

Leaving Cert Reform: Research-led or Student-led?

Presentation by Áine Hyland at the
ResearchEd conference in St.
Columba's College, Rathfarnham.

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Format of Presentation

- Teaching as a form of scholarship (SoTL)
- Curriculum Decision-Making in Ireland
- Senior Cycle Reform – limitations of NCCA template
- A Vision for the Future – OECD's *Learning Compass 2030*
- Values – the UN Sustainable Development Goals
- Disciplinary knowledge and disciplinary styles
- *Equity and Excellence* – proposals for a re-imagined senior cycle in Ireland – a critique

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)

- Teaching and learning (T&L) as a form of research and scholarship has been recognised in higher education for over thirty years.
- Many education scholars have embraced the concept of SoTL including scholars and researchers in the Harvard Graduate School of Education.
- The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning (located on the grounds of Stanford University in California) spearheaded the SoTL movement and provided support for colleagues around the world in the 1990s and 2000s as teaching and learning became a recognised form of scholarship in our universities. UCC afforded T&L parity of esteem with research..

Secondary school Curriculum in Ireland

- The curriculum is a national curriculum, decided by the Minister for Education
- National assessment and certification at 15/16 and 18/19 years of age (Junior Cycle and Leaving Cert).
- Minister is advised by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)
- Examinations are set and marked by the State Examinations Commission (SEC)
- In normal times (i.e non-Covid) teachers do not assess their own students for certification purposes.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)

- The NCCA was established on a statutory basis in 2001 “to advise the Minister on matters relating to (a) the curriculum for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools and (b) the assessment procedures employed in schools and examinations on subjects which are part of the curriculum”. (*Education Act 1998*).

State Examinations Commission (SEC)

- The State Examinations Commission (SEC) was established by statutory order in 2003. It is described as “a non-departmental public body under the aegis of the Department of Education and Skills” and is responsible for “the development, assessment, accreditation and certification of the second-level examinations for the Irish State – the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate”.

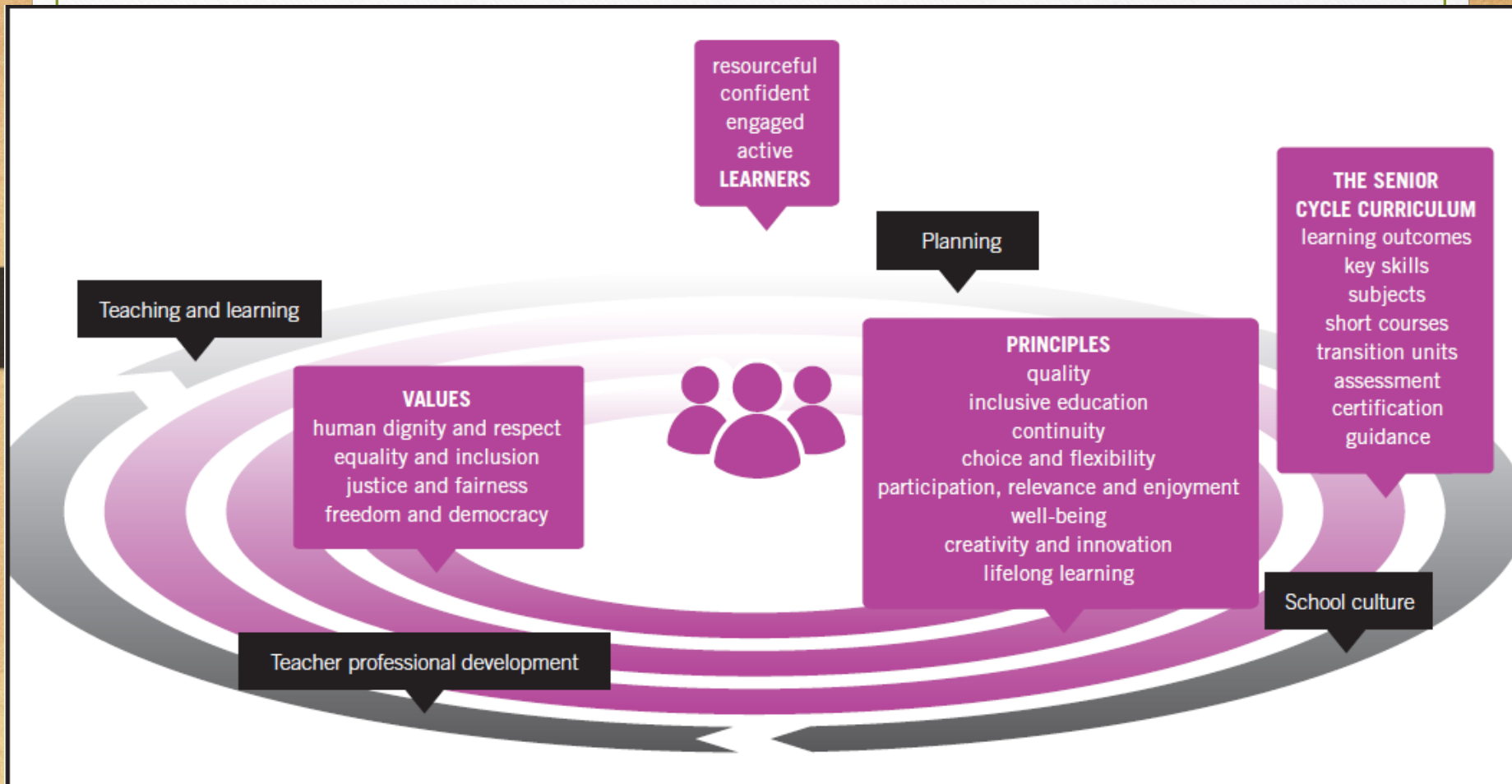
Leaving Certificate

- The Leaving Certificate examination is externally set and assessed, and is a high-stakes national examination.
- It is held in high esteem by students, teachers, parents, higher education institutions and employers.
- It certifies successful completion of second-level education and is a “passport” for admission to further and higher education and for apprenticeship and employment .
- It is accepted by all Irish Higher Education institutions for admission purposes and is also accepted by many leading universities internationally.

Senior Cycle Reform

- An overall Senior Cycle Curriculum framework was agreed in Ireland in 2009. This was described in the NCCA document *Towards Learning*. Note the emphasis on skills – and no specific mention of “disciplinary knowledge”.
- Subject Development Groups were set up and individual subject syllabi / specification were or are now being drafted.
- Some new or revised subject syllabi / specifications have been completed e.g. P.E., Computer Studies, Agricultural Science. Draft specifications have been circulated for some others e.g. Gaelge and are about to be circulated for the three science subjects, Biology, Chemistry and Physics.

An Overview of Senior Cycle Education



Format of all syllabi as set out by the NCCA in *Towards Learning* (2009)

- Introduction to senior cycle
- Introduction, rationale, aims etc of subject
- Statement about skills etc
- Related learning
- Syllabus overview
- Statements on key skills, etc
- **Syllabus material expressed as topics and learning outcomes**
- Assessment arrangements (a very general overview).

NCCA reply to ISTA in 2014

- In 2014 the ISTA contacted the NCCA expressing concern about the skeletal nature of the syllabi / specifications. The NCCA replied saying: “*We don’t intend to include ‘depth of treatment’ and/or ‘range of subject knowledge’ in the new specifications*”. At that stage the Junior Cycle syllabi (specifications) had been issued containing only Themes / Topics and Learning Outcomes and teachers had already expressed concern about the vagueness of the specifications.

NCCA approach to subject revision

- “.... curriculum content will be expressed as learning outcomes, in which inquiry-based learning and the key skills of senior cycle – critical and creative thinking, being personally effective, working with others, communicating, and information processing - were embedded. ...driven by a need to change the focus of assessment and to include practical assessment”.

Learning Outcomes

“Learning Outcomes are statements of essential learning, and as essential learning, they are written at minimum acceptable or threshold (pass/fail) standard. The learning described in learning outcomes is the learning that must be attained in order that the learner can pass”.

(Jenny Moon, *Linking Levels, Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria*).

Learning Outcomes

When designing a curriculum or subject syllabus, learning outcomes are a valuable tool for identifying what learners should know and be able to do at the end of a course or programme. But they are not a sufficient description of a syllabus. It is not appropriate to use learning outcomes alone to define an externally assessed examination syllabus.

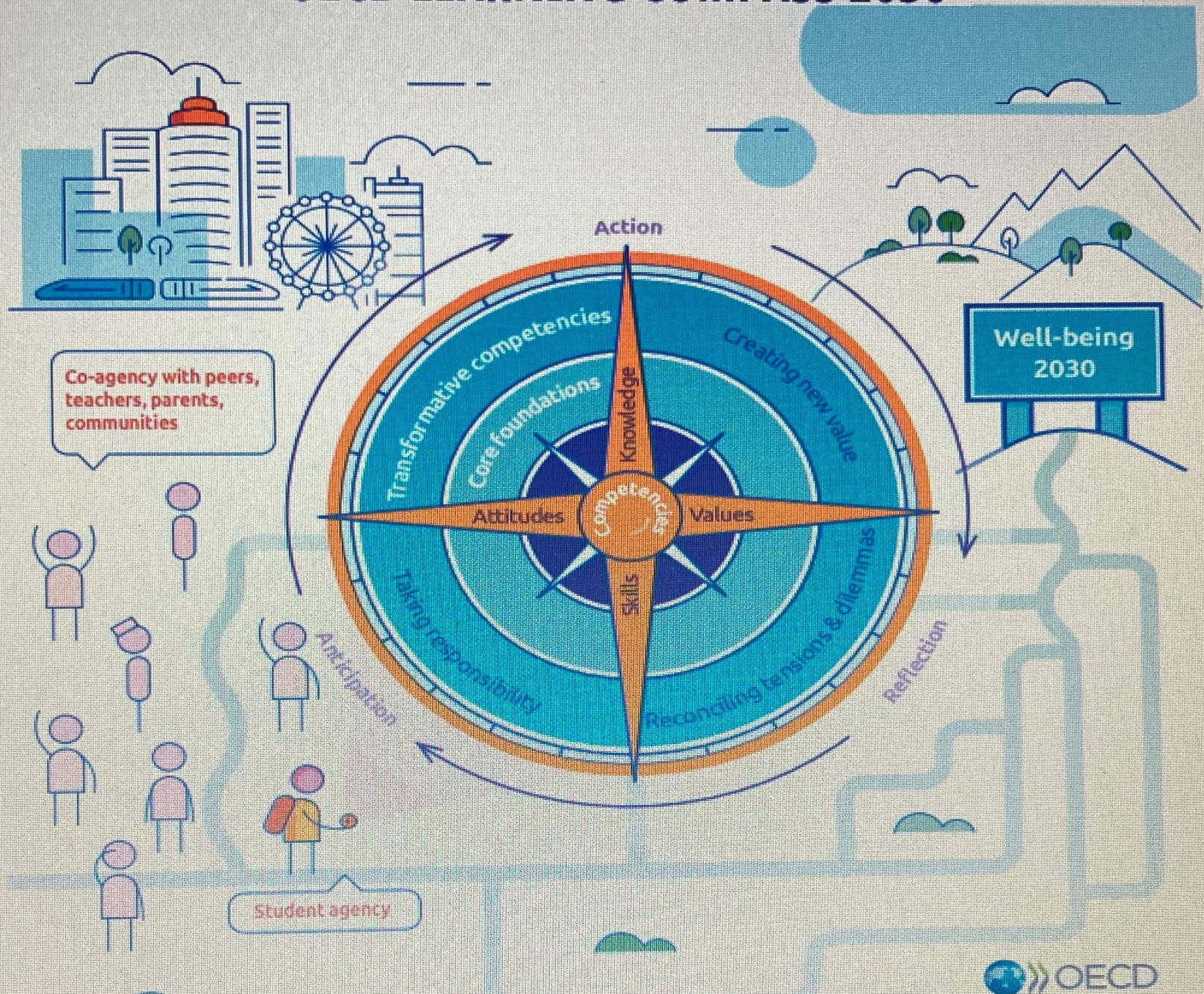
Learning Outcomes

- Unless they are rigorously written and are accompanied by additional information e.g. depth of treatment, teacher guidelines and assessment details and criteria, a curriculum or a syllabus consisting only of themes and learning outcomes can result in a dumbed down and superficial curriculum, lacking in depth – what Andreas Schleicher (OECD) referred to a “a mile-wide-and-an–inch-deep curriculum”.

A Reimagined Senior Cycle in Ireland

- We need an ambitious up-to-date framework for a reimagined senior cycle curriculum. Our vision of the future world has changed since 2009. Global warming, climate change, the risk of pandemics, energy crises, war etc. have changed our perspectives. Technology has radically changed our concept of education and of work.
- The design of curriculum or syllabus should include **knowledge**, skills, attitudes and values.
- At senior cycle the curriculum should be embedded in the disciplines while providing opportunities for interdisciplinary learning.
- The curriculum should recognise and take account of the different disciplinary styles – in syllabus design, in teaching and learning and in assessment. A “one-size-fits all” approach to T&L is not appropriate.

OECD LEARNING COMPASS 2030



OECD Learning Compass 2030

- It sets out a “learning framework” which offers a broad vision of the types of competences students need to thrive in 2030.
- Four points of the compass:- **Knowledge**, skills, values and attitudes.
- Transformational competencies:- Taking Responsibility; Reconciling Tensions and dilemmas; creating new values.
- Co-agency with peers, teachers, parents and communities.
- Student Agency.
- Emphasis on Well-being.
- Action, reflection, anticipation

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

1 NO POVERTY



2 ZERO HUNGER



3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING



4 QUALITY EDUCATION



5 GENDER EQUALITY



6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION



7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY



8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH



9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE



10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES



11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES



12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION



13 CLIMATE ACTION



14 LIFE BELOW WATER



15 LIFE ON LAND



16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS



17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS



SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT
GOALS

The UN Sustainable Development Goals

- The “Values” aspect of the reimagined senior cycle curriculum should draw on the UN SDGs.
- How can we incorporate these goals into senior cycle curriculum?
- When planning each subject syllabus, how can we take account of some or all of these goals?
- Are there other ways in which we can raise students awareness of the UN SDGs?

Equity and Excellence for All: Where the Student is at the Centre of their senior cycle experience. (March 2022)

The tenets of the proposed senior cycle reform as stated in the document Equity and Excellence for All:

- To empower students to meet the challenges of the 21st century
- To enrich the student experience and build on what's strong in our current system
- To embed wellbeing and to reduce student stress levels.

Equity and Excellence for All: Where the Student is at the Centre of their senior cycle experience. (March 2022)

- Barriers between the established LC, LCVP and LCA will be removed.
- Two new LC subjects – *Drama, Film and Theatre Studies* and *Climate Action and Sustainable Development*, initially in network schools.
- Revised curricula in Biology, Chemistry, Physics and Business will be trialled in Network schools and will be examined for the first time in 2028. Changes may be made in the light of experience and the new syllabi will not be rolled out to all schools until after the trialling.
- New and revised subjects will have 60% of marks for the written examination paper with the balance for another assessment component
- From 2023, candidates will take Paper 1 in LC Irish and English at the end of 5th Year.

Equity and Excellence for All: Where the student is at the centre of their Senior Cycle Experience. (March 2022)

- Some of the key recommendations had not been mentioned in the *NCCA Advisory Report on Senior Cycle Reform* (March 2021).
- Teachers of English and Irish (through their subject organisations iNote and An Gréasán) expressed their concern about the proposal to move LC Paper 1 to the end of 5th Year.
- There was no mention of the fact that of the 41 Leaving Cert subjects only 14 are assessed only by terminal written examination.
- Irish teachers pointed out that currently 40% of the LC marks are for the Oral Irish exam.

Minister Foley's response to concerns about moving Paper 1

“Paper 1 (of LC English and Irish) obviously would reflect the fact that the paper is being taken at the end of one year rather than the end of two years. There will be remodelling and reshaping of paper 1 in English and Irish so as to ensure that any of the issues that have been raised will be factored in and will be accounted for, the primary objective at all times is to ensure that students have the best opportunity to maximise their ability and potential and do much in a stress free, anxiety free, atmospheric environment”.

(Minister for Education, Norma Foley, on a radio interview 29th August 2022).

Characteristics of a well-designed syllabus.

- In a well-designed syllabus there should be clear and constructive alignment between learning outcomes, (detailed) subject content, pedagogy and assessment. The syllabus should be planned in an integrated way taking account of and making transparent all these elements from the start. And the full information should be available for students and teachers BEFORE the new or revised syllabi are introduced in schools.

Report of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education, May 2022

- “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. The Committee recommends that the NCCA reviews the proposed design of the new specifications to ensure teachers are properly supported and students taught to the highest professional standards”.

Joint Oireachtas Committee of Education, *Learning for Life*, May 2022.

Good news from the Minister about the design of syllabi?

- *“As teachers are key to implementing curriculum change, **particular attention will be paid to the design of the curriculum documents** and the professional development that is required. The department has learnings from the experience of curriculum change and the NCCA is being asked to conduct further research and a consultation process with teachers to inform what is needed”.*

(Dept. of Education, Extract from press release about senior cycle reform)

Roles of the NCCA and the SEC

- At present, there appears to be a lack of alignment between the NCCA and the SEC (apparent in some Junior cycle exam papers this year). It is my view that the NCCA should provide full information on each new and revised syllabus (including details of assessment) before they circulate draft syllabi for consultation. They should do this in collaboration with the SEC who have the knowledge and experience of what's feasible. This was the practice in the past – why has it been changed in the past decade?

thankS