



RESPONSE TO THE CONSULTATION
BY THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR
CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT
ON THE DRAFT JUNIOR CYCLE
PHILOSOPHY SHORT COURSE

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Introduction

The Ethical, Political, Legal and Philosophical Studies Committee of the Royal Irish Academy/*Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann* ('the Academy'), Ireland's leading body of experts in the sciences, humanities and social sciences, welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) on the introduction of Philosophy as a short course in the Junior Cycle. This paper builds on the Academy's proposal to the NCCA in 2012 suggesting that Philosophy be introduced at second level.¹ The views expressed in this submission are not necessarily shared by each individual member of the Academy or of the Academy's committees.

Key points

- 'Philosophy' should be restated in positive terms in the Rationale for the draft course.
- Clarification of the year/stage in the Junior Cycle when Philosophy is going to be included as a course is essential to take cognisance of the intellectual, psychological and developmental differences of students in the age-range 12–15 years, as well as enabling teaching to adjust course content and reading to the different age groups.
- The inclusion of female philosophers, non-Western philosophers and additional contemporary philosophers would strengthen the course.
- Broadening the curriculum to include a second mandatory strand on Moral Philosophy, as well as elective strands on the Philosophy of Religion and the Philosophy of the Environment, should be considered.
- The canon of great philosophers should be explored in detail in order to provide a sense of the history underlying contemporary philosophical problems.
- Specific learning outcomes for each strand would be helpful to teachers and students.
- The course should contain clear assessment guidelines that indicate how achievement in the Classroom Based Assessments of group activity and individual philosophical enquiry are to be measured.
- Teachers should be supported to have the requisite knowledge, skills and competencies in Philosophy to implement successfully the proposed Philosophy course in Junior Cycle.

Rationale and aim of the Philosophy course

The Junior Cycle programme focuses on students aged between 12 and 15/16 years. It builds on prior learning as well as enabling students to develop knowledge and skills that will assist them in meeting the challenges of life beyond school. The introduction of a short course in Philosophy supports this endeavour. The course is structured using a strand approach which is particularly helpful regarding the promotion of optimum teaching and learning. The emphasis of the proposed course is on the questioning aspect of philosophy and the acquisition of skills as a consequence. This is commendable.

However, it expresses the rationale for studying philosophy rather negatively and tautologically. It would be desirable to articulate it in positive terms and tone by the inclusion of a positive statement about what philosophy is, rather than what it is not. This would support better the stated aim, which is well-pitched for learners in the 12–15/16-year-old category.

¹Royal Irish Academy (2012) 'Proposal for Philosophy as a Leaving Certificate Subject' prepared by the National Committee for Philosophy and Ethics.

Furthermore, there is no indication in the NCCA draft Philosophy course regarding the year of the Junior Cycle within which this will be included as a subject. In other words, the stage in the Junior Cycle at which the students will be introduced to Philosophy is unclear. Is this known? As a rule, there are important intellectual, psychological and developmental differences between a 12-year-old and a 15-year-old. Will the course content, including the readings, be adjusted to make it appropriate to the intellectual and developmental stage of the students taking it?

Finally, care should be taken to ensure that the notion of there being 'no answers' in Philosophy is avoided, lest it produce a laissez-faire attitude in the Philosophy classroom. There are certainly answers but such answers may be subject to change, particularly those which have unhelpfully evolved into unquestioned dogmatisms (such as, 'democracy is the best [or least worst] form of government'). Thus a balanced emphasis should be placed upon the search for truth and the questioning of such truth or truths.

Links between Philosophy course and Junior Cycle SOLs & Skills

Statements of learning

The table illustrating the links between learning within the Philosophy course and the statements of learning (SOLs) of the Junior Cycle curriculum as a whole is very useful (NCCA, *Philosophy: Draft Short Course Specification* page 7). Three statements of learning are identified in the Draft Short Course Specification as being particularly relevant: SOL 5, SOL 6 and SOL 18. Two clarifications are suggested in order to facilitate teachers' and students' appreciation and comprehension of the links between the learning within the Philosophy course and the Junior Cycle generally:

- **Statement of Learning 5:** The examples of relevant learning in the Philosophy course related to SOL 5 include the phrase 'to identify their own values'. It would be helpful to extend this into a statement making the point that philosophy can also help students to develop clearer and better-articulated values, not simply to discover their current values.
- **Statement of Learning 18:** Clarification is essential here, because as currently expressed in the Draft Short Course Specification, this point has not been articulated correctly. No deductions follow from empirical events. Therefore a revision of Statement of Learning 18 is recommended. It would be desirable to restate it to say that students gather and critically evaluate information about the world and draw valid inferences and conclusions.

Philosophy and key skills

Eight key skills of the Junior Cycle curriculum are identified as of particular relevance to Philosophy. 'Being Creative', the first of the key skills identified, outlines exploring options and alternatives as skills acquired through learning activities in the Philosophy short course. The description of this key skills element would benefit from the inclusion of the following additional skills:

- Critical but constructive thinking
- Analysis
- Problem solving
- Acknowledging the right of others to hold views different to one's own
- Demonstrating respect for that right in practice by courteous and respectful behaviour towards others
- Resolving disagreements through rational argumentation

Appraisal of course overview

The proposed short course in Philosophy is based on a strand approach whereby students are required to complete one compulsory strand, entitled Foundations for Doing Philosophy, and may choose four further strands from eight elective strands offered: Philosophy of Knowledge; Philosophy of Language; Philosophy of Art; Philosophy of Sport; Philosophy of Science; Moral Philosophy; Social and Political Philosophy; and Philosophy of Education. The utilization of this strand approach, combining a basic compulsory strand with four specialized strands, is helpful regarding the promotion of optimum teaching and learning.

Choice of strands

Questions arise, however, with regard to the choice of the nine strands listed and the rationale for their inclusion, to the exclusion of other possibilities. The omission of any reference to gender issues, environmental issues, and philosophy of religion is notable.

Observations on the strands

The following observations are made with regard to the strands:

A single compulsory strand, *Foundations for Doing Philosophy*, may be insufficient for students to acquire the knowledge of concepts and principles necessary for philosophical enquiry, as well as for developing the skills in using them through debate and discussion. The addition of reading resources for this strand from suggested philosophers is recommended; this should include both female and male philosophers, and an appropriate blend of classic and contemporary sources.

It is recommended that *Moral Philosophy* be made a compulsory strand, rather than an elective as listed at present, since it encompasses issues that are of importance to young people in every generation. The inclusion of topics that are of contemporary concern is also suggested, such as human rights and their emergence; feminist moral perspectives; animal rights; our duties towards the animal world; vegetarian and vegan horizons; and environmental issues. In addition, the inclusion of the term 'values' as a key concept is recommended, provided that it is supported by appropriate resources (such as selections from Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, and some basic readings from Nietzsche, particularly in relation to the critique of morality). Moreover, the suggested study of human rights and their emergence should be couched in an exploration of the European Enlightenment (again, provided that it is adequately supported by appropriate resources, such as selections from Descartes, Locke, Rousseau, Hume and Kant). The strand would benefit from the inclusion of classic as well as contemporary reading resources that are inclusive of both male and female philosophers and drawn from global cultures and intellectual traditions.

The inclusion of a strand on *Philosophy of Religion* would strengthen greatly the Junior Cycle Philosophy course and enrich further cross-curricular links with other subjects such as Religious Education, CSPE, Art, Music and History. *Philosophy of Religion* encompasses ideas and experiences that Junior Cycle students grapple with on a daily basis, such as questions about the meaning of life and death, the relationship between belief and knowledge, and the question of God's existence (or lack thereof). Such topics are explicitly addressed in the UK's A-Level syllabus and are also considered in the GCSE Religious Studies syllabus, for example. It is essential that a strand in *Philosophy of Religion* has a multicultural dimension by including non-Christian philosophers as well as atheist thinkers and those who question the fundamentals of religion.

The *Philosophy of Education* strand seems a little out of place in a Junior Cycle course and would be better placed within a Senior Cycle course in Philosophy. Its replacement on Junior Cycle Philosophy by a course on *Philosophy of Religion* and/or *Philosophy of the Environment* is recommended.

The exploration of gender issues is notably absent from the draft Philosophy course. Its inclusion as a theme of *Social and Political Philosophy* would be appropriate, so that it does not run the risk of ghettoization, which may occur if it is circumscribed in a strand of its own. The *Social and Political Philosophy* strand would also benefit from the inclusion of a topic on the role of ideology as well as an updating of suggested reading by including more contemporary philosophers.

The strand on *Philosophy of Language* would be enriched by the inclusion of a theme/topic on the ideological uses of language, e.g. in propaganda. The inclusion of a work by Frege is problematic for students in the Junior Cycle as it is difficult even for undergraduates. Noam Chomsky has written articles on language for school-goers which could be used instead. As with other strands, the suggested reading requires updating to reflect gender balance as well as contemporary philosophical enquiry.

The *Philosophy of Knowledge* strand would be enriched by the inclusion of two further concepts that are vital to any exploration of the process of knowing; that is, the concept of judgement and the concept of action. In addition, the inclusion of extreme scepticism and relativism as topics of study should be considered in more detail. While relativism is included as a topic under the *Moral Philosophy* strand, it is not mentioned in this strand, which seems unwise. Worryingly, no mention at all is made of scepticism in the document. Given its importance in the history of Philosophy, its omission as an explicit topic of study is somewhat surprising.

The inclusion of *Philosophy of Sport* as a strand in the Junior Cycle Philosophy course is an interesting one. It is debatable whether it should be included at the expense of more central areas of philosophical concern. Nevertheless it has merit in being likely to attract young people who are not drawn to the world of ideas and in giving them an opportunity to become more reflective. This is possible because sport enables young people to develop and demonstrate values that are essential to interpersonal, societal and political relations: fair play, equality, respect and solidarity. Reflection on the social and physical roles of sport is especially relevant today, in a global context deeply challenged by discrimination, insecurity and violence. The provision of a strand on Philosophy of Sport enables young people to draw on the unique potential of physical and sports education – in all their diverse forms – to foster citizenship, nurture solidarity and consolidate peace. As Irina Bokova, UNESCO Director-General, noted: 'In every society, sport is a field of dreams and a force for fabulous positive change – we must do everything to harness this power.'²

Learning outcomes of the strands

There is a distinct difference in the way the learning outcomes are listed in the compulsory strand and the eight elective strands. The compulsory strand, *Foundations for Doing Philosophy*, laudably identifies three topics as core content for young people beginning the study of philosophy: community of enquiry, tools for thinking, and generating the big questions. These topics are then expressed as learning outcomes delineating the kind of knowledge, skills and attitudes/behaviours that students develop as they engage personally and collaboratively with others in philosophical enquiry. The other strands, however, all list identical learning outcomes, despite the differences of theme for each strand. Those identical learning outcomes, although well expressed, would be more appropriate if stated as general learning outcomes for the Philosophy course as a whole. It would be desirable for each strand to identify specific learning outcomes that are directly related to the content of the topics, questions and concepts explored in each strand, and to express them clearly, in order to give clarity to students and teachers as to what the goals of their learning and teaching in each strand actually are.

²UNESCO (2016) *The Power of Sport Values*. ISBN 978-92-3-000025-7.

Suggested reading for the strands

All nine strands feature reading resources almost exclusively by male philosophers, with only two female philosophers included. The absence of non-Western philosophers is also striking. Contemporary philosophers are omitted for the most part, which is most surprising. This creates the unfortunate impression that philosophy is the domain of dead white men only. Such omissions facilitate a biased approach to philosophical enquiry which impacts adversely on individuals, communities and societies.

An adequate representation of female philosophers in the Philosophy course for Junior Cycle is essential. Useful resources in this regard are the following works outlining the achievements of the many woman philosophers throughout history, as well as the works delineating the concept of woman within the context of the history of philosophy: *Women Philosophers*;³ *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period*;⁴ *Woman and the History of Philosophy*;⁵ and *The Concept of Woman*.⁶ Further information on contemporary female philosophers is available at the website of the Society for Women in Philosophy Ireland.⁷

The inclusion of non-Western philosophers – for example, Chinese and Islamic philosophers – in the Junior Cycle Philosophy course is also essential. The following resources are helpful in detailing the contribution of non-Western philosophers: *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*;⁸ *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy*;⁹ *The Oxford Handbook of World Philosophy*;¹⁰ *An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy*;¹¹ and *A History of Islamic Philosophy*.¹²

In general, in tandem with the freedom to select and mould their own approach, teachers appreciate greater guidance from syllabi regarding matters of teachable content. For that reason it is imperative that the suggested reading for the Philosophy short course reflect the world of the lived experience of students and teachers, as well as the discipline of philosophy as it has developed historically: that is, one that includes women and men, from different cultures and traditions, and that draws on contemporary as well as classic sources.

Teaching and learning in the Philosophy course

A variety of educational paradigms appear to underpin the strand approach of the Philosophy course. These include the historical paradigm, the problem-solving paradigm and the democratic and discussionary paradigm. Suggested reading for the various strands, drawn from classic and contemporary philosophers, challenges young people to engage with issues and problems in a disciplined way. Interactive teaching and learning activities related to problematic issues, difficult questions and case-studies challenge students to debate and discuss with each other and to attempt to resolve problems – epistemological, logical, moral/ethical – in a spirit of openness and solidarity. Specific learning methodologies identified are discussion, deliberation and debate, which contribute to the development of the kind of skills needed for participation in a community of enquiry. These are skills that need to be taught – as well as practised over and over again in order to acquire them – ranging from listening to the contributions of others, analysing and critiquing premises and arguments, managing personal feelings and bias, resolving dilemmas, composing arguments and counterarguments, and so on. The skills acquired in these Philosophy classes are transferrable to all other areas of life, both personal and professional.

³Mary Warnock, ed. (1996) *Women Philosophers*. London: Everyman.

⁴Margaret Atherton, ed. (1994) *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period*. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company.

⁵Nancy Tuana (1992) *Woman and the History of Philosophy*. New York: Paragon House.

⁶Prudence Allen (1985) *The Concept of Woman: the Aristotelian Revolution 750 B.C.–A.D. 1250* Montreal: Eden Press.

⁷Society for Women in Philosophy Ireland (SWIP Ireland): <http://www.swip-ireland.com/>

⁸Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden, eds (2006) *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

⁹Bryan W. Van Norden (2011) *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

¹⁰Jay L. Garfield and William Edelglass, eds (2014) *The Oxford Handbook of World Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹¹Oliver Leaman (2001) *An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹²Majid Fakhry (2005) *A History of Islamic Philosophy*. New York: Columbia University Press.

¹³Michel Tozzi, cited in UNESCO (2007) *Philosophy: A School of Freedom*, pp. 83–85.

It is recommended that as many links as possible are made between the teacher and/or school and external philosophical associations in order to emphasise to students the global appeal and scope of the subject. For example, the International Federation of Philosophical Societies (FISP) has been running a highly successful international Philosophy competition for the past twenty-four years: the International Philosophy Olympiad (IPO). It would be important to ensure that teachers of the new short course were both aware of such events and actively encouraged the participation of their students.

When young people encounter a subject or activity for the first time, their appreciation for it is awakened and nurtured by teachers who have a passion for it, as well as the requisite knowledge and skills to bring the subject to life within the classroom context. To ensure a rewarding and enriching classroom experience, it is important that teachers have appropriate philosophy training at third level. Sometimes teachers are assigned to teach subjects which they have not studied at degree level, such as RE and CSPE, often to the detriment of the students, who can identify lack of interest, knowledge and passion in their teachers. It would be unfortunate if Philosophy teaching was treated similarly by school authorities.

Assessment and reporting in Junior Cycle Philosophy

A student-centred approach to learning is at the core of the mechanisms for assessment and reporting. The proposed Philosophy course makes provision for a varied approach to assessment, ranging from formative self-assessment and peer-assessment during the learning process to two required Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs). One of these is a group activity leading to a group presentation, during which the student's individual role and contribution to the group will be the focus of the assessment. The other is an individual philosophical enquiry, presented in written format. Developmental feedback is given to the students during both CBAs and at the end of the assessment process. A report of student achievement is given to parents at the end of the second and third years of the Junior Cycle. A record of student achievement is logged on the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA).

The assessments outlined in the draft course are in need of further and more detailed development. This is particularly true of CBA1: group activity, which proffers two narrow options to students – a debate, or a stimulus-based exploration of an issue. Although this kind of task-based learning has merits, particularly in science subjects, it is a rather rigid approach to philosophical enquiry, which thrives in an atmosphere of freedom to explore a question or issue from its initial manifestation in consciousness or life through to an identification and resolution of its various facets.

The omission of detailed Assessment Specifications and Guidelines in this section of the draft is regrettable as it inhibits a complete evaluation of how student achievement in the Philosophy course is actually assessed. Although the Assessment Specifications and Guidelines are mentioned on page 25, followed by a table providing a summary overview of the quality-features of both CBAs, these are very general and do not give any indication of how poor-quality work is to be differentiated from work of a high standard. It would be helpful to have Assessment Specifications and Guidelines, indicating different marking bands in numerical terms or percentages, alongside their accompanying performance descriptors. A sample Assessment Guideline including those features is provided in Appendix I.

The requirement for schools to ensure that supports for students with special needs are available during CBAs in the Philosophy course, as well as throughout the school year, is a positive element of the Assessment and Reporting section. This enables the assessment of a student's actual abilities, so that she/he can demonstrate learning and achievement in philosophical enquiry and philosophical studies as a whole. It also manifests respect for rights in practice by and to the students and staff in schools.

Support material

The list of eleven general textbooks and ten websites related to teaching philosophy, while useful, is far too sparse. A substantial strand-specific set of resources would be of benefit to both teachers and students, taking into account the requirements already mentioned for inclusivity of female and male philosophers, as well as non-Western perspectives, through the inclusion of reading resources from other cultures and intellectual traditions such as China, Africa, Asia-Pacific, Confucianism, Islam, and so on.

Planning Template

The provision of a Planning Template for teachers of the Philosophy course is helpful. However, it appears to be a general template for a strand, rather than for individual lessons – which is where teaching and learning actually occur. The Philosophy course proposal does not specify how many contact hours are provided for within the overall school year for the proposed course. Even so, it is clear from the draft outline of the Philosophy course that each strand would take a period of time to teach, necessitating a series of individual lessons to meet the requirements of the content – which includes concepts and guiding questions as well as supplementary reading. It would be helpful for teachers to have access to a lesson planning template that incorporated these practicalities, which they might use in planning their daily/weekly Philosophy class. For that reason, a Sample Lesson Plan is provided in Appendix 2.

Conclusion

The NCCA proposal to include Philosophy as a course in second-level education in Ireland is a very welcome one. It is a particularly effective route towards learning to become an independent thinker, which will benefit young people not only throughout their school years, but also throughout their adult lives.

The background features a series of smooth, flowing, wavy lines in various shades of blue, ranging from light to dark, set against a white background. The lines create a sense of movement and depth, typical of a modern, clean design.

APPENDICES

Appendix I: Sample Assessment Guidelines

Classroom Based Assessment I: Group Activity

Grade Band	Performance Descriptor
85%–100%	<p>Outstanding – the best performance that can be expected from a student at this level in the time available.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent collaborative planning; respectful listening and dialogue; building upon each other’s ideas; responding thoughtfully. • Excellent use of the language of argument, presentation skills and creative modes of expression. • Excellent consideration of the question issue from different perspectives; excellent research of topic and critical analysis of relevant literature; articulation of reflective personal insight. • Excellent critical thinking skills; ability to present a coherent argument and justify it; adjusts thinking in light of others’ viewpoints.
70%–84%	<p>Clearly an above-average student.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very good collaborative planning; respectful listening and dialogue; building upon each other’s ideas; responding thoughtfully. • Very good use of the language of argument, presentation skills and creative modes of expression. • Very good consideration of the question issue from different perspectives; very good research of topic and critical analysis of relevant literature; articulation of reflective personal insight. • Very good critical thinking skills; ability to present a coherent argument and justify it; adjusts thinking in light of others’ viewpoints.
55%–69%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good collaborative planning; respectful listening and dialogue; building upon each other’s ideas; responding thoughtfully. • Good use of the language of argument, presentation skills and creative modes of expression. • Good consideration of the question issue from different perspectives; good research of topic and critical analysis of relevant literature; articulation of reflective personal insight. • Good critical thinking skills; ability to present a coherent argument and justify it; adjusts thinking in light of others’ viewpoints.
40%–54%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequate collaborative planning; respectful listening and dialogue; building upon each other’s ideas; responding thoughtfully. • Adequate use of the language of argument, presentation skills and creative modes of expression. • Adequate consideration of the question issue from different perspectives; adequate research of topic and critical analysis of relevant literature; articulation of reflective personal insight. • Adequate critical thinking skills; ability to present a coherent argument and justify it; adjusts thinking in light of others’ viewpoints.
<39%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of collaboration with others. • Poor presentation and inadequate presentation skills. • Insufficient evidence of research. • Lack of understanding of concepts/issues.

Appendix 2: Sample Lesson Planning Template

Junior Cycle Philosophy

STRAND:	
Lesson theme/topic:	
Date:	
Teacher:	
Class/Year:	

AIM OF LESSON:

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

At the end of this lesson students will be able to:

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)

TEACHING STRATEGIES		LEARNING ACTIVITIES	TIME
Key concepts			
Guiding questions			
Relevant philosophers			
Stimulus materials			

ASSESSMENT/FEEDBACK
re STUDENTS' LEARNING:

RESOURCES NEEDED:





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www.ria.ie