

NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT



**Latin and Classical Studies
in the post-primary curriculum**

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LATIN AND CLASSICAL STUDIES IN THE POST-PRIMARY CURRICULUM

Introduction

This paper aims (i) to provide an overview of the position of Latin and Classical Studies in the post-primary curriculum as it stands at this time and (ii) to put forward some suggestions for reforming the present syllabuses in these subjects and (iii) to suggest possible new developments for the subjects.

It does not purport to be an exhaustive study nor to prescribe definite measures. It is envisaged rather that it will initiate a process which will lead to firm proposals for Classics (Latin and Classical Studies) in the post-primary curriculum.

Urgency of review/action

There is real urgency attaching to this review. In the case of Classical Studies, there has been no review of the syllabus at either Junior Certificate or Leaving Certificate since they were first introduced into the post-primary curriculum in 1981-83. There is general agreement amongst those involved that Leaving Certificate Classical Studies is in urgent need of reform and that a new approach should be adopted to Ordinary level Classical Studies at both Junior and Leaving Certificates. It seems likely that some students are not taking Leaving Certificate Classical Studies because of the perceived difficulty and length of the syllabus. The expansion of the subject may well be suffering because of this perception.

Action for Latin is even more urgent as the very survival of the subject could be said, without exaggeration, to be at stake. Numbers continue to fall to the point where a future without Latin has become a possibility.

It is also true that the possibility of development of new courses in areas such as Transition Year, Leaving Certificate Applied and first year needs to be examined as quickly as possible.

1. Present position of Latin

1.1 Numbers and type of school

The position of Latin in post-primary schools is a precarious one. Numbers have been falling for many years and have now come close to crisis – some 450 at Junior Certificate and about 120 at Leaving Certificate.

Latin is taught almost exclusively in one type of school *viz* voluntary secondary and, in particular, in fee-paying schools within that sector. This means that the whole vocational sector, and almost all community and comprehensive schools, are without Latin. Admittedly, in those schools where Latin is being taught, there is a strong commitment to the subject and in some cases numbers have held up well.

1.2 Gender balance

Within the small number of pupils taking Latin, boys are very much in the majority.

1.3 Teachers

With the decline in the numbers taking Latin, there has been a concomitant decline in the numbers of graduates coming out of the universities with a degree in Latin. Quite a few existing teachers of Latin are in the older age bracket and at the moment it is hard to see how they can be replaced when their time comes to retire.

1.4 Syllabus at Junior Certificate Latin

This syllabus was revised some ten years ago and is generally agreed to be a substantial improvement on what preceded it.

Prose composition is no longer compulsory. The emphasis is much more on reading Latin and there is a fine anthology of Latin poetry produced by teachers under the auspices of the Classical Association of Ireland and accompanied by a tape and CD.

Parts of this anthology are prescribed each year. This means that students are reading original Latin from writers such as Virgil, Catullus and Ovid. However, the downside of this is that many students do not have a good enough knowledge of Latin grammar and vocabulary. They fall back therefore on learning by heart translations of the set poems.

The syllabus recommends three course books as suitable for use in the junior cycle. However, any review of the syllabus should look again at these. The recommended course books are *Ecce Romani*, *Cambridge Latin Course* and *A New Approach to Latin*.

1.5 Aims of the Junior Certificate Syllabus

We need to be clear on what our goals are for the three year junior cycle course in Latin.

The course is trying to serve two purposes. Firstly, it aims to give pupils a worthwhile and enjoyable experience of the Latin language and a knowledge and appreciation of Roman history and civilisation which have had, and continue to have, a profound influence on Europe. Secondly, it aims to prepare students for the Leaving Certificate.

In spite of the caveat about the prescribed material mentioned above (1.4), the Junior Certificate syllabus does seem to fulfil the first aim set out above reasonably well. A basic vocabulary list of some 600 words has been drawn up and should be available in the near future to help students and teachers in the reading of Latin. The history and civilisation part of the course is very popular with students to judge by the high proportion of excellent answers remarked on in the *Chief Examiner's Report*. (2000)

In short, the syllabus may not require significant revision.

However, when we look at the second aim, there is definitely a mis-match between the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate. Teachers report that students have considerable problems tackling the prescribed text and unseen authors at Leaving

Certificate. There is a need to look at the Leaving Certificate syllabus in the light of these problems.

1.6 Latin in Transition Year

There is also the question of Latin in Transition Year. What sort of course is suitable for students who have completed three years of Latin and are intending to go on to Leaving Certificate Latin? A number of schools have devised modules for their Latin students in Transition Year. This year should represent an excellent opportunity to bridge the gap between Junior and Leaving Certificates referred to above.

1.7 Leaving Certificate Latin

There is more cause for concern about Leaving Certificate Latin than about Junior Certificate. The reasons for this concern are as follows:

- The numbers have dropped steadily – a small but significant fall every year – to the present low of fewer than 120 candidates
- A majority of students attain high grades but the decline has continued
- The syllabus is substantially unchanged for over 30 years and looks increasingly unsuitable for present day circumstances.

1.7.1 Review of the Leaving Certificate syllabus

At the moment, the course is too long and has the look of a course devised in a time when Latin was compulsory for entry to university. That time is, of course, long gone. Indeed, it is usual nowadays for students in Classics departments to take Latin *ab initio* (as is the case with some continental languages). Priority should therefore be given to devising a course that can stand alone and not be seen as a preparation for third level. Obviously, it must still be acceptable to the various bodies for the

granting of points. (See below for the desirability/ feasibility of a two-year Leaving Certificate for beginners in Latin.)

A review should examine a range of issues.

- Firstly, there is a long, continuous extract of original Latin (Virgil, Cicero or Livy) prescribed each year. Evidence both anecdotal and from examiners shows that many students resort to learning a translation of the text by heart. Alternatives to the present practice could include the use of an anthology from which suitable passages could be prescribed or the prescription of a longer text with parts to be read in the vernacular.
- The existing number of passages (three from four) of unseen Latin to be translated in the examination is excessive and does not allow sufficient time.
- A vocabulary list along the lines of that in the process of publication for the Junior Certificate would greatly help teachers and students.
- The period of Roman History (44 B.C. – A.D. 117) prescribed at present is very long. It is also a complex period politically and culturally. There is not really time to cover it adequately as things stand. It should be noted that as well as history, art, architecture and literature of the period must also be studied.

1.8 Current numbers studying Latin

The following table shows the numbers taking Latin in each year group (2002 – 2003):

Year group	1 st Year	2 nd Year	3 rd Year	4 th Year	5 th Year	6 th Year
Number of pupils	1210	512	496	107	104	105

These figures show that some schools make Latin compulsory for all their First Year pupils either for all or part of their first year in post-primary school. The other striking feature is the huge fall-off after the Junior Certificate. One would expect that rather more than one quarter would opt to continue Latin into the senior cycle. The results in Latin at Leaving Certificate are very good (73% of candidates achieved A or B grades in 2003 Higher Level examination, results which one would expect to attract more students).

A number of factors might help to explain this dramatic drop in the numbers taking Latin after the Junior Certificate year. Those include:

- The existence of a Transition Year in which little or no Latin is studied may have a negative influence on students
- In some schools, Latin may suffer by being time-tabled against more popular subjects
- The perception that, despite the good results mentioned above, Latin is a very difficult subject at Leaving Certificate level.

2. Present position of Classical Studies

The profile of Classical Studies in the post-primary curriculum presents some unusual features due, partly, to the nature of the subject. Classical Studies is more a horizontal than a vertical subject. It can be – and is - taken up at various points at post-primary level.

Of the 65 schools (not including privately run institutes of education) which offer Classical Studies, some introduce it in first year, others in Transition Year, others in fifth year, and a small few in sixth year.

This flexibility has made the subject attractive to external candidates and particularly to those attending the institutes of education. For example, in 1995 external candidates made up 45% of the total Classical Studies cohort at Leaving Certificate Higher Level – this in a year when the external candidate rate for the entire Leaving Certificate cohort stood at c. 6%. This percentage has decreased as the numbers taking Higher Level have decreased since 1995, and stood at c. 28% in 2003.

Given that Classical Studies has now been on the post-primary curriculum for twenty years, it is disappointing that the numbers taking the subject are still so low.

While a number of community and comprehensive schools offer Classical Studies, there is little or no presence in the vocational sector. Voluntary secondary schools remain the most likely to have the subject on their timetables.

This poor uptake is particularly disappointing as Classical Studies can contribute to the general education and development of pupils in all types of school. It appeals to a range of ability with its variety of topics and its exciting material. Those involved in the teaching of Classical Studies and its promotion must find ways of spreading the good news about the subject because there is no doubt that most of those who study it at all levels become fascinated by their contact with it.

2.1 Teachers

Unlike the situation with Latin, a number of graduates with Greek and Roman Civilisation in their degree enter the teaching profession each year. Some of these graduates will have taken Classical Studies as their methodology subject in the Higher Diploma in Education year.

However, Classical Studies can be very well taught (and frequently is) by teachers without a degree in the Classics. This is a strength and allows many schools to introduce and maintain the subject at all levels.

2.2 Syllabuses

2.2.1 First Year

The NCCA has produced two very helpful publications for teachers of Classical Studies at Junior Certificate. These are (a) *Guidelines for Teachers of the First Year Course* and (b) *Guidelines for Teachers of the Second and Third Year Course*.

The First Year Course is heavily biased toward Greek myths and legends on the one hand, and towards Roman social life and history on the other. It lends itself to a story-centred approach. The students hear and read the stories of gods and heroes: the Trojan War, Odysseus' adventures, the Labours of Herakles, Theseus and the Minotaur, and many more. The stories are not just enthralling tales but can be exploited in various way and, in addition, can be used as a bridge between the world of myth and that of evidence-based history.

This course is considered satisfactory and suitable for the 12 – 13 age group. The main problem is the difficulty of accessing resource material. Teachers spend considerable time photocopying material.

2.2.2 Junior Certificate

This is a two-year course divided equally between Greek and Roman topics. The Higher level course is generally regarded as a good course with some reservations:

one or two of the topics are seen as too long or difficult and are taken by very few candidates.

The main area of concern is the Ordinary Level. The failure rate here is very high (c. 40%). There are several reasons for this:

- The number of candidates opting for Ordinary Level is very low and their aptitude for the subject is also low
- The Higher Level paper and the Ordinary Level paper are exactly the same for 60% of the questions on each topic. Many Ordinary level candidates have difficulty coping with these common questions.

2.2.3 Transition Year

Only 29 of the 65 schools which offer Classical Studies, offer the subject in the Transition Year, while eight of the 65 schools have Classical Studies in Transition Year but not at any other stage.

There are no set programmes for the Transition Year. Each school devises its own course or modules which may be for a whole year, a term or half-term. Where the school has no Classical Studies in the junior cycle, the programme tends to focus on Greek mythology and/or Roman daily life. In schools with Classical Studies in the junior cycle, students may read a text such as Homer's *Odyssey* or a Greek tragedy such as *Antigone*.

There are some schools where Classical Studies was first introduced into the curriculum in Transition Year and then went on to become an established Leaving Certificate subject.

2.2.4 Leaving Certificate

Numbers taking Leaving Certificate Classical Studies have fluctuated significantly in the twenty years since it was introduced into the post-primary curriculum. A peak of almost 1,500 was reached in the mid-nineties. The *Chief Examiner's Reports* of 1995 and 1999 suggest reasons for this. The numbers fell sharply but now appear to have

levelled off at c.800 candidates. The results have fluctuated in tandem with the numbers – as the numbers went up, the results went down.

The syllabus at Leaving Certificate is the cause of much current dissatisfaction. There is an overwhelming case for revision.

- The syllabus is very demanding as it consists of four topics to be studied, each requiring a considerable amount of reading of Classical texts. This forces some teachers to omit parts of topics, reducing the choices available to their students (e.g. vase painting in the topic on Greek Art and Architecture).
- The actual examination calls for eight questions (almost all essay-type) to be answered in three hours. This allows far too little time for many candidates to produce well thought out and well developed answers. This is more demanding than any comparable subject. (History asks for five questions to be answered.)
- In relation to the text books, some of the prescribed books have proven to be quite unsuitable for students at this level. This is particularly true of the Greek Art and Architecture and the Roman Art and Architecture. In other topics, the prescribed material is out of print (e.g. Writers of the Augustan Age).
- Teachers claim that students are avoiding Classical Studies because of the amount of work involved and because of what they perceive as the difficulty in gaining high grades. Statistics show that Classical Studies does have one of the lowest rates of C+ grades in the Leaving Certificate. In fact, the education correspondent of one of the national newspapers recently placed Classical Studies amongst a select number of subjects to be avoided if one wants high grades.
- The results of the Leaving Certificate examination are problematic. A very small number opt for the Ordinary level paper (e.g. 85 out of 868 in 2003) and results are very poor (e.g. 44% of Ordinary level candidates achieved an E- grade in 2003; 15% acquired NG!). Successive Chief Examiner's Reports indicate that many of those who failed answered only a small number of questions.

- Even at Higher Level, over 4% of candidates were awarded F or NG.

In short, Classical Studies is very popular with many of those who take it at Leaving Certificate but its potential is not being fulfilled: there is a pressing need for a review of the syllabus. This review could well follow the example of the revised syllabus in Leaving Certificate History and look for course work as part of the assessment process. Classical Studies would seem to be ideally suited to such an initiative.

3. The Case for Latin - Possibilities for Development

3.1 Introduction

It is still difficult to consider the Classical languages without reference to their past. They were for so long the staple of the education of a relatively restricted number of people that to many they represent an age now gone. They seem to have little to offer to modern Ireland with its preoccupation with economic growth and technical advance.

Latin also became synonymous with a certain methodology of teaching language which, in turn, became a model for the teaching of other languages in the post-primary system.

There is no need to rehearse here the reasons for the extraordinary decline of Latin in the Republic of Ireland. These have already been well-documented elsewhere.

3.2 Latin's contribution to general education

What is needed now is a major shift in the way we view the importance of Latin and Classical Studies in the education system. Yes, we must improve the existing syllabuses in Latin and do everything possible not only to save the subject but also to attract more schools and more students. However, we must accept at the same time that the majority of post-primary students will not encounter Latin through the existing syllabuses.

And yet, there is a strong case to be made for Latin as a standard part of the junior cycle (and also of the primary curriculum). Research in the United States and in the United Kingdom has convinced educators that the study of Latin through properly constructed courses delivers important benefits to young learners. It is an excellent medium for improving *literacy*, *understanding of grammar* and *cultural awareness*. It is precisely in these areas that our education system is failing many students.

A healthy democracy needs a literate population. Most of the language used in public discourse (politics, economics, public affairs generally) uses words that come from Latin. Unless people are at ease with such words they are effectively at a considerable disadvantage in their participation in citizenship.

The evidence from studies in the U.S. (much of it carried out in deprived inner city areas) shows that courses in Latin, focusing on vocabulary, significantly improve literacy and all round general knowledge.

The lack of an understanding of grammar (how language works) has become increasingly a problem. Without it, there can be no proper analysis of one's own language or of any other language. Latin, being an inflected language, is an excellent medium for teaching rules of grammar in an interesting way. There is positive 'spin-off', not only for English but also for the learning of other languages (especially those derived from Latin.)

Our cultural debt to Greece and Rome is something we share with the rest of Europe and not just Western Europe (Serbia, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, for example, give Latin far more prominence than we do.)

Even within our own country, knowledge related to Greece and Rome is part of our 'cultural literacy'. This is a knowledge we share with many other parts of the world, not just the rest of Europe (Boston as well as Berlin!).

3.3 First year

One way of benefiting from what Latin can contribute would be to devise a one-year course which uses Latin in an entertaining way to improve students' word power – spelling, punctuation and understanding of grammar. Such courses already exist elsewhere, notably in the U.K. where *Minimus* has proved both effective and popular in primary schools. This book combines in a lively cartoon format basic grammar and

vocabulary and an authentic cultural context. A follow-up *Minimus 2* is in preparation.

Education authorities in Britain and in Scotland have for some years past been using Information Technology to provide courses in Latin to schools, and to users outside schools as well. The idea behind this is to make the subject available to any student who wishes to study Latin by means of e.g. video conferencing. We need to be open to examining the British and Scottish experiences to see if such an approach could be applied here.

3.4 Transition Year

Latin should also be looking to establish itself in Transition Year. In the context of recent proposals for the development of senior cycle, a transition unit with the same rationale as the first year course, but suited to students aged 16-17, might be developed and made available to schools. Courses such as those can be taught by most teachers and do not depend on the availability of a Latin graduate. The Post-Primary Languages Initiative might be able to provide support to schools offering such a course.

3.5 Leaving Certificate (established)

The most pressing need is a thorough revision of the existing syllabus. However, Latin might also look at the example of certain modern languages for which a two-year syllabus leading to a Leaving Certificate has been made available. This is already happening with some modern languages such as Japanese. Such a syllabus would have the added advantage of appealing to adult and returning learners (much as the existing Classical Studies course does).

Schools which already offer Latin would continue to do so in the same way as they do now.

Another possible initiative is the development of a two-year combined Latin and Classical Studies course. Such courses already exist in Britain.

The ban on a candidate taking both Latin and Classical Studies needs to be removed.

3.6 Leaving Certificate Applied

Modules suitable for students taking the Leaving Certificate Applied should be developed. They should focus on using Latin to develop word-power, grammatical knowledge, and language awareness, as well as introducing our cultural inheritance from Greece and Rome.

3.7 Latin as part of an integrated language curriculum

Latin has become isolated by its exclusion from the debate about language teaching in Ireland. Granted that this debate has been fragmented and sporadic, Latin has still played no part in it.

Languages in the Post-primary Curriculum (2003), a recently published discussion paper commissioned by the NCCA, has drawn attention to the absence of any overarching language policy in post-primary education and to the lack of an integrated language curriculum. Instead of such an integrated curriculum, we have as things stand 'a series of language curricula that are largely independent of one another' (p. 1). The author goes on to point out that one of the main functions of an integrated curriculum is to give students 'a critical awareness of language as a rule-governed system of communication' (p. 5).

It is vital that Latin (and Greek) be included in the debate which has followed the publication of this discussion document because of the unique contribution it can make to the formulation 'of a language policy on the basis of a thorough investigation of Ireland's language needs'.

4. Possibilities for Development – Classical Studies

4.1 First year (foundation year)

It is generally agreed that story-telling plays a central part in education in general and particularly in the Primary and early Secondary stages. Greek myths and legends are probably the best stories ever told and certainly they have had the most influence on European art, literature, music and language right down to our own time.

The existing first year of the Classical Studies syllabus draws heavily on these stories and it deserves to be much more widely offered in schools of all types. This syllabus could be adapted without too much difficulty to serve as a one-year stand-alone course (or even a 10 week module) in first year in schools which are either unable or unwilling to introduce Classical Studies as a full subject.

Classical Studies should be ready and eager to take advantage of the current immense popularity of everything to do with the Ancient World (*Gladiator, Alexander the Great, Pompeii, the Iliad*, etc).

4.2 Transition Year

Some 30 schools already offer Classical Studies in one form or another. Sometimes, Transition Year is the only presence of Classical Studies in a school. It may be time to tap into the experience of these schools to develop programmes to suit the different circumstances obtaining in schools. Once again, the idea of developing a transition unit may be of relevance here.

4.3 Leaving Certificate

The most pressing development needed at Leaving Certificate level is the reform of the existing syllabus.

4.4. The European Dimension

It is worth stressing again the importance of the European dimension of the Classical subjects. Ireland is a member of a union of states which share a Greco-Roman heritage reflected in their languages, their institutions and in their culture. It would be a tragedy if Ireland were to cut itself off from that shared Classical tradition by its neglect of the Classical subjects in our schools.

5. GREEK

5.1 Introduction

There are currently four schools offering Greek in the Republic of Ireland. They are all in the voluntary secondary sector and all are fee-paying. Two are all-boys, one all-girls and one co-educational.

Some 30 students sat the Junior Certificate Greek examination in 2003, while about 15 sat the Leaving Certificate.

Despite the necessity of having to learn a different alphabet, Greek literature is in some ways more accessible to younger learners than its Latin counterpart. Greek history is also full of interest covering as it does the Persian Wars (Marathon, Thermopylae, Salamis), the Peloponnesian War (Athens against Sparta), and Alexander the Great.

5.2 Syllabus review

5.2.1 Junior Certificate

The Junior Certificate syllabus retains composition (translation from English into Greek) as a compulsory element. This might be better considered an optional question. Alternatives to the existing set texts should also be considered. The section dealing with history, myths and legends, art and architecture could be widened and its layout made more attractive and colourful.

There is also a need for the publication of an agreed vocabulary for Greek (as is under development for Latin).

5.2.2 Leaving Certificate

As in the case of Latin, there is a choice between a prose or poetry set text - both are long and an anthology of extracts might be an alternative worth exploring.

Again, three unseen passages from four is very demanding in a three hour paper.

The history course (which includes literature, art and architecture, and constitutional politics) while it covers a fascinating period, is long and detailed.

5.3 Possibilities for development

Developments in Greek are likely to be more difficult than in the case of Latin. This is due mainly to the problem of finding teachers. However, there are courses available to teachers and granted aided by the Department of Education and Science which would allow the teacher to teach to a fairly high level.

It seems clear enough that the Transition Year represents the best opportunity for the Greek language to reach a wider audience. A module with interesting and manageable target texts could prove an attractive introduction. A Classical Studies module could also make good use of the very large number of Greek words which have been taken into English, particularly in the fields of science and technology.

The points already made about the desirability of a two-year Leaving Certificate course in Latin (or three-year if Transition Year is added) apply equally to Greek.

6. Postscript

6.1 Despite the problems outlined above, Latin and Classical Studies have a number of important things going for them. These include:

- Close co-operation between the Classics departments of universities and the schools
- Large numbers of students studying Greek and Roman Civilisation at third level
- Strong public interest in things classical
- A perhaps surprising level of support for Latin among parents and teachers.

6.2 Factors impeding the growth of Classical subjects include:

- The small number of teachers available and willing to devote time and energy to the work of development
- The lack of awareness in schools of the vital contribution the subjects can make to the general education of students. It is worth noting how well the Classical subjects fit in with the aims and outcomes for junior cycle education, where the importance of literacy, language skills as well as knowledge and appreciation of cultural heritage are highlighted
- Difficulty of accessing resource material
- Curriculum overload particularly in the Junior cycle
- Weak linkage between primary and post-primary education.

7. Recommendation

An enabling structure should be convened to consider the issues raised in this paper and to propose a course of action in relation to Latin and Classical studies at both junior cycle and senior cycle.