

Submission to the National Council on Curriculum and Assessment on the Redevelopment of the Senior Cycle SPHE

November 2022

**About Dublin Rape Crisis Centre**

The mission of Dublin Rape Crisis Centre (DRCC) is to prevent the harm and heal the trauma of all forms of sexual violence in Ireland.1 DRCC has been at the forefront of the Irish response to sexual violence for more than 40 years. That response includes:

* Running the National 24-Hour Helpline and associated services;
* Providing individual advocacy, counselling and other support;
* Accompaniment and support services for those attending the Sexual Assault Treatment Unit (SATU) and those reporting to An Garda Síochána or attending court;
* Data collection and analysis on trends and issues relating to sexual violence.
* As a frontline service provider, DRCC works with and supports people who have been directly affected by sexual violence including online abuse. DRCC are also committed to eliminating its tolerance through education, awareness raising, advocacy and policy analysis.

**About the submission**

DRCC broadly welcomes the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment’s redevelopment of the Senior Cycle SPHE (Social, Personal, and Health Education) curriculum. DRCC is pleased to participate in the public consultation, to provide further considerations to the Council on the target group, status and time allocation, naming of the curriculum, alignment with government strategies/policies and international commitments, supporting the continuity, progression, and coherence of the SPHE curriculum developments, and conditions needed to support effective SPHE in senior cycle.

**Issues for Consideration**

***Target Group***

It is noted that variations of SPHE enrolment are based upon student’s engagement with Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), Leaving Certificate Established (LSE), and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). LCA engaged students are mandated to participate in SPHE through Social and Health Education modules. LSE, and LCVP programme students can participate in a non-mandatory framework, but this course can have deviations in objectives and learning outcomes from the mandated SPHE curriculum.

For a comprehensive SPHE curriculum to be successful, it must be accessed by every senior cycle student, regardless of programme. Thus, the curriculum should be mandatory for and designed to address the needs of all students engaging in every senior cycle programme.

***Status and Time Allocation***

Following on from the recommendation for mandatory engagement with SPHE in every senior cycle programme, time allocation must be considered. Since the duration and intensity of SPHE is a critical factor in its efficacy, the curriculum should be taught in timetabled classroom lessons. These lessons can be supplemented by special activities, projects and events. By situating SPHE within timetabled classroom lessons, it provides the curriculum with an elevated status. The lack of importance within the senior cycle curriculum as a whole has often times been cited as an obstacle for both educators and students alike in engaging with the programme. Thus, to enhance this status, designated time allocation is needed to ensure the necessary objectives are comprehensively taught by educators and core knowledge is obtained by students to progress their development into adulthood.

It has been suggested by UNESCO’s *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education*, that 12 or more sessions to 30 or more sessions, lasting 50-minutes per session, has shown positive results in retention of learning objectives for students.[[1]](#footnote-2)

This guidance tool has also suggested that time allocation of SPHE be pilot-tested to ensure student and teacher feedback is considered when solidifying the time allocation of senior cycle SPHE.[[2]](#footnote-3)

***Naming of the Curriculum Area***

We are of the opinion that the renaming of the curriculum area would be contrary to the aims of the broader redevelopment of SPHE curriculum. These aims seek a continuous progression of knowledge regarding SPHE from childhood through adolescence.

It is proposed that re-branding would clarify the purpose and rejuvenate interest in the senior cycle SPHE curriculum. However, the need for clarification could potentially cause confusion of purpose given the loss of continuity between age groups studying SPHE. In regards to rejuvenating interest, this could be done without spending time and resources through re-branding. Rather, as mentioned above, a shift of status and designated time allocation could do the same.

***Alignment with government strategies/policies and international commitments***

Per the Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual, and Gender-Based Violence implementation plan, SPHE education for children should be focused on the elimination of gender-based violence.[[3]](#footnote-4) To do so effectively, teaching staff should be supplied with all the necessary training. Per the implementation plan, we hope the NCCA will continue to support the new upskilling programme for post-primary SPHE/RSE teachers and POST summer course for primary teachers in RSE.[[4]](#footnote-5)

Per international commitments, we recommend the Istanbul Convention as a referenced framework when redeveloping the senior cycle SPHE. Specifically, Article 14 of the Istanbul Convention which states,

“Parties shall take, where appropriate, the necessary steps to include teaching material on issues such as equality between women and men, non-stereotyped gender roles, mutual respect, non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships, gender-based violence against women and the right to personal integrity, adapted to the evolving capacity of learners, in formal curricula and at all levels of education.”

Furthermore, the Committee on the Rights of a Child recognises children’s right to education includes informative courses on living healthy lifestyles, whether in interpersonal or sexual relationships.[[5]](#footnote-6) The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women echoes these sentiments by recommending member states make sexual education compulsory and to provide it systemically in primary and secondary schools.[[6]](#footnote-7)

***Supporting continuity, progression, and coherence in SPHE curriculum developments***

We recommend a multi-strand; spiral approach be applied to the senior cycle SPHE as was utilised in the redevelopment of junior cycle SPHE. Building upon the existing framework, areas of learning development are Mental Health, Gender Studies, Substance Use, Physical Activity and Nutrition, and Relationships and Sexual Activity. It is important to note that the senior cycle SPHE learning objectives should act as an extension of the junior cycle SPHE, rather than an opportunity to introduce new concepts entirely. Thus, each of the below recommendations made are in accordance with the redevelopment of the junior cycle SPHE materials.

The following outlines the recommended, specific learning objectives within 4 strands of the junior cycle redevelopment, which we believe should continue on into the Senior Cycle:[[7]](#footnote-8)

**Strand 1. Understanding Myself and Others**

**Mental Health**

Within the current framework, objectives in this learning area include ‘develop students’ confidence and competence to act in support of mental health and wellbeing, develop students’ self-awareness about the attitudes, values and beliefs that underpin healthy personal lifestyle behaviours and choices, develop students’ capacity to empathise with others through a greater understanding of different life experiences, motives and feelings of other individuals and groups, examine the factors which impact on mental health and wellbeing and develop young people’s ability to act on behalf of personal and group health and wellbeing.’

Adolescent, mental health issues are often associated with increased school drop-out rates, grade repetition, and poor academic performances.[[8]](#footnote-9) Similarly, they are also reported to have correlations to higher rates of earlier sexual experiences, contractions of STI/STDs, and regular, unsafe sexual activity.[[9]](#footnote-10) Given the risk factors of unaddressed mental health issues amongst Irish young people, it is important for additional considerations within the Mental Health learning area.

We welcome that these objectives contain an explanation of mental health and wellbeing, ranging from mental health to mental ill-health to mental illness, as well as the exploration of personal understandings and attitudes towards mental ill-health and mental illness. However, we suggest that to act within continuation of the junior cycle SPHE, objectives on what trauma is and how it can affect students and those around them, mental health should be considered. The addition of a trauma-informed objectives would benefit students as it could be essential for them to understand how trauma can cause unhealthy coping strategies and/or behaviours.[[10]](#footnote-11) This can be accompanied with objectives on healthy coping strategies and resources/support services available.

**Gender Studies**

Within the current framework, objectives in this learning area include ‘develop students’ knowledge and understanding about the influence of gender on one’s experience of health and wellbeing, explore personal experience of gender and gender stereotyping and the impact of these experiences on their lives, explore the differences and similarities between both genders in their approach to health and wellbeing, develop personal and interpersonal skills which support the development of respectful, dynamic relationships for both genders, examine the different influences on sex-role stereotyping and the implications for health and wellbeing, examine how different males and different females support or hinder their own and others’ effective participation in education.’

We support the existing objectives within the Gender Studies learning area. However, gender-related objectives and delivery of those objectives should not be isolated to just this area of learning. Rather, the entirety of the SPHE senior cycle curriculum should be gender proofed. Per the European Institute of Gender Equality, gender proofing is the act of identifying any potential gender discriminatory effects arising from a policy or proposal and eliminating them and ensuring gender equality is promoted.[[11]](#footnote-12)

This notion is further promoted by UNESCO’s *Mainstreaming Gender Equality in Curricula and Teaching and Learning Materials* , which advocates that gender proofing include ensuring curriculum documents and teaching and learning materials do not perpetuate existing gender bias and discrimination in society, the national curriculum and teaching and learning materials are relevant to the gendered needs of boys and girls, and the inclusion of gender-responsive content and concepts in the development of the national curriculum so that girls and boys learn about gender equality at all level.[[12]](#footnote-13)

**Strand 2. Making Healthy Choices**

**Substance Use**

Within the current framework, objectives in this learning area include ‘enhance students’ knowledge and understanding about substance use and misuse, develop awareness of personal experiences, values, attitudes and feelings which influence lifestyle choices about substance use, develop students’ personal and interpersonal skills so that they might have the confidence to act appropriately in the face of social pressures to behave differently, examine life stories associated with the harmful use of substances to develop understanding and empathy with those involved, examine the external influences on substance use including the media, peers and community.’

In continuation of addressing and educating on substance abuse, it would be beneficial to mention other addictive behaviours that contribute negatively to health and wellbeing such as gambling and porn addictions. Much like substance use, porn and gambling addiction can both alter the prefrontal cortex of the brain, which regulates impulse control, and cause damage to the dopamine reward system.[[13]](#footnote-14) With the inclusion of these behaviours, these addictions can be put into context and explored as how they can be equally as harmful and can affect their interpersonal relationships.[[14]](#footnote-15)

**Strand 3. Relationships and Sexuality Activity**

Within the current framework, objectives in this learning area include ‘exploring personal thoughts, values, attitudes and feelings about relationships, developing an understanding of different types of relationships and what is important in them and skills to enhance relationships, promote empathy with others who have different cultural values attitudes and beliefs about family, relationships, sex and sexuality, develop students’ knowledge, understanding and skills in support of sexual and reproductive health, develop students’ understanding of sexuality and sexual orientation and the importance of an inclusive environment, develop personal and interpersonal skills which support beginning, maintaining and ending relationships, and develop skills for coping with peer pressure, conflict, and threats to personal safety.’

We welcome these objectives as a general tool in educating young people on relationships and sexual activity. Yet, there are key elements needed to fulfill the necessary learning young people need as they enter into adulthood. To begin, it is necessary for senior cycle students to revisit and expand upon their past learnings on gender-based violence and consent from their junior cycle SPHE. For example, the time given to educating on the importance of giving and receiving consent in sexual relationships from the perspective of building caring interpersonal relationships and from a legal perspective should be expanded. This not only acts as a tool to combat gender-based violence, but also as a preventative measure. In 2021, the Central Statistics Office reported that more than half of the recorded victims of sexual offences were under the age of 18. [[15]](#footnote-16) Given the increase likelihood of the age demographic within senior cycle to become victims of sexual violence, great focus on consent should be placed within the curriculum. In research commissioned by Dublin Rape Crisis in 2021 70% of adults surveyed identified that there was a problem with consent in Ireland with young adults, and in particular young males, being the least comfortable or familiar with the topic.[[16]](#footnote-17)

Continuing, the addition of how to “end relationships” would be useful under the objectives on maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships. In the 2022 National Study of Youth in Ireland it was recorded that of the young people surveyed whom had experienced a breakup, 40% reported to finding it very distressing and 20% reported to finding it distressing.[[17]](#footnote-18) Thus, an examination of how to end relationships within the aims of promoting genuineness, empathy, and respect is crucial. Furthermore, using the proposed spiral-approach to learning areas, this objective can link back with the knowledge development in the mental health learning area.

Much like the redevelopment of the junior cycle SPHE, the inclusion of online influences such as pornography and how it can affect perceptions of healthy and respectful relationships is key when redeveloping the senior cycle SPHE. Research suggests that schools are effective sites for the promoting of health and violence prevention.[[18]](#footnote-19) Per the Journal on Interpersonal Violence’s *Pornography, Sexual Coercion and Abuse and Sexting in Young People’s Intimate relationships: A European Study*, male adolescents who use porn more frequently were more likely to perpetuate sexual violence.[[19]](#footnote-20) Within the survey, of the 4,564 young people aged 14 to 17 in five European countries, boys were far more likely than girls to regularly watch pornography. Among boys, regularly watching pornography was associated with increased probability of being a perpetrator of sexual coercion.[[20]](#footnote-21) Within the Irish context, Women’s Aid’s 2022 publication, *It’s Time to Talk About Pornography*, 63% of the respondents surveyed believed increased pornography use leads to increased instances of sexual violence.[[21]](#footnote-22) 81% of the young people (18-25) polled found that pornography increased men’s interest in trying rough or violent sex and 74% agreed that pornography impacts the sexual development of youths.[[22]](#footnote-23)

With this in mind, addressing student’s use of pornography is inherent to the sex education process. Yet, while it is increasingly clear the importance of examining the harm porn can cause within the SPHE curriculum, it should also be accompanied with critical consumerism learning objectives. These critical consumerism objectives should include porn literacy. This is imperative to ensure young people are able to discern the difference between sexual scenarios in porn versus in reality with their sexual partners.

In continuation, young people should be equipped to understand and articulate their own sexual needs and wants in healthy and respectful ways to their partners. Thus, general overviews on sexual pleasure can aid in this effective communication.

***Strand 4. Emotional Well-Being***

We recommend that further exploration of the digital world’s effects on students’ mental health, be included. Per UNICEFs *Children in the Digital Space*, “More attention should be given to the content and activities of children’s digital experiences – what they are doing online and why.”[[23]](#footnote-24) One 2022 study suggests that due to the fact that young people’s brains are still developing, they could be more susceptible to lower self-esteem and self-worth by engaging in certain online activity.[[24]](#footnote-25) Thus, an emphasis on how online activity can positively and negatively affect student’s perception of themselves and others and how this relates to mental health is integral for learning development.

***Conditions needed to support effective SPHE in senior cycle***

Practical implementation strategies for teaching staff should be developed as a key element of the senior cycle SPHE. This entails creating an environment in which both students and educators can engage in dialogues on all topics mentioned openly and can learn in a way that they are comfortable and do not feel ashamed. Thus, supplying educators with the tools to feel confident in their delivery of this course is necessary. This can be achieved through the development of accredited SPHE/RSE qualifications.[[25]](#footnote-26) However, to achieve optimum productivity, these should be equally accessible to educators across Ireland.

On a holistic level, senior cycle SPHE should be part of a school-wide approach to addressing students’ growth in relation to their sense of self-worth, emotional well-being, and healthy and respectful relationships. For full engagement and comprehension, the curriculum should not only theoretically exist within the allocated time for teaching, but should be implemented within the education system as a whole.

1. [UNESCO (2018). *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality*](chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https:/www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/ITGSE.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. [Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual, and Gender-Based Violence Implementation Plan (2022): Goal 1.3.1.](C://Users/AshleyPerry/Downloads/228481_69e48889-49ea-49d6-8143-982f6cc28bac%20(4).pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. [Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual, and Gender-Based Violence Implementation Plan (2022). Objective 1.3.2](C://Users/AshleyPerry/Downloads/228481_69e48889-49ea-49d6-8143-982f6cc28bac%20(3).pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. [Committee on the Rights of a Child (2001) General Comment 1: The Aims of Education.](https://www.ohchr.org/en/resources/educators/human-rights-education-training/general-comment-no-1-aims-education-article-29-2001) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. [Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (2017). Concluding Observations to Ireland](https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/concluding-observations/cedawcirlco6-7-concluding-observations-combined-sixth-and-seventh) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. [See Strand 1. Understanding Myself and Others, Strand 2. Making Healthy Choices, Strand 3., Relationships and Sexuality, and Emotional Well-Being.](https://ncca.ie/media/5169/sphe-background-paper-for-consultation_en.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. [Cleary, A., Fitzgerald, M., & Nixon, E. (2004). *From child to adult: A longitudinal study of Irish children and their families*. University College Dublin (UCD).](https://www.lenus.ie/bitstream/handle/10147/234031/From+Child+to+Adult.pdf?sequence=1) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. [Dooley, B. A., & Fitzgerald, A. (2012). *My world survey: National study of youth mental health in Ireland*. Headstrong and UCD School of Psychology..](https://researchrepository.ucd.ie/bitstream/10197/4286/1/My_World_Survey_2012_Online(4).pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. [Downey, C., & Crummy, A. (2022). The impact of childhood trauma on children's wellbeing and adult behavior. *European Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, *6*(1), 100237.](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2468749921000375) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. [European Institute of Gender Equality (2022).](https://eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/terms/1202) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. [UNESCO (2019). *Mainstreaming Gender Equality in Curricula and Teaching and Learning Materials*](https://dublinrcc-my.sharepoint.com/personal/ashley_perry_rcc_ie/Documents/Documents/Mainstreaming%20Gender%20Equality%20in%20Curricula%20and%20Teaching%20and%20Learning%20Materials) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. [Neuroscience News (2019). *Watching Pornography Rewires the Brain to a More Juvenile State*](https://neurosciencenews.com/neuroscience-pornography-brain-15354/) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behaviour(2022).*Sex Addiction, Pathological Gambling, And Other Mental Health Disorders* [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. [CSO (2022) More than half of victims of sexual offences were aged under 18 years in 2021](https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-rcvo/recordedcrimevictims2021andsuspectedoffenders2020/recordedvictims2021/#:~:text=There%20were%202%2C892%20victims%20of,Table%203.1%20and%20Figure%203.1) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. [Dublin Rape Crisis Centre (2021). Attitudes on Consent in Ireland](https://www.drcc.ie/news-resources/events/2021/10/20/launch-of-research-on-attitudes-to-consent-in-ireland/) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. [Dooley, B., O’Connor, C., Fitzgerald, A., O’Reilly, A. (2019). *My World Survey 2*](http://chrome-extension/efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/http:/www.myworldsurvey.ie/content/docs/My_World_Survey_2.pdf)*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. [VicHealth (2007) Preventing violence before it occurs: A framework and background paper to guide the primary prevention of violence against women in Victoria](https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/publications/preventing-violence-before-it-occurs) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. [Stanley, N., Barter, C., Wood, M., Aghtaie, N., Larkins, C., Lanau, A., & Överlien, C. (2018). Pornography, Sexual Coercion and Abuse and Sexting in Young People’s Intimate Relationships: A European Study. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 33(19), 2919–2944.](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0886260516633204) [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. [Women’s Aid (2022). It’s Time to Talk About Porn.](chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https:/www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/its_time_to_talk_about_porn_report_womens_aid_november_2022.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. [Ibid.](chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https:/www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/its_time_to_talk_about_porn_report_womens_aid_november_2022.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. [UNICEF (2017). Children in the Digital Space](https://www.unicef.org/media/48601/file) [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. [Cingel, D. P., Carter, M. C., & Krause, H. V. (2022). Social media and self-esteem. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 101304.](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352250X22000069) [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. [Teach RSE Teacher Professional Development and Relationships and Sexuality Education (2020).](chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https:/www.dcu.ie/sites/default/files/staff/2022-03/TEACH-RSE%20Research%20Report_Final.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-26)