

JUNIOR CYCLE FRAMEWORK: CONSIDERATIONS FOR SCHOOLS AND LEARNERS

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The necessity for reform of the student's experience of school in Ireland is underpinned by the ESRI's Longitudinal Study, Leaving School in Ireland (2014). This study – which documents the many strengths as well as weaknesses of our second level education system – is the culmination of a decade of research into the experience of second level students in Irish schools.

The phased introduction of the new Junior Cycle Framework (2012) offers a significant contribution in bringing around reforms in learning and teaching. The Junior Cycle Framework will be introduced between now and 2022. This implementation corridor offers schools, teachers, students, parents and other stakeholders the opportunity to engage with the changes outlined in the Framework so that the system best serves students, schools and society. The Junior Cycle Framework (2012) offers options and choice at the level of the individual and the school. These choices will offer greater scope to develop a capacity for independent, self-directed learning (which is called for in the ESRI report) and offers schools the opportunity to gradually change their existing provision in light of these emerging research findings and societal needs.

THE HEART OF THE NEW JUNIOR CYCLE:

The most common question that those of us who work in education face these days is something like: “Can you tell me what is this new Junior Cycle all about?” or “What is going to be different?”

The answer deserves more than a fleeting reply as the framework sets out a complex, comprehensive curriculum that focuses not only on what is to be learned, but on how it is to be learned and how students link their learning across a range of subjects, short courses and

other learning experiences. Key facets of the new Junior Cycle Framework include:

- From 2017, the new certificate will be known as the Junior Cycle Student Award (JCSA).
- Students will be accredited in no more than 10 subjects at Junior Cycle level. A total of 21 subjects will be available to schools. English, Gaelige and Mathematics will be scheduled for a minimum of 240 hours with all other subjects requiring a minimum of 200 hours tuition time.
- Short courses may be offered by schools instead of subjects, with each short course equating to 0.5 subjects when determining accreditation in the new Junior Cycle Student Award. Each short course should include approximately 100 hours tuition time.
- Assessment of subjects will include ongoing school-based assessment and terminal exams.
- Students with lower mild and moderate learning disabilities may now access the Junior Cycle Student Award at Level 2, affording schools greater scope for accrediting the learning of these students.
- 24 Statements of Learning will feature in the Junior Cycle experience of all students. These statements will inform curricular choices and school provision.
- Students will work towards mastering 8 key skills over the three years of the Junior Cycle experience. These key skills, together with the statements of learning, are embedded in the specifications for subjects and in short course design.
- The JCSA is underpinned by 8 principles.

At the heart of the reform is a devolution of greater autonomy to school, class and student level. It links with the learning at primary level while developing knowledge and skills for senior

cycle. The statements, principles and key skills documented in the framework allow schools to plan for, design and evaluate their junior cycle programmes. This will be a phased, progressive activity where schools need to consider many factors in the planning process.

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PLANNING A JUNIOR CYCLE PROGRAMME: KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR SCHOOLS.

While the principles, statements of learning, and key skills documented in the framework guide and direct schools in planning their programme, several key questions will be considered by schools in determining their future provision:

1. How does our current provision measure up to the statements of learning, key skills and principles of the Junior Cycle Framework? Are there particular statements of learning that need to be reinforced better in the future?
2. What options does a school have in terms of current staff capacity, staff recruitment and staff development? Do we have the capacity to offer short courses?
3. How do the demands of senior cycle inform our provision at junior cycle? Must students take specific subjects and/or short courses at junior cycle level in order to take up a particular subject at senior cycle? How can knowledge and skills acquired in one subject or short course at junior cycle contribute to learning at senior cycle across a range of subjects?
4. How well informed are students as to the options that they are taking currently, in terms of future choices for either junior cycle or senior cycle?
5. How can we better facilitate the transfer of learning from primary to second level?
6. Over time, how does our school ensure that the key skills of Junior Cycle are

a feature of teaching and learning in all classrooms?

The Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) service has recently written to all school leaders inviting them to avail of a regionally based whole-school support service that will facilitate teachers and school leaders in exploring the implications of the new Junior Cycle Framework and in developing the skills and capacity to address some of the issues outlined above. This service will assist schools in:

- Auditing current curricular provision and identifying current strengths
- Prioritising areas for development/ improvement
- Developing action plans and building staff capacity.

When the appropriate review of the current programme at Junior Cycle takes place, schools can then develop a vision of future provision. Accepting that it may take some time to arrive at the full realisation of this vision, schools will establish a plan that will gradually introduce desired changes. Some of the issues to be considered will relate to the structure of the school’s junior cycle programme. English, Gaeilge and Mathematics are the only subjects that remain as essential learning with all schools making appropriate provision for 240 hours learning related to health and wellbeing. Significant decisions will then be made as to:

- How a school can ensure that students make informed decisions when choosing subjects or short courses. Currently some schools offer “tasters” or flipped timetables in first year to expose students to experiencing a maximum number of subjects. Other schools are looking at how their options can be adjusted to give more choice to students. The ESRI report notes that many students are looking to the school for effective guidance when making such decisions.
- In providing for the Statements of Learning, schools may consider the role of subjects, short courses and other learning experiences. There is a tacit recognition that all three of these has a potential role to play in terms of providing students with the breadth and depth of learning required at junior cycle level. Subject specifications demand new modes of learning and new approaches to assessment. Short courses

and non-accredited learning modules can offer the student real options in terms of accessing the various statements of learning.

SHORT COURSES:

While many schools and teachers are currently at the point of coming to terms with the requirements for teaching and assessing short courses, there is little doubt the introduction of short courses to the Junior Cycle Student Award offers significant scope for flexibility and creativity in the programme on offer to students. Schools may choose to provide a short course which has been pre-developed by NCCA. All of these are available at www.juniorycycle.ie, or indeed any school can design, teach and certify their own short course. Each school will consider the need, demand for, and capacity to deliver short courses. Moreover short courses afford students:



- New and creative learning opportunities that were not heretofore readily available in our schools
- Learning opportunities that are more reflective of the needs of the community and of the unique student cohort attending the school.
- Opportunities for partnership with other educational and community organisations
- Access to a wider range of learning and assessment methodologies. This may lead to opportunities to develop an appreciation of any area of learning before studying it in more depth.
- Preparation for specific subject areas in

senior cycle, notwithstanding school policies as to requirements for uptake of subjects at senior cycle.

Furthermore, it provides the school with an opportunity to avail of existing teacher expertise, to offer a refreshed learning programme and to strengthen some areas of learning through the provision of additional, specialised short courses. Inter-school and school-community partnerships can offer new possibilities.

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JCT has recently appointed a Team Leader for Short Courses, who, with a team of Associate Members will provide school leaders and teachers with appropriate CPD in developing and implementing short courses in their schools.

THE ROAD AHEAD:

In conclusion, the Junior Cycle Student Award has been born out of the necessity and the desire to refresh the learning opportunities of students at lower secondary education. It offers greater flexibility and choice to students and to schools. The movement from current provision to the full roll out of the JCSA will take place in planned phases from now to 2022. As it does, schools will plan the optimum provision of subjects, short courses and other learning experiences for their specific cohort of students. It provides exciting new opportunities, and invites schools to think anew about many aspects of the junior cycle experience. The JCT service is expanding to provide schools with the support and expertise that may be required to guide them in planning for, and implementing, sustainable changes to their curriculum provision.

JCT services can be accessed at www.juniorycycle.ie, or by contacting the JCT office 047 74000