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1 November 2019

**Re: Senior cycle review**

Dear Sir/Madam,

The American Chamber of Commerce Ireland welcomes the senior cycle review and the focus of the NCCA and the Department of Education and Skills on ensuring that students are best placed to successfully transition to education, apprenticeships or employment. The American Chamber views the senior cycle, and indeed the entire education cycle, in the context of its vision for Ireland to be **'an Inclusive location-of-choice for talent and Innovation with global impact'**. The senior cycle is an important milestone for students before entering third level education or employment, and it is crucial that they are equipped with the right skills for this next phase. The American Chamber recognises the important steps the Government has taken in recent years in reviewing education cycles. **The American Chamber believes that two areas should be given more emphasis in the senior cycle, namely soft skills, and alternative pathways.**

The themes emerging from the initial NCCA report suggest that students and teachers recognise that the senior cycle is, and should be, about more than setting students up for third level education, that it should **"build towards a range of diverse futures for students"**<sup>1</sup>. The American Chamber agrees with this position noting that future workers will need to be highly adaptable particularly with the onset of the fourth industrial revolution and that the skills required for this should be developed at an early age.

Of utmost importance for the American Chamber is to highlight the importance of soft, or transversal skills as they are also known, for students. Soft skills can encompass a range of different skills such as problem-solving, resilience, business acumen and communication, all of which are critical skills for the workplace. As outlined in the National Skills Strategy<sup>2</sup>, soft skills are of increasing importance and are now seen by some employers as important as technical skills which tend to have a lifespan of three years or less. Employers value the ability of staff who can operate in teams, communicate effectively and adapt quickly to changing business needs.

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<sup>1</sup> *Interim report of review of senior cycle education (July 2019)*, NCCA, p.33

<sup>2</sup> *Ireland's national skills strategy 2025*

The Expert Group on Future Skills has noted that soft skills are “the building blocks for the development of the ‘hard’, ‘vocational’ or ‘technical’ skills required to succeed in the labour market”<sup>3</sup>. In this sense, the development of these skills can set the groundwork for students to continue to upskill and develop technical skills post-secondary school education. The American Chamber would view the further development and integration of these skills during the senior cycle as a positive step towards preparing students for life after secondary school, including the workplace. This is of heightened importance for students who choose to enter the workplace or apprenticeship programmes immediately after the senior cycle.

Tying into the latter, the American Chamber strongly suggests that alternative pathways for students post senior cycle, such as apprenticeships or traineeships, should be given as much emphasis as possible during the senior cycle. Alternative pathways are important for students who may, for a variety of reasons, wish not to pursue a full-time academic degree but would prefer to gain practical and professional experience as soon as possible. It would also complement the increased emphasis of soft skills in the curriculum, which could work in tandem to prepare students who will be entering the workforce immediately post senior cycle. This is referenced by the NCCA report that the senior cycle “...aims to support coherent transitions to apprenticeships, traineeships, employment and further and higher education.”<sup>4</sup> The American Chamber would like to see the various options or alternative pathways available to students post senior cycle given as much emphasis as possible.

As the Government has broadened the possible alternative pathways available to students, such as expanding the number of apprenticeship programmes, it is important that students and their parents/guardians are fully aware of all these options. The American Chamber suggests that the creation of an online platform, which would outline all the available options to students post senior cycle including academic and apprenticeship options, on one dedicated website would be greatly beneficial for this purpose.

The American Chamber welcomes the opportunity to submit to the NCCA public consultation on the senior cycle review, and to highlight the importance of soft skills and alternative pathways for senior cycle students. Please do not hesitate to contact the American Chamber should you wish to discuss the above priorities in greater detail.

Yours faithfully,



Conor Neylan

Acting Head of Advocacy & Communications

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<sup>3</sup> *Ireland's national skills strategy 2025*, p.33

<sup>4</sup> *Senior cycle review: consultation document*, NCCA, p.6