03

3. Learning in the Junior Cycle

The orientation of the new junior cycle – the rationale for change – is to place a greater emphasis on student learning, on the quality of that learning, and on the respective roles of teachers and students in that process. That's not to say that learning does not happen in the junior cycle we have now. Of course it does. But the evidence from research (ESRI 2004, 2006, 2007), and the feedback from the consultation indicates that each year of junior cycle is associated with a particular learning challenge. In first year the challenge is one of *progress*. While schools make considerable efforts to help students to settle in to post-primary school, they are less successful on connecting learning in primary school with the learning in post-primary classrooms. As a result, research shows that most students make little progress in the key areas of reading and mathematics in first year and some even regress.

In second year, the learning challenge is different. Here, the issue is the question *purpose*. Students are not sure of the purpose of second year and some drift into disengagement that will become more acute in the years ahead. As students move into third year the challenge is all about *product*. Student learning narrows and becomes more and more focused on preparing for the examination. During this time, an over-emphasis by teachers, with the support of their students, on the structure of lessons and covering the course at the expense of deep learning emerges. The key to addressing these challenges lies in a different approach to assessment and the examination. These proposed changes are outlined in the next chapter but some development will also be needed in how learning is organised across the junior cycle.

A Framework for Junior Cycle

To support schools in developing a high quality junior cycle programme that meets the needs of their students and that provides a close fit with the context, environment and community of the school, a *Framework for Junior Cycle* will be introduced.

The Framework describes what all junior cycle students should learn. It provides for the national qualifications associated with learning in junior cycle. But it also gives school management and teachers the professional space and flexibility to decide how best to organise the learning and adjust it to meet the learning needs of their students. In this sense, the primary focus of the framework is to ensure that all aspects of the curriculum and its organisation are focused on improving the learning and teaching that takes place every day in every classroom and site of learning. Recent research into educational change in improving education systems worldwide shows that while structural change and resources are still important, the vast majority of interventions now focus on learning and teaching and *'spend more of their activity on improving how instruction is delivered than on changing the content of what is delivered'* (McKinsey, 2010).

The framework will combine statements of purpose and intent relating to junior cycle education with information designed to guide schools in planning and developing their junior cycle programme. It sets the parameters for schools and supports schools engaged in planning for the development of their junior cycle.

How will the Framework support better learning in junior cycle?

The *Framework for Junior Cycle* will provide schools with greater autonomy and more flexibility than they have at present as they plan and organise junior cycle programmes that focus on the learning taking place in classrooms in each year of junior cycle. The framework is designed to encourage innovation in schooling and teaching and creative learning in the classroom. It will also facilitate the school in ensuring that literacy, numeracy and key skills are embedded in the learning.

The framework will have a clear and concise description of what it is that students should learn. This is expressed, in 24 **statements of learning**. The statements do not set out *everything* the student can learn in junior cycle, but their introduction does reflect the view that it is inadequate to describe what students should learn in terms of subjects alone. The statements will provide the basis for schools planning and evaluating their junior cycle programmes That process of planning will involve thinking about the combination of curriculum components (subjects and short courses) and learning experiences that will ensure that all statements of learning, along with key skills and literacy and numeracy skills, are addressed in the programmes of all junior cycle students. The combination of these statements of learning and skills will effectively represent the learning with which *all* students in junior cycle will be expected to engage. The statements are also useful for students and their parents as a guide to what they should expect from the junior cycle experience.

The junior cycle statements of learning describe what it is essential for students to know, understand, value and be able to do as a result of their time in junior cycle. Given that schools will be planning their own programmes, these statements provide the basis for consistency between schools and for the monitoring and evaluation of the work of schools. They set out the focus of teaching and learning across all areas of learning. The statements of learning are set out in Table 2.

Table 2.
Statements of Learning

	The student
1	communicates effectively using a variety of means in a range of contexts in L1[1]
2	reaches a level of personal proficiency in L2 and one other language in reading, writing, speaking and listening
3	creates, appreciates and critically interprets texts (including written, oral, visual and other texts)
4	recognises the potential uses of mathematical knowledge, skills, and understanding in all areas of learning
5	uses mathematical knowledge, reasoning and skills in devising strategies for investigating and solving problems
6	describes, illustrates, interprets, predicts and explains patterns and relationships
7	improves their observation, inquiry, and critical-thinking skills
8	develops an understanding of the natural world
9	values what it means to be an active citizen, with rights and responsibilities in local and wider contexts
10	learns how to think and act sustainably
11	understands the distribution of social, economic, and environmental phenomena
12	values local and national heritage and recognises the relevance of the past to current national and international issues and events
13	makes informed financial decisions and develops good consumer skills
14	takes initiative, is innovative and develops entrepreneurial skills
15	uses appropriate technologies in meeting a design challenge
16	applies practical skills as they develop models and products using a variety of materials and technologies
17	creates, presents and appreciates artistic works
18	brings an idea from conception to realisation
19	uses ICT effectively and ethically in learning and in life
20	takes action to safeguard and promote their wellbeing and that of others
21	appreciates and respects how diverse values, beliefs and traditions have contributed to the communities and culture in which they live
22	develops moral, ethical and responsible decision making and a sense of personal values
23	understands the importance of food and diet in making healthy lifestyle choices
24	participates in physical activity confidently and competently

[1] L1 is the language medium of the school (Irish in Irish-medium schools). L2 is the second language (English in Irish-medium schools).

Curriculum components

Engagement with the statements of learning will be built around three curriculum components; subjects, short courses, and for the small group of students working towards a Level 2 qualification, Priority Learning Units (PLUs).

The NCCA will develop and publish the specifications (syllabus documents) for all subjects and PLUs and some short courses The new subject specifications will represent more than a tweaking of what's already there or a new edition with learning outcomes replacing topic lists or objectives. As discussed in section 1, the framework is the essential connection between curriculum *and* assessment. With the new assessment arrangements in place, the subject specifications take on a role they have not had so far in post-primary education. They become the tools for planning, the means by which learning is supported, and progress monitored, and the resource for reporting to parents. The course is no longer an entity to be 'covered'. Rather it becomes the focus of and resource for learning.

Subjects

The NCCA will provide the curriculum specifications for subjects and these will be outcomes-based and in most cases at a common level. English, Irish and Mathematics will be specified at two levels.

The learning outcomes in these specifications will be less extensive and detailed than at present and will be designed for approximately 200 hours of learner engagement. The term 'approximately' is used here in recognition of the fact that the amount of time devoted to the learning in a specification will vary from school to school according to the priority given to, among other things, its time allocation, the learning and teaching approaches and activities used, and the particular cohort of students involved. The 200 hours should be viewed as a minimum and does not preclude a school devoting more time where it's needed or desired. To promote the development of literacy and numeracy skills, English, Irish, and Mathematics will be designed for a minimum of 240 hours of engagement. The increased focus on literacy and numeracy across the curriculum will also contribute significantly to learning in these areas.

To assist in the planning for learning and teaching, the specifications will indicate the time to be spent on assessment activity and homework. The specifications will also establish how the learning in a subject or short course links to particular statements of learning.

The key skills of junior cycle will be embedded in the learning outcomes of the subject. Throughout the specifications, there will be a strong focus on learning and teaching in the subject, and the section on assessment and evidence of learning will reflect the changed approach to assessment at junior cycle and indicate how evidence of learning in the subject can contribute towards junior cycle qualifications.

Through the use of exemplification, the curriculum specifications for subjects will ensure that schools, students, and parents are clear about the level of achievement or standard expected of students as they engage with the curriculum. The list of current junior cycle subjects is presented in Table 4 (page 30) and new curriculum specifications will be developed in these subjects.

Short courses

Why short courses? Because schools asked for opportunities to connect to their communities, to consolidate and strengthen aspects of student learning, to include new and different learning experiences and ICT in the junior cycle experience. Short courses will be designed for approximately 100 hours of learner engagement.

The range of potential short courses presented in Table 3 indicates the scope for school innovation offered by this component. In the first instance, NCCA will produce specifications for six short courses for use by schools. These will offer schools examples of short courses of different types at a standard aligned with Level 3 of the National Framework of Qualifications. However in many cases, schools will develop their own short courses to a template designed by the NCCA. To support them in this developmental activity, and in addition to the exemplification offered by NCCA short courses, NCCA will provide materials to guide schools through the developmental process and assist them in ensuring the courses are at an appropriate standard.

Some short courses may look quite like shorter versions of subjects based around a particular learning focus or a particular area of competence, such as *Chinese language and culture* or *Mathematics for living and work*. Others may focus on themes that span a number of domains, for example *Sustainable living and resource management* or *Being innovative; product design*. Personalised learning skills can also be developed by means of short courses that focus on enquiry based learning or ICT based learning around a topic or theme of interest to students. From a whole school perspective, the format of short courses is flexible enough to encompass specific learning activities, initiatives and events organised by the school, such as school musicals or book clubs.

As in the case of subjects, the specifications will set out the aims and learning outcomes of the course (including embedded key skills), how evidence of learning will be generated, gathered, judged and reported on, and how that evidence can contribute towards junior cycle qualifications.

It is envisaged that short courses will be introduced at an early stage in the junior cycle developments. They will be distinctive features of the new junior cycle and though there will be a limit on the number of short courses that can be used in the qualifications, their introduction offers schools opportunities to engage in curriculum development on their own, with other schools, with community organisations or with external agencies. Supports will be provided to assist those involved in this process and experiences gathered as the development of short courses progresses will be shared widely.

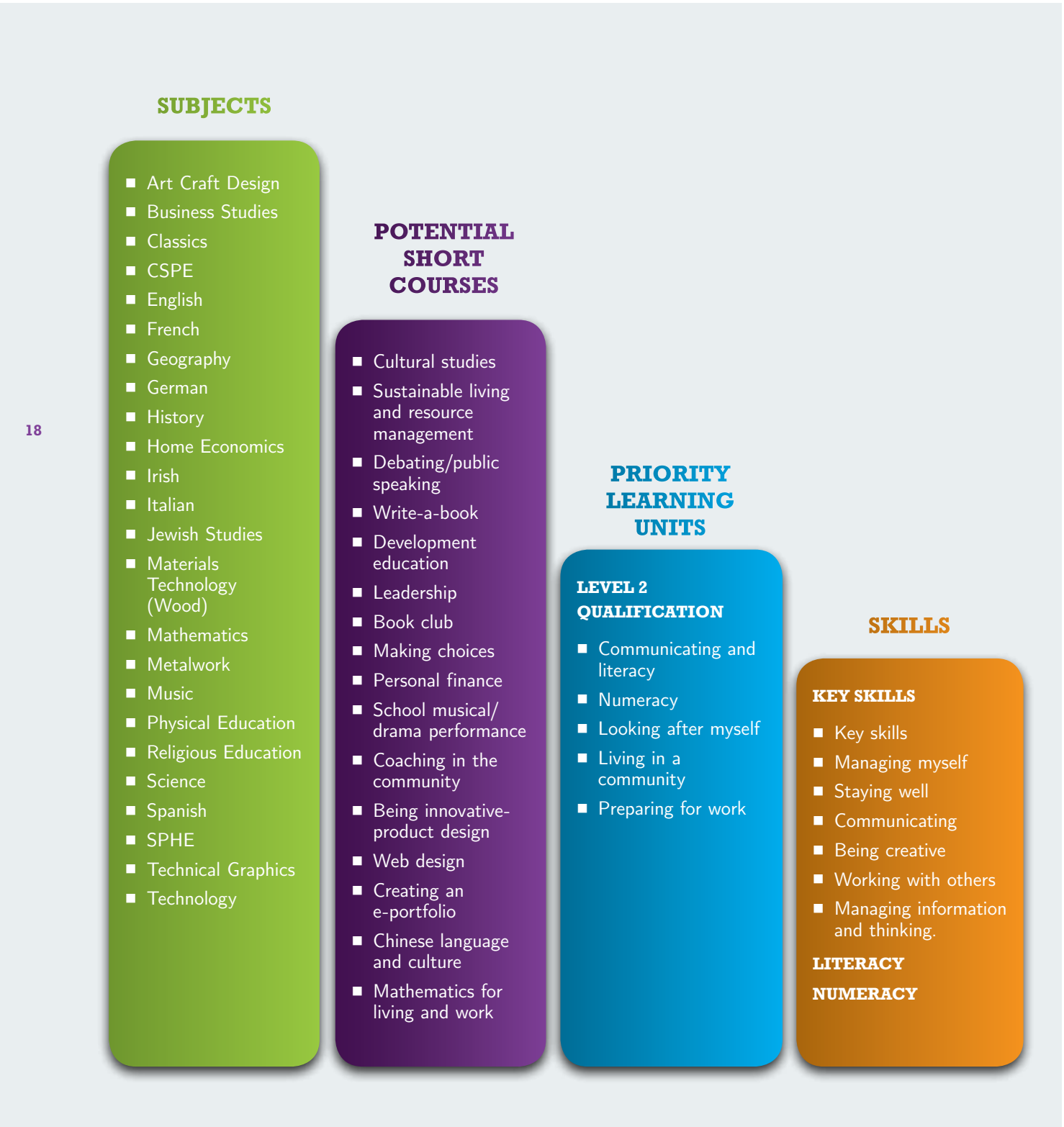
To ensure the quality of short courses and the standard of outcomes for learners, short courses will need to be delivered by teachers. While community or external agency involvement is to be encouraged, the leadership of the education professional in the development, support and evaluation of these courses is essential.

Priority Learning Units (PLUs)

For the small group of students working towards a Level 2 qualification, much of their programme at junior cycle will centre on *Priority Learning Units (PLUs)*, the main curriculum component of that qualification. The PLUs encompass the learning that is most important, relevant and beneficial to the students in question. There are five *PLUs – Communicating and literacy, Numeracy, Looking after myself, Living in a community, and Preparing for work*.

Curriculum specifications for each *PLU* will be developed by the NCCA. Each unit is designed for approximately 250 hours of student engagement.

Figure 2.
Junior Cycle Curriculum



Key skills of junior cycle

Key skills have become the focus of developments at all levels of education systems around the world. Ireland has also been active in this regard leading to the consolidation of a skills emphasis in early childhood education, the primary school curriculum and senior cycle. In junior cycle, while specific skills are encountered in subjects and short courses, key skills have a role to play in deepening the students' learning and in making them more self-aware as learners. This will contribute to equipping them to take up the challenges of further study in senior cycle and beyond.

This new focus on key skills is also significant for the changes proposed in assessment at junior cycle. Helping students to become more aware of *how* they learn, alongside *what* they are learning will enable them to generate evidence of that learning as they progress.

The key skills of junior cycle are grounded in both national and international research and practice. The starting point was the OECD DeSeCo—the definition and selection of key competencies—framework (DeSeCo Executive Summary, 2005) which sets out three broad categories for key skills/competencies: using tools interactively; interacting with heterogeneous groups; and acting autonomously. The approach to key competencies in a number of other countries such as New Zealand, Queensland, Australia and Canada were also influential in developing this set of key skills.

The selection of key skills at junior cycle also reflects also reflects the importance of making and maintaining connections with skill development in the other phases of education in Ireland. Early childhood and primary education emphasises self-help skills, communication skills, thinking skills, skills of co-operation, creative thinking, problem-solving skills, inquiry skills. Increasingly, at senior cycle skills such as critical and creative thinking, communicating, information processing, being personally effective and working with others are being introduced. While the key skills of junior cycle have been developed with the junior cycle learner as the main focus, they are also connected to the skills at senior cycle and the skills already developed in early childhood and primary education. The choice of key skills was also informed by interactions with schools, in particular those schools who had experience of working with key skills at senior cycle. The main messages from the schools were: keep the language of the skills appropriate to the age of the learners; provide details of each key skill with elements and outcomes that help teachers to relate the key skills to their subject curriculum; provide tools that help teachers to integrate the key skills into their planning and classwork. Junior cycle students will engage with skills appropriate to their stage of development while at the same time experiencing continuity with previous and future learning.

The skills have a particular value for first year students, allowing them to consolidate what they have learned in primary school and to develop skills that will give them a strong foundation for second and third year. In this way they act as a vehicle to smooth the transition from primary to post-primary school. Learners can begin developing responsibility for their own learning and can use the key skills to help them navigate the new learning environment of junior cycle.

The key skills of junior cycle are *Managing Myself, Staying Well, Communicating, Being Creative, Working with Others, Managing Information and Thinking*. As learners develop their competence in each of the six key skills, they also develop their competence in learning by using the skills to constantly improve how they learn. Working with new technologies also forms part of each of the skills.

The key skills will be embedded in the learning outcomes of all curriculum specifications and teachers will be encouraged to build them into their class planning, their teaching approaches and into assessment. The elements of the skills are set out in Table 5, describing what the learner is expected to know and be able to do in respect of each one. The key skills are expressed in learner-friendly language so that learners can use them to support, monitor and evaluate their own progress.

Table 3.
Key Skills of Junior Cycle

MANAGING MYSELF

- Knowing myself
- Making personal decisions
- Setting and achieving personal goals
- Being flexible and being assertive
- Learning how to direct my own learning
- Using ICT to manage myself

STAYING WELL

- Being healthy, physical and active
- Being social and safe
- Being spiritual
- Being confident
- Being positive about learning
- Using ICT safely and ethically

BEING CREATIVE

- Imagining
- Exploring options and alternatives
- Implementing ideas and taking action
- Changing and taking risks
- Learning creatively
- Being creative through ICT

COMMUNICATING

- Listening and expressing myself
- Using language
- Using number
- Discussing and debating
- Communicating my learning
- Using ICT to confidently communicate

WORKING WITH OTHERS

- Relating effectively and resolving conflict
- Co-operating
- Respecting difference
- Contributing
- Learning with others
- Using ICT to work with others

MANAGING INFORMATION AND THINKING

- Being curious
- Gathering, recording, organising, and evaluating information
- Using information to solve problems and create new ideas
- Thinking creatively and critically
- Reflecting on and evaluating my learning
- Using ICT to access, manage and share knowledge

How are key skills included in learning and teaching?

Developing these skills in a variety of contexts and in a way that will lead to action requires a creative approach to teaching and learning. Learners need to encounter each of the skills frequently throughout the curriculum and experience many opportunities to work with others, to reflect on their learning and to try new ways of doing things. A range of design tools and other support materials will be made available to support teachers in including key skills in their junior cycle teaching. Students will also be provided with self-assessment material to monitor their own engagement with and progress in the key skills.

When incorporated imaginatively and energetically, and when supported by assessment processes, the role of key skills in bringing about a renewal of learning and teaching cannot be underestimated. The experience of their integration in other levels in our education system (evidenced for example by the NCCA's work at senior cycle) and of the emerging trends in other countries points to their significance as a means of deepening the quality of engagement across the curriculum and in other aspects of the lives of young people. In progressing to senior cycle and preparing for the Leaving Certificate, students who are skilled in learning will be able to make the most of the various programmes on offer.

Linking literacy and numeracy to the key skills

The key skills also support the development of literacy and numeracy, which are crucial for learners in accessing the curriculum and in their future life chances. For example, skills in communication, problem-solving, accessing and selecting information will contribute to literacy and numeracy development in all of the areas of the learning. The subjects and short courses related to language and mathematics in particular will contribute directly to the development of literacy and numeracy skills. On a broader front, learning outcomes related to all curriculum components promote the integrated development of literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum as well as promoting key skills learning.

Reference was made earlier to the challenges faced by learners in making progress in areas such as mathematics and reading and by schools in providing opportunities for them to develop these skills. The planning and design flexibility provided by the Framework for Junior Cycle will allow schools to put programmes in place that focus on the consolidation of literacy and numeracy skills in the first year. As well as enabling students to make progress in the skills themselves, such a focused programme will give them a strong foundation for second and third year work. For this to happen effectively, the development of the skills must form part of the school's vision for junior cycle.

In post-primary schools it is not just teachers of English, Irish and mathematics who have the responsibility for developing literacy and numeracy skills; teachers of all subjects have an important role to play. All teachers must be conscious of improving the learners' capacity to communicate meaning—from speaker to listener, from writer to reader, from creator to viewer—and to use number with confidence in all areas; they should seek opportunities in their own subjects for the development of the skills. The new subject specifications should give teachers and students the space for this engagement, and the new short courses offer the chance, for the first time, for schools to offer skill-specific courses to students as part of junior cycle if they believe that such an approach is needed.

Junior cycle programmes

Schools will design their own junior cycle programmes and each programme will be made up of the particular combination of subjects, short courses, key skills (or PLUs) with which the student will engage during their junior cycle. The programme has to be consistent with the Framework but, beyond that, schools will be free to decide what should be included in their junior cycle and how it should be organised.

To comply with the Framework a school's programme must**;**

- subscribe to and fully reflect the vision, values and principles of junior cycle education
- address the statements of learning

- emphasise the development of the key skills of junior cycle – Managing myself, Staying well, Communicating, Being creative, Working with others, and Managing information and thinking
- facilitate assessment and the process by which evidence of learning is generated, gathered, judged and reported
- contribute towards to a junior cycle qualification
- ensure continuity with primary education and offer progression opportunities towards senior cycle education

How will the programme be organised?

The junior cycle programme will last for the three years of junior cycle. They may be planned and structured on a year-by-year basis or in a different way. Many schools favour a first year of junior cycle which concentrates on students making a successful transition from primary school, on consolidating skills and on putting in place a sound basis for learning later in junior cycle. These schools see first year as somewhat separate from the following two years when student learning turns to a broad experience across the areas of learning, leading to a junior cycle qualification. Regardless of the decisions schools make on structuring the junior cycle, the framework will make explicit that evidence of learning from first year will not feature in the assessment for qualification.

To a certain extent, the junior cycle programme of a school will be influenced by the qualification/s pursued. For example, schools with students who are pursuing the Level 2 junior cycle qualification will have to devote considerable time to Priority Learning Units (PLUs), the main curriculum component involved in that qualification. But schools will find that the demands that the qualification places on the programme will be less than in the case of the current Junior Certificate because the overall number of curriculum components involved in the qualification will be fewer. This means that schools will have considerable flexibility in planning and organising the programme.

How will schools develop their junior cycle programme?

Schools can build on their existing junior cycle programme, adapt it and augment it. They can feature elements of programmes such as the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) as part of their overall junior cycle programme. Schools with students working towards the Level 2 junior cycle qualification will have extensive guidelines available to them, including examples of programmes already developed by schools.

In a broader context, some schools will work with the NCCA over a period of time on planning and developing their junior cycle programme and sample programmes from these schools will become available online for others to use as a resource. Other schools will form small networks and collaborate in developing a range of programmes. Work with these schools will also indicate the scale of time for collaboration needed and show how schools can deploy current allocations, and make best use of the additional ones to be made available to schools to support this work. Planning tools and templates will be developed and made available to contribute to the planning and development work of schools. Building on the experience of the Primary Curriculum Planning Tool the NCCA will develop an online tool that links the learning outcomes in subjects and the statements of learning while also providing exemplification of the standard expected.

The flexibility available in designing and planning the programme will present schools with the possibility to involve students and their parents as well as staff in discussions about the kind of programme that will best serve the learning interests and needs of the students, while at the same supporting the particular mission and goals of the school.

Programme evaluation

The extent to which a school's programme supports students in developing key skills, improving literacy and numeracy, and in learning relevant to all the statements of learning will be evaluated in the first instance by the school itself through an on-going process of self-evaluation. In this process, assessment information gathered throughout junior cycle will undoubtedly be useful. This internal evaluation will be supported and supplemented by the evaluation carried out by the Department of Education and Skills through the work of its Inspectorate.

The statements of learning, key skills, subjects, short courses and PLUs will signal the new focus on learning discussed at the opening of this section. But the degree to which this focus will make a real difference for students depends on changing how that learning is assessed. The proposals in the next chapter outline those changes.

In conclusion

The main focus of the *Framework for Junior Cycle* will be on learning. The focus of that learning is clearly set out in the Statements of Learning and in the Key Skills of Junior Cycle. The vehicle for the learning will be programmes that use newly specified subjects, new short courses and, in some cases, PLUs. The aim is for all these to contribute to connecting the learner to the experience of junior cycle education from start to finish.