

Designing Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate Syllabi

The need for a new template

Introduction

In recent years, concerns have been expressed by practising teachers, university academics, professional bodies, Oireachtas committees, and experts in curriculum design about the design and quality of Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate subject syllabi published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).*

The current design template is minimal, comprising little more than a list of topics and learning outcomes. The Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate are nationally assessed by an external body, the State Examinations Commission (SEC), but unlike in similar jurisdictions, which provide comprehensive guidelines linking syllabi with assessment, no such details are provided in Ireland.

Junior Cycle syllabi

In the past decade, all Junior Cycle subjects have been revised by the NCCA using a minimalist 'learning-outcomes-only' template, as have some new and a small number of existing Leaving Cert subjects. There has been widespread criticism of the template. In 2019, the Irish Science Teachers' Association reported that lack of depth of treatment in the Junior Cycle science specification was a major problem; 85% of 762 respondents believed that the Junior Cycle template would be unsuitable for use at Senior Cycle level (ISTA, 2019).

In a survey by An Gréasán (the Association of Teachers of Irish), 97% of teachers believed that more details should

* This article uses the term 'syllabus' instead of 'specification' because it is clearer and is used more commonly at international level.



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Concerns have been raised by teachers, academics, professional bodies, Oireachtas committees, and experts in curriculum design about the minimal 'learning-outcomes-only' template currently being used by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment for Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate syllabi. This article proposes that a new template be adopted and suggests some alternatives.

be provided in the draft specifications (An Gréasán, 2021). Another survey of over 750 teachers of Irish as a second language regarding the new Junior Cycle Gaeilge specifications in 2022 found that 95% were critical of the new template; 93% said further guidance should be provided on the subjects, themes, and topics arising from the learning outcomes (Sealbhú, 2023). And in 2022, based on a questionnaire answered by 2,981 teachers, the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland stated:

it would be an under-statement to say that there is profound and universal concern among teachers about the capacity of the junior cycle subject specifications to prepare students for the senior cycle curriculum. . . . Learning outcomes remain problematic. They are too broad, too vague and are lacking in guidance to the teacher on what students are expected to be able to do in order to show that they have achieved each learning outcome. (ASTI, 2022, pp. 13–14)

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Leaving Cert syllabi

A new Leaving Cert syllabus in Agricultural Science was introduced by the NCCA in 2019, using the same minimal 'learning-outcomes-only' template. The Irish Agricultural Science Teachers' Association criticised what they called 'a sub-standard syllabus that does not measure up to international best practice', stating: 'It is time to call a halt to the practice of the Department of Education publishing these vague and dumbed down syllabi' (IASTA, 2021).

A revised draft syllabus for Leaving Cert Irish was circulated by the NCCA in 2021 and, under the auspices of Conradh na Gaeilge, 14 organisations interested in the promotion of Irish in the education system rejected it (Hyland & Uí Uiginn, 2021). They found that the draft specifications, based on themes and learning outcomes, were sparse, lacked depth, and lacked information about what the teacher is to teach or the student is to learn. The report recommended that the learning outcomes should be clear and that the depth and breadth of knowledge required should also be provided. They recommended that teacher guidelines should be provided as well as comprehensive information on subject assessment.

Third-level academics also expressed their concern about the design template being used by the NCCA. In a letter to the *Irish Times*, Dr Peter Childs, emeritus senior lecturer in science education at University of Limerick, wrote about the use of templates of syllabus design based only on learning outcomes as follows: 'It is like trying to build a house based only on its desired features, but without an architectural drawing and detailed plans. Teachers need a detailed syllabus, like the ones currently used, in order to teach effectively' (Childs, 2021).

Very significantly, reports from the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in 2022 and 2023 were also critical: 'As part of Senior Cycle reform, a key priority for the Department of Education must be that the revised syllabus for each subject is far more detailed with comprehensive instructions for teachers' (Joint Oireachtas Committee, 2022). And in July 2023, they recommended that the NCCA 'reviews the proposed design of the new specifications to ensure teachers are properly supported and students are taught to the highest professional standards' (Joint Oireachtas Committee, 2023).

The above comments from various stakeholders are only some of the concerns expressed about the current approach being taken to syllabus design. While the NCCA has indicated that its approach is influenced by 'international best practice', the present authors have failed to find even one example of a jurisdiction or an examining board anywhere in the world which provides such sparse information on a syllabus which is nationally examined.

The way forward

When designing a syllabus using a learning-outcomes framework, especially an externally assessed syllabus, there must be alignment between (i) learning outcomes, (ii) teaching and learning activities, and (iii) assessment. Biggs (2005) referred to this as constructive alignment. Such alignment is clear and transparent in externally assessed examination syllabi in other jurisdictions. Having examined these, the present authors are particularly impressed with the quality of syllabi published for various subjects by the Oxford Cambridge and RSA (Royal Society of Arts) Examination Board (Awarding Body) in the UK.

The OCR Biology, Chemistry, and Physics syllabi have recently been revised and are in keeping with international best practice (OCR, 2022). Not only are they designed within a learning-outcomes framework laid out in tabular format, but learning outcomes are set as the starting point in the framework. This is followed by depth of treatment provided in the *Topic Content* column and the highlighting of *Skills Covered* when guiding students to achieve each learning outcome. Finally, the framework emphasises *Teaching and Learning Opportunities* to guide teachers in helping students achieve the learning outcomes to the correct depth of treatment.

Other externally assessed curricula, such as the International Baccalaureate, also provide excellent syllabus design (IBO, 2022).

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Conclusions and recommendations

We believe that a new syllabus template needs to be developed for all syllabi at Junior Cycle and Leaving Cert level.

In a recent interview, Andreas Schleicher, Head of the OECD's Directorate of Education and Skills, and an expert on educational systems worldwide, urged caution over Senior Cycle reform in Ireland. He said the Irish educational system has helped most people to succeed and has created a high level of equity with very strong outcomes. He favours maintaining an externally assessed Leaving Cert and highlights the importance of an examination that is 'accepted by society' (Schleicher, 2022).

Schleicher has also advised against adopting curricula which are 'a mile wide and an inch deep' (OECD, 2020). In the view of the present authors, the NCCA's current approach in curriculum design risks reducing the Leaving Cert curriculum to one matching this description. To ensure that this does not occur, and that the current high quality of Leaving Cert syllabi is maintained, it is our view that when designing Leaving Cert subject syllabi, explicit details should be provided about the depth of treatment required as well as detailed documentation and guidelines for teachers and students to support them in achieving high-quality outcomes. Information about assessment should also be provided.

We believe that a new syllabus template needs to be developed for all syllabi at Junior Cycle and Leaving Cert level. This template must contain more detailed information about the depth of treatment of subjects and should explicitly link learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and assessment. The full range of syllabus documentation (including guidelines for teachers, sample exam papers and marking schemes, etc.) should be officially published at the same time as the syllabus itself, as has been the case in the past. This elaborated documentation should be available well before the syllabus is due to be implemented, to enable teachers to become familiar with it and to undergo appropriate continuing professional development and up-skilling programmes.

This modest proposal would ensure that Ireland will continue to be highly regarded internationally for the quality of its education system.

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