



National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)

Written Submission for the Joint Committee on Gender Equality

May 2022

1. Introduction

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) was established in 1987 as a successor to the Curriculum and Examinations Board (CEB) and was reconstituted as a statutory body in July 2001. The remit of the Council, outlined in the Education Act (1998), is to advise the Minister for Education on matters relating to the curriculum for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools, and the assessment procedures employed in schools and examinations on subjects which are part of the curriculum (Section 41.1 a, b). As part of this, the Council has a responsibility to review the curriculum and to advise the Minister accordingly (ibid., Section 41.2 a).

In accordance with the Education Act, the Council is a representative structure and is appointed by the Minister for Education for a four-year term. It has 26 members who represent teachers, students, school managers, parents, business interests, trade unions, the Irish language sector and other educational interests. Other members include representatives of the Department of Education, the State Examinations Commission, a nominee each of the Minister for Education and the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. The current Council was appointed in March this year until February 2026.

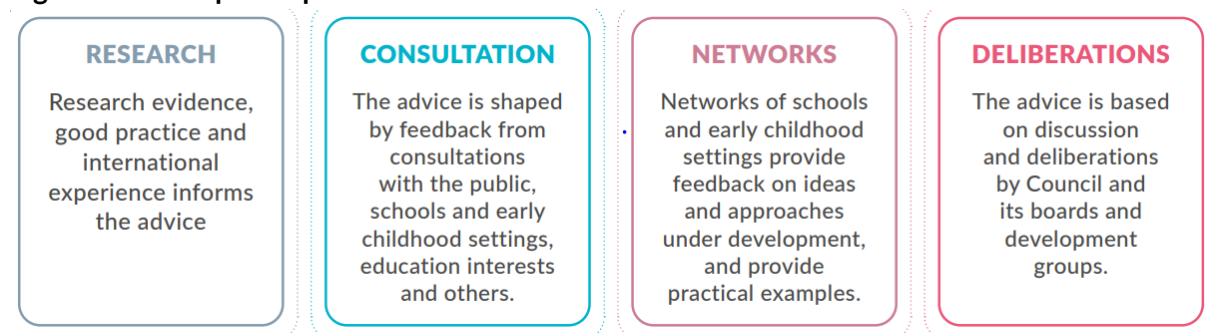
NCCA has a full-time executive staff, led by a Chief Executive. Funding is by way of a grant from the Department of Education.

2. Curriculum and assessment development

The Council's work is progressed through a number of representative structures. This representation brings significant experience and expertise and supports the development of high-quality advice on curriculum and assessment matters at early childhood, primary and post-primary levels. In addition to the Council itself, work is progressed through boards and development groups whose work takes place with the agreement and under the guidance of Council. Council also uses other structures such as working or standing groups to advance aspects of its work such as liaison with key bodies and sectors.

NCCA's vision is *to lead and sustain developments in curriculum and assessment that are sufficiently far-reaching so that all children and students can experience and benefit from enjoyable, engaging, relevant and appropriately challenging experiences to support learning, living in, contributing to, caring for, and working in a changing world* (NCCA, 2022, p.14). Guided by this vision, NCCA develops curriculum and assessment advice in an iterative and responsive manner through close engagement with learners, teachers, practitioners, parents and school leaders; through extensive public consultation; by drawing on research evidence, good practice and international experience; and through ongoing discussion and deliberation by the Council, boards and development groups (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Development process



Throughout the work, the Council remains attuned to new opportunities to innovate and to new national policy priorities as they arise. While NCCA is not responsible for implementing curriculum change, it supports educational change in early childhood settings and in primary and post-primary schools by developing a range of support materials such as examples of practice, examples of student work, assessment guidelines and planning resources, and by working with those introducing new developments to practitioners and teachers.

Purpose and principles

As set out in the *Strategic Plan 2022-2025*, NCCA’s work in early childhood, primary and post-primary education is guided by a clear, overarching purpose of education. This purpose is to

- *enable all young people to learn for and enjoy the ‘here and now’,*
- *support holistic development and help all young people to live in, contribute to, care for and work in a changing world,*
- *nurture respect and dignity for all, and*
- *create lovers of learning* (NCCA, 2022a, p.4).

In developing curriculum and assessment to fulfil this purpose, the Council’s work is underpinned by eight principles one of which is ‘Inclusion and diversity’ whereby our work recognises the uniqueness and rights of each young person and the importance of supporting all children/students to reach their potential. Equality, including gender equality, is a key part of this.

Recommendations 26-31 in the *Report of the Citizens’ Assembly on Gender Equality* (2021) refer to ‘Norms & Stereotypes and Education’. The remainder of this submission focuses particularly on Recommendation 27 which relates to gender equality within curriculum review and development. In doing this, attention is drawn to the specific areas of Social, Personal and Health Education, and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Education, as well as noting wider relevant curriculum developments.

Social, Personal and Health Education, including Relationships and Sexuality Education

In 2018, at the request of the then Minister for Education, Richard Bruton, T.D., the NCCA undertook a major review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and post-primary schools. RSE is an integral part of the *Social, Personal and Health Education Curriculum* (SPHE). The review included an examination of the curriculum for RSE, the approach to teaching and learning, supports needed, and ways to improve the experience of RSE for young people. The

review was comprehensive and wide reaching. The process engaged large numbers of children/students, parents, teachers, school leaders, researchers and organisations who shared their experience about current provision of RSE within schools and suggested how school-based RSE could better meet the needs of young people. The NCCA's *Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality (RSE) in primary and post primary schools (2019)* highlighted the need for an integrated and updated curriculum grounded in the rights and needs of young people and recommended that RSE should adopt an approach that is holistic, student-centred, inclusive, age- and developmentally-appropriate and whole-school.

In redeveloping the curriculum, a range of topics were identified as needing to be addressed and these included healthy and unhealthy relationships, consent, LGBTQ+ matters, the impact of the internet on relationships, and gender equality and diversity.

Key actions relevant to Recommendation 27 in the Citizens' Assembly Report

Following the review, the NCCA convened two development groups, one for primary and one for post-primary. The groups were tasked with beginning the curriculum redevelopment work and with developing online toolkits to support schools in teaching SPHE in a more up-to-date, comprehensive and inclusive manner. The following provides a summary of actions to date with many of these supporting gender equality.

a. Provision of resources and guidance for teaching SPHE/RSE

The immediate focus of NCCA's work has been on the creation of support materials for teachers which are published online as part of an Interim Guidance Toolkit. The toolkit is intended to support effective teaching and learning of SPHE/RSE linked to the curriculum and to provide guidance on how SPHE/RSE may be approached in a comprehensive way that meets the needs of all young people today. These resources cover the topics referred to in Recommendation 27 of the Citizens' Assembly's Report—rights and responsibilities in relationships; recognition of healthy, unhealthy and abusive relationships; interacting safely and respectfully with the internet; gender and sexual diversity; sexual consent; and more.

Below are examples of content published in the toolkit for **primary schools**. These resources and materials promote gender equality and aim to challenge unhelpful social norms and stereotypes:

- [Gender Equality Matters](#), a primary school resource to tackle gender stereotyping, gender-based bullying and gender-based violence.
- Guidance on [Using inclusive and respectful language](#) which highlights the importance of inclusive language related to relationships and sexuality, and includes a section on adopting a gender inclusive approach and environment.
- [Teaching about consent](#) aims to support primary teachers in teaching about consent as a core principle relevant to all interpersonal relationships and [Helping your child to learn about consent](#) offers practical advice for parents on how they can support their child's learning.
- [An-inclusive-approach-to-SPHE/RSE - LGBTI+ identities](#) aims to support teachers in developing an approach to SPHE and RSE that is inclusive of LGBTI+ identities, grounded in a positive view of individual differences that enrich the lives and learning of all children.

Examples of resources and materials published in the toolkits for **post-primary schools** include:

- [Gender identity and gender expression e-resources for second level schools](#) aim to help teachers to understand and support diversity of gender identities.

- [Through the Looking Glass - A Guide to Empowering Young People to Become Advocates for Gender Equality](#) was developed to support educators in working with young people around gender issues.
- [Personal Safety Resource Pack](#) explores a range of topics including anger and conflict; anger and violence; negotiating and managing conflict; domestic violence; sexual violence; dating violence and rape.
- [LGBTQI+ students' experiences of RSE: Guidance for SPHE teachers](#) provides support for teachers in creating a more LGBTQ+ inclusive classroom.

Most recently, the NCCA collaborated with Barnardos in producing a short animated video, [Supporting children and young people living with Domestic Violence and Abuse](#) which aims to develop teachers' awareness and understanding of Domestic Violence and Abuse (DVA) and help them support children/students in their classrooms who might be experiencing DVA.

The NCCA Toolkits will continue to be expanded in 2022 to include further age- and stage-appropriate guidance for teachers working with a range of topics within the SPHE classroom so that teachers feel more confident in addressing important and sensitive issues with young people.

b. Redevelopment of the SPHE/RSE curriculum

In tandem with the development of the online toolkits, work to update the SPHE curriculum is progressing. A draft revised Junior Cycle SPHE specification will be available for public consultation this Autumn when schools re-open. The final updated specification is then due to be completed by the end of 2022 and available for schools to work with from September 2023. Professional development for teachers is central to enabling schools to enact this new curriculum and planning for this is already underway.

Updated curriculum specifications for senior cycle and for primary schools will be finalised in 2023 and 2024 respectively.

All three updated SPHE curriculum specifications will support teachers in adopting an approach that is inclusive and in accordance with the principles of equality and human rights. Children/students will learn to respect and appreciate themselves and others, based on an appreciation of individual differences. They will learn how stereotyping can impact on a person's experience of rights and wellbeing and how to critique the influence of the media and social norms on their understanding of gender and sexual stereotyping. In redeveloping the SPHE curriculum, the NCCA is highlighting the importance of fostering young people's self-awareness and self-esteem and building the foundational skills and dispositions needed for building caring and healthy relationships (including respectful communication, showing empathy, appreciating difference). The new specifications will also foster skills needed for dealing with challenging times. Consent education will be included within the learning outcomes for SPHE, across all levels, based on the principle that consent is a core dimension of all healthy, interpersonal relationships.

Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)

As noted in the *STEM Education Policy Statement 2017-2026* (Department of Education and Skills, 2017a), Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) permeates every aspect of today's world with careers and roles in these areas contributing to advances in medical research, medicines and treatments; new technologies that shape how we live, interact and communicate; engineering feats; and creative solutions to long-standing and emerging problems. Much has been

written and researched about the underrepresentation of females in the STEM fields and, in turn, much is expected of schools and the curriculum to help address this.

As noted above, the principle of 'Inclusion and diversity' underpins NCCA's work. The Council is particularly conscious of the gender dimension of this in areas of the curriculum such as STEM. Through membership of the Department of Education and Skills STEM Steering Group, NCCA contributed to the development of the *STEM Education Policy Statement 2017-2026* (DES, 2017a) and the *STEM Education Implementation Plan 2017-2019* (2017b). NCCA also met with the Department's Gender Balance in STEM Advisory Group whose work has informed the *STEM Education Implementation Plan 2022-2026* due to be published shortly. As part of this, NCCA highlighted how the principle of inclusion and diversity encompassing consideration of gender equality and equity of participation, informs the Council's curriculum and assessment work from early childhood to the end of post-primary education.

Since late 2019, NCCA has been working on new curriculum specifications for Leaving Certificate Biology, Chemistry and Physics. The report of the Gender Balance in STEM Advisory Group (Department of Education, 2022) influenced decisions made by the subject development groups working on these specifications. The Brief for the updating of these subjects, on which the work of these groups is based, includes a specific reference to widening the appeal of the subjects in order to meet the targets of the STEM Strategy and re-balance gender uptake. This has influenced much of the groups' deliberations about what knowledge is of most worth for young people living in a twenty-first century society and about appropriate methods of assessment.

Wider curriculum developments

Intercultural Education in the Primary School – Guidelines for Schools (2005) and *Intercultural Education in the Post-Primary School – Guidelines for Schools* (2006) published by NCCA support the promotion of equality, human rights, challenging unfair discrimination, and the values upon which equality is built in primary and post-primary schools. While the guidelines focus on discrimination in the context of ethnicity, the underlying ideas are equally applicable to other forms of discrimination such as sexism, ageism, or discrimination against people with a disability. In particular, the use of 'stories' to encourage young people to recognise bias and stereotyping have been used to great effect in schools. The recognition of bias and stereotyping and the importance of critical analysis of and reflection on this is, in turn, supported in other areas of the curriculum used in early childhood settings, primary and post-primary schools. For example, young people have opportunities to explore different perspectives on past events, and the development of their critical literacy skills helps raise their awareness of the underlying biases that influence perspectives presented in texts.

The curriculum is being revised across 11 years of a young person's educational journey with the redevelopment of the primary curriculum and senior cycle. In addition, NCCA is updating *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) and providing ongoing support for schools' work with the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (DES, 2015). This work, as a whole, is grounded in a commitment to inclusion and diversity as well as active citizenship and social justice. This is evident in many of NCCA's recent publications which set the direction for developments in the coming years. Such publications include the *Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report* (2022b), *Education for Sustainable Development: International Curriculum Audit* (2021) and the proposals set out in the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (2020).

3. Governance

NCCA prides itself on being an equal opportunities employer and promotes the use of open, universally designed, inclusive and unrestrictive selection processes. This approach supports the principles of fairness, equality and merit-based appointment. Employees are appointed through one of two routes—NCCA-led competitions and competitions led by the Public Appointment Service (PAS).

NCCA's staff has a gender composition of 64% female and 36% male. As approximately 77% of staff are former teachers/practitioners and/or school leaders, it's important to view these figures in the context of the gender composition of the wider education system and, in particular, within early childhood settings, primary and post-primary schools.

The Inter-Departmental Group (IDG) on Gender Balance on State Boards chaired by the Department of Justice and Equality reported in March 2019. This resulted in the *Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies: Annex on Gender Balance, Diversity and Inclusion* being published in September 2020. Under this Annex, a number of recommendations were made in respect of accelerating progress towards the 40% representation of women and of men on all State Boards. NCCA's Council (Board) is appointed by the Minister for Education based on nominations received from the member stakeholder groups and two Ministerial nominees. The current Council, appointed from 1st March 2022, has 31% male and 69% female members among its membership of 26 individuals. Stakeholder groups are encouraged to consider gender balance by sending two nominees forward when making nominations to the Department of Education for membership of Council. It should be noted that the current gender balance may change during the year following the appointment of a new Chairperson and when the President of one stakeholder body changes.

The Council manages appointments to its sub-committees—the Audit and Risk Committee (ARC) and Governance Committee—and gives due consideration to gender balance when making such appointments. The ARC currently stands at 50% male, 50% female. The Governance Committee is 40% male, 60% female.

4. Conclusion

NCCA's work in early childhood, primary and post-primary education is grounded in a commitment to develop curriculum and assessment that can enable all young people to thrive and fulfil their potential through participating in and benefiting from enjoyable, engaging, relevant and appropriately challenging experiences.

NCCA's *Strategic Plan 2022-2025* sets out ambitious goals for the redevelopment of the primary curriculum and senior cycle, the updating of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and ongoing support for schools' work with the *Framework for Junior Cycle*. Taken together, this work provides opportunity for a continued strong focus on matters related to gender equality and the role of education in contributing to its advancement.

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