

Meeting of H.T.A.I. delegation with the Minister for Education, 4th April 2012

Why should History be part of a compulsory core in Junior Cycle?

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The European Assembly

The Taoiseach

The Minister for Education

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A. Introduction

We all agree that History is an important subject for students to study in a civilized and democratic society. There is actually no dispute about that.

⇒ The European Assembly adopted a statement on History and the learning of History in 1996, which began

“People have a right to their past...”

and went on to say that

“Historical awareness is an important civic skill, without it, the individual is more vulnerable to political and other manipulation”.

And to issue the following recommendation:

“... that the Committee of Ministers encourage the teaching of History in Europe with regard to the following proposals:

- i. Historical awareness should be a part of the education of all young people. The teaching of History should enable pupils to acquire critical thinking skills to analyse and interpret information effectively and responsibly, to recognize the complexity of issues and to appreciate cultural diversity. Stereotypes should be identified and any other distortions based on national, racial, religious or other prejudice.
- ii. The subject matter of history teaching should be very open. It should include all aspects of societies (social & cultural history as well as political). The role of women should be given proper recognition. Local and national (but not nationalistic) history should be taught as well as the history of minorities. Controversial, sensitive and tragic events should be balance by positive mutual influences”

[Recommendation 1283 (1996)[1] on history and the learning of history in Europe]

⇒ The Taoiseach last June made the following statement:

As we move into the decade of commemorations that stretch before us, from the 100th anniversary of the Third Home Rule Bill, the Ulster League and Covenant, the foundation of the Ulster and Irish Volunteers, the Dublin Lockout, 1916, the Somme, and beyond it is imperative that the social, cultural, economic, administrative and political environments that shaped these events be understood.

All of us can recall when we were growing up our parents or grandparents reflecting on events in their time, their remembrances and experiences that stretch back to 1916, the

War of Independence and the Civil War – events we are going to commemorate in the forthcoming decade. History is that close to us. Subliminally our initial opinion was shaped by how we grew up and what we heard. Many of us went on to benefit from a great education system and solid historical research and made up our own minds.

[Speech by the Taoiseach, Mr. Enda Kenny, T.D. at the launch of two books of the multi – volume History of Ireland Series National Library of Ireland on Wednesday 8th June 2011 at 1pm]

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⇒ The Minister for Education made the following statement last August

“the more we understand the past the more we understand ourselves and our neighbours.” ...

the more we Europeans share sovereignty within the European Union the greater the need for us to deepen our own identity so that whatever unity we create rests on the solid foundation of popular consent – a consent that comes from a true realization of who it is we are and why we need to work together in unison.”

[Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairi Quinn, T.D, Celtic Congress, 1st August, 2011]

B. Why should all students study History in the Junior Cycle?

The Junior Cycle of Post-primary education is a crucial time for the study of History for several reasons. If History is not part of the compulsory core in the Junior Cycle then many students may not learn any History beyond primary school. History can be taught very effectively in primary school and it can arouse great interest and enthusiasm in the pupils. But if the compulsory study of History ends there, then students understanding of history is very limited.

1. Firstly, the nature of the study is necessarily limited by the capacity and understanding of the children at that stage of development. From developmental psychology for example, Piaget’s theory of cognitive development explains how students up to the age of 11 are generally thinking in the ‘concrete operational’ stage and it is not until after the age of 11 that students begin to reach the stage of ‘formal operational’ thought where they have the ability to think abstractly. Therefore if students are only taught History in primary school there is a limit to the kind of History that they can be taught. In England the Ofsted Report on “History for All” illustrates this point very clearly about the nature of historical understanding from primary school.

“...some pupils found it difficult to place historical episodes they had studied within any coherent, long term narrative Their chronological understanding was often underdeveloped and so they found it difficult to link developments together”

[History For All – History in Schools 2007/10, Ofsted March 2011]

History at Junior cycle in post primary school can involve analysis of more complex issues, developing understanding of concepts like cause and effect, change, bias, propaganda, objectivity etc. This level of understanding will not be possible unless History is part of a

compulsory core into these early teenage years.

2. Secondly, History in post-primary school is taught by specialist History teachers. In primary schools teachers have to teach everything on the curriculum, and with the best will in the world they can't be specialists or even enthusiastic about everything. The Ofsted Report comments on this too,

‘...Many primary teachers did not themselves have adequate subject knowledge beyond the specific elements of history that they taught. In the secondary

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schools visited, effective teaching by well-qualified and highly competent teachers enabled the majority of students to develop knowledge and understanding in depth. In these ways the teaching of History is helping students to develop important and broadly applicable skills”

[History For All – History in Schools 2007/10, Ofsted March 2011]

3. Thirdly at the junior cycle stage the curriculum can be more comprehensive – not just a ‘patch’ approach as in primary school. Research has shown that depth and coherence and context are important in order to deepen historical understanding. The study of History needs to be done in sufficient depth and breadth to be comprehensive. Again Ofsted comments on this aspect of the primary curriculum in History

“..the curriculum structure for primary schools was itself episodic and militated against pupils grasping such an overview.

... Where the teaching of foundation subjects, including History, had become based on cross-curricular topics and themes, planning for progression in developing historical knowledge and thinking was limited”

[History For All – History in Schools 2007/10, Ofsted March 2011]

The approach adopted for History in the new Primary school curriculum can certainly engage pupils in a very good way with their own history, that of their locality and wider history of our country and beyond. But the cross curricular approach, the structure of ‘Strands’ and the advice that “A strict adherence to a chronological treatment of strand units should be avoided” again illustrate that there is a limit to what History can be learned in Primary school and therefore it is crucial that students continue their study of History into post-primary school.

C. Evidence from other countries

Up to now England has been seen as being out of step with most other European countries in not having the study of history as part of the core curriculum up to the end of compulsory schooling [Albania is identified as being the only other country]. But even in Britain, History has been part of the core curriculum up to the age of 14 [just before students select their subjects for the G.C.S.E.]. The situation is summarized in a recent Ofsted report:

In England, history is currently not compulsory for students beyond the age of 14 and those

in schools offering a two-year Key Stage 3 course can stop studying history at the age of 13. England is unique in Europe in this respect. In almost all the countries of the European Union, it is compulsory to study history in some form in school until at least the ages of 15 or 16. History is compulsory until the age of 14 in Northern Ireland, the Netherlands and Wales, and all pupils study history as part of their broad general education in Scotland until they are 15.

[History For All – History in Schools 2007/10, Ofsted March 2011]

However we in Ireland are now contemplating changing this situation and becoming one of the very few countries that do not have History as part of the core curriculum up to the end of

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compulsory education. Under the new proposals for the Junior Certificate students might give up a formal study of history at age 12. It would seem extraordinary that Ireland would deviate in this way from a common practice in European and other countries of placing History firmly in the core curriculum up to the end of compulsory schooling. We could cite evidence from many countries, but here we are going to make some comparisons with just 3 countries: our nearest neighbours England and 2 countries that are constantly being cited as high achieving countries – one inside Europe – Finland and one outside Europe – Australia.

1. England

At present History is part of the National Curriculum for Key Stage 3, [which is 11-14 year olds]. Currently it is not a compulsory subject for Key Stage 4 [14-16 year olds – the G.C.S.E. years]. But, there is a review of the National Curriculum underway in Britain at the moment. There is a great deal of time and debate and expert committees devoted to this proposed review. Some of the issues that have arisen in relation to History are:

- That in some cases and areas, History is being squeezed out in the non exam years and being merged into general Humanities type courses and this has resulted in less coherent History teaching and learning. That History is losing its integrity and being marginalized in some schools because of vague definition and merged subjects when decisions are left up to the school. Flexibility in Britain allowed the statutory subjects to be squeezed even in Key stage 3. The concentration in our Framework document on flexibility and school-based autonomy could have a similar effect.
- That in many areas there is a distinct social/class divide in terms of the schools where there are more/less students take History for their G.C.S.E. History is perceived as having value in the independent and grammar schools and areas of higher social class and in the comprehensives and academies the more practical or vocationally oriented subjects are perceived as being more suitable. A recent analysis of the take up of History in different parts of England showed this worrying trend dramatically,

“This report demonstrates how the study of History, a subject which should unite us

as one nation, has now become the subject of two nations. In entire communities and schools, often in some of the most deprived areas of the country, the study of history has been shunned; elsewhere, it has become the preserve of more affluent areas and schools. This cannot be healthy for the future of the nation- indeed, for our own national identity; we must seek to end the current situation where two worlds can sit side by side, not understanding our common history and shared values. History has a crucial role to play in defining these, and more must be done to transform and reinvigorate the study of a subject so vital to our national identity.

[Chris Skidmore M.P., History in Schools- A School Report, 2012,]

This issue is being debated vigorously in the newspapers; last August Tristram Hunt wrote in The Observer,

“The coming generations are in real danger of becoming detached from the past,

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of losing their capacity as citizens to call power to account, as well as simply to revel in the contradictions, achievements and misdeeds of our forebears.”

[Tristram Hunt, “If we have no history, we have no future”, The observer, 28 Aug 2011]

- That because there is a free choice of subjects available [apart from the core of English, Maths & Science] there is a tendency for students to be nudged in the direction of subjects which are perceived as being academically less challenging in order to boost school exam result and league table positions. Again Hunt comments on this,

“In fact, across the UK, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds have been systematically steered away from academic subjects to be placed on grade-inflating semi-vocational GCSEs. All too often, these provide neither the skills which employers require nor a route into further education.”

[Tristram Hunt, “If we have no history, we have no future”, The observer, 28 Aug 2011]

- This Review of the National Curriculum in England is being delayed in order to allow the issues to be fully debated before final decisions are made. This review is considering that some of the changes made in 2007, which include more vague curriculum definition have proved to be unwise and should be looked at very seriously.

So in England there is no argument about the retention of History up to age 14, but there is a growing argument that the curriculum entitlement would be strengthened at this stage [Key Stage 3] to ensure that all students study History for these 3 years; and there is a very definite move towards the idea that it might be made compulsory up to age 16 [Key Stage 4]

The Report of their expert Committee that was issued in December states

“We believe that at Key Stage 4 there should be greater depth than there is at present in the current system. A feature of high performing jurisdictions is a requirement on all students to study a broad range of subjects to the age of 16. It appears that England narrows its curriculum for the majority of students earlier than most successful nations.

This has the consequence at Key Stage 4 of depriving many young people of access to powerful forms of knowledge and experience at a formative time in their lives, and foreclosing on some pathways and choices. Specifically we recommend that, in addition to existing arrangements, curricular provision in the following subjects should be made statutory at Key Stage 4: geography, history, modern foreign languages

[The framework For The National Curriculum: A report by the Expert Panel Dec 20111]

No decisions have been made; indeed all the decisions have been delayed until there can be a more fuller debate on the National Curriculum, but expert Committees have sat and reported and the issue of History has been debated in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords and in preparation for this, a special report was issued to inform the discussion. [House of Lords Library Note, Debate on 20 Oct 2011: Teaching of History in Schools]

In a separate development the English Baccalaureate (EB) was introduced in 2010 to recognize pupils who was received a C grade or better across a range of academic subjects: English Mathematics, History or Geography, the sciences and a language. ... One reason for developing the EB has been “the decline in the opportunity to take

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some core subjects, such as modern foreign languages, history and Geography at key Stage 4 a situation which disproportionately affects pupils from the poorest backgrounds or attending schools in disadvantaged areas”. History has been chosen along with other core academic subjects, as a subject most likely to be required or preferred for entry to degree courses and one that will keep most options open.”

[House of Lords Library Note, Debate on 20 Oct 2011: Teaching of History in Schools]

2. Australia

The study of History is compulsory up to the end of year 10 [which is age 15]. The History course is spelled out in detail with each year having a survey element [building chronologically on the previous year] and a selection of studies in depth. The extract in the box below gives a brief flavour of the history studied from age 11 to 15.

The study of history in Years 7–10 consists of four historical periods:

Year 7 curriculum focuses on history from the time of the earliest human communities to the end of the ancient period (approximately 60 000 BCE – c.650 CE); a period defined by the development of cultural practices and organised societies

Year 8 curriculum focuses on history from the end of the ancient period to the beginning of the modern period (c.650 – 1750); a span of human history marked by significant economic, religious and political change

Year 9 curriculum focuses on the making of the modern world and Australia from 1750 to 1918; an era of industrialism, nationalism and imperialism

Year 10 curriculum focuses on the history of the modern world and Australia from 1918 to the present; the twentieth century was an important period in Australia's social, cultural, economic and political development.

Running parallel with the subject specific specifications there are **Capabilities** and **Cross Curricular Themes** listed – see chart below

Australia	Capabilities	Cross Curricular Themes
	Literacy	Sustainability
	Intercultural Understanding	Aboriginal histories & cultures
	Personal & Social Capability	Engagement with Asia
	I.C.T.	
	Numeracy	
	Ethical behaviour	

3. Finland

In Finland History is a compulsory subject in the Core Curriculum up to the end of Basic Education [age 16] and it is even compulsory for those who follow the upper secondary curriculum after 16. In the preamble to the History syllabus the following is stated:

Instruction in history at upper secondary school will provide students with capabilities to understand the nature of different ages and problems and change processes in their own time and help them to understand the world in international terms. History is a subject that creates an individual, national and European identity.

Again a very specific syllabus is laid out with a detailed listing of content to be covered. The box below just gives a very brief introduction to the broad areas. This is spelled out in detail over several pages in the Core Curriculum Document.

1. Man, the environment and culture (H11)

The course will examine the interaction between people and nature and the resulting construction

and development of the cultural environment from prehistoric times to the modern day.

2. European man (H12)

The course will deal with the key achievements of European culture and changes in the European worldview, together with developments in science and the history of ideas underlying these changes. Students will familiarise themselves with the products of European culture through different types of historical source material. Culture will be understood as being a broad-based concept.

3. International relations (H13)

The course will discuss the key events, backgrounds and changes in international politics since the late 19th century. The course involves analysis of phenomena in international politics on the basis of economic, ideological and power-political rivalry. The key perspectives of the course include democracy versus dictatorship.

Cross-Curricular Themes also run alongside the specific subjects. These cross-curricular themes are illustrated in the chart below.

Finland	Cross Curricular Themes
	Active Citizenship & Entrepreneurship
	Safety & Well-being
	Sustainable development
	Cultural identity & Knowledge of Cultures
	Technology & Society
	Communication & Media Competence

D. Ireland

1. Now we look at Ireland. There is one sentence, Statement of Learning number 12 which has the sole responsibility for ensuring that Irish students will receive their entitlement to this very important subject in a democratic and civilized society :-

“The Student values local and national heritage and recognizes the relevance of the past to current national and international issues and events”

[Towards A Framework For Junior Cycle, N.C.C.A., Nov. 2011]

That is it, as far as Ireland is concerned! We know that other statements 1, 3, 5, & 21 can also be fulfilled through the study of History, but lots of other subjects contribute to these as well. In the current climate of cutbacks and redeployment and where Guidance Counselors have been put back into the quota putting many schools over quota that have never been over quota, a Principal could easily redeploy a History teacher and fulfill this requirement by running a Heritage week once a year! We would be very concerned about this. We do not feel that these Statements of Learning are strong enough to ensure Irish students entitlement to their History, and as we have seen in England where there is room for local interpretation, History is a subject that can be squeezed and marginalized. We feel very strongly that the Framework document in emphasising autonomy and flexibility at the level of the school is open to this danger. There is not enough here about what students are entitled to learn. In Finland, for example, the flexibility is in terms of the methods and materials that the teachers use to teach, but not about what they teach – that is compulsory.

2. In addition to entitlement, students actually enjoy studying History at Junior Cycle at present. In the recent consultation with young people about reform in the Junior Cert it is reported that the subjects students most enjoyed learning were History, Maths, Music and English

“Young people at Junior Cert enjoy learning History because it is an interesting subject, they enjoy learning about the past and about Ireland’s history, they are good at it and they think the textbooks are helpful.”

[A Consultation with Young People on Reform of the Junior Cycle, Department of Children & Youth Affairs, 2011]

3. Since the foundation of the state History & Geography have been part of the core of subjects for recognized pupils in Secondary school. The Minister has several times quoted the anomaly relating to Vocational schools. Vocational Schools were set up under the Vocational Education Act in 1930 to run parallel with the secondary education system at a time when a very small minority of students attended secondary school and the curriculum of Vocational schools was originally intended as continuing and technical education and a preparation for employment in trades. Therefore the educational remit of the schools set up under this act was initially quite narrow and vocational in focus rather than a general education. The climate has changed considerably since then with:

- the vast majority of students now completing a full cycle of secondary education,
- The broadening of courses available in vocational schools,
- The abolition of the Group Certificate Examination when it was amalgamated with the

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Intermediate Exam into the Junior Certificate in the late 1980s.

- The amalgamation of small post-primary schools in many Irish towns [often a vocational school and 2 single sex secondary schools into one co-educational community school or college]

Therefore to apply the curriculum model that was originally part of a very narrow vocational

education provision in 1930 to the full cohort of schools in 2012 seems a very retrograde step.

4. We agree that there is curriculum overload, but, In order to address the perceived problem of curriculum overload in the Junior Cert., why not consider implementing the rebalanced syllabi which teachers and the other partners have spent years drafting on the N.C.C.A. Committees. These new Syllabi which are ready for implementation have been shelved, and History teachers in particular were looking forward to implementing the rebalanced syllabus because the reduction in content would have allowed more opportunity for the development of historical understanding & skills. This reduction in syllabus content would be much more educationally sound than reducing the number of subjects which students can take for assessment in the Junior Certificate. In Ireland, unlike in Britain we have had a tradition of a broad curriculum and of not specialising too early. Why would we contemplate going down a road that in England they are now questioning?

5. We can't tell from the Framework document when exactly students will make this choice of subjects. In any event it is very early to narrow the range of options open to the students later at Senior Cycle. If students take only 8 subjects for Junior Certificate their range of choices from which to pick 7 subjects for their Leaving Cert is necessarily limited. If indeed in some schools the 8 subjects is reduced to 6 full subjects with 4 short courses then the range is narrowed even further since the short courses may not prepare them for a subject at Leaving Cert standard. We urge you strongly to consider this issue very carefully. Some students may be making this choice as they enter post-primary school and cutting off their options very early.

6. We agree that the Junior Cert examination needs to be changed, but we do not have to throw out the baby with the bathwater, in terms of changing the whole curriculum and narrowing students options in this way. We agree and support your strategy for literacy and numeracy and can see very clearly how the study of History can help to implement this strategy.

7. The debate in Britain is highly politicised. In addition to the issue of when and for how long History should be part of the National curriculum, there is always the issue of how much British History is taught in schools. This issue doesn't tend to arise to the same extent in Ireland but the retention of History for all students is all the more important as a cultural birthright for Irish people as we are no longer able to pass on our distinct cultural heritage to the majority of our people through our national language?

8. Our own history has not been without its controversies and myths and therefore the rigorous study of History is an important channel for reconciliation and antidote to myth-making. Recently on the 60th anniversary of the Council of Europe a European Parliament

Report has referred to the importance of History in this context,

“History teaching can be a tool to support peace and reconciliation in conflict and post-conflict areas as well as tolerance and understanding when dealing with such phenomena as migration, immigration and changing demographics. A multiple perspective approach, instead

of a single interpretation of events, will encourage students to respect diversity and cultural difference.”

[History teaching in conflict and post-conflict areas. Report Committee on Culture, Science and Education. Rapporteur: Ms Cecilia KEAVENEY, Ireland, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Doc. 11919 25 May 2009]