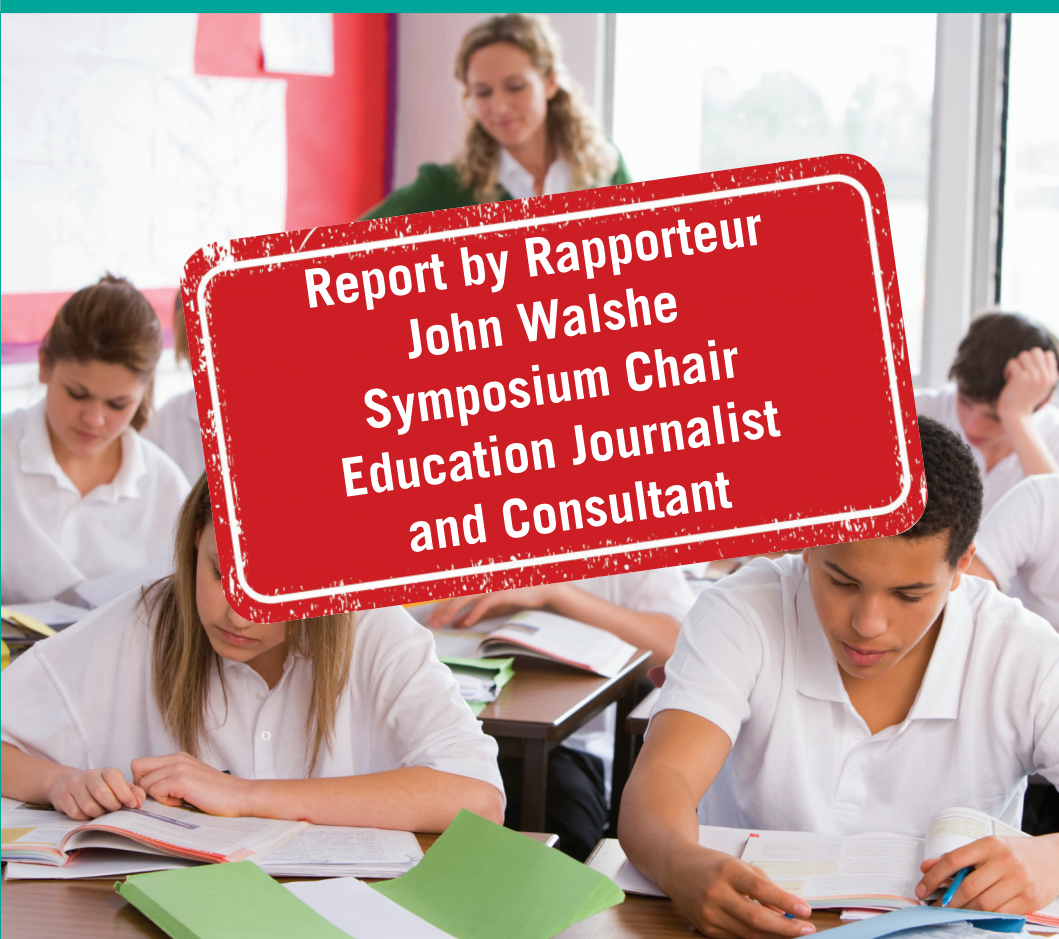


# SENIOR CYCLE REFORM *CARPE DIEM*



**Report by Rapporteur  
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## Introduction

NAPD President, Rachel O'Connor, in opening the Association's Annual Symposium in the Marker Hotel Dublin, had two main messages:

- The outside world is changing rapidly but change in education is very slow – too slow
- The Leaving Certificate (LC) is almost 100 years old and needs urgent reform

Other key messages that emerged from the lively discussions over the following few hours were that:

- Senior Cycle is too preoccupied with preparing students for selection to Higher Education Institutions
- Stress levels are increasing as the LC exam draws near
- Students must be at the centre of reform
- Soft skills have to be embedded into the curriculum
- The LC/CAO is culturally embedded – we need cultural change
- We need a new focus on multiple pathways within, and beyond, schooling

The event had a much bigger reach than in the past, with more than 240 people participating online and 80 attending in-person. Combining in-person and online attendance may be the way forward for future Symposiums, possibly with greater provision for online participation.

Guest speakers were:

- Dalton Tattan, Assistant Secretary General, Department of Education
- Dr Niall Muldoon, Ombudsman for Children
- Professor Anne Looney, Executive Dean, DCU Institute of Education
- Professor Selina McCoy, ESRI and TCD

## Heartful education

*When educating the minds of our youth, we must not forget their hearts – Dalai Lama*

The Symposium was bookended by the President's thoughtful opening speech and concluded on an optimistic note by NAPD Director Paul Crone, who saw hope for change in the future. After each guest speaker, time was given to tables to discuss three questions related to the presentation. The feedback provided was fascinating.

### What's wrong with the Senior Cycle?

The obsession in Ireland with university entry was clearly demonstrated by the unanimous view that Senior Cycle is too preoccupied with preparing students for selection to Higher Education Institutions. This obsession is not confined to schools - there is a cultural and societal preoccupation with Higher Education. *"This is what success looks like"* was the apocryphal but telling reaction of parents to their daughter or son getting 550 points in their LC.

The effects of this pre-occupation are felt keenly in schools and include:

- Rote Learning
- Teaching to the test
- Memory training by teachers
- Student stress
- Growth of grind schools
- Loss of 21st century skills in the final two years of second level schooling
- Dropping of sports and other extra-curricular activities

Paul Crone, NAPD Director, had no doubt about the causes of high levels of student stress and the fact that many clearly intelligent young people were unable to excel in school: *"We have secondary level education that is determined by two extremely suffocating factors - the LC terminal exams and the current entry process into Third Level"*. He made a strong case for the proposition that the current system of filtering students by points gained after the terminal exam is damaging.

### What's right with the Senior Cycle?

The LC is held in good standing, individually, collectively, nationally and internationally. Ireland has a very high completion rate at second level and has invested substantially in special education. Dalton Tattan pointed out that over 30 subjects now had additional components beyond the conventional written exam. He acknowledged that the 'bigger' subjects such as English, Maths and some Science and Business subjects still relied solely on the terminal exam.

Prof McCoy referred to an ESRI study in which teachers and parents highlighted affirmative teaching. Students mentioned positive relationships with teachers and being treated as adults in the Senior Cycle. Other positives were the range of programmes and subjects available, particularly in Transition Year, which offers a variety of learning experiences and fosters a range of skills.

*"We need a real visionary to lead the change"* - Participant

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### Students at the centre of change in the Senior Cycle

There was general agreement that students must be at the centre of change - but what does that mean in terms of schooling and assessment? Should students have more autonomy to direct their own learning and should they, for instance, be involved in their own assessment?

These questions provoked more comments than any others during the Symposium. Suggestions on how to put students at the centre of change included:

- More components and choices within subjects
- More choices of electives
- Multiple modes of assessments
- Promotion of self-directed learning
- Better guidance
- More therapeutic services
- Major and minor subjects at Senior Cycle
- Prioritise critical thinking and problem solving
- Provide real life experiences in the curriculum
- Extend the transition year into a 'real' three-year Senior Cycle
- Peer assessment and peer reporting
- Build resilience and ensure work experience for every student
- Listen to students, so they feel their voices are being heard

The response of one table when asked if students should be involved in their own assessment couldn't have been clearer - "*why wouldn't they be reflecting on their own learning?*" Another agreed "*to some extent, yes*" but left open the question of whether this would be self-assessment or peer assessment. There was a perceived need to build students' self-confidence to allow this to happen. It was also suggested that the success of Junior Cycle assessment should be built on. "*Encourage the concept of personal best*" was the recommendation from another table. It was agreed that greater training would have to be provided to teachers regarding feedback from autonomous learners.



### What do we want in a reformed Senior Cycle?

If Senior Cycle is to be reformed, then choices have to be made from a wide range of possibilities. To be successful the changes cannot happen in isolation from the rest of the education system or from the wider cultural and societal context. Symposium attendees put forward a very wide range of ideas for reform. They included:

- Use different assessment models
- Vary subject choices and make them accessible to all
- Challenge students
- Offer varied pathways for students to move forward
- Develop school cultures of creativity and exploration
- Focus on building relationships within classrooms
- Provide more education in the use of technology
- Help students to develop skills to survive and thrive in society

The link between the LC and CAO points weighed heavily on the discussions. Just over half of the in-person attendees gave a single word “Yes” answer to the question “*is the Senior Cycle too preoccupied with preparing students for selection to Higher Education*”? Others agreed but with the caveat that this preoccupation was culturally ingrained.

The idea of decoupling the LC from Higher Education entry was supported by some but by no means all. It would mean that Higher Education Institutions would have to devise new selection systems. Some believed this would free up the second level system for a more meaningful learner experience and would take pressure off students. But it would require a huge mindset shift. It would need bravery and courage due to the political implications. As one participant remarked, “*We need a real visionary to lead the change*”.

A significant minority of attendees was, however, strongly opposed to decoupling the LC from Higher Education entry. One table predicted that it would be catastrophic, while another doubted that it was a realistic proposition. The introduction of the HPAT test for medicine was described as a failure because students who could afford it were able to pay for lessons which helped them prepare for the test. “*Would this decoupling not devalue the post-primary system*”, asked one, while another suggested that it would lead to a lack of focus and motivation among Senior Cycle students.

The big unanswerable question was if this approach would lead to students dropping out of Senior Cycle altogether and concentrating instead on preparing for new separate entrance tests devised by universities.

What an alternative college entry system might look like was not clear. The possibility of using portfolios for Art courses or interviews for nursing was mentioned.

*“We are excellent at writing reports  
but too slow to implement them” -  
Niall Muldoon*

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as was weighting of relevant LC subjects for particular courses, as well as lotteries above a certain points threshold for high demand courses. There was considerable support for Prof Anne Looney's suggestion of subject specific scores in the LC for a number of high points courses. There was near unanimous support for her call for better pathways within and beyond schooling.

### What skills should be embedded in the Senior Cycle curriculum?

Skills have moved rapidly up the education agenda in recent years with increasing calls to help students develop so called soft-skills such as communications, teamwork etc. An online contributor argued that we should stop describing these as 'soft' because they are needed for a rapidly changing world.

Another suggested that the LC is serving the needs of society but that it may not be serving the needs of students, since the skills they are acquiring may not be easily quantified and are overlooked. The question about what life skills should be embedded in the curriculum provoked a very long and diverse range of suggestions, including:

- Emotional agility
- Well-being – to include good mental and sexual health
- Developing an appetite for lifelong learning
- Citizenship
- Independent learning
- Critical thinking
- Problem solving
- Financial management
- Resilience
- Personal effectiveness
- Learning to deal with grief and bereavement



- Conflict resolution
- Health management
- Experience of the world of work
- Dealing with peer pressure
- Information literacy
- Learning acceptance and confidence
- Presentational skills
- Increased involvement in social activities
- Interpersonal skills
- Communication skills
- Ability to promote and drive change

### Obstacles to change in the Senior Cycle

Dr Niall Muldoon, Children's Ombudsman, said *"We are excellent at writing reports but too slow to implement them"*, diagnosing our tardiness as a form of 'implementation deficit disorder'.

Vested interests were mentioned as obstacles to change in the feedback from several tables.

Among identified obstacles were:

- Teacher unions
- Parents
- Public perception
- Cultural factors
- Higher Education Institutions and the CAO

The Department of Education wasn't specifically mentioned, but its inclusion was implied in some responses.





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Fears of insufficient investment were highlighted by several attendees as an obstacle to reform. Allowing students to mix and match elements of the LCA and LCVP and FE with the established LC has been suggested. But some said that a potential obstacle to this happening was the negative attitudes in some quarters to current programmes such as the LCA and LCVP.

### Conclusions

Reform of the Senior Cycle cannot be divorced from the rest of the education system and reform in education cannot be divorced from changes outside the school walls. Technological changes are ricocheting around every aspect of our lives, while climate change and biodiversity loss are real and present dangers.

The 'digital era' is radically different from the industrial world for which the Senior Cycle was designed. It follows that changing the Senior Cycle requires nothing less than a significant cultural shift in the education system.





It's clear that there is a hunger for change across the education system. This is reflected in many different fora and media. The NAPD Symposium and its forthcoming policy on Senior Cycle reform are important contributors to the debate on what kind of system we want.

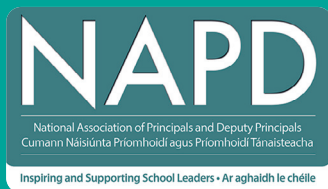
Any reforms have to be based on principles of equity, access, diversity, inclusion and fairness. They also have to be capable of implementation and of winning support. Several specific measures were suggested during the course of the Symposium including:

- Allow students to take FE components and elements of LCA/LCVP in Senior Cycle
- Consider post-primary education as three cycles (2 + 2 + 2) or (2 + 2 + 1), with the final post compulsory cycle focused on preparation for what comes next
- Put students at the centre of the design and implementation of reform
- Embed life skills and work experience in the curriculum
- Have multiple forms of assessment spread over the Senior Cycle
- Increase the allocation of marks to coursework
- Ask Higher Education Institutions to review their entry procedures
- Introduce subject specific scores plus course specific selection mechanisms, for a number of high points courses
- Persuade Government to commit to real change within three years



### Summing Up

NAPD Director **Paul Crone** argued that with the potential of the forthcoming Citizens' Assembly for Education, the Association should champion a modern approach to learning: *"Let's place a value on the student voice and a value on their individual aptitudes. This requires more than a small reform of the LC or the assessment model — it means a complete reimagining of what value we place on education and on skills within that system of education"*.



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