

Second Level Geography in Ireland: Past, Present and Future

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Abstract

In the 1981 issue of *Geographical Viewpoint* Michael Hallinan provided a review of geography in Irish second level schools over the preceding 20 years. He noted that during these years obvious change had taken place in both the junior and senior cycle programmes compared to with the 'non-changing, static syllabuses of the preceding decades' (Hallinan, 1981: 56). At the time that he was writing a syllabus committee was meeting to consider developments at both junior and senior cycle. Meetings of a syllabus committee began in 1978 and by 1980 the group had laid the groundwork for the development of new junior and senior cycle syllabi. However, change for both programmes did not happen for a considerable period, until 1989 for the junior cycle and 2004 for the senior one. The two syllabi remain in force in 2011. This paper will review events during the period from 1981 up to 2011, including the syllabus developments and other aspects of second level geography.

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Introduction

The last review of geography in Irish second level schools published in *Geographical Viewpoint* was in 1981 in the edition which marked the 20th anniversary of the founding of the Association of Geography Teachers of Ireland in 1960. Since that time there have been major changes in the curriculum in schools and a number of threats and opportunities have arisen for geography. This paper charts the course of events from that time up to the present day (2011), when, once again, geography is in a state of some uncertainty facing into another time of potentially radical change to its status within schools.

The beginnings of change

There was wide agreement in the early 1980s that the syllabi both for junior and senior cycle were too long and also lacked precision and detail. Course planning often consisted of the slavish following of a text book with close reference to the content of examination papers, followed, possibly, by some reference to the syllabus. The examination process was shrouded in secrecy, with only those marking the examinations having official access to the marking scheme and all involved being sworn to secrecy about the procedure. This did, of course, aid the recruitment of examiners, but there were few other convincing reasons advanced for this. Members of the AGTI were involved in the process of curriculum development and at the 1980 Annual Conference and in other meetings, members identified alternatives to the proposals being made at the time. Submissions were then made to the appropriate

authorities. One major suggestion was the 'need to cut content either by precision or by use of options' as the 'present Leaving Certificate syllabus is long and repetitive' (AGTI, 1980). It was noted that that In-service courses would be needed to support the changes, and Holland (1981) suggested 'in a time of financial stringency ... courses might be organised for teachers who would guarantee to transmit the information to other teachers in their area.' (p72).

She recommended that the new syllabi should be 'shorter... where the aims and objectives further clarify the selection of topics and the teaching methods to be used, along with time allocation for topics, bibliographies and lists of teaching aids... More information concerning assessment would further lessen the element of chance and uncertainty ... that exists at present' (Holland, 1981, p.72). Finally, she considered that fieldwork should become compulsory and should not be 'the classroom type lesson in the field' but 'problem-solving and relevant to conservation and the environment, along with the development of values' (Holland, 1981, p.73). Holland also advocated that the time allocated to junior cycle geography should be increased for all three years of the junior cycle, partly to allow time for the more practical aspects to be developed.

The degree to which the ideas and suggestions from 1980 have been implemented is considered in the rest of this paper, which reviews the development of syllabi and other aspects of the school programme which have had effects on geography in second level schools.

Junior cycle developments

The junior cycle programme proposed in 1980 was based on a modular structure with three core modules (mapwork, physical geography and economic geography) plus options including, amongst other things, mathematical geography, conservation and soils and land use and The Third World. It was also noted that further options could be added with the help of teachers. This programme was never implemented, partly because of the financial difficulties of the time and also because structures for curriculum planning and development changed in the first part of the 1980s, leading to a reconsideration of the process.

In 1984 the Curriculum and Examinations Board [CEB] was established and one of its initial acts was to issue a position paper 'Issues and structures in Education' in which it stated that it was 'Anxious to share its initial thinking with those who may wish to contribute to the search for a curriculum and examinations system better suited to current and evolving needs'. The AGTI responded to the document with a robust statement affirming 'the importance of geography in education now and in the future, particularly at second level' (AGTI, 1984, p.58). The statement noted that the subject had 'a direct usefulness to the student 'because it is concerned with the real world in which he or she lives' (ibid, p. 59) and went on to note geography's direct contribution to many of the issues dealt with under the CEB's terms of reference, such as the need for personal development, relevance to changing demands of scientific and technological developments and for lifelong education.

Proposals for junior cycle made following this consultation in 1986 (CEB, 1986) included a recommendation for a

curriculum based on eight areas of experience, one of which was Social, Political and Environmental Studies (CEB, 1986: p.21). There was no specific mention of either history or geography within the chapter relating to the junior cycle, nevertheless a matrix was provided indicating how individual subjects might fit within these areas and it was stated that 'subjects are well established as a convenient and familiar way of organising learning' (CEB, 1986 p.12). There was freedom within the format for schools to choose whether they continued to teach geography and history as two separate subjects or to adopt Environmental and Social Studies as a combined subject.

A new junior cycle programme was developed over subsequent years by the CEB and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA] which replaced the CEB in 1987. The process culminated in the introduction in 1989 of the Junior Certificate, which replaced both the Intermediate Certificate and the Day Vocational [Group] Certificate as the programme for the first three years of second level education. The new programme for geography was devised by a small committee which included representation from the AGTI, teaching unions, representatives of both secondary and vocational education bodies and a member of the inspectorate. (For a fuller description of the process, see Moles, 1990.) The syllabus included statements on the philosophy underlying the programme plus a full set of aims and objectives and of the practical skills which might be developed, as proposed in the 1986 CEB report. A description then followed in which the course was divided into three sections, each with a number of key units (Table 1). Within each unit key ideas were identified and suggestions were made for local, national and international settings (DoE, 1989).

Table 1: Basic outline of Junior Certificate Geography Syllabus

Section	Units
A: The human habitat- processes and change	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Earth's surface: shaping the crust 2. The restless atmosphere: the heat engine 3. The workings of our life support system
B: Population, settlement patterns, and urbanisation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Population – distribution, diversity and change 2. People on the move 3. Settlement: changing patterns in where we live – villages and towns 4. Urbanisation: changing patterns in where we live – cities
C. Patterns in economic activity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Primary economic activities: the Earth as a resource 2. Secondary economic activities; building resources into products 3. Tertiary economic activities: facilitating our use of resources 4. Economic inequality: the Earth's resources – who benefits?

[Source, DoE, 1989 p.3]

This new programme was certainly a radical departure from its predecessors. The syllabus was designed to be non-linear and it was envisaged that a single setting would be used to develop a number of different key ideas, thus enabling the programme to be shorter than its linear predecessor. Further written guidance was also supplied in the form of a set of guidelines which provided commentary on the syllabus, sample studies (suggesting how different key ideas may be integrated into a single series of lessons) and some guidance on assessment, as agreed at that time, and also about fieldwork and the resources available (NCCA, 1989).

The degree of detail provided and guidance was generally welcomed by teachers and, indeed, one teacher stated that 'The new junior cycle syllabus in geography is awaited with outstretched arms by the second level teaching fraternity' (Sherwood, 1988). He considered that 'the new syllabus appears refreshing, stimulating, and definitely encouraging and worthwhile for students studying the course' and he welcomed the inclusion of a definite commitment to fieldwork within the programme.

Despite this initial enthusiasm, doubts were already being raised, for example Kelly (1988) after noting the 'praiseworthy if a little over ambitious' aims and objectives, commented that 'content is shorter than the old syllabus. However, our [teachers'] workload is not' (ibid, p.89). He raised the controversial issue of lack of additional payment for the 'undoubted extra teacher workload' (ibid, p.90), especially in relation to fieldwork and assessment. While McGloin (1990, p.34) observed that 'From being comfortable in dealing with the existing syllabus, teachers are now compelled to develop a new competence in a new syllabus.... It will, therefore, take some years before teachers are again fully comfortable with their area of specialism'.

During the preparation for the new programme and during the first cycle further issues were raised by teachers. A major cause for dissatisfaction was the In-Service provision for teachers prior to and during the first cycle. A survey undertaken in 1990-91 (during the first cycle of the course) revealed that teachers were unhappy with the quality, quantity, content and administration of the In-Service provided (Waddington, 1995). This was partly related to timing as many were unable to attend all the sessions for geography as several subjects were timetabled simultaneously and most teachers were involved in teaching an additional subject. Those who did attend felt that groups were much too large to allow real discussion, that there was very limited detail on assessment, on fieldwork (a compulsory part of the programme at the time) and on methodology in general. Certain of the suggested case studies also raised levels of concern, particularly the recommendation of Mali as the international setting for study of very low population density areas – a country

about which most teachers knew very little and for which little published material was available in English. This general uncertainty was heightened during the first cycle by changes to official guidance which occurred after the start of the programme – for example, sample examination papers were not issued until more than a year into the course and fieldwork was, ultimately, not mandatory. As noted by some respondents to the survey, curriculum planning was needed, but there was little formal opportunity to facilitate this in the In-Service programme.

During subsequent years familiarity with the course and with the assessment has reduced teacher concerns, but the initial uncertainty led to teachers placing heavy reliance on the first textbooks produced for guidance and relatively few schools have ever developed away from the sample studies used in these books. There are, of course, notable, praiseworthy exceptions to this general state of affairs. During the intervening period other text books have also been produced providing at least some variation in the programme. This syllabus has remained in place up to the time of the writing of this paper (2011).

Geography in the established Leaving Certificate programme

The Leaving Certificate [LC] 1980 syllabus was to be based around six main themes: natural environment; natural resources; agriculture and agricultural systems; society and settlement; secondary and tertiary economic activities and regional studies. Field studies were to be assessed separately. Sub-themes were identified within each of the themes, e.g. society and settlement included population. The syllabus was to include suggested depth of emphasis and time allocations for use as examples by teachers. It was conceded that not only would it not be possible to state the whole syllabus in full detail, but it would be wrong to make such an attempt. Concepts, principles and skills to be taught and pedagogy were to be developed by the bodies represented on the committee. A teaching handbook would then be issued by the department – including the syllabus details plus methodology and resource information. It was also anticipated that a handbook would be issued including 'syllabus details and as much information as possible on methodology and resources' (Hallinan, 1981 p.61). As with the junior cycle, the actual introduction of a new syllabus only followed after a long period of time.

No changes were actually made during the 1980s to the LC syllabus which had been adopted in 1975, apart from the addition of a statement of objectives at some point during that period – even the list of possible resources was not up-dated for many years. The syllabus had four sections: mapwork; systematic geography (including physical, economic and social); regional geography and field studies. The terminal, three hour examination, at Higher Level included one compulsory question on both

mapwork and regional geography, with two others to be answered from the systematic section (which included a question related to field studies). The Ordinary Level examination required a further question, either based on a world map, or chosen from one of the other sections. Teachers experienced a considerable degree of frustration with the programme as the syllabus was very long and unwieldy. Although the number of questions on the examination paper did allow for selectivity in what was taught, 'there appears to be a lottery as to what aspects ... one might teach ... based on personal preferences, previous geographical training (or lack of it) and careful analysis of the trends that appear on successive examination papers' (Sherwood, 1989, p.33). Indeed, booklets of past papers and revision notes included an analysis of previous years' papers, identifying topics and their recurrence intervals. Sherwood concluded his account by noting that 'It seems of paramount importance to undertake a review of the present senior cycle syllabus, in order that the expected interest and relevancy of the new junior cycle syllabus may be maintained throughout the entire school programme in geography' (ibid, p.35).

Writing in 1989, Gillmor noted a steady decline in the proportion of students taking geography at LC, from a high point of 87% in 1960 to only 36% in 1986. It must, of course, be noted that increasing participation meant that the total number of geography candidates was much greater in 1986 than it was in 1960, before universal second level education. Clearly, the figures also provided support for the need to reform the programme.

It was 1994 before a committee was established by the NCCA to review the LC Geography course. This group included a representative from the AGTI along with representatives of management bodies, the Inspectorate, Third Level institutions the State Examinations Commission and teaching unions. As noted by Boyd (1997, p.36), 'it was acknowledged that the breadth and width of the subject made it necessary to limit the amount of material for study in some way.' As might be assumed, this limitation posed major problems for the committee who were required to agree on what could be omitted. To limit the omissions, while ensuring that all students had the same basic experience, the new programme had a radically different structure from its predecessor, with a compulsory core, plus electives and options, the last being available only for Higher Level candidates [Figure 1]. The syllabus was planned to be clearly linked to its JC predecessor – for example the key concepts were common to both – but was also designed to ensure that those who had taken Environmental and Social Studies (ESS) could also take Geography in their LC.

As with the JC programme, aims and objectives were specified, as were the skills which it was envisaged would be developed by the students. Assessment of the Core

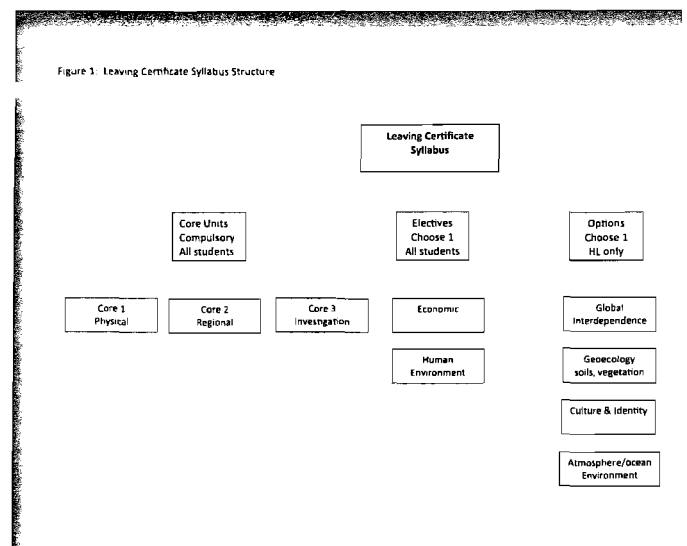


Figure 1: Leaving Certificate Syllabus Structure.

units 1 and 2 would be by means of multiple choice and short answer questions, the elective by multipart questions and the option using the traditional, essay-type question. A radical departure from the previous course was the Core unit 3, the Geographical investigation, would be assessed by means of a report completed before the end of the programme. An annual list of approved topics for this investigation was to be supplied by the Department of Education. In the draft version of the syllabus Core unit 3 was to represent 15% of the total mark, which rose to 20% in the final version of the syllabus. Teachers were involved in the supervision of this unit and required to confirm that the work had been undertaken by the students concerned, but were not directly involved in its assessment, although this involvement had been proposed during the syllabus development period.

In 1998 the draft syllabus was made available for consultation over a period, following which the course committee met again to address issues which had been identified and to work on further developing the programme. Outcomes were differentiated for Ordinary Level [OL] and Higher Level [HL] students, and were restated more clearly, for example 'assess the impact of human activity on physical processes at work on the landscape' (NCCA, 1998, p.9) became 'show how human activities affect these [physical] processes' (OL), while the HL course outcome was 'assess, at different scales, the impact of human activity on physical processes at work on the landscape' (NCCA, 2003, p.9). In 1998 the AGTI syllabus committee member reported that he considered implementation of the new syllabus may not take place for a considerable period, partly related to the need to enable teachers to attend all of the In-Service provided for the subject which had been such an issue during the time when the JC was being introduced. In the event, this delay lasted until 2004, when the new programme finally began. For a considerable part of the intervening period a long-lasting dispute between the

teaching unions and the Government over conditions of service, prevented any participation by teachers in In-Service courses.

When this dispute was finally resolved, the model of In-Service delivery was much more successful than that adopted for the JC. A team of experienced teachers was seconded from their classroom positions to provide a full-time support service. These people led various In-Service courses for much smaller numbers of teachers than was the case for the JC. These courses were focused on the various parts of the syllabus and considered pedagogy, course planning and assessment. Apart from the general Guidelines (similar to those for the JC) (NCCA, 2004) a wide range of other materials was also produced to support the implementation, such as CDs with images, maps and other resources and printed materials. In general, teachers considered the In-Service provision to be much better than that for the JC, although some did report that the amount of time available, particularly before the start of the first cycle and during the first year should have been greater and, particular concerns related to the assessment process (Waddington, 2005).

The first cycle of the LC programme began in September 2004 ending in 2006 with the first examination. Since then the programme has, to date, continued relatively unchanged. After the initial uncertainty, teachers (and their students) have adjusted to the new course and various types of text book and other resources have been produced which facilitate delivery. In a series of interviews with teachers undertaken at the start of the first cycle, concerns were expressed about the changing emphasis on different aspects of the subject in the new programme. In particular it was suggested that OS map skills would be less developed in the new programme, as there was no longer a single question (worth 25% of the total mark on the previous HL paper) (Waddington, 2010). An assessment completed by students who had taken either the old or the new LC course revealed that this was, indeed, the case. However, the same study also indicated that there had been some increase in knowledge and understanding of aspects which had an enhanced focus in the new syllabus, e.g. aspects of the environment and sustainability (Waddington, 2010).

Core unit 3 (Geographical Investigation), while generally welcomed, has over the years given rise to some concerns. One issue relates to the use of ICT. One of the aims of the syllabus is 'To encourage the use of information and communication technologies in the teaching and learning of geography' (NCCA, 2003, p.2). Despite this statement, the use of ICT to present work for the Geographical Investigation is not allowed, so that students have to write their answers and draw graphs, etc., by hand in the report of their work. The rationale for this decision is that it avoids disadvantaging students who do not have good access to technology and also reduces the possibility of

plagiarism. It is widely perceived as a major disadvantage particularly when there is a focus on the need for students to develop such skills as part of their preparation for life in the 'knowledge economy' of the 21st century. While it must be admitted that the investigation is not the only place where ICT may be used within the LC course, it is clearly a major aspect within this Core Unit and its prohibition in this context clearly limits an important way in which the development of such skills could be integrated fully into the LC programme. A further concern, expressed informally by teachers, is that while the rotating list of topics was designed both to provide options suited to teachers' interests and skills and also to avoid endless repetition of the same project, there has been an increasing tendency for topics chosen to be related to physical geography.

In 2010, geography appeared to be in a satisfactory state in the LC programme, with approximately 50% of the total cohort taking it as part of their studies. This represented an increase in terms of both percentage and in actual number of candidates compared to the 1986 situation quoted by Gillmor in 1989.

Geography elsewhere in the Senior Cycle programme

a) Transition Year

While Transition Year [TY] was first introduced into Irish second level schools in 1974, full implementation of the programme took place during the period currently under review. This programme was introduced to 'release students from the educational pressure for one year so that they could devote time to personal development and community service' (Burke, 1974 – quoted in Jeffers, 2007, p.1).

By 1985 only 95 schools operated a TY programme, but the opportunity to develop this was seized on by a large number of schools at the same time as the JC was being introduced in 1986, particularly those who had had a six year programme, during the IC (Intermediate Certificate) period. Guidelines published by the Department of Education in that year, described the programme as offering a 'broad education that integrates academic study and careers education' (DoE, 1986 p.5). Although the emphasis was on the development of a wide variety of skills and competencies, it was stated that 'between 30 and 50 percent of the time should comprise traditional and / or academic studies'. Thus geography (along with other subjects) had an obvious role in TY. The lack of focus on assessment allowed schools to develop active learning within their geography modules and opportunities for fieldwork.

When new guidelines were issued in 1993, the emphasis had moved further towards more interdisciplinary working and TY was much more directly integrated into the whole

programme of the school, rather than represented as an option. It was noted that TY 'should offer pupils space to learn, mature and develop in the absence of examination pressure.' The meant that schools should make certain that 'there is a clear distinction between the Transition Year programme and the corresponding Leaving Certificate programme (...) NOT ... an opportunity for spending three years rather than two studying Leaving Certificate materials' (DoE, 1993, p.5). In this new format, there was a much greater emphasis on exploring the subjects in different ways from the LC approach and some specific suggestions for different subjects. Geographical studies recommended focus on 'the local landscape and environment, planning and development, tourism awareness' (DoE, 1993, p.28). The focus on interdisciplinary work also offered scope for geography. For example, one recommendation was choosing a social theme, such as ... 'unemployment, use of energy' (DoE, 1993, p.7) and to explore this in way which integrated different traditional subjects. Some schools developed combined fieldwork options – including elements of geography, biology and outdoor pursuits, while others had comprehensive geography programmes within the year, (see for example, Travers (1997), who noted that 'the aim [of the programme] was to provide a course which would be a foundation for [LC students] while at the same time be useful and relevant for those who do not continue on with the subject' (Travers, 1997, p.42)).

b) The Leaving Certificate Applied programme

The Leaving Certificate Applied programme [LCA] was first introduced into schools in September 1995 and was designed to allow the TY approach to be continued – with links to vocational training and subjects integrated together, including a community-based aspect. It was designed for students who did not wish to, or were not able to take the established LC course. While there were some 'traditional' subjects included, geography is not amongst these. However, there is some potential for involvement of the subject within the remit of the student 'tasks', for which one of the possible aspects is 'The development of an issue', while one of the aims is 'To promote and develop active citizenship' (DoE/ NCCA, 2001, p. 27-28). It does not provide a direct route for entry to third level education, but participants may progress to Post- Leaving certificate courses.

c) The Leaving Certificate Vocational programme

The final LC programme is the Leaving Certificate Vocational programme [LCVP], introduced first in 1994. It was designed to have a more vocational focus than the established LC and 'combines the academic strengths of the Leaving Certificate (established) with a new and dynamic focus on self-directed learning, enterprise, work and the community' (NCCA, n.d., p.6). The traditional academic subjects do not include geography, and so these students again, would not generally have the option of studying the subject.

Numbers of candidates participating in both the LCVP and LCA have remained small in comparison to the established LC, for example 3358 people taking the LCA in 2010, compared to almost 50,000 taking the established LC, so the effect on geography of these new programmes has almost certainly been quite limited.

Geography's place in the Junior Cycle core curriculum

Although the vast majority of junior cycle students have taken geography at either Inter Certificate or Junior Certificate level, it has never been a compulsory subject for all students, merely for those who attend secondary schools, but not for those who attend other types of second level schools, such as community or vocational schools. For much of its existence it has also been classed as a half subject [combined with History], with obvious implications for timetabling. However, in the latter part of the pre-JC period, students were awarded separate grades in the two subjects, making it possible to pass one and not the other. Prior to this it was necessary to obtain a pass grade in both. This change, in effect, separated the two subjects, although it did not have any major effect on the time available for each subject either before or after the introduction of the JC, with both having two or three class periods per week, compared to five or six for maths or Irish.

During the development of the JC, the status of geography as a separate, core subject was raised, particularly in relation to its vital importance in a world where 'There is an increasing air of pragmatism; direct career relevance is a major criterion for the consumer...' and 'School curricula are already overcrowded, yet there are demands for the introduction of new subject entities and for the extension of others' (Corcoran, 1989, p.74). He also notes that, while the two subjects remained a compulsory part of the secondary curriculum, there were arguments made that these schools should have the same freedom as the other second level sectors. Particularly in smaller schools, the removal of the requirement could have been seen as a way to provide greater flexibility in teaching with 'simplifying measures' being 'taken... which would not be in the long term interests of education generally, or of individual subjects in particular' (Corcoran, 1989, p.75). He, therefore, argued that it was important to ensure that geography worked hard to ensure that a positive image of the subject was maintained in schools, for example by making the relevance of the subject clear to students, parents and other stakeholders.

In the 1990s the status of geography was, indeed, called into question once again, initially in 'Education for a changing world' – a green paper (policy discussion document) in which the whole of the education system was reviewed, published in 1992. The proposal to include

Technology and Enterprise as an additional compulsory core subject caused considerable concern to the AGTI (and to all those who considered geography to be a vital subject for the education of future global citizens) as it was felt that this would encourage a move towards more schools adopting Environmental and Social Studies [ESS], rather than maintaining geography and history as separate subjects within the core. Attention was drawn by the AGTI in its response to the green paper to past evidence that 'many combined studies courses fail to meet the basic requirements for some, if not all, of the component subjects, particularly when the rationale for adoption of the course has not been educational desirability but organisational necessity' (AGTI, 1993, p.137-138). The NCCA (1993) response to the discussion document recommended that either geography and history (as half subjects) or ESS should remain within the compulsory core.

This green paper was followed three years later by a white paper (which forms the basis for proposed legislation) 'Charting our education future' (DoE, 1995) in which there was no specific reference to geography as either a core or optional subject, something at no time recommended by the NCCA. A vigorous campaign was mounted by the geography community to redress this omission. Participants in the process included the AGTI, the Geographical Society of Ireland, the Heads of all of the Higher Education geography departments within the State, the Royal Irish Academy's National Committee for Geography and National Commission for the Teaching of Geography, teachers, planners and members of the public. The three main arguments used to support the case for the retention of geography were:

- (1) the long-established status of the subject in the compulsory core secondary junior cycle curriculum...
- (2) the academic merits of geography as a school subject; and
- (3) the practical implications of geographical knowledge for individual and societal welfare.' (Cawley, 1998, p.9).

There was a campaign which involved attempts to meet with the Minister for Education, submissions to the Minister from those involved (circulated to other key players), letters in the press and the lobbying of politicians. Ultimately a motion was passed in Dáil Éireann, stating ...' that the Dáil endorsed the commitment in the White Paper 'to promote and develop in pupils a knowledge and appreciation of their social and cultural heritage and environment through the study of history and geography at junior certificate level, and... welcomes the Minister's commitment to maintain the status of history and geography as core curriculum subjects in the junior cycle' (Dáil Éireann, 1996, p.274). Nevertheless, the Minister did include reference to her concerns about curriculum overload, particularly in the light of the introduction of

Civic, Social and Political Education [CSPE] into the core timetable from the following year, leading to concern at the time that timetable provision for geography would be reduced.

In the later 1990s the Junior Certificate was reviewed by the NCCA at the request of the Minister for Education. In the subsequent report, geography and history (or Environmental and Social Studies [ESS]) were recommended to be retained as part of the required course for all recognised junior cycle students. The rationale for the inclusion of geography and history (or ESS) was that 'The development of a sense of identity is part of the process of maturation... in the context of an understanding of communal and national identity and a sense of the place of Ireland in Europe and the world' (NCCA, 1999, p.25).

At the time of writing, 2011, geography maintains this status as part of the core curriculum. It is currently taken by approximately 92% of the cohort and the syllabus has remained unchanged from its original format. In 2008 a report produced by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education noted that 'Geography was well supported in most schools, ... with an allocation of three class periods per week in the junior cycle' (DES, 2008, p.36) and that the quality of teaching was 'either good or very good in almost all lessons' (ibid, p.38).

Potential changes to the Junior Certificate

Despite the positive position of geography, concerns had been expressed about the increasingly dated syllabus and, once again, about the time pressures within the overall programme. A 're-balancing' exercise was therefore begun in 2007 which was planned to affect ultimately all of the junior cycle subjects, partly to clear time for the additional subjects within the timetable.

Initial work was begun on the geography syllabus which revealed wide agreement on the need to both up-date and to reduce the programme, but the stumbling block arose in deciding exactly what should be removed. The rebalancing process has been completed, the results have not yet been released for consultation as a more radical change to the JC programme was proposed. However, there was little evidence that teachers would be happy to accept the reduction in class time which was a major purpose of the exercise, to facilitate the introduction of new subjects to the core, particularly Civic, Social and Political Education [CSPE] and Social, Personal and Health Education [SPHE].

Almost simultaneously with the re-balancing plans, wider concerns about the junior cycle, expressed by students themselves and by other key players, both within education and in the wider community, began to coalesce into a general consideration of the whole programme.

The student perspective was obtained via a longitudinal study carried out on behalf of the NCCA which explored perceptions and attitudes in first, second and third year of junior cycle (Smyth, 2009). This revealed that the vast majority of first year students were positive about their experiences on entry to second level, although enthusiasm declined during the year and that they found more practical, new subjects generally more enjoyable than the ones with which they were already familiar. However, as they progressed through the programme, this generally satisfactory state of affairs changed radically for many students. While many developed as learners during year two, a significant number began to disengage with the process and by the time they reached the final year, 20% did not look forward to school and 10% did not find the work interesting (NCCA, 2007, p.9). In this summary it was noted that students reported that 'they learned best when teachers explained things clearly, had a clear grasp of their subject, made learning fun and encouraged students to express their opinion in class.' It is notable that a didactic form of teaching, or 'teaching from the book', was viewed by students as less helpful in their learning. (NCCA, 2007, p.12). They also suggested that this more engaging pedagogy was far less evident in third year, while the pace of work and pressure perceived were much more problematic.

In 2009 the then Minister for Education requested that the NCCA give consideration to the junior cycle process and, subsequently a report was produced which was 'a set of ideas about what a junior cycle of the future might look like, and some ideas about how we might get from where we are to where we would want to be.' (NCCA, 2010, p.5). This document outlined five 'pathways to change', focusing on potential for schools to develop their own curriculum, a broader definition of qualifications, changes in structure of the junior cycle, changes in pedagogy used and in forms of assessment. It was planned that following the identification of the issues and possible solutions, a curriculum framework would be developed, to be used subsequently by a pilot group of 50-100 schools, adopting different models, which would design their new curriculum. A high degree of support would be provided to facilitate the process and, during the following year these schools would begin to implement their curriculum, while more schools began the planning stage.

Of particular concern to the geography community was the lack of emphasis on geography (and, indeed, other subjects) within the framework so far identified. Key skills were identified (with a particular focus on literacy and numeracy) – and no reference to graphicacy (surely a key skill) and it was stated that 'education should focus more on the experience and quality of learning and be less concerned with subjects and examinations.' (NCCA, 2010, p.15). A public consultation process was subsequently carried out by the NCCA, involving an on-

line questionnaire and a number of consultation meetings, during 2010. The AGTI (in common with all except one of the subject associations) did not contribute to this process, which was not well advertised at the time. This consultation revealed a general agreement on the need for change, but was unsurprisingly less clear on the exact nature of the change. While those involved in the consultation process generally assumed that separate subjects would remain, this is by no means clearly stated. The learning areas identified in the 1986 CEB report remain in a somewhat modified form, with the Social, Political and Environmental Studies area being renamed Social Education, although presumably this was still the 'location' of geography within the programme. It is also unclear about whether schools would make a choice of one of the subjects included under the general heading, or take a combined course, similar to the current Environmental and Social Studies. This potential downgrading of the key importance of geography appears somewhat puzzling when the introduction to the consultation document notes that 'Across the ... world schooling finds itself at the centre of a set of global concerns about the future of the planet, about food and water security, and about the movement of peoples in the face of climate disasters. ... schools are being asked not simply to teach students about these issues but to shape the next generation of creative problem solvers who can quite literally save the world' (NCCA, 2010, p.6). Surely geography is one of the key subjects which can deliver this programme. At the time of writing some proposals suggested that there might be formal assessment only in core subjects (which appeared to be language, mathematics and science). It was clear from speeches made by the Minister for Education during April 2011 that he was in favour of radical reform of the junior cycle, and stated that 'I believe our students take too many subjects... but reducing the number will not be enough.' He also noted that this change would be challenging both in financial terms but would also require major changes in the mindset of those involved (Quinn, 2011). The AGTI, Geographical Society of Ireland, the Royal Irish Academy Committee for Geographical Sciences, Geological Association of Ireland and other interested parties mounted a campaign to challenge the proposals. At the time of writing, this campaign is still on-going.

Apart from the societal aspects of the possibility that geography will no longer be studied by almost all of the junior cycle cohort, there will almost certainly be a negative impact on the numbers of students who take the subject to LC level and beyond. If schools chose either history or geography, then the potential impact is obvious, but a combined subject is also likely to have a major effect too. It is acknowledged in Japan that when geography is taught by social studies or history graduates within a combined social studies programme, the up-take of geography at senior cycle is much lower than in schools where the combined subject is taught by geography

graduates. The same phenomenon has also been noted in New Zealand. In Australia such was the concern about the lack of understanding of geography and of history that a National Curriculum is in the process of being introduced for both history and geography, separating the two from their previous combined position.

Potential changes in the Senior Cycle

Even at the start of the period of this review concern about senior cycle was being expressed on a wider front about the appropriateness of the traditional LC course – for example ‘The established Leaving Certificate programme does not cater adequately for the variety of needs and abilities of students now completing senior cycle. A fundamental objective of the restructuring ... is to cater more effectively for the needs and aptitudes of all students.’ (DoE, 1995, p.50). In this white paper, a revision of the established LC, plus further implementation of the two alternative LC programmes was recommended.

Criticism of the established LC has continued over the years prior to 2011 with a full review being undertaken from 2002 onwards. This process has involved widespread consultation with stake holders, research undertaken on the experience of learners, examination of senior cycle in other countries and on on-going research in education. It was generally acknowledged that there were many strengths in the existing programme, and that changes should build on these. In 2003 the vision set out in Directions for Development (NCCA, 2003) recommended the development of:

- ‘a different learning experience and school culture for senior cycle students
- a rebalanced curriculum
- different assessment arrangements and a new certificate at senior cycle’ (NCCA, 2011, p.3).

Since then the focus has been on developing this vision, with a particular focus on ‘how learners learn as well as what they learn’ (NCCA, 2011, p.3). The integration of key skills learning and of formative assessment within the programme are seen as a major aspects of the change.

Proposals in the 2011 consultation process involved the development of a three year programme, fully integrating the TY into senior cycle. The programme of study for this new version of TY would include schools either developing or adopting TY units, occupying 45 hours of class time (NCCA, 2011). Currently (2011) a number of example units have been produced, at least some of which provide definite opportunities for geography to play a major role, for example Debating Development, Tourism Studies – The Irish Experience, “What’s with the Weather?”: An exploration of the effects of global warming on today’s weather patterns, Environmental Studies and Setting up a Green School. It is also envisaged that some

new subjects would become available, possibly as short courses, within the redesigned years two and three. These would last for 90 hours and would be taken along with full (i.e. ‘traditional 180 hour’) courses. The traditional subjects are to be “rebalanced” to integrate formative assessment and key skills and to ensure that learning outcomes are matched by pedagogy and assessment procedures. While geography has not been involved in the trial phases of the integration of either formative assessment or of key skills held under the auspices of the NCCA, it is clear that these aspects represent an opportunity for geography to contribute to their development. Indeed, it may be argued that in the Geographical Investigation many of the key skills are already being practiced.

At the time of writing, this consultation process has not been concluded and so it is not possible to reflect further on the possible changes to the LC in the future.

Conclusion

Over the past 30 years geography as a second level subject has undergone major changes and has adapted to meet the changing demands of the system and to meet the needs of the students in Irish second level schools. There are clearly significant challenges for the subject in the immediate future and in the evidence of the last 30 years, there is good reason to suppose that the subject and the large number of dedicated teachers that the challenges will be met. Thirty years ago Hallinan noted that ‘Geography is today, more than ever before, an essential part of the core curriculum for every pupil. It, among other things, imparts a wide range of skills, interests, knowledge and attitudes which enables pupils to develop as responsible people and the lack of which would place each one of them at a disadvantage.’ (1981, p.62). His words were appropriate when he was writing, and they remain relevant for today’s second level students and their teachers and, arguably, will remain so for the future, so that (as suggested by Lydon, 2011) ‘With a little luck and the traditional strong commitment of Geography teachers to their subject, the AGTI may live to celebrate 100 years of serving teachers’.

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