further education. Such activities are often taken outside the teacher's school, either on an individual basis or with teachers from other schools. In some countries, personal professional development activities are closely linked to the outcomes of teacher appraisal.

Investing in teacher professionalism may also contribute to teachers' satisfaction. Analysis of the 2013 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) revealed that overall levels of teacher professionalism (conceptualised as a composite measure of teachers' knowledge base, autonomy, and peer networks) are positively associated with teachers' perceived status, satisfaction with the profession and the school environment, and perceived self-efficacy.

These three types of professional development activities exist simultaneously, but their relative importance has changed over the years. An OECD comparative study of teacher policies noted school-based professional development activities involving the entire staff or significant groups of teachers are becoming more common, while teacher-initiated personal professional development probably less so, at least in terms of programmes supported through public funds.

Source: OECD (2016^[10]).

Student assessment in senior cycle

According to OECD data, secondary schools in Ireland use standardised assessments to make decisions on student promotion or retention to a higher degree than the OECD average (OECD, 2018^[26]). Adjustments to the student assessment framework might be needed if the senior cycle review is to result in a shift in the development of skills and competencies of students. Currently, schools seem to prioritise assessment methods that replicate the final examinations. Considering the impact of the Leaving Certificate examinations on internal forms of assessment, adjustments would need to consider the balance between formative, summative, internal and external forms of assessments. If the curriculum of the senior cycle is to be reformed and non-cognitive skills receive more attention, there will be a greater need for varied methods and assessment tasks to gauge student progress.

The OECD considers that formative assessment should be used as a support for learning in addition to summative assessment. While summative assessment and reporting are important at key stages of education, it is the daily engagement of teachers and students with assessment information that will lead to sustainable improvements in teaching and learning. Both types of assessments should be well embedded in a broader assessment framework.

While most OECD countries have promoted the use of formative assessment, often there is little information available regarding its effective and systematic implementation across schools. There are tensions between formative and summative assessment that need to be recognised and addressed: pressures for summative scores may undermine effective formative assessment practices in the classroom; assessment systems that are useful for formative purposes may lose their credibility if high stakes are attached to them. Professional learning in assessment and concrete support for teachers and schools can support and rebalance some of the tensions.

Ireland and its teachers have acknowledged for quite some time the benefits of formative assessment for their students' learning outcomes, attitude and motivations in secondary education. Some stakeholders expressed their interest to start a discussion about whether the introduction of classroom-based assessments (CBAs) can be positive for students learning or not. Nevertheless, the stakes of final examinations for students' career paths significantly raise the costs for schools and teachers to spend time developing and grading assessments that might not be considered by themselves, students or parents as the most direct preparation for success in the final exams, as several confided to the OECD team. The successful implementation of any change in student assessment in senior cycle faces considerable challenges, given the prevailing influence of the Leaving Certificate Examination.

The possibility to introduce complementary assessments for certification or shifts in the way they are delivered in junior and senior cycles while safeguarding the quality of SEC examinations is an ongoing

topic for debate. For instance, some stakeholders suggested during the NCCA review and to the OECD team that Leaving Certificate subject examinations be spread out rather than clustered at the end of one year. Counter arguments included the cost of organising several national sessions and the stress it would duplicate in students, who could be seen as effectively sitting multiple examination sessions rather than preparing all year for one.

In general, the current examination system retains credibility because of the highly trusted efficiency, objectivity and transparency of its administration processes and the expertise that teachers have accumulated in preparing students for state examinations. A key issue to take into account is that teachers in Ireland generally reported to the OECD and during the review that they preferred not to be involved in their own students' assessment for certification at least while there is no specific proposal about which role they should be playing; in addition this might significantly add to their workload. If, during phase 3 of the senior cycle review, there is consensus about broadening the cycle for students to acquire knowledge and competencies, then adjustments in the overall student assessment approach might be needed.

Equity should play a more prominent role in the discussion agenda

Some schools might have financial difficulties to implement certain changes intended in a reform; there are already reported differences in terms of the provision of some programmes depending on the socio-economic background of some schools in Ireland¹. Funding allocation depends on the student-to-teacher ratio, which encourages competition between schools to grow their student base – as reported during the OECD team visits plus some schools are able to charge fees. This situation risks widening the gap between schools in terms of the range of subjects offered. For example, expanding the range of subjects on offer or establishing modules rather than year-long courses in the programmes might require hiring more teachers, or technical (often expensive) equipment might be needed, putting some schools in a more privileged position than others. Another visible aspect of the equity challenge is illustrated by the provision of the TY in schools: while 89% of the schools offer the option and approximately 72% of the students take it, stakeholders interviewed by the OECD team reveal that smaller schools (and those with a higher proportion of socio-economically disadvantaged students) are less likely to offer this programme in full.

There is public pressure and attention on policy development

There is enormous public pressure on any education policy development in Ireland. Given the importance of senior cycle, as the last cycle before finalising secondary or as a bridge into tertiary education, even minimal adjustments might generate heated debate. What happens around senior cycle, especially in relation to the final assessment, is followed and scrutinised by Irish media intensively. At the same time, despite the levels of stress and anxiety generated for students and their families, the Irish public seems confident in the fairness and transparency of this process. In short, any adjustment or reform in the area should factor in a considerable level of attention from the media and the public.

Notes

¹ At the same time, equity and provision are also impacted by other dimensions such as school size, gender provision and geographical location.

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5

A coherent approach to the next stages of the review of senior cycle

This chapter presents a set of reflections to build a coherent strategy for the next stages of the review of senior cycle in Ireland. These reflections bring together the analysis from the previous chapters and are organised around the dimensions of the OECD framework for education policy implementation: policy design, stakeholder engagement and policy context. The OECD suggests the third phase of the review of senior cycle could be organised around the following: i) dissemination of the main conclusions of phase 2; ii) identification of the main strengths and challenges identified in phase 2; and iii) discussion of the main priorities and potential policy lines to tackle the issues identified.

Furthermore, it provides suggestions which can contribute to shape the next steps of the review: refining the vision, objectives and tools of senior cycle; their coherence with the broader policy context; clarifying roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders; data and information needed for decision-making; communication and engagement plan; resources for implementation; timing and data.

Why is establishing the next steps from the review of senior cycle important?

In a current effort to explore ways to adapt and improve in a rapidly changing world, Ireland embarked on a review of its senior cycle (upper secondary education). This report aims to take stock of Ireland's senior cycle review process, provide feedback on progress made and offer recommendations to inform next steps.

Senior cycle review phase 1 included the comparative analysis of upper secondary education in nine jurisdictions to understand this key level of education, in preparing students for employment, developing their adaptability to the future, and ensuring they have the skills to become lifelong learners, and to participate actively in society (O'Donnell, 2018^[1]). Phase 2 has included consultations in schools and a large-scale consultation which has involved a range of education professionals across Ireland through seminars and an online consultation. The review up to this point proved to be a rich source of information on perspectives of senior cycle and led to the engagement of different education stakeholders on the analysis of current strengths, issues and options for the future. The results have been communicated to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), which is leading the review. However, next steps are important to conclude this initial consultation, reach agreements on how to move forward and agree on which specific actions to take.

To be successfully completed, the review needs to meet a number of requirements. It needs clarity in terms of the vision to be achieved and its related objectives as well as how to carry it forward; it needs information about how stakeholders' contributions will be integrated and how participants will be accountable in this process; it needs to indicate how other policies should be aligned if changes or evolutions of senior cycle are adopted; and clear communication on content and timing to guarantee engagement, well co-ordinated efforts and identification of challenges in a timely fashion. In addition, there should be enough resources available and adequate capacity to undertake the review (Viennet and Pont, 2017^[2]).

The OECD team suggests that the next stage should reach a conclusion on the senior cycle review. It should be informed by a discussion about the vision and purpose for the review of senior cycle education in Ireland, with recognition of both its strengths and challenges and clarity about the reasons for change and the goals to be pursued. It should continue with the effort to engage stakeholders in an inclusive approach, discussing with all (or at least most) relevant players in the system, and giving consideration to their opinions when developing the corresponding senior cycle change or adjustment. It should consider the complementary policies that are vital to any change, especially student assessment approaches, education professionals' capacity building and school networks. With this information, the review could conclude with a clear and actionable vision for developing senior cycle.

In the following pages, this chapter presents the more detailed reflections of the OECD team for the next stages of the review of senior cycle in Ireland.

Implementing the senior cycle review: suggestions for next steps

To move forward in the review of senior cycle, Ireland can take stock of and build on the lessons learnt and information collected during phase 2 of the review process. The following sections offer suggestions on how to address the issues identified in terms of the design, the engagement of stakeholders, and the context of senior cycle in a coherent and strategic way. Each section focuses on key elements which can contribute to shape the next steps of the review from a coherent perspective: refining the vision, objectives and tools of senior cycle; their coherence with the broader policy context; clarifying roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders; data and information needed for decision-making; communication and engagement plan; resources for implementation; timing and data.

Refining the vision for senior cycle and reviewing its structure accordingly

For implementation purposes, the vision of a policy needs to be refined in operational objectives and tools (Viennet and Pont, 2017^[21]). As reported during phase 2 of the review process and the meetings of the OECD team in Ireland, the purpose of the review of senior cycle is to assess the extent to which the current form of senior cycle is a good fit for the needs and challenges an Irish learner is facing in the 21st century. More concretely, as discussed in Chapter 3, the education community in Ireland is interested to know if senior cycle programmes fulfil the aspirations Ireland has for its students. In general, findings from the review process (until phase 2) point towards a perception that the purpose of senior cycle seems narrow for Ireland's future aspirations, and that the focus of senior cycle to enter tertiary education excessively drives the dynamics of upper secondary education in the country (with the exception of the TY and LCA programmes). In turn, senior cycle education seems to be anchored to the premises of the “points system”.

In this regard, it seems that the general purpose of the process is to broaden what is perceived to be a rigid and narrow upper secondary education subsystem to one that is more open and flexible. Another major conclusion of the discussion of phase 2 (confirmed by the interviews and visits of the OECD team) is about the need to enhance the diversity of pathways to cater for the needs of all students.

Immediate challenges

Further discussion of the review conclusions in phase 3 will need to take into account the main challenges to putting these changes into effect. First, the education community in Ireland should be conscious that the current vision and objectives of senior cycle are rooted in a strong institutional tradition that permeates multiple generations in Ireland. The system and its logic is well-known across Ireland and, despite its rigidity, it also offers trust and certainty to society. As a result of this situation, any discussion taking place in phase 3 about refining the vision and objectives of senior cycle, should consider how trust and certainty should be kept in the system.

Second, diversifying pathways, in particular the vocational stream, a proposition identified by phase 2 of the review and confirmed by OECD meetings and interviews, will require strong commitment from stakeholders outside the education sector. More concretely, some of the missing but essential elements of strong vocational education options (such as workplace learning) cannot be possible without precise instruments to link vocational programmes with employers.

Actions to consider in phase 3

To tackle the concerns identified, discussions during phase 3 of the review process should aim to define collaboratively a clear **vision** and specific **objectives** of senior cycle in Ireland, and defining whether or how the **current structure** of senior cycle can evolve to realise this vision. More concretely:

- Identify, clarify and agree as much as possible with key stakeholders the implications of “equipping students with the proper set of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to face the challenges of the 21st century” and “positioning Ireland as one of the best (if not the best) education system in Europe” as stated in the ‘*Action Plan for Education 2016-2019*’.
- Define how the current structure of senior cycle should evolve to guarantee the flexibility and permeability needed to ensure that the system, although diversified to cater for the needs and preferences of different learners, remains well integrated.
- Define how the current vocational stream should evolve to respond better to the needs of its students and to have a better link with the world of work.

Reviewing complementary policies that need to be aligned in senior cycle

As indicated in Box 5.1, policy alignment is essential in senior cycle. Findings from phase 2 of the review process, OECD evidence, and meetings and interviews with stakeholders in Ireland indicate that, in addition to the structure and flexibility of the programmes in senior cycle, three other areas or policies stand out as the most relevant ones shaping the future of any senior cycle review in the country: the assessment approach; continuing professional development for teachers; support and guidance for schools, students and teachers. These three were systematically identified by stakeholders (students, teachers and parents) during school-based reviews, national seminars, interviews and meetings of the OECD team and relevant documentation and literature.

Immediate challenges

Further discussion of these policies during phase 3 of the review process will need to take into account their complexity and the challenges to align them with the review. The current assessment system, embodied by the Leaving Certificate assessment at the end of senior cycle that feeds into the “points system” that determines entry into higher education, is an element deeply rooted in Irish society. It is perceived as transparent and (most of the time) fair. Adjusting the assessment would require not just to identify a good technical alternative but also one that satisfies the level of trust and transparency that Irish society demands.

Enhancing the overall quality and aligning teachers’ and school leaders’ continuous professional development with the ambitions of senior cycle is also strongly highlighted by stakeholders interviewed by the OECD team, prevalent in the reform literature and was a recurrent topic during the discussions in phase 2 of the review. Teachers translate and make sense of education policies in the classroom. Evidence points towards the need for them to continue playing a central role in discussions and design of any adjustment of senior cycle. In addition, any change to the curriculum requires teachers to be supported by targeted continuing professional development. School leaders, authorities and unions could collaborate with teachers to identify their specific needs and how to address them.

Reinforcing information and guidance services is also one of the main concerns raised during phase 2 of the review process and during the interviews and meetings undertaken by the OECD team. This concern seems to be a consequence of the conclusions emanating from the need of senior cycle education in Ireland to evolve towards a more flexible and open structure. If this policy line is eventually followed, students and their families will require information and guidance to navigate through the changes introduced.

Actions to consider in phase 3

To tackle the challenges and concerns identified about complementary policies, discussions during the next stage of the review process of senior cycle in Ireland should be aiming at clarifying the options for adjustment of assessment methods, needs for continuing professional development for teachers, and guidance services. More concretely:

- Define if (and how) the assessment approach in senior cycle could be adapted in terms of: a) its periodicity (e.g. how assessments can be better distributed across the two years of the upper secondary education); b) its purpose and shape (i.e. knowledge and competency based assessments, including more formative components); and c) administration (e.g. if it is convenient to explore different combinations of external and classroom assessments).
- Define more precisely what kind of continuing professional development is required to support teachers in the provision of changes in senior cycle and complementary policies and how this support will be run in practice across schools and the whole system.

- Define the kind of information and guidance services required by students and their parents at school and system level so they can navigate more successfully any change in the system. Pay special attention to socio-economic disadvantaged students.

Box 5.1. Align the education system around the mission and vision of balancing knowledge-based and competency-based learning frameworks

According to OECD work focused on teaching, it is crucial to link curriculum design, professional development opportunities for teachers, and classroom practices, to create an education system that balances both knowledge- and competence-based learning and teaching. Knowledge-based learning frameworks have largely determined teaching and learning practices in the classrooms. Also, high-level policy discussions about the design of competency-based learning frameworks do not always trickle down to the classroom. Instead of following a top-down approach, where policy makers in isolation determine the approach that fits the learning framework, governments and education systems should follow a bottom-up approach that involves teachers and schools, and builds on their insights in policy making.

Source: OECD (2018^[3]), Teaching for the Future: Effective Classroom Practices To Transform Education, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264293243-en>.

Clarifying roles and responsibilities

A policy needs clarity and visibility regarding who is supposed to implement what, and who is responsible in case a given step of the implementation goes wrong (Viennet and Pont, 2017^[2]). The distribution of tasks and responsibilities is determined first by the institutional structure in place in a given education system. The implementation strategy, therefore, should identify key players and stakeholders and their corresponding responsibilities. The results of the discussions in phase 2 and the evidence collected through meetings and interviews with the OECD team highlight that the review of senior cycle requires the perspectives of all relevant stakeholders and institutions to continue to be engaged in phase 3. More concretely, institutions directly associated with the three areas/aspects identified in the previous section (assessment, continuing professional development, and guidance services) should be encouraged to play a more active role in the discussions of phase 3 and commit themselves to provide specific solutions and support in their related areas. Many of these institutions are part of the board of the NCCA and are already expressing their voices.

Immediate challenges

The review of senior cycle in Ireland is led by the NCCA, as facilitator of the stakeholder discussion. Discussions during phase 2 have offered some general conclusions about the policies that require alignment and co-ordination to improve the chances of being successfully implemented. To move forward, it would make sense to invite the relevant institutions and agents in these policy areas to contribute to the discussion. So it is essential to find the right set of incentives to involve more strongly the participation of entities such as the Central Applications Office or the Teaching Council.

Actions to consider in phase 3

Discussions during phase 3 of the review process of senior cycle in Ireland should be aiming at clarifying the views and contributions of relevant institutions/agents. This can be done with specific invitations to the relevant institutions to present and contribute actively to discussions to the next stages of the review process in their corresponding policy area(s):

- Invite the State Examinations Commission (SEC) and the Central Applications Office (CAO) to express their views and discuss how to adapt their instruments to respond to the need for changes/adjustments of the assessment approach in senior cycle.
- Invite secondary graduates who pursued a variety of paths following their senior cycle education, to widen the perspective on specific strengths and shortcomings of senior cycle and offer suggestions on potential evolutions.
- Invite the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and related institutions to express their views about the impact of their admission criteria on senior cycle and the adjustments needed (as demanded by stakeholders in phase 2).
- Invite teacher unions (ASTI and TUI) and the Teaching Council to express their views in the conclusions of phase 2 of the review of senior cycle and invite them to commit themselves to play a more active role in identifying the support needed for teachers to meaningfully enact changes in the curriculum in the classroom. This initiative could, in turn, help the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) and the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), under the auspices of the Teacher Education Section of the DES, to enhance CPD provision.
- Invite organisations such as the Joint Managerial Body Secretariat of Secondary Schools (JMB), the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS), and the Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD), and the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) to express their views and define their contribution to the enhancement of guidance support services for students and their families.
- Invite more systematically employers' representatives to enrich the reflection about potential developments of senior cycle with their perspective and suggestions.

Designing a communication and engagement plan

The language of a policy may not necessarily be understood by the stakeholders who are expected to implement it (Hill and Hupe, 2009^[4]). A policy must gather political support among actors and across implementation levels if it is to be realised (Datnow, 2005^[5]). With a large number of vocal stakeholders in the education sector, policy designers are encouraged to plan for engaging stakeholders as early as possible in the process of policy making (Schleicher, 2018^[6]) and also to communicate clearly on the goals, objectives and processes required for the policy.

Immediate challenges

An adequate communication plan is also essential to keep stakeholder engagement, and this is particularly relevant for long lasting policy development processes. Even if stakeholders are committed to the exercise, a long review process can exhaust their support and resources for this task. To support long-term engagement, countries might need to explore planning options with short-term or intermediate outcomes to serve as incentives to encourage continuous engagement and this should be properly communicated. In this regard, stakeholders should receive clear indication that all the input contributed is received, discussed and, if appropriate, integrated to the policy making process, so that stakeholders feel their contributions are taken seriously even if they do not form part of the final policy document. At the same time, it is important to remain vigilant to avoid the absence of any key player in the discussion; if this happens, this should be fixed or at least acknowledged so proper actions are taken.

Actions to consider in phase 3

Discussions during phase 3 of the review process of senior cycle in Ireland should also be aiming at establishing the communication strategy to maintain inclusive stakeholder engagement for the next stages of the review process. More concretely:

- Provide clarity about specific results and outcomes for stakeholders from the review of senior cycle specifically for phase 3 and beyond. That is, clarification on the main priorities and specific policy lines for future steps.
- Discuss and receive feedback on the dissemination mechanisms used until phase 3 and identify if any adjustment is needed.
- Identify all the relevant players absent in phases 2 and 3 of the review and discuss how they can be included in future steps.
- Explain the steps that will follow after the finalisation of phase 3 and how stakeholders are expected to stay involved.

Securing resources

The inputs necessary for education policy implementation consist mainly of the funding, technology and knowledge available to the actors, as well as their capacity to use them. The amount, quality and distribution of these resources allocated to implementation determine to a great extent whether and how a policy is implemented (Wurzberg, 2010^[7]). A recurring issue with resources is not only about whether they are available for implementation, or in sufficient quantities, but how they are used, and what for, i.e. what the resource strategy is (Bardach, 2000^[8]).

Immediate challenges

Resourcing was not often mentioned as a limitation during discussions taking place in phase 2 of the review process or during the interviews and meetings with the OECD team. However, this aspect should still be considered as the discussion unfolds. Perhaps resourcing has not played a prominent role in discussions yet because specific priorities or policy lines are still to be decided and it is difficult for stakeholders to estimate the amount of resources needed for their implementation. In that sense, it is again strongly justified that one of the main goals of phase 3 of the review process is to establish, as clearly as possible, what are the main priorities and specific policy lines that should be followed after the finalisation of the review process. This can help clarify the funding or resourcing needed for schools and others in the future.

Actions to consider in phase 3

To identify the resources needed to implement future steps in the review and adjustment of senior cycle, discussions during phase 3 might consider establishing the specific objectives after the finalisation of phase 3 of the review process and which will be the main policy priorities to be followed. More concretely:

- Consider what would be the implications in terms of capacity and resources at school level of changes in senior cycle education, whether current school funding approaches would need to be adjusted, and whether specific resources would be needed to implement the potential changes. This reflection should encompass all schools, with specific attention given to schools with a high proportion of socio-economically disadvantaged students (DEIS).
- Clarify the leadership capacity that is needed, at school level, to lead change and adjustments in senior cycle. Take advantage of the network of schools established for discussions in phase 2 to identify leadership capacity and those cases where support will be needed.
- At system level, make sure that teacher unions and relevant organisations work closely with the DES and NCCA to express their views on capacity building and support for change/evolution and commit themselves to the elaboration of specific policy mechanisms on this matter. This can be done through their participation and membership in the boards of the NCCA.

Clarifying expectations on timing and pace

The timing and pace set for implementation determine to a large extent how the process unfolds. However, timing can be highly sensitive to the resources, willingness and capacity of individual stakeholders to collaborate in a co-ordinated manner during implementation. For the senior cycle community in Ireland, it is important that the timing is chosen carefully to continue with the review process and (potential) implementation, paying attention to the needs of all the relevant stakeholders.

Immediate challenges

International experience points to some lessons in terms of timing and pace of the review process and subsequent steps. Some countries undertake curriculum reforms ad hoc, while others undertake curriculum reviews in cycles, leading to clarity in steps and engagement processes by those involved. Defining the timing and pace in more ad hoc situations requires careful analysis and consideration of actors involved, and political and social context.

In addition, a recurring concern expressed by a group of participants in phase 2 of the review and in conversations with the OECD team was the relationship with the reform experience of junior cycle. More concretely, a group of stakeholders indicated that any discussion and reform of senior cycle should take place only after an assessment of the reform of junior cycle. However, this position is often contested by other stakeholders whose major concern is the potential negative impact of what is perceived as a misalignment between the recently reformed junior cycle and the senior cycle.

Actions to consider in phase 3

To tackle the concerns about the timing and pace of the review of senior cycle identified in phase 2, discussions during phase 3 in Ireland should be aiming at clarifying what is the best timing for the introduction of adjustments in senior cycle and what are the pre-conditions needed. More concretely:

- Discuss and decide the different steps that can be taken to achieve a review of senior cycle and subsequent steps in the mid- and long-term. For example, it should be decided if resources should be mobilised in advance in some specific areas (such as assessment methods, continuing professional development, or guidance services for students and their families) taking into account only the general lines reported by the review process until now, or if resources and related complementary policies should be considered and mobilised only once a specific/detailed curriculum framework is available as reference.

Gathering data and information for decision-making

Data and information constitute valuable implementation instruments that inform decision-making, improve the dialogue with participants and contribute to transparency. Data, and information in general, should serve the purpose of helping out the education community in Ireland to inform and to monitor the development of the review of senior cycle, its results, and further (potential) reform. Otherwise, it is difficult to grasp the lessons learnt and identify challenges to be tackled. At the same time, data and information might support accountability as a basic element in policy implementation, especially when public resources are in place. One of the main conclusions of phase 2 of the review process, which was also confirmed by the OECD team meetings and interviews, is the need to have better information about the impact of the reform of junior cycle to better inform future developments of senior cycle. In this sense, the experience of junior cycle can offer valuable lessons learnt and reference points to calibrate and anticipate the scale and kind of challenges ahead in the (potential) evolution of senior cycle.

Immediate challenges

Despite the need to learn more about other and previous experiences (like the reform of junior cycle) and the need to identify monitoring mechanisms to measure progress and impact, it is essential for phase 3 of the review process to identify which are the specific aspects to be taken into account to guide information and data gathering. Data should also be aligned to the vision expressed in the *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019* and eventual vision for senior cycle refined collectively.

In addition, the senior cycle community could explore specific policy areas from which they can learn from this review process, including information systematically collected and data indicators constructed, if needed. This may include analysing the junior cycle reform and other similar experiences, on adjustments of the assessment approach, on continuing professional development for teachers, and on the enhancing of guidance services for students and their families.

Actions to consider in phase 3

To tackle the concerns identified in phase 2 about the need to have solid information and data for the review process, discussions during phase 3 should be aiming at clarifying the priority areas for lessons learnt in the reform of junior cycle and other relevant experiences as well as on what progress would look like. More concretely:

- Identify the key policy priorities for senior cycle review and determine what is the relevant information and data which can provide the necessary evidence base to support it.
- Discuss and agree on measures which would demonstrate progress with the review process and communicate these to all those involved.

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Annex A. OECD team members

JOSE-LUIS ALVAREZ-GALVAN is project manager and policy analyst in the OECD Implementing Education Policies team. Previously, José-Luis worked as project manager in the OECD National Skills Strategy team where he was responsible for the projects for Mexico and Peru. José-Luis joined the Directorate for Education and Skills to contribute to the analysis of vocational education and training policies, being the main author of the reports for Costa Rica, Egypt, Kazakhstan and Northern Ireland; co-author of the reports for Canada, Denmark and South Africa; and part of the research team for the reports on England and the Netherlands.

José-Luis has more than 15 years of experience in policy analysis, has written two books, published numerous articles and delivered lectures on a wide range of topics in public policy. He holds a bachelor's degree from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), a master's degree from the University of Massachusetts, and a PhD from the London School of Economics (LSE). José-Luis has taught at UNAM, Brunel University (United Kingdom) and LSE.

BEATRIZ PONT is a senior education policy analyst at the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills, with extensive experience in education policy reform internationally. She currently leads the OECD Implementing Education Policies team and recently led a comparative series on education reforms, the Education Policy Outlook. She has specialised in various areas of education policy and reform, including equity and quality in education, school leadership, adult learning and adult skills. She has also worked with individual countries such as Greece, Japan, Mexico, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom (Wales) in their school improvement reform efforts.

Previously, Beatriz was a researcher on education and social policies in the Economic and Social Council of the Government of Spain and also worked for Andersen Consulting (Accenture). She studied Political Science at Pitzer College, Claremont, California, holds a master's degree in International Relations from Columbia University and a PhD from the Complutense University, Madrid. She has been a research fellow at the Institute of Social Sciences (Tokyo University) and at the Laboratory for Interdisciplinary Evaluation of Public Policies (LIEPP, Sciences Po, Paris). She has an honorary doctorate from Sheffield Hallam University.

ROMANE VIENNET is a policy consultant in the OECD Implementing Education Policies team. She holds a bachelor's degree in Political Science and Economics and a master's degree in International Affairs from Sciences Po, Paris. She has worked previously as a social impact analyst in France and as a research assistant in behavioural economics projects with Professor Arnab Basu of the Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management, Cornell University, New York. Her research interests include education policy implementation and change management (especially with respect to public policies).

Annex B. Meetings and interviews conducted by the OECD team

Table A B.1. Visit 1 to Ireland 5-9 November 2018

Date	Activity/Representatives
Monday 5 November	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initial introduction meetings with NCCA senior management team
Tuesday 6 November	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visit to Cork to attend an event of the first cycle of national seminars of the review of senior cycle
Wednesday 7 November	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visit to Dublin to attend an event of the first cycle of national seminars of the review of senior cycle
Thursday 8 November	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School visit 1 School visit 2 Closing meeting with the Steering Group NCCA/DES

Table A B.2. Visit 2 to Ireland 21-25 January 2019

Date	Activity/Representatives
Monday 21 January	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initial meeting with NCCA senior management team Meeting with officials from the Ministry of Education and Skills
Tuesday 22 January	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meeting with academics and experts (ESRI) Meeting with Parents Associations Meeting with the State Examination Commission School visit 3
Wednesday 23 January	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meeting with the Inspectorate Meeting with the Teaching Council Meeting with the Higher Education Authority (HEA) School visit 4
Thursday 24 January	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meeting with Teacher Unions (ASTI) Meeting with Teacher Unions (TUI) Meeting with Education and Training Boards School visit 5
Friday 25 January	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Closing meeting with the Steering Group NCCA/DES

Table A B.3. Visit 3 to Ireland 4-7 February 2019

Date	Activity/Representatives
Monday 4 February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initial meeting with NCCA senior management team
Tuesday 5 February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visit to Limerick to attend an event of the second cycle of national seminars of the review of senior cycle School visit 6
Wednesday 6 February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visit to Athlone to attend an event of the second cycle of national seminars of the review of senior cycle School visit 7
Thursday 7 February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Closing meeting with the Steering Group NCCA/DES

Implementing Education Policies

Education in Ireland

AN OECD ASSESSMENT OF THE SENIOR CYCLE REVIEW

Ireland is undertaking a review of their senior cycle (upper secondary education) led by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). It aims at collecting the views of all relevant stakeholders to identify the strengths and challenges of senior cycle in its current form, and identify priority issues and actions to move forward. As part of OECD's implementing education policies project, an OECD team was invited to support the review of Ireland's senior cycle. The team has carried out the assessment presented here and provided strategic advice based on four analytical aspects: smart policy design, inclusive stakeholder engagement, conducive context and a coherent implementation strategy. Each one of these dimensions matters to ensure that the review of senior cycle can move forward based on evidence and with strong support from stakeholders.

Consult this publication on line at <https://doi.org/10.1787/636bc6c1-en>.

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