

Summary

Innovation & Identity

Ideas for a new Junior Cycle



To support a debate on junior cycle education and on how to bring about change, the NCCA has generated some ideas about what a junior cycle of the future might look like and how we might get from where we are today to where we decide we want to be.

1. What's it all about?

This is a summary of the key points contained in the NCCA discussion paper *Innovation and Identity: Ideas for a new Junior Cycle*. The paper is not a set of proposals about the future of junior cycle. It is a set of ideas about what a junior cycle of the future might look like and about the process of change at junior cycle. The paper is tentative in tone; putting out its ideas for your consideration and reaction. It is non-prescriptive, but we hope highly challenging and stimulating. Have a read, see what you think!

The *identity* of the title refers to a desire to establish just what it is that young people should be learning in junior cycle. For many, the experience of passing through this period of schooling is just that — ‘passing through’— coming from somewhere and headed for somewhere else within the system. Junior cycle is often defined by its relationship to other stages of education. It is seen either as a continuation of primary education or as preparation for senior cycle. In this sense, what is distinctive to and characteristic of junior cycle itself is sometimes unclear. In other words, the identity of junior cycle education can be seen to derive less from the needs of the students at this stage of their lives than from their prior experiences in education, or the expectations of the *next* stage. For the years spent in junior cycle to mean something to students, it really must stand for something on its own merits; it must have its own identity.

Innovation features in the title for at least a couple of reasons. The paper suggests that the changed junior cycle should lead to young people who have the disposition and the capacity to be innovative; who are in tune with the challenges they are facing into at a personal, local and global level; who know about the threats to the future of the planet, about food and water security, and about the movement of peoples in the face of climate disasters but who can become part of a generation of creative problem solvers that can quite literally, ‘save the world’.

To become innovative you need to see others being innovative; if we want young people to be innovative we must change their experiences of learning and of school. And if we want to change school experiences then who better to involve in thinking about that than schools themselves, their teachers and their students? That involvement has to go beyond consultation and discussion into ongoing development. From the outset we are saying that schools must play a central role in shaping the junior cycle of the future.

And this is why we have set out the discussion paper, *Innovation and Identity*, in the way that we have – so that it offers ideas about the *why* of change, *how* junior cycle should change, and suggests a number of PATHWAYS towards change, each of which raises questions for discussion and debate. As you read through this summary you will notice that each of the pathways imagines a school

- making a small change
- changing further
- changing further still.

Remember, the purpose of *Innovation and Identity* and of the consultation website www.ncca.ie/juniorcyclodevelopments is to give you the opportunity to share your thoughts on questions we meet along each of those pathways.

2. Why change?

But the junior cycle isn't in crisis—is it?

Well, at one level, the organisational structure of junior cycle looks solid, secure and 'sound'. Evidence from a number of studies would indicate that most young people are relatively happy and satisfied with their schooling at this level. However, this paper challenges complacent attitudes to junior cycle; the view that nothing is 'broken' and that 'fixing' is not required.

Research conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) for the NCCA over the last number of years provides new insights into the junior cycle experience and the impact of that experience on participation and achievement—including on subsequent achievement in senior cycle and in the Leaving Certificate examination. This research identifies several points of concern within the junior cycle and suggests that the student experience would improve if we managed to address

- the dominating effect of the Junior Certificate examination on teaching and learning practice and on school organisation and structures
- the absence of any significant curriculum flexibility which would allow for engagement with other areas of interest to teachers and students and areas of local interest or need
- a curriculum that is seen as inflexible and overcrowded
- the disengagement of many students at an early stage in the cycle
- the inadequate time available for learners to engage with deeper learning
- the narrow range of assessment activity, both in terms of examinations and in general teaching and learning
- the limited access to a single qualification.

All of these areas of concern have existed for some time but remain a challenge at a system level, both in Ireland and in lower secondary education internationally. With the Junior Certificate now in its 21st year, it is time to take a close look at the learning experience we are offering our young people at this stage of education.

3. How should junior cycle change?

If some things in junior cycle education need to change, how should we go about changing them? Before getting started on what we need to change, we should pay a lot of attention to how change actually happens in schools and in classrooms. In other words, our approach to change at junior cycle should be based on the reality of *how* change happens!

In recent times, the NCCA has been developing its thinking on educational change and you can read more about our perspective in a discussion paper called *Leading and Supporting Change in Schools*, which is available on the NCCA website (www.ncca.ie). That paper is based on our experience of change over the years, particularly recent years when we've been working more directly with schools. It is informing discussions about curriculum change in NCCA and in all our ongoing work with schools in areas like Project Maths and Key Skills. *Innovation and Identity* draws on the ideas in *Leading and Supporting Change in Schools* to suggest some of the things that should characterise change at junior cycle.

In developing junior cycle we should try to combine bottom-up with top-down development in very effective ways! The top-down elements of junior cycle change need to include political support, the setting out of a clear policy framework which we will all work within and the generation of funding so that developments are appropriately resourced. But, the essential direction of the change should be bottom-up. It must, above all, be centred on and involve from the outset the key agents of change—**schools, teachers and students**. This perspective on junior cycle development reflects initial discussions among the education partners where there has been as much interest in *how* the development *could* happen, as in *what* developments *would* happen.

So, what kind of change are we talking about?

What would be the *nature* of the change? Well, the paper sets out a number of hallmarks or characteristics of junior cycle development. It suggests that;

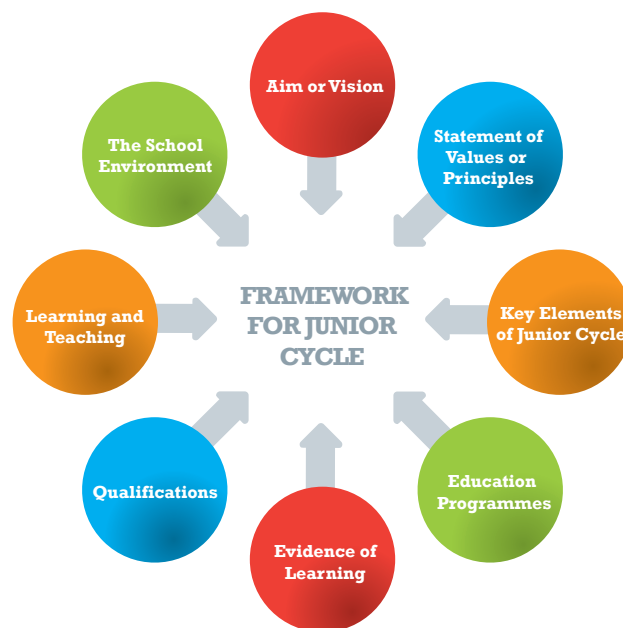
- developments will need to build on what already works well but, at the same time, create enough space for new ideas and innovative approaches and practices to emerge in schools
- schools should be well resourced to change from within, but will also need external assistance and support to do so
- the kind of developments involved will encourage some *difference* to emerge among and between schools. Some schools will feel disposed towards taking small, incremental steps forward while others will have a greater need and appetite for change. The process of change should allow schools to develop at a reasonable pace and in the directions of their choice!

But will schools be free to construct any kind of junior cycle?

Differences between schools will be an inevitable consequence of the approach to change envisaged in the paper. But in order to ensure a reasonably level playing pitch for schools and that students benefit from their junior cycle experience, schools will plan for their junior cycle in the context of a **Framework for Junior Cycle**. As part of the process of change, schools, teachers, and very importantly students and their parents will be involved in generating, reviewing and improving this framework. Work on developing the framework will commence towards the end of 2010. The framework will guide schools in their curriculum planning and will also guarantee that **certain learning experiences are provided and requirements met by all schools**. Figure 1 suggests a number of aspects of junior cycle education which may be considered in a *Framework for Junior Cycle*.

The framework will not involve starting from scratch on every aspect of junior cycle education; it will recognise that all realistic change comes about through integrating what we already know and what already works well with new ideas. In this sense, some aspects of the change process will proceed on a phased and incremental basis and will build on developments already happening and experiences already gained in junior cycle. But the framework will also provide for dramatic development in new directions by schools.

Figure.1. Aspects of junior cycle education considered in the framework



The framework might include statements of learning outcomes that would guide the curriculum and learning experiences of all junior cycle students. But while these statements would be defined centrally they might be capable of being interpreted and addressed in different ways at a local level. What the framework says will clearly be a major determinant of the flexibility that will be available to schools in developing their junior cycles. It will seek to achieve a certain level of commonality while at the same time encouraging diversity.

The framework will address the basic questions any school will be asking in planning for junior cycle, helping the school to clarify what it's trying to achieve in junior cycle, how it would be likely to organise the learning students undertake, and establishing how the outcomes of junior cycle might be evaluated.

4. What should change?

The pathways towards junior cycle change

The paper looks in detail at the directions or pathways the change may take and explores the question of how far schools and the education system can, could, and should travel in these directions. The degree of change envisaged is a key issue here. How much change are we talking about? Our tradition in Ireland has been of slow, steady, incremental change along quite familiar lines but does junior cycle need something different at this point?

A new junior cycle offers possibilities for new thinking that might go beyond simple reform, or improvement, towards something really different. How far we go depends on how far we *want* to go, how far we judge that we *should* go, and how far we feel we *can* go. For schools it may involve making a small move, moving further or taking a sizeable step on the five pathways set out on the following pages. The main focus of the pathway and the kind of change involved is described on the left of each page, with some key questions for you to think about on the right. The pathways should be seen as tools for thinking about the big ideas at junior cycle, that schools will be able to use in discussion and planning. How far we travel along each of these and, of course, whether there are other pathways too – that's a matter for debate!

PATHWAY 1

From curriculum conformity to schools having freedom to be different	For discussion on this pathway
<p>Curriculum is a key element in developing junior cycle. So the first pathway outlines how schools could have the freedom to be different with a shift away from the conformity of a centrally determined curriculum and a move towards schools having more scope to customise the curriculum to respond to their own local needs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ If schools are offered more freedom to design their own curriculum, a small move might see fewer, or less emphasis on, subjects with some embedding of key skills such as working together and critical and creative thinking. ■ A further move might see the embedding of key skills in all learning and include an emphasis on thematic learning and investigation across subjects. Schools could also devote a proportion of their curriculum time to courses devised locally. ■ Moving further still might see schools having a curriculum that would be completely different from the subject structure in use today. Schools would have the freedom to develop their whole curriculum within the Framework for Junior Cycle, but with very little centralised prescription. 	<p>Should every school offer the same junior cycle curriculum, more or less?</p> <p>Or should each school, while working within a common curriculum framework, have more freedom to include and use elements of the curriculum in different combinations and ways?</p> <p>Should schools include in their curriculum courses they have developed themselves?</p> <p>Should students take fewer subjects?</p> <p>Should students take specific core subjects? If so, what should the core subjects be?</p> <p>Should literacy and numeracy be prioritised at junior cycle?</p>

PATHWAY 2

From the Junior Certificate to qualifications designed for all	For discussion on this pathway
<p>We can't talk about curriculum without considering qualifications and this pathway looks at moving away from the current qualification, the Junior Certificate based solely on performance in the examination, towards the development of a qualification or qualifications based on multiple sources of learning. A key question in developing junior cycle is how to design qualifications that are suited to and meet the needs of ALL students.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A small move in the area of qualifications would see something similar to the current Junior Certificate being retained but with developments that accommodate a wider range of learning in line perhaps with Level 3 of the National Framework of Qualifications (www.nfq.ie). ■ Moving further on this pathway, we could envisage a redesigned junior cycle qualification (or more than one qualification) that included some new school-specific elements. ■ A move further still would give schools greater flexibility to combine the new junior cycle qualification with open access for learners to external qualifications not only at level 3 of the NFQ but at adjacent levels 2 and 4. 	<p>Should the junior cycle qualification continue to be the Junior Certificate alone?</p> <p>Is there a need for a qualification that's more than just the results of an examination?</p> <p>Is there a need for more than one qualification at junior cycle to cater for all students?</p> <p>Is there a need for a second qualification for students who cannot reach the standard of the Junior Certificate?</p> <p>Should all qualifications nationally and internationally be available to schools to offer to their learners?</p>

PATHWAY 3

From the three years <i>in</i> junior cycle to three years <i>of</i> junior cycle	For discussion on this pathway
<p>The third pathway looks at whether junior cycle might be organised or structured differently so as to make the transition from primary school smoother and more coherent and to facilitate the movement towards senior cycle. Should we continue, for example, to see junior cycle as a three-year programme or are there variations and developments of this which we should pursue?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A small step on this pathway might see an increased information flow between sending and receiver schools, greater use of bridging arrangements and curriculum-based bridging frameworks, and an improved understanding overall of the transition issues that students face. ■ Moving further might see students experiencing subjects as tasters for a given period of time and then choosing from a range of subjects for their remaining time in junior cycle. ■ Moving further still might see schools focusing on a junior cycle with planned and comprehensive connections with the sixth class curriculum and/or the first year of senior cycle; effectively a four-year junior cycle that would take students to the end of compulsory education. 	<p>Would stronger bridging with the later years of primary schooling and more flexibility in junior cycle itself improve the three-year cycle?</p> <p>Perhaps a 1+2 approach (a one-year transition from primary school followed by a two-year junior cycle) would make the students' move from primary more seamless and still allow them to engage with significant new learning?</p> <p>Maybe a 2+1 approach (a broad two-year junior cycle curriculum followed by a year preparing for the junior cycle qualification and making choices for senior cycle) is the best option for getting students to a point where they can move effectively into senior cycle?</p> <p>Would a five-year model (final year of primary school and the fourth year of post-primary school being seen as extensions of junior cycle) provide a radical option which would really make a difference to students' learning?</p>

PATHWAY 4

Towards a renewal of learning and teaching	For discussion on this pathway
<p>Everything depends on the learning and teaching that takes place in the classroom and this pathway looks towards a renewal of learning and teaching. The paper identifies the need to deepen students' relationship with their learning, ensuring that it is both relevant and challenging to them.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A small movement in this direction might involve schools focusing on developing key skills, having an increased emphasis on students' reflecting on their work and progress, and would also see greater use of learning which is activity based. ■ A move further could see schools encouraging students to learn from each other and assess themselves while also placing an emphasis on project work and co-operative learning. ■ A move further still might see schools creating learning communities where students become much more self-directed in their learning, and where teachers involve students more in learning and teaching decisions, perhaps even having some input into what they would like to learn. 	<p>How can teachers be provided with opportunities to discuss and reflect on teaching and learning with colleagues in and beyond the school?</p> <p>What conditions are necessary for peer learning, self-assessment and self-directed learning to thrive in junior cycle?</p> <p>Worldwide, many people promote the concept of greater student involvement in learning (for example, having more opportunities to reflect on and discuss their learning and even having input to curriculum and assessment planning in schools). Is this a trend we should follow in Ireland?</p>

PATHWAY 5

From generating an examination grade to generating evidence of learning	For discussion on this pathway
<p>Pathway 5 explores the role that examinations as-we-know-them should play and whether evidence of learning can be generated as effectively and meaningfully in other ways. A junior cycle that facilitates greater choice for schools in how they think about and plan for learning will also need to include some choices as to how they can generate and use evidence of that learning.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A small move in this direction would see the use of multiple sources of evidence of learning, and schools placing less emphasis on central examinations. ■ But you could move further and involve students in the dialogue around a record of achievement? The use of this record could be balanced with use of summative tests that might be developed both locally and centrally. ■ Going further still could involve using a wide variety of sources such as a statement of achievement or a form of portfolio, which would be linked to a qualification? 	<p>Would the more negative effects of the examination be diminished sufficiently if Junior Certificate continued, but with fewer subjects being examined each year.</p> <p>Does a combination of national examinations and locally administered examinations offer the best alternative to the current system?</p> <p>Should examination results and a portfolio of achievement based on evidence of learning form the basis for a new junior cycle qualification?</p>

5. The change process

What will happen next?

It appears likely that the change process for junior cycle will have at least four stages. While presented in sequence, each stage should also be viewed as developmental. In other words, in keeping with the emphasis in this process on communication, consultation and development, it is likely that the stages will overlap somewhat and that ideas generated in one stage of the process may change the content or sequence of what will happen in another.

Effective change has to involve a developmental process led by schools themselves. In the junior cycle paper, the idea of schools as centres of innovation and change is nowhere more in evidence than in the four-stage process it sets out, which puts development in schools at the centre!



The paper adopts a non-specific time frame that recognises the uncertainty of current times but the change model does allow at each stage for genuine engagement with the ideas that the paper advances and the generation of others.

STAGE 1 was completed with the production of the ideas paper.

STAGE 2 involves extending and deepening debate about junior cycle education with the education partners and the wider public. This is taking place throughout 2010 and will culminate with the generation of a draft **Framework for Junior Cycle**. This stage has also seen the launch and development of our website (www.ncca.ie/juniorcycledevelopments) to support the discussion on junior cycle education.

At **STAGE 3**, with intensive external support, a number of schools will plan the development of junior cycle in their school; thinking about how their junior cycle is to be developed and, in the process, starting to change it. The outcome is likely to be a range of models of junior cycle education programmes customised to the various sizes and types of schools, all of which are consistent with the Framework. Because the models will reflect the perspective, situation and context of the schools involved, they are likely to be on a developmental continuum ranging from the *cautious* to the *exploratory* to the *adventurous*. They will describe the kind of learning, teaching, curriculum, assessment, qualifications and learning environment involved in the programme.

STAGE 4 will see all other schools using these models in the planning of their own junior cycle programmes.

6. Getting started

It is clear that the junior cycle has the potential to forge a strong identity for itself by building on what it currently does very well, by drawing on the multitude of innovative, challenging educational ideas which exist and are yet to emerge, and by looking positively at the opportunities offered by the rapidly evolving environment in which it operates. The potential for the realisation of what we are setting about in schools can only be achieved through the engagement of all educational partners.

We're looking for your views on the perspective on junior cycle presented in *Innovation and Identity: Ideas for a new Junior Cycle*. To support the consultation a range of materials is available at the consultation home page (www.ncca.ie/juniorcycledevelopments)

- video vox pops where some schools share their opinions with you
- a multimedia presentation introducing the key ideas
- the paper along with other relevant reading available to download
- regular updates on what is happening with the junior cycle developments.

So, get involved in the consultation! Visit www.ncca.ie/juniorcycledevelopments and share your views by completing the short questionnaire or by blogging your thoughts to us.