

Junior Cycle Level 2 Short Course Development Community 2015

Supporting Special Schools in the development of Level 2 Short Courses

**A pilot Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) CPD initiative in conjunction
with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment**



Final Report - January 2016

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Introduction

The *Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015) outlines the key educational changes that the Department of Education and Skills (DES) is putting in place for young people in the first three years of their post-primary education, and represents one of the most significant educational reforms in Ireland since the foundation of the state. The framework incorporates a shared understanding of how teaching, learning and assessment practices should evolve to support the delivery of a quality, inclusive and relevant education that will meet the needs of all junior cycle students, now and in the future.

As part of the new junior cycle, schools can provide Level 2 Learning Programmes (L2LPs) suited for students with general learning disabilities in the higher functioning moderate and low functioning mild categories. L2LPs are designed only for students who are not accessing some or all of curriculum specifications aligned with Level 3 National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). L2LPs may be offered to students in both special schools and mainstream settings.

Short courses are a new and optional curriculum component within the *Framework for Junior Cycle* which require 100 hours of student engagement. Short courses are also a key feature of the L2LPs, and therefore form part of the junior cycle pathway for students who would benefit from a short course experience at Level 2 of the National Framework of Qualifications. Short courses allow a school the flexibility to broaden the range of learning experiences for students, meet student needs, address their interests, and encompass areas of learning not covered by the combination of curricular subjects available in the school. Short courses are assessed through Classroom-Based Assessments, and reported on to parents/guardians and students by the school.

In early 2015, the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) Short Course Team, in collaboration with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), established an initiative entitled the 'Junior Cycle Level 2 Short Course Development Community'.¹ This initiative facilitated participating teachers to come together in a peer-learning environment. Together with supports offered by JCT and NCCA, this approach was intended to enable schools to follow the short course development steps outlined by the NCCA. These steps include becoming familiar with junior cycle documentation, consultation with stakeholders in the school community, engagement with short course support material, completion of a scoping document, and the development and refining of a short course specification.

¹ The JCT Short Courses team offers support to teachers and schools by facilitating CPD activities to enable the introduction of junior cycle short courses.

Overview

The short course development community initiative sought to:

- build the capacity of participating special schools to develop a short course
- investigate the process of short course development in participating schools
- inform future models of JCT and NCCA support for short course development
- contribute to the development of JCT/NCCA information and resources designed to support short course development

The initiative therefore had two complementary strands:

- curriculum development (i.e., the development of Level 2 short courses by participating schools)
- research

The research methodologies employed were mainly qualitative in nature, largely due to the scale and the nature of school participation. Qualitative methodologies included JCT short course team observations during meetings, the team's reflections on draft documents produced by participating schools, and video recordings of small focus group interviews with participating teachers. The main quantitative methodology employed was a series of short online questionnaires disseminated at regular intervals for completion by participating teachers. The purpose of these questionnaires was to gauge progress in relation to the steps for short course development outlined by the NCCA, and to inform the agenda at subsequent meetings, and also to ensure that relevant school-specific supports were made available in a timely manner.

Six special schools from four counties agreed to take part in the pilot programme. These schools expressed an interest in the initiative following JCT Whole School CPD days in late 2014 and early 2015. All participating schools have some students who will engage with Level 2 short courses. However, they reflect the diversity of learning populations in special schools, also catering for students who will benefit from access to Level 1 and Level 3 curriculum programmes.

The initiative commenced in January 2015, and featured a series of meetings over the course of the first six months, including three days of core training. There were school visits by JCT staff to four schools, and access to additional support via an online blog was available. In the period June-December 2015 support was mainly provided in the form of email communication, although several schools availed of a second school visit or phone conference. School specific support was also available in terms of focused feedback on short course documentation as follows:

- scoping document
- revised scoping document
- Short Course Specification – Draft 1
- Short Course Specification – Draft 2

In taking the feedback provided on board schools moved through the steps outlined by the NCCA for short course development. (See Appendix 1 for an overview of the support received by participating schools).

It was envisaged that involvement, with the opportunities it presented to discuss experiences with peers from other schools, and with the support offered by both JCT and the NCCA, that all participating school would have a penultimate draft of the short course specification completed by the end of the process. In reality, a variety of factors contributed to the fact that schools progressed through the short course development steps at differing rates. By December 2015 some schools were at the stage of piloting their short course (step 5), whereas others were still working on or had just finalised their scoping documents (step 4). (See Appendix 2 for case studies of the six participating schools).

Discussion

Strengths

All participants spoke about the value of short courses in terms of being able to formally profile and award a certificate of national significance, namely the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement, to the students in their schools.

Some of the 'lead' teachers were excited about the peer-learning element of the initiative, where they had a chance to collaborate with teachers from other schools around the country. They spoke about having previous experience of curriculum development, having designed courses to suit the specific needs and learning styles of their own students, but valued the unique professional development opportunities involved in working together in a 'community' with support from JCT and the NCCA. This level of support, they recognised, might not be available at a later stage in the implementation of the junior cycle framework.

Some schools articulated the belief that involvement with the Level 2 short courses would prepare them for future Level 1 developments.

At the final meeting teachers were asked to reflect on the value of their involvement. Their feedback included the following:

'A different opportunity to work with colleagues in school and beyond'.

'A positive, enjoyable and interesting curriculum development experience'.

'A sense of confidence and empowerment'.

'Better knowledge about junior cycle changes'.

'We have developed short courses which engender essential life skills amongst students'.

Participating teachers acknowledged the importance of the support provided by JCT short course team and the NCCA, and in particular commented on the level and quality of feedback received on draft documentation.

Challenges

Short course development work

Participating teachers were encouraged to follow the steps outlined by the NCCA for developing short courses:

1. Research and read
2. Consult with staff, students and other stakeholders about the proposed short course to ensure suitability
3. Look at NCCA Guidelines for developing short courses
4. Complete the scoping document
5. Develop, reflect and refine (short course specification template) based on feedback

(For more information see: www.juniorcycle.ie)

Step 1: Research and read relevant documentation

The Whole School CPD day with JCT in 2014 and 2015 included an overview of the Framework for Junior Cycle, L2LP documentation and Level 2 short courses. In this way participating teachers had exposure to the content of relevant documentation prior to the commencement of the short course development process. However, there was a time lag between the JCT Whole School Day and the start of the initiative, and some teachers reported feeling overwhelmed by the depth of knowledge of documentation required to engage in the initial steps of short course development.

Step 2: Consult with staff, students and other stakeholders about the proposed short course to ensure suitability

The NCCA recommends that staff, students and parents be consulted to generate ideas about short course development. In all six schools a short information and consultation session with whole staff was organized, with support from school management. In the case of one school this was done with JCT involvement, prior to the first 'community' meeting. In general, teachers recognised the value of consultation, however, meaningful consultation with students and parents proved challenging. Feedback from 'lead' teachers indicated that consultation with students and/or parents was significant only in the case of two schools.

Step 3: Look at NCCA Guidelines for developing short courses

Four schools made conscious decisions to develop short courses which are cross-curricular in nature ('Living in Our Community', 'Grow it, Cook it, Eat it!', 'Music and Drama in Our Lives', and 'Water, Water Everywhere'), while the remaining schools elected to work on short courses specifically linked to a single subject area ('Learning to Cook' – Home Economics; and

'Knowing Me, Knowing You' – Social, Personal and Health Education). At the end of the initiative the schools who chose to link to a single subject area were at step 4 of the process, while the remaining schools had completed more than one draft of their short course specification (step 5).

The *Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015) states that short courses are not intended to replace existing subjects. However, short courses can complement or build on a subject. It is worthwhile asking if the focus on a single subject, when the subject is an area of expertise for the teacher writing the short course, is the more difficult curriculum development process. A short course linked to a single subject may also mean that there is less school-based expectation in terms of staff collaboration, with the result that the writer can feel isolated in the curriculum development process.

Step 4: Complete the scoping document

The template for the scoping document was revised in the initial months of the initiative, following feedback from the 'lead teachers'. This meant that participating teachers were asked to complete two versions of the scoping document. Teachers expressed frustration with the change in template structure. They felt that the additional work involved made the process too long, more complex and more difficult. The scoping document required a level of knowledge of the L2LP and junior cycle framework documentation that participants did not feel equipped to handle. Feedback also indicated that teachers struggled with a lack of visible correlation between the scoping document and the short course template. The teachers who found the scoping document most difficult were supported with face-to-face sessions by JCT staff.

Step 5: Develop, Reflect, Refine

The teachers who reached step 5, where they were drafting their short course template, encountered several challenges. They found writing learning outcomes challenging. They found it hard to articulate learning outcomes using action verbs and underpinned by junior cycle key skills and Priority Learning Units, while at the same time staying true to their original vision for the short course.

Getting the balance between learning outcomes which recognised the range of needs of learners who access Level 2 short courses, and ensuring quality and wide-ranging student engagement also proved challenging. Teachers needed to be reminded that short courses represent 100 hours of student engagement, and to structure their learning outcomes with this in mind.

Some participants reporting struggling with organising learning outcomes into strands. Where short courses included one or more learning outcomes which cut across all strands, e.g. learning outcomes relating to engagement with ICT, participants grappled with whether to situate these in a distinct strand or embed them throughout strands according to the order in which they might be encountered. There is a suggestion that those undertaking cross-

curricular short course development found organising and grouping of learning outcomes into strands and strand elements more difficult than those working from the single subject perspective. Writers of these short courses also struggled to appropriately title their strands and strand elements. These teachers reported finding it difficult to design appropriate formative and summative assessment tasks. These challenges may be specific to the broader learning that the curriculum process entails. However, it may be that as more of the junior cycle curriculum is rolled out, teachers will become more familiar with learning outcomes and their role in shaping quality learning experiences.

Support from school management

Principals in all six schools began engagement in the initiative in a very similar way. They were very interested and supportive at the start, e.g. facilitating information/consultation inputs at whole staff meetings. As the process progressed the role of principals varied greatly. It varied from being generally supportive but not actively involved, to requesting regular updates, to giving verbal feedback on drafts of documentation and being very supportive in terms of time and/or reviewing and revising the drafts of the various documents.

The principal actively involved in helping to develop the documents was described by the 'lead' teacher as 'very helpful'. In this school, time was allocated for short course development. All the staff was involved in the consultation process, and thereafter to varying degrees. These supports had a positive effect on the scoping documentation and short course specification drafts produced.

Involvement of staff in schools

Staff involvement varied greatly between the schools. The timing of commencement of the initiative (mid-way through the school year), together with a perceived unsuitability of Level 2 learning for the majority of students in the school contributed to a situation where two of the teachers worked alone on the short course development. Three schools involved working groups with three people, and one school, although there was an official working group of three; periodically involved the whole staff of approximately forty. The multiple perspectives taken on board in this latter case was evident in the quality of early drafts of the scoping document, and the completed short course specification.

Although schools who successfully established a working group identified 'time to meet' as a barrier to their work, they also identified the value of a having a working group in terms of access to feedback, sharing of expertise, ideas and planning to enhance the quality of the course. The teachers who worked alone did not have to schedule and facilitate meetings, but reported the experience of writing as time consuming and lonely. They found it more difficult to generate ideas, keep the momentum going, and had no on-going feedback from peers.

The importance of developing the short course in a working group is also an important factor in promoting its sustainability within the Junior Cycle programme in the school over time

The role of the short course developer

Even where the participating teacher had ongoing access to the views of the whole staff, they took sole responsibility for drafting documents. Participants identified that it makes sense for an individual to have responsibility for writing in terms of consistency of oversight and writing style. However, in all cases the short course development work was largely undertaken in personal time.

Participating teachers were asked to identify the knowledge and expertise needed to take on the role of 'lead' teacher or to become a member of a short course working group. With the exception of leadership skills seen as essential to the role of the former, their feedback for both roles was very similar:

- knowledge of background and content of the junior cycle framework and L2LPs
- experience in teaching at Level Two level combined with creative and realistic strategies for teaching, learning and assessment
- ability to research
- capacity to develop documents using appropriate terminology
- leadership skills, e.g., the ability to delegate, to focus and motivate members of the working group
- critical analysis skills
- interpersonal, communication and ICT skills
- strong work ethic
- ability to deal with constructive criticism in a professional manner in order to improve their work

Teachers recognised that leadership skills were needed for the effective co-ordination of working groups, but in reality they found it difficult to delegate and did not formulate an action plan for the members of their working groups.

Allocation of time during school hours

Protected time to engage in the process of short course development proved to be a major issue for participating teachers, with one teacher stating if she had known how much time it was going to take she may not have become involved. Others attributed the lack of time during school hours to the difficulty of establishing or sustainable working groups:

You really do need time allocated within the school day to meet with people or talk to people, or else it will become a solo project.

Only two schools allocated regular time during school hours for this work. The time of year in which the initiative was most active (Dec – June) proved to be very demanding for the schools involved, in terms of time-management and deadlines being met. Several teachers suggested that if schools were recruited in the middle of a school year, and the initiative

commenced at the start of the following school year, this would allow school management to factor short course development work into their school planning time.

Model of support

JCT support for participating schools consisted of five meetings over the course of the first six months, including three days of core training, as well as school visits by JCT staff to four schools, and the moderation of communication between schools via an online blog. Between June and December 2015 schools were able to access further support via email and phone conferences.

The role of NCCA was primarily a consultative one to the JCT short course team. An NCCA Education Officer liaised with the JCT team throughout the initiative. Support was provided in developing a framework around which to structure the initiative. In addition, the NCCA Education Officer collaborated with the JCT in the provision of feedback to schools, and attended one of the meetings with teachers.

Teacher Meetings

Participants felt that there was too much information provided at the first meeting. They reported a lack of clarity about their role and what was expected on departure. The teachers also believed that the process of writing the short course would be more constructive if there was more clarity at the beginning as to what each step involved. Following the second and subsequent meetings, participants reported receiving clearer guidance, and as a result feeling more confident about the process of short course development.

The presence of principals at the initial meeting led to an extended discussion about systemic challenges facing special schools in the context of the Junior Cycle changes. Although this discussion was very informative for JCT personnel, it was less beneficial for the participating teachers.

Online community

JCT set up an online form (<http://kidblog.org/home/>) to facilitate communication between 'community' meetings. This forum was under-utilised, and after an initial exchange of questions and comments focused on the 'values and attitudes' section of the scoping document, was used mainly as a way for JCT to gauge progress by the schools. Feedback from teachers highlighted the lack of email notification about new entries as a limitation to involvement.

Recommendations

Step One: Read and research relevant documentation

As professionals, teachers need to be informed about changes that will impact on their practice and affect student learning. JCT Whole School in-service ensures some knowledge of junior cycle and L2LP documentation amongst wider school staff and provides a context for any subsequent input by school management and/or 'lead' teacher. However, to engage in short course development 'lead' teachers and members of working groups need an in-depth familiarity with the relevant documentation. Some of this professional development could be happening in advance of the first 'cluster' meeting, thereby ensuring that 'lead' teachers can take full advantage of the supports on offer.

Step 2: Consult with staff, students and other stakeholders about the proposed short course to ensure suitability

The ongoing work by the NCCA on student voice should be considered an important source of information about the importance of consulting with students, and the benefits that ensue if student feedback is given due weight in subsequent short course development work. This work could inform the development of supports and resources for meaningful consultation with young people and other stakeholders in the school community.

JCT should work with teachers to develop guidelines and templates to assist schools to engage stakeholders in meaningful consultation.

Step 3: Look at NCCA Guidelines for developing short courses

The NCCA's guidelines for developing short courses, and the support materials provided on the JCT website, should include a reflection on the advantages and challenges of short courses which are cross-curricular and those linked to a single subject in guidance documentation.

Step Four: Completing the scoping document

In its current iteration the scoping document is less an opportunity to probe the emerging big ideas and concepts, and more an intermediate document between scoping and first draft of the short course specification. Based on the experiences of this initiative it is recommended that the scoping template be simplified and include sections that are linked to the short course specification template.

Step Five: Develop, Reflect, Refine

Teachers will need some guidance and capacity building around writing learning outcomes. They also need training in organising and grouping learning outcomes under elements and strands.

CPD activities enabling teachers to engage effectively in the writing and sequencing of learning outcomes could include some or all of the following:

- Familiarisation with findings from research to provide the rationale which underpins learning outcomes-based curriculum development
- Analysis of NCCA-developed subjects and/or short courses to deconstruct learning outcomes in them
- Familiarisation with the Level indicators for Level 2 and Level 3 of the National Framework of Qualifications which inform the kind and breadth of knowledge, skill range, competence level expected
- Comparison of learning outcomes that are well articulated with those that are less so
- Suggesting strand elements and strand titles for a set of learning outcomes

Revision of steps

The timeline for short course development should be revised based on JCT and NCCA experience of supporting and providing feedback to schools. One possibility would be to develop a timeline linked to the three stages where schools can access NCCA feedback, i.e. when the scoping document is complete, when the first draft of the short course specification is complete, and when the final draft of the specification is complete. A list of supporting documents needed for each stage could also be provided. The inclusion of advice around piloting prior to redrafting the final draft for NCCA feedback would be especially useful.

A reframing of the steps based on JCT and NCCA experience of supporting schools would need to be realistic in terms of the time required by participating schools for completion of each step, as well as allowing sufficient time for NCCA feedback on draft documentation. Schools might then be clearer about the nature of short course development and could access and respond to the support structures on offer in a timely manner.

School management

Involving principals from an early stage in short course development is very important, as they have a key role in creating a supportive environment in school for this work. The School Leadership team within JCT could be consulted to create a set of suggestions for principals on how to support short course development work in their schools.

Model of support

1. Schools could be provided with guidance about the desirable knowledge and skills set of the lead teacher and members of the working group
2. Teachers could be supported to establish and effectively co-ordinate short course working groups in their school
3. A range of possible approaches to guide the task of working groups might be developed for schools.
4. Templates for recording the process of short course development might be drawn up e.g. for working group meetings, for consulting students/parents/staff.

5. JCT professional development should include a further strengthening of the content knowledge and skills required in short course development work.
6. Guidelines to support schools in the design of appropriate short course assessment tasks, both of a formative and summative nature, might be developed
7. Schools should be supported to engage in piloting of short courses, i.e. structuring their pilot process, using effective feedback tools, revising draft specifications in light of pilot data etc.

Appendix 1: JCT support for participating schools

	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E	School F
JCT support for consultation with staff	Y					
CPD Event 1: Feb 9 th 2015 <u>Attendees</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principals • Teachers • JCT personnel (short course team) <u>Agenda</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome and Introductions • Overview of Level 2 Learning Programmes • Project Overview (Structure, Timeline, Roles and Expectations, Research) • Initial Steps (Read and Research, Consultation, Scoping Document) 	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
CPD Event 2: Mar 18 th 2015 <u>Attendees</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers • JCT personnel (short course team) <u>Agenda</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of Progress and Mapping our work • Deciding and Supporting the Next Steps (Redesigning the Scoping Process, Short Course Specifications, Writing Learning Outcomes) 	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Focused CPD Event: May 9 th 2015 <u>Attendees</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers from 2 schools • JCT personnel (short course team) <u>Agenda</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The learning envisaged within short courses 	Y	Y				

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Features of the scoping document • The status of work • Focused support session 						
School Visits: Apr – May 2015			Y		Y	Y
CPD Event 3: Jun 10 th 2015 <u>Attendees</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers • JCT personnel (short course team + others) • NCCA personnel <u>Agenda</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overview of the project to date • Short Course development in schools (teacher presentations) • Development and organisation of Learning Outcomes • Feedback on specification documents • Future supports 	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Short Course development: Writing day	Y	Y				
School Visits: Sept - Dec 2015					Y	Y
Phone Conference: Sept - Dec 2015				Y		

Appendix 2: School Case Studies

School A

Short course description

Title: Where am I from? Where am I going?

Focus: A course that enables the student to develop skills related to finding their way to new activities to try, how to choose them and how to access them.

Curricular link: This course uses parts of each of the PLU's especially Living in a Community, Personal Care, Numeracy and Communications and Literacy.

Short course status

By December 2015, the second draft of the short course specification was produced. The school is currently piloting the short course, and plans further refinement based on feedback from students, teachers, and parents.

Involvement of staff

In school A the principal was very involved initially, but this involvement decreased as the time went on.

Teacher A first met with a short course working group of 4 teachers and 3 Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) during a breakout session at a whole-staff meeting. The working group decided to elicit ideas about the short course from all staff using a short questionnaire. Teacher A used the questionnaire data to draft the title for a cross-curricular short course, suited to the needs of the students. Many of the ideas reflected learning that was already happening in the existing programme.

The working group were not subsequently able to come together to discuss the short course. Instead Teacher A visited each working group member in their class. He indicated that this was possible only because of the size of the school and way the timetable is structured.

'We didn't get a chance to sit down for an hour or for people to in school to critique my documents'.

Process of development

Most of the work on the development of the short course was done by Teacher A in free time after school, during the week. He acknowledged that time and the resulting sense of isolation arising from working alone was a challenge:

'It was predominantly my work, adapting it with feedback from the meetings and feedback from JCT. It was hard work as you were writing, and not knowing whether it was right or rubbish'.

JCT support

Much of the feedback that guided the work of Teacher A was from JCT, through emails and phone calls, as well as school visits on three occasions

Teacher professional development

Teacher A articulated that involvement has given him confidence regarding future curriculum development.

'The process was difficult, but having gone through it, I feel better equipped to do another [short course]'.

In particular, Teacher A highlighted his sense of achievement in relation to the selection of learning outcomes and learning experiences which would be different, engaging and enjoyable for students, as they would allow them to get out and visit places in their local community. He also stated that the 'quirky' title was 'all-encompassing' and that captured attention.

School B

Short course description

Title: 'Knowing Me, Knowing You!'

Focus: This short course allows students build self-awareness and confidence, and develop competence in a range of communication and self-awareness skills and strategies, to facilitate them towards being their personal best and making a valuable contribution to society.

Curricular link: Social, Personal and Health Education, Art

Short course status

By December 2015, the second draft of the scoping document was in development.

Involvement of staff

In School B the principal was involved initially, and thereafter indicated availability if needed, but Teacher B was conscious that the principal was very busy, and chose not to request assistance.

Together with the principal, Teacher B initially asked for volunteers to join a short course working group during a whole-staff meeting. However, because most students in the school follow Level 1 programmes, there was little interest amongst staff.

Process of development

Teacher B worked independently on the development of the short course, which she acknowledged as very difficult:

'There was no group buzz, no meeting of ideas, or ongoing assessment of the work. The most difficult aspect for me was working alone'.

Teacher B did most of the short course development work at weekends and during school holidays, and also availed of a days' release from school duties covered by JCT.

Teacher B found the scoping document difficult to complete and as a result believed that she needed to spend a substantial amount of time reading the L2LP documentation.

School B was the only participating school who consulted with parents. Two parents engaged in the discussion, one of whom was a member of the parent's association. They were very positive about Level 2 short courses, recognising that they offered a formal opportunity to recognise the learning of their children.

JCT support

Teacher B reported a lack of clarity after attendance at the first cluster meeting. However, the later full-day one-to-one support with JCT staff offered her a chance to breathe life into her short course.

'I felt that it was dull and lacking, but we turned the course upside-down and inside-out...and I think it's much better now'.

In particular, the one-on-one support helped Teacher B to align the proposed learning in the short course with specific events which already occur in the school (e.g. the graduation ceremony).

Teacher professional development

Teacher B stated that she was much better informed about junior cycle developments as a result of involvement in the pilot.

School C

Short course description

Title: 'Music and Drama in my Life'

Focus: This short course was based on a level 3 project previously run in School C which was considered to be very successful and beneficial for students.

Curricular link: Music, Drama, History, English

Short course status

By December 2015, the school received feedback on the first draft of the short course specification. The school is now piloting the short course, which will be refined based on feedback from students, teachers, and parents.

Involvement of staff

The principal in school C expressed a high level of interest in the development of the short course, underlined by a willingness to join the working group. However, the principal was very busy and Teacher C found her less accessible than he would have liked. The principal did however review and provide verbal feedback on the drafts of short course documents.

Teacher C found getting other staff involved difficult. He reported limited time to meet with staff during, or even after, working hours; and, other school events such as a WSE impacted on the time and availability of teachers to engage in the process. The working group in the school (3 senior school teachers and the principal) met on three occasions, but not all members could make it at the same time.

'We didn't have as much time as I wanted, and it wasn't always possible to meet'

Despite the challenge of meeting Teacher C found that the existence of the working group meant multiple perspectives fed into the development process, and strategies specific to the needs of the Level 2 learner were kept to the forefront.

Process of development

Teacher C reported that most of the short course development work was done alone in the evening times during the school week, and during the holidays.

Teacher C consulted with staff members and students using a questionnaire, with responses coming predominantly from the senior school.

Teacher C initially found it difficult to complete elements of the scoping document, in particular the positioning of the statements of learning covered by the short course under the Framework and in alignment with L2LP.

This short course was based on an existing Level 3 project in the school, and Teacher C sought information about this project from the teachers, students and special needs assistants who had been previously involved. Teacher C reported that this was an essential determining factor in the strengths of the short course which has been developed.

School D

Short course description

Title: Learning to Cook

Focus: This course focuses on the development of basic practical skills required by students who are having their first opportunity to cook. By participating in this course, students will gain knowledge and the confidence to use their school experiences in their home lives; and potentially progress to work in this area at a later stage.

Curricular link: Home Economics, SPHE/Lifeskills, Literacy, Numeracy.

Short course status

By December 2015, the school was working on the first draft of the short course specification. This included piloting specific aspects of the course with a small group.

Involvement of staff

The principal in School D expressed a high level of interest in the process of short course development, asked for progress reports throughout the process, and was very involved in the early stages.

Teacher D reported that staff were reluctant to get involved because L2LP was still at an introductory stage. A working group, consisting of the principal, Teacher D and one other teacher, was established but the work was predominantly undertaken by Teacher D. The working group came together at the start of the process to share ideas, but thereafter interaction was mainly in the form of updates from Teacher D.

Teacher D identified challenges associated with the timing of the short course pilot programme, and suggested that a start early in the school year would facilitate the use of whole-staff CPD hours for working group meetings.

Process of development

Teacher D had very little time allocated for her work during school hours, although she did use the facility of a day release offered by JCT. Most of the short course development work was done in the evening time during the school week.

JCT support

A JCT team member visited during a staff meeting in School D in advance of the start of the pilot, to outline the structure of the pilot programme, and to conduct a small-scale consultation with staff about their ideas for short courses.

The lead teacher felt that although she was developing a learning area specific short course, the type of learning described in the course would allow many teachers in the school to lead it afterwards

‘While I have the responsibility for putting this [course] together, I don’t see it as my course..., it can be handed on to someone else once it is finished’.

School E

Short course description

Title: Water, Water Everywhere

Focus: This short course is designed to build on prior knowledge that students have on the subject of water. It aims to provide the context within which students may learn the important role water plays in their lives, develop awareness of water at home, school, in the community, and how water may be used for leisure. The short course also aims to inform students’ about the importance of water in sustaining all life on Earth, develop practical skills to demonstrate the importance of water use in all facets of daily life and develop and maintain a positive attitude to water conservation.

Curricular link: This is a cross-curricular short course and as such touches upon many different areas of the Junior Cycle Curriculum. In English, oral presentations, written descriptions and reading for information ensures that all strands of the subject are met. The course is also focuses on history, geography, physical education, science while other areas such as drama, music, math and art are also integral parts of the course.

Short course status

By December 2015, the third draft of the short course specification was drafted. The school are piloting the short course, and will seek to refine it further based on feedback from students, teachers, and parents.

Involvement of staff

The principal in School E was very supportive of the short course development process made time available for Teacher E to talk to staff during whole staff meetings about the

project, consult regarding possible course content and seek to bring together a working group.

At the whole staff meetings ideas for short courses were generated, and feedback was gathered relevant to sections of the scoping document. Teacher E reported by whole staff input as being very important in terms of a sense of ownership of the short course. At this point several staff volunteered to be part of a working group, but the group never managed to meet. Teacher E recognised this as a missed opportunity.

'Although the initial feedback and involvement from the school was great, as the process evolved it became more of an individual pursuit. There are a number of reasons for this – the school is a very busy place. Finding time during the school day to meet with staff was an issue and time during staff meetings was limited'.

Process of development

Other than the whole staff meetings and a single meeting meetings with the working group, Teacher E undertook the short course development work outside of school hours.

Teacher E put in a lot of preparation before and after whole staff meetings, designing discussion sheets related to various sections of the scoping document to ensure relevant feedback was gathered.

I would look at the scoping document, highlight whatever was difficult, and design a document so that the staff could discuss and come up with answers in groups during our various staff meetings. I would then collect, collate and try put into the form of a document. It was way better than me sitting at a computer, trying to think of things. I would never be able to think of things that they mentioned'.

JCT support

Early in the process a JCT team member visited the school to review the work to date. This feedback was welcomed as providing reassurance to the school that they were on the right track.

'The feedback from the JCT team was an integral part of the design of the document and without them I would not have produced anything worthwhile'.

School F

Short course description

Title: Grow it, Cook it, Eat it!

Focus: Personal Care - Life Skills, SPHE, Science - Appreciation of the Cycle of Life

Curricular link: Home Economics, Horticulture, ICT

Short course status

By December 2015, the school developed the third draft of the short course specification. The school will pilot the short course in September 2016, and refine it further based on feedback from students, teachers, and parents.

Involvement of staff

The principal in School F was supportive of the short course development work, facilitating Teacher F to work with two colleagues for an hour during a whole staff meeting. However, her heavy workload prevented direct involvement.

The working group consisted of Teacher F, the cookery and horticulture teachers. Despite the fact that the group came together on one occasion only, Teacher F found this session very empowering and useful.

'It was fantastic, as we had never sat down and actually planned as a group [in this way] before. The sharing of ideas and expertise really got the enthusiasm going. It was brilliant and I came away with reams and reams of ideas of how I could deliver this course'.

Subsequently Teacher F asked her two colleagues for their comments on the drafts of various short course documents. They took this work on in their own time.

Process of development

Teacher F took advantage of the day's release offered by JCT to draft the course specification. Aside from this day all work was done in the evenings after school and at weekends. Despite misgivings about the workload involved, Teacher F remained convinced that the writing of the short course should be done by one person in a school, with the role of the working group being to advise.