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Designing Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate syllabi – the need for a new template.

- Áine Hyland and Declan Kennedy

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[1] 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. Both the Junior Cycle and the Leaving Certificate are nationally assessed by an external body – the State Examinations Commission (SEC), but unlike 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 the minimalist "learning-outcomes-only" template, as have some new and a small number of existing Leaving Cert subjects. Ther has been widespread criticism of the template. In 2019, The Irish Science Teachers' Association (ISTA) published a report which found that lack of depth of treatment in the Junior Cycle science specification was a major problem. 85% of the 762 respondents believed that the Junior Cycle template would be unsuitable for use at Senior Cycle level. In April 2021, a survey carried out by An Gréasán (the Association of Teachers of Irish) found that 97% of the teachers who completed the survey, believed that more details should be provided in the draft specifications. A survey of over 750 teachers of Irish as a second language (L2) regarding the new Junior Cycle Gaeilge specifications in 2022 found that 95% of teachers were critical of the new template. 93% stated that further guidance should be provided on the subjects, themes and topics arising from the learning outcomes. And in 2022, the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI) based on a questionnaire answered by 2981 teachers stated: (ASTI, 2022, pp. 13-14):… 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. They added: "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".

[1] In this article the term "syllabus" will be used instead of "specification" as the term "syllabus" has greater clarity and is the more commonly used term at international level.

Leaving Cert syllabi

A new Leaving Certificate 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 (2021) criticised what they referred to as "a sub-standard syllabus that does not measure up to international best practice" and stated: "It is time to call a halt to the practice of the Department of Education publishing these vague and dumbed down syllabi". A revised draft syllabus for Leaving Certificate Irish was circulated by the NCCA in 2021 and, under the auspices of Conradh na Gaeilge, fourteen organisations interested in the promotion of Irish in the education system rejected the draft syllabus. (Hyland and Uí Uiginn, p. 19). They found that the draft specifications, based on themes and learning outcomes, were sparse and lacking in depth and lacked information about what the teacher is to teach or what 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 the assessment of the subject.

Third level academics also expressed their concern about the design template being used by the NCCA. In a letter to the *Irish Times* (Childs 2020) Dr. Peter Childs, Emeritus Senior Lecturer in Science Education, University of Limerick, described the situation regarding the use of template 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".

Very significantly, reports from the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in 2022 and 2023 were also critical. In 2021 they stated that "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." And in July 2023, they recommended that the NCCA "review the proposed design of the new specifications to ensure teachers are properly supported and students are taught to the highest professional standards".

The above comments from various stakeholders are only some of the concerns which have been and continue to be expressed about the current approach being taken by the NCCA to syllabus design. While the NCCA have indicated that their approach is influenced by 'international best practice' the authors of this paper 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.

This alignment is apparent in externally assessed examination syllabi in other jurisdictions. Having examined syllabi in many countries, the authors of this paper 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 International Baccalaureate also has some excellent examples of subject syllabi. While well designed syllabi in other jurisdictions include a statement of learning outcomes, they provide information on depth of treatment, on teaching and learning approaches and on assessment - considerably more information than is currently being provided by the NCCA.

Conclusions and recommendations

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 when it comes to senior cycle reform in Ireland. He argued that 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 has also advised against adopting curricula which are "a mile wide and an inch deep". In the view of the authors of this paper, the current approach in curriculum design being taken by the NCCA is in danger of reducing the Leaving Cert. curriculum to one which could become "a mile wide and an inch deep". To avoid this, 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.

It is the view of the authors of this paper that a new syllabus template needs to be developed for all syllabi at Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate level. This template must contain more detailed information about the depth of treatment of subjects and explicitly link learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities and assessment. The full range of syllabus documentation (including guidelines for teachers, sample examination 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 the new material and to undergo appropriate CPD (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.