

# TRANSITION YEAR



## Exploring the Student Experience

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**Irish Second-Level Students' Union**

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## Foreword



Transition Year (TY) is unique when it comes to second-level education; it provides the opportunity for students and schools to innovate and to be creative with their learning methods, as well

as giving students the chance to develop numerous skills with a range of extra-curricular activities being made available nationally. However, TY has also gained a reputation amongst many people, both inside and outside of the education system, that it is simply a year to slack off and relax between the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate.

The question of whether TY is worthwhile has certainly been brought up as an issue, especially in the context of the new Junior Cycle Student Award and the reforms that it brings to our education system. Many of the skills that the Junior Cycle Student Award aims to promote and develop are those that TY currently provides; the question is now how TY will need to change to complement the Junior and Senior

Cycles, and provide a unique learning experience for students.

Transition Year, when done well and when both staff and students are committed to and recognise the potential of the programme, then it can be truly fruitful in personal development. The Irish Second-Level Students' Union sees great value in the TY programme, in skills and maturity gained, as well as helping students determine what their path may be after school, and what they need to do to follow it.

From our regional events, surveys and school focus groups it is clear that Transition Year is to be valued, however both students and teachers have identified ways in which it could be improved. The innovation and creativity that Transition Year brings to classrooms (and beyond) is not matched in any other form within second-level education. As President of the ISSU; I encourage you to read the findings of this highly important report on student perceptions of TY.

**Mark Caffrey**

ISSU President 2013-14

## Message from the Minister

I welcome the publication of this Transition Year report by the Irish Second Level Students Union. The report explores the student experience, mainly from the student perspective. I believe it is important that we hear the voice of second level students in relation to the policy issues which affect them directly.

Young people want a meaningful opportunity to give their views. This report shows that they are more than capable of responding in an insightful way which is useful to practitioners and policy makers alike. I am delighted that my Department was in a position to support ISSU in carrying out this work.

I note with interest that some of the positive findings in the report relate to the opportunity which TY gives to students to develop different kinds of skills such as communication skills, social skills and group work skills. It is interesting that the key skills in the new Framework for Junior Cycle include communicating and working with others; the very skills which students identify as valuable in Transition Year. The Framework for Junior Cycle will give students a real opportunity to develop these important skills and others over the three years of Junior Cycle.

This report shows that nearly 80% of students who responded found that TY was a worthwhile experience. That is a hugely positive finding and

it is a tribute to the co-ordinators, teachers and schools involved. It shows that when given the opportunity to devise their own programmes, Irish schools do rise to the challenge to develop interesting and stimulating learning experiences for their students.

It is heartening to see so many positive messages about Transition Year coming through in this report. We must continue to use the year to its optimum capacity, as a holistic programme that broadens students' minds, and their educational experiences, and resist the temptation to see Transition Year purely as an early start on the road to Leaving Certificate. In keeping with the core values of Transition Year nationally, a good programme can and should provide both that broad educational experience and help students' skills development, motivation and maturation before they embark on any further programmes of study.

Congratulations to the young people in the Irish Second Level Students Union for carrying out this survey, for their succinct analysis and for giving our young people and their TY co-ordinators an opportunity to express their views.

**Ruairí Quinn T.D.**

Minister for Education and Skills

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# Introduction

Transition Year is an independent year sitting between the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate in second-level schools in Ireland. It is a school programme which differs from other periods of second-level education, as it has no set state examinations. Transition Year consists of an open curriculum designed by schools themselves for exclusive modelling to students' needs, backgrounds and location. The curriculum varies but is composed of four set layers.

These are:

1. Core subject layer such as English, Irish and Maths
2. Subject sampling layer (also known as subject tasters) such as business studies and engineering
3. Transition Year specific layer such as Drivers ED
4. Calendar layer such as work experience



The layout of the Transition Year Programme varies from the Junior Cycle and so creates a positive challenge for personal development and self directed learning of students. This report will discuss each of these layers and it will also provide a platform for students' opinions on Transition Year. It will also incorporate Transition Year coordinators' views of the Transition Year Programme.

## Methods

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used in this research in order to get a full view of the student experience of the Transition Year Programme.

Items which were considered when carrying out this research included composition of schools, location, gender and compulsory or optional Transition Year Programmes. Various types of schools and students were included to obtain representative responses and results.

Quantitative research was used to collect numerical data from both students and teachers using an online survey. Two surveys were created; one for teachers and one for students. These surveys consisted of both closed and open ended questions. The surveys were open to all Transition Year Coordinators, and Transition, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Year students within Ireland.

To obtain as many responses as possible, an information pack was sent to all schools, providing details about the research and links to the survey on the Irish Second-level Students' Union website. 1,323 student responses and 57 Transition Year Coordinator responses were collected.

The approaches used for gathering relevant qualitative data on students' experiences involved a number of focus groups in schools located across Ireland. These comprised Transition and 5<sup>th</sup> Year students who had participated in the Transition Year Programme as well as those who had decided to progress directly from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> Year. The focus groups were used to gather students' opinions and knowledge of the year, referring to what they liked about Transition Year and changes which could be made.

Transition Year Coordinators were also interviewed to obtain a greater in-depth opinion of the views and opinions of the Transition Year Programme.

Four large group sessions were held; two in Dublin, one in Galway and one in Cork. This allowed schools to attend the most convenient venue for them, and also to obtain a broad range of responses and opinions from students. These sessions were used to gather students from a variety of schools so that a diverse range of student voices were heard. These students came and discussed their opinions of the Transition Year Programme.

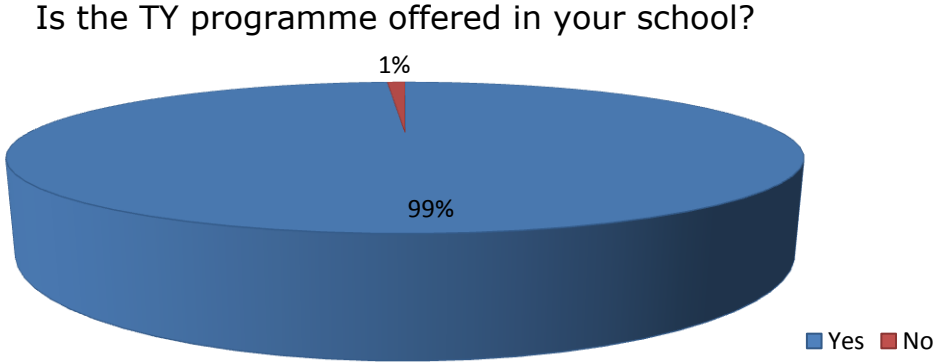
the best times are the times  
outside school and less  
time in the classroom





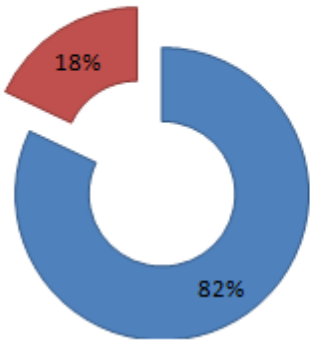
# Transition Year Participation

Transition Year is not a compulsory year offered by second-level schools; instead its provision is at the discretion of the school. Transition Year was available as an optional course to 99% of students surveyed.



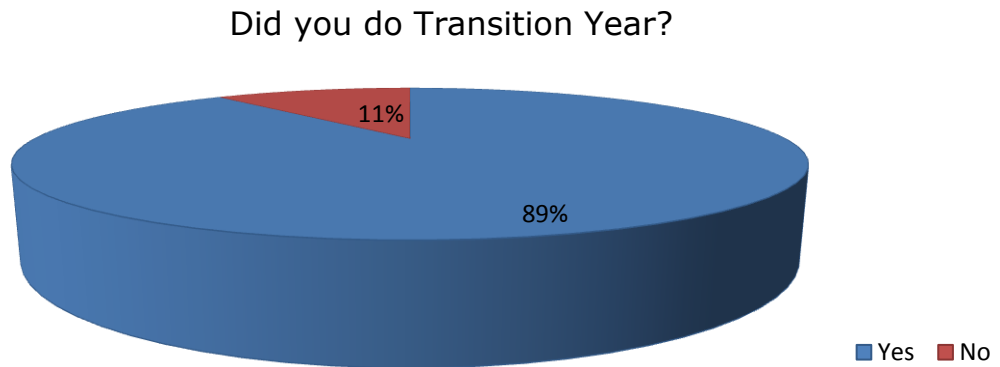
With a large availability of the Transition Year Programme in schools, it is important to note that the year can be either optional or compulsory. The online survey showed that the vast majority of schools provided an optional Transition Year Programme: this allowed students the choice of whether they wanted to participate in Transition Year or progress directly into 5<sup>th</sup> Year.

Is Transition year; ■ Optional ■ Compulsory

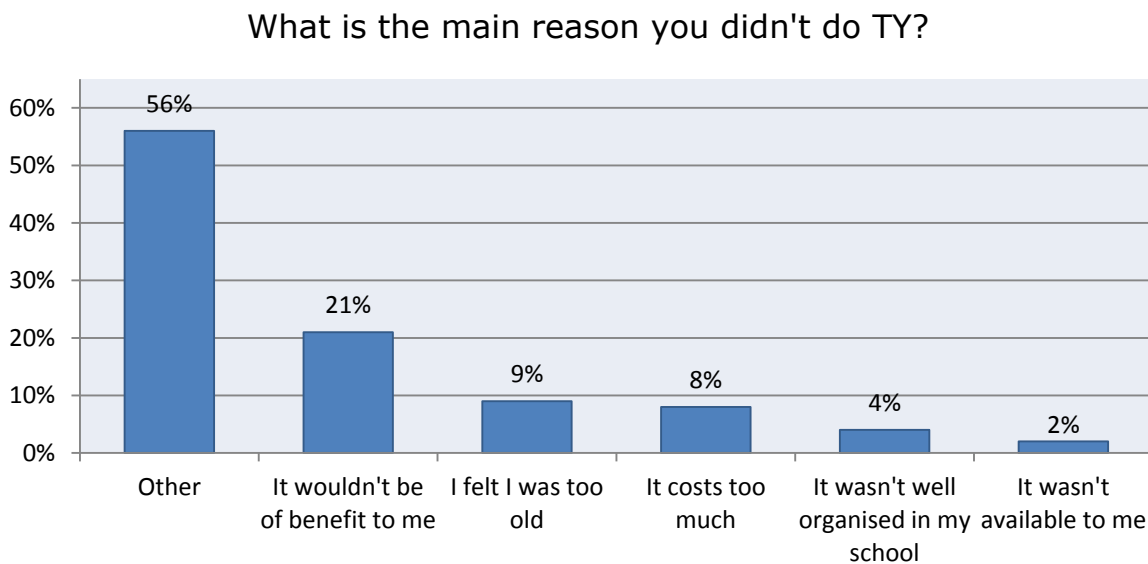


Feedback at focus schools and regional meetings showed that students preferred an optional Transition Year being made available in schools. This allows the small number of students who would prefer to progress directly into 5<sup>th</sup> Year to do so.

Even though Transition Year is optional in the majority of schools, a large majority of students (89%) still opted to do the year.



The online survey and feedback collected from focus groups showed similar reasons given as to why students did not choose to do Transition Year. The main reasons included that it didn't benefit them, students felt that they were too old and that it cost too much.



Students' responses for **other** reasons (56%) for not doing Transition Year included:

- If they had to repeat the Leaving Certificate, it would be two extra years in school;
- Felt that it was a year doing nothing;
- It was a waste of a year;
- Friends dropped out of Transition Year in previous years;
- Friends moved into 5<sup>th</sup> Year;
- Wanted to get out of school as soon as possible.

Feedback from focus groups showed that the majority of students would choose Transition Year if it were available in their school. Only a small number of students said that they would change their mind on whether they would do Transition Year, if given the choice again.

In schools where Transition Year was compulsory, a small minority of students stated that they would have preferred to proceed directly into 5<sup>th</sup> Year. The reasons given for this included:

- Get to leave school earlier
- You can learn the skills of Transition Year outside school
- TY is boring; just another year in school, which you don't have to do
- Cost of the year



'all that stuff looks  
good on the CV. There are  
practical skills which  
you can use in everyday life  
and not just theory from  
the book which can't  
be applied to our life situations'



## Improvements in TY Participation

Our focus group research shows that students believe that more information needs to be provided for students to make a better and more informed choice about entering Transition Year or 5<sup>th</sup> Year. Students stated that there was not enough communication provided from past students who had completed the Transition Year Programme, or students who had chosen to go straight into 5<sup>th</sup> Year.

Students thought that it would be a good initiative for former Transition Year students to be brought into talk to their class in 3<sup>rd</sup> year. This would

help them make a more informed decision on which year to select. By listening to those who have progressed, students feel that they could make a better choice and be more informed about the course outline and activities which would suit them better.

Students surveyed believe that Transition Year should remain in place as part of the Senior Cycle. The majority said that it should be an optional year. They also think that changes to the programme need to be made to make it a stronger year within school.



# Perceptions of Transition Year

In the focus groups, students gave their opinions on what Transition Year as a programme meant to them and how the Transition Year Programme was viewed within society. These experiences were both positive and negative. Through explanation and expansion of the terms, students broadened their insights and opened their frame of thought about the Transition Year Programme, while also providing some interesting information about the programme.

## Doss

Transition Year is often referred to as a 'doss year'. Many people would view the term as having a negative connotation, meaning that you do nothing within the year and that it's boring. Students deemed the term to also have a positive meaning and suspected that this is not portrayed in general society. In a positive meaning, students supposed the term meant having no pressure placed upon them compared to the Junior Certificate exams. This gives them a chance to relax and concentrate on other aspects of their lives so as not to be solely focused on exams.

One school explained that DOSS stood for '*developing other skill sets*'; that Transition Year was a year where you got to gain and develop new skills, which you would not have had a chance to do in other years. Skills included communication, self

directed learning, adapting to new situations, personal skills and computer skills. They saw developing new skill sets as being positive and that it could benefit them both now and in the future.

## Maturity and Development

Transition Year is viewed as a year to mature. Students felt that they were given more independence from both parents and teachers. One student said it was a year in which '*I could find myself*'. Another student stated it was the year he '*got all the messing activity out of the way*' before the Leaving Certificate.

Students also found that they matured which helped them to make decisions for their future careers. They had time to determine, who and what they wanted to be when they got older. The year also allowed them to make better subject choices for 5<sup>th</sup> Year and to research into the most suitable college course or make decisions on what they wanted to do after they finished second-level education.

Students believed that they would be too young going straight into 5<sup>th</sup> Year, which would also mean that they could be 17 going into college; '*Who knows what you want to be at 14?*' making the point that they would have been aged 14 when choosing their Leaving Certificate subjects which would then affect future career choices.

The opposing argument was that if you had to repeat the Leaving Certificate you could be 'really old' entering college; possibly 19 or 20.

## **Skills**

The general consensus from students was that they learned new skills which you wouldn't learn in other years. The skills gained were different throughout each school and some depended on what activities were on offer by schools. These activities included GAA (learning to be a referee or coaching younger children), first aid training, driver theory test, health and safety and the ECDL.

*Students felt that 'all that stuff looks good on the CV. There are practical skills which you can use in everyday life and not just theory from the book which can't be applied to our life situations'.*

Transition Year is also a year where students can stand out and gain confidence, boost their moral, develop better communication skills, social skills and group work skills. Students said that you don't get a chance to adapt and learn these skills in other years, as there isn't enough time because of concentration on state examinations.

Students who progressed straight into 5<sup>th</sup> Year are aware that those who did Transition Year have an advantage over them in some of these areas. Some students felt that the only way they could compete

was to try and improve their skills outside school such by volunteering and/or learning new skills.

## **Fun**

A shared opinion from students is that Transition Year was fun while they were doing the year. They felt that their Junior Certificate years were very academically focused and that had restricted the amount of fun that they could have in school (meeting new people, broadening horizons etc).

In contrast, the Transition Year Programme is not centred on exams and getting something covered within a certain time frame. There is more time to have fun in the class and learning in a different way, such as playing scrabble in English class.

Teachers are also viewed as being different in Transition Year. Students feel that they are more '*fun orientated*'. You get to talk to teachers as if they are 'normal people', '*it's kind of a break for the teachers as well they are not as stressed out*'.



## Relationships

Most students had been in assigned core classes throughout the Junior Cycle, and for most of this time, they were only in contact with a finite amount of peers in their year. Students felt that they developed relationships in Transition Year; they got to know other people in their classes better and as a result made new friends.

In some schools students expected to make new friends during Transition Year. They felt this did not always occur as there can be a strong division between groups, such as girls and boys in the class. Students expressed that this was an issue which needed to be improved in some cases. This could be improved on by doing more group work, more trips or being divided into different groups by teachers.

The students who made more friends said this occurred through mixing the year up for different activities and classes. Students felt that Transition Year was the first time that the year got together as a whole, especially when on bonding and activity trips. Students felt that peer interaction had not been done like this during the Junior Cycle.

Other relationships were built with teachers during Transition Year. Students who went straight into 5th Year said that they thought that teachers talk more to the students who did Transition Year than those who had gone straight into 5<sup>th</sup> Year; *'like for maths, my maths teacher knows the majority of the Transition Year people. So she talks more to them and focuses the class around them. She got to know them personally in Transition year.'*

Students would like to develop better relationships and connections with society during Transition Year. More interaction with other schools both locally and nationally could help this. Liaising with other schools could help with costs of activities and creating a wider amount of options available to schools.

In a single sex girls school it was said that *'a musical in conjunction with a local school which would cut the costs, instead of pretending to be a boy every single year'*. In some single sex schools there was not the ability to offer certain modules as facilities were not available. *'Options like engineering, it's not offered in this school but we could go to another local school that has the resources as girls can be engineers too. They're currently trying to encourage girls to do this. Everyone excluding three people (in my class) would like to sample this'*.

Students feel that working on community projects, competitive matches and competitions between them and other schools would develop enhanced spirits and relationships between students from different schools. Socialising with other schools would allow students to explore different backgrounds and create diverse outlooks on life.



## Lazy

Although students enjoy having a break from the stress of examination years and learning new skills, for some this can cause dilemmas when entering 5<sup>th</sup> Year. Some students stated that it was hard to get back into studying in 5<sup>th</sup> Year. Students had varied opinions on being lazy in Transition Year, some stating that at the end of Transition Year they were hungry *'to get stuck into the Leaving Certificate, Transition Year was fun but it's now time to start focusing, I have had enough of the fun and want to get the Leaving Certificate over'*.

Some students had suggested that the end of Transition Year should be made more academic by focusing on learning strategies for the Leaving Certificate. There were differing opinions on this; some felt that the end of Transition Year would be boring with no activities or trips.

The majority of students at focus groups stated that laziness depends upon the person and how driven and determined they are. If a student has gained the correct skills in Transition Year, then 5<sup>th</sup> Year should be easier. *'We all don't want to get out of bed on Monday morning but we do and then the day falls back into routine... it's the same as studying'*.

## Expensive

The majority of students surveyed found that Transition Year was an expensive year.

The contribution fund for Transition Year varied from school to school from €150 to €900 with the average being €300. The variances mostly

occurred due to the inclusion or exclusion of fees for buses, activities and bonding trips etc. Second-Level schools in the free education scheme receive an additional grant support of €95 per Transition Year student from the Department of Education and Skills. This funding can help subsidise trips and workshops etc.

Some students said their schools had declared that the contribution fund would include trip expenses and all other expenses covered for the year. However, throughout the year (and even on a weekly basis some students) they were asked for more money. Some students said that they were nervous going home and asking for more money as they knew that their parents would not have the finances available.

It was suggested that an alternative could be made by paying no contribution fund and instead just paying as you go for each trip. This would mean that students could decide what trips to go on. Then they would still be paying money weekly with no lump sum needed at the beginning of the year. Students mentioned a number of ways in which expenses could be managed, including asking students would they like to go on certain trips. Students surveyed said that some of their money was spent on trips which they had no interest in.

Students stated that more transparency was needed regarding Transition Year expenses and contribution funds. A number of current students were not aware what their money was being spent on. They would like to be made more aware during the year, and at the end of the year, of finances and what the money had been allocated to.

They feel that this would make it easier for future years, as it would provide a cost estimate of the year and also as reassurance to their parents that their money was spent wisely.

Due to social and economic conditions, finances can be an issue for some families, which may result in these families having less discretionary income to pay for trips etc which may arise throughout Transition Year. Students brought up how some students may not be able to go on trips for financial reasons.

### **Negative**

A small minority of students felt that Transition Year is seen as a negative year within society. They feel that some teachers have a negative view of Transition Year which results in them having less interest in teaching Transition Year classes.

Some students believe that Transition Year students are not taken seriously and that other years can take priority over them. They understand this to a certain extent such as with Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate exam classes; *'It's not like they are going to look at*

*your grades in Transition Year (and) be like "that's a good teacher" whereas they do in other years'.* Students feel that some teachers could show a bit more enthusiasm when teaching Transition Year classes.

### **Students' Voice**

Focus groups showed that some students think they were not listened to at all, while other students described how understanding their teachers and Transition Year Coordinators could be.

One school liked how their Transition Year coordinator *'gets letters and then shows them to us and if we have no interest, we do not do them'.* These students felt like they had some choice in the activities in which they partook. Students understood that it takes time organising trips and workshops; *'we mentioned the ploughing championships however we didn't give enough time and only mentioned two days before so there wasn't enough time to organise it'.*



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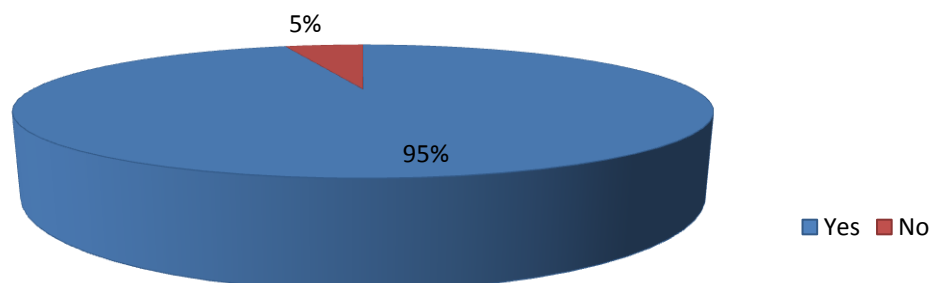
## Transition Year Layout

Second-level schools generally follow a similar structure for their Transition Year Programme. This comprises of 4 layers; core subject, subject sampling, Transition Year specific layer and calendar layer.

The content of each aspect of the programme varies between schools depending on location, number of students within the Transition Year Programme and facilities available such as substitute teacher cover and bus transportation.

The majority of schools introduced some new content into the Transition Year Programme which had not been done in previous years for students. Some schools provide students with a calendar of events which allows students to view the content of the Transition Year Programme. Students viewed this calendar initiative as showing organisation by their Transition Year coordinator and allowed them to view their schedule for the year.

Did you get the opportunity to sample new subjects or study new modules?



### Core Subject Layer

Core modules in schools comprise of a range of subjects which usually include Irish, English, Maths and Physical Education in schools. The content of each of these subjects vary from following the traditional Leaving Certificate syllabi, to teachers creating their own syllabus.

Students felt that core subjects are still taken very seriously within Transition Year. They felt that less of an emphasis needs to be made on these subjects, as they have already done them for the Junior Certificate. This could be done by placing less emphasis on these classes, and

reducing the amount of contact hours for these academic subjects.

In the focus groups, students said they feel that English within Transition Year could be more enjoyable and relevant to their life compared to the curriculum content of the Junior and Leaving Certificates. English within Transition Year could involve performing a modern play or a teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) course. Students find interactive subject methodologies more interesting and engaging and as a result, look forward to English class when these are used.

For maths, students would like to play games with numbers instead of doing similar work to what they had just been doing for their Junior Certificate. They feel this would be learning in a fun way. One school said that in some maths classes they used everyday maths such as playing darts, and that as the year was fun, they have some memories that they will have forever.

From the focus groups, it was clear that most students enjoyed physical education classes. The content of these varies from normal physical education classes, to tasters of sports and specific sport classes.

Students who did traditional physical education classes such as playing football or circuit training found these 'boring'. Other students did 1 hour physical education classes of a sport of their choice for the duration

of year, such as playing basketball for all physical education classes for the entire year. The opinion of these students was that this year long module of doing a specific sport was uninteresting. Students also disliked that there was no change of mind after selection of sporting activity. These fixed classes included athletics and basketball. The curriculum of these classes included learning theory, skills and set patterns on how to improve their performance in relation to the sport chosen.

The most popular option for physical education was periods of different sports at different times of the year. Students said that if they disliked a sport, a rotation would occur in 6 weeks' time anyway and they would get to try something new. Examples of sports given were golf, horse riding, roller skating, gym, kayaking and orienteering. During these classes, students discovered new hobbies in areas of sport which they had never tried before.

## **Sampling Layer**

### **(Subject Tasters)**

Many schools offer a taste of Leaving Certificate subjects. Pupils stated that there was a huge jump in content and difficulty in subjects from the Junior Certificate to the Leaving Certificate. The tasters are designed to allow students to explore the content and try out different Leaving Certificate subjects. Students found these tasters helpful. However they would also like to follow a curriculum which wasn't

based just upon the Leaving Certificate. For example, in History they would prefer more practical work, such as studying a country like Germany and then going to visit it on a foreign trip.

As regards language classes, students felt it was a year to develop their oral and grammar skills.

After completing the subject tasters some students picked up new subjects for the Leaving Certificate which they had not done for the Junior Certificate. This also helped them to make a more suited and informed choice of subjects for the Leaving Certificate.

Feedback from students in focus groups showed that obtaining their Junior Certificate results whilst in Transition Year was of benefit to them. They were able to see what subjects they were strong and weak at. This again could help them make a more informed choice for their Leaving Certificate.

Students who progressed straight into 5<sup>th</sup> Year after the Junior Certificate felt that they would have made different subject choices based on their results or on tasters of the Leaving Certificate course. One student stated that *'some of these students did Transition Year but never did Design Communication Graphics for the Junior Certificate, as I did, and are still better than me at it now (in Leaving Certificate classes)'*.

In some schools, student numbers restrict the options available to students. If the number of students in Transition Year were small, then this would result in a smaller amount of classes on offer. If the school had a large population it may result in students not getting an experience of all subjects due to classes being full. One student stated *'I would like to do woodwork, never got to do it for the Junior Certificate and was thinking about it for the Leaving Certificate but won't get to try it out (in Transition Year)'*.

Within classes, there are also divides due to students' differing ability levels. Students who had completed a subject at Junior Cycle such as woodwork felt that they ended up making the projects for students who hadn't taken the subject before. Students feel separate projects would allow a more enjoyable class. Those who had completed the subject should be given more difficult projects and those who hadn't. An alternative option would be splitting students into classes who had and hadn't done the subject before *'those who have done woodwork should do art and the art students should do woodwork'*. Students felt that this may increase satisfaction of taster subjects throughout the year.

### **TY Specific Layer**

The Transition Year Specific Layer comprises classes specifically designed by teachers to fit students' needs and experiences including courses related to interests of

students, such as young budding entrepreneurs participating in mini-companies etc.

Schools create their own Transition Year Programmes and modules. These modules do not always follow the subjects listed for the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate.

## **Calendar Layer**

Calendar layer modules occur at a certain time of the year, such as work experience or specific activities. Students feel that certain modules need to be longer such as cooking, as they classify it as a life skill, with 6 weeks not being long enough to incorporate all basic skills.

We will now discuss some of the common activities which compose part of the Calendar Layer.

## **An Gaisce**

When asking students during focus groups which words they associated with Transition Year, a large amount of students mentioned Gaisce. Gaisce was described as a good activity with a lot of hard work involved by most, while other students viewed Gaisce as being negative due to the vast amount of work involved.

Most students felt that their hard work was rewarded and acknowledged with a medal. They described Gaisce as being good for their CV and evidence of holding

certain skills. They look back upon the activity now as being enjoyable and they took part in activities which they wouldn't have done otherwise *'I went to the nursing home... it was a bit of craic playing bingo and stuff'*.

Each school has different criteria to make sure that students have successfully completed the 5 stages. Students feel that this aspect of Gaisce could be improved upon in the recording of each stage. For each stage there were a number of different days involved. One student said that on each day they took part in an activity and they had to write 10-12 lines about that activity. Students said that after two weeks this often became very repetitive.

Some schools had the option of writing in a journal or blogging. The majority of these students enjoyed writing as they could write in the journal whenever they had time. They viewed blogging negatively *'loads of people had problems logging into blogging last year. Then during the year they were trying to catch up'*.

Students said that an essay at the end of each stage and a person signing off on a record sheet after each day would be preferable. While photos can be used as evidence, students felt this was not always a viable option based upon the activity they were doing. One student mentioned how *'you can't take pictures of us training with children (due to child protection).'*

## Work Experience

Work experience is a core aspect of the Transition Year Programme. Students enjoy this aspect of Transition Year with the general opinion being that there is not enough time given to work experience. The layout of work experience varies with schools doing between two and four weeks. Some schools also take part in a compulsory week of community involvement.

Work experience varied between schools with periods of either block weeks, or doing one day a week for a course of 2-3 months. Students were in agreement that block periods were better as they got a better insight into their jobs.

Students felt that doing one day a week resulted in them not really seeing what the career was like. For example, if they attended work on a Tuesday they did not get to see what occurred on the other days of the week.

Some schools understand that issues may arise with school calendar dates set for work experience. These schools allow students to take up extra work experience if it does not fall within the assigned dates. In these cases, if a job placement is available during a different time period, the student is allowed to participate.

On entering Transition Year, students saw work experience as a chance to

try careers which they would have never been able to try before. This idea turned out not always to be the reality because of the difficulties in organising and finding a suitable career available for placement.

Students sometimes chose work experience based on their parents wanting them to choose a certain career, having a contact within the job or career, or because they had no other options. During work experience, some students felt that they did not get the proper insights into what the job entailed. The jobs which were designated to them were sometimes making coffee, cleaning or filing etc. Students felt these were not the normal tasks of the job.

Students stated within the focus groups that they would like more notice of when work experience would be on as this would help in selection. *'If we were given dates in 3<sup>rd</sup> Year, it would be easier getting into the bigger firms'*. Some students do not get to apply for places in places which are competitive because of late notice. Some companies require applications to be sent within 3<sup>rd</sup> Year or during the summer. As some students are unaware of these deadlines in 3<sup>rd</sup> Year, they feel that it's harder to get a placement which interests them.

Students also felt that a class about work experience may be beneficial before applying. One student suggested that they could make a video clip to help Transition Year classes of the future.



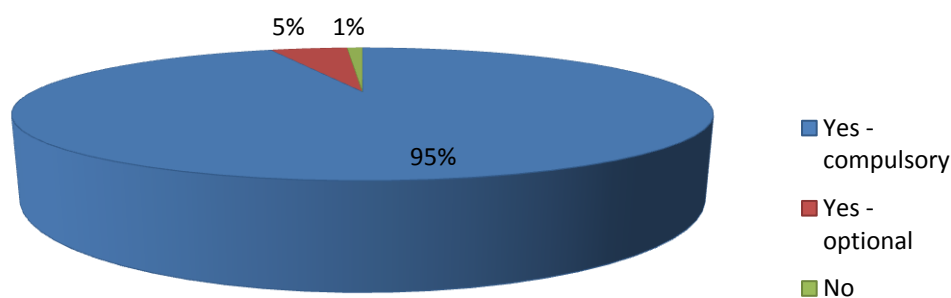
Rural schools face difficulties when selecting work experience which urban schools may not face due to location. Students in rural schools stated that there are not as many options available when selecting work experience. The reasons being:

1. Sometimes another local school may be on one day a week work experience which means when it comes to their block period there are few places available.
2. Few options are available in small towns which include working in shops or local businesses.

3. Transport restricts work experience choice with parents working or no public transport available to take them to larger cities such as Dublin.
4. There is no accommodation available to stay within the urban centres for periods of work experience.

Work experience is not always a compulsory part of Transition Year. The online survey showed that it was optional for 5% of students who did Transition Year.

Was work experience offered as part of your TY programme?



## Trips

One of the most popular and favoured activities within the Transition Year Programme was trips outside of school. Trips included day outings, adventure/bonding trips, foreign exchanges or foreign holidays. Every student mentioned trips as a highlight of the year. In certain schools there would only be a set number of places available which meant that not all pupils were able to go on trips. The main reason given for the popularity of trips was that they don't get out of school much during the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate.

Students at focus groups said trips are not just fun, but can also have some academic and learning basis. One student said *'the best times are the times outside school and less time in the classroom'*. Students would like more trips added to the Transition Year Programme. Although they are aware that trips can be expensive, they would like the option of being given a choice on where they are visiting as sometimes there are trips that no student wants to attend. One school stated that they went to see 4 plays during the year which they felt was too much. Students would like a balance between teachers deciding one trip and them deciding the next.

Adventure/bonding trips often occurred during the beginning of the first term. Students mentioned these as the highlight of the year. For most it's their first experience away from

home and parents. New social and communication skills are developed. They rely on independence and maturity for daily tasks, which before may have been facilitated by parents such as getting up in the morning, budgeting money to last the trip and choosing the correct attire to wear for activities. Students enjoyed the range of activities on offer which they had never experienced before. These included archery, canoeing, abseiling, high wires, bog runs and surfing.

Language exchanges were viewed as a positive experience within Transition Year. *'It's a once in a life time experience'*. Students feel that they gained a lot of skills from the exchange, such as independence, getting a chance to find themselves, experience another culture and improving their oral language skills. Students who have participated in exchanges would advise others who get the chance to take part as *'It's the only chance you get; there isn't time in other years'*.

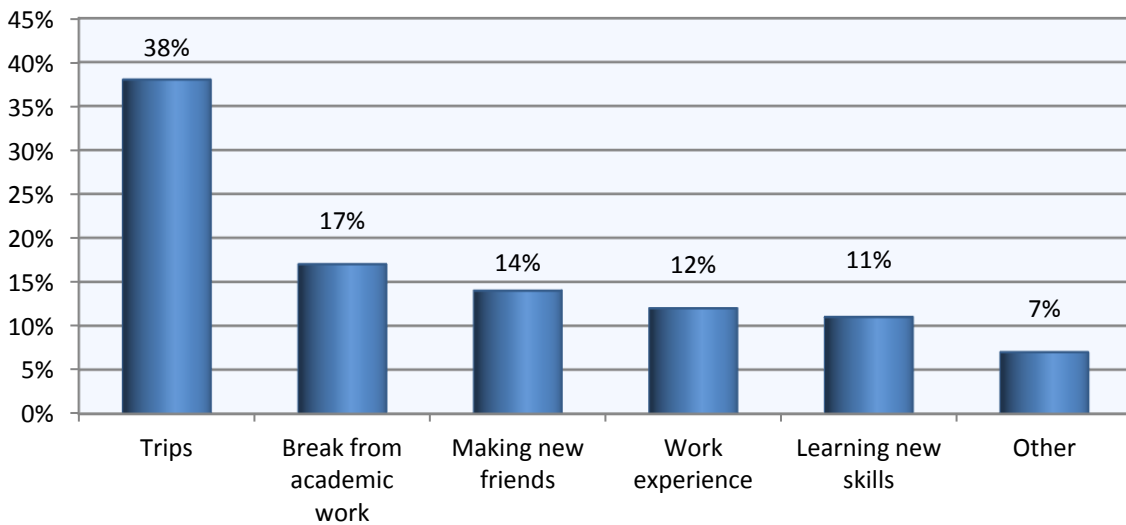
Exchanges in schools are offered usually only to students who have done languages. Students who did not have a language felt that they too could gain some valuable skills from a foreign exchange. Students said that there could be other exchanges offered such as those who did home economics could go to Italy for cooking, history students could go to Germany etc.

For some students, a foreign exchange or a trip abroad is not viable or interesting. In most schools the majority of students take part in a foreign trip, and sometimes there are one or two students who do not go. These students can feel annoyed and frustrated as these trips are talked about constantly at group assemblies and in classes. These students feel like the trip is *'being rubbed in their face, it's the only activity discussed'*. Students who do go on foreign trips feel sorry for

these students and agree that foreign trips are discussed too much.

Local trips could reduce the cost of expenses during Transition Year. (We) *'need to make more use of what's on offer'*. Students felt that there was plenty to offer in their local area such as heritage or visiting local businesses. Learning can occur outside the classroom, and this was seen as a way to incorporate this into the Transition Year Programme.

What was the best part of your Transition Year?



It's a once in a life time experience



## Careers

Work experience is one way to try and steer students down the career path for them and to make the most suitable choices when they leave school.

During Transition Year, students also visit college open days, career days, listen to guest speakers from different career backgrounds and research projects on different career types. Students said that they enjoyed the Higher Options Exhibition in the RDS, however they felt that this trip was not always well utilised by students.

Students who are aware of career choices are interested in the fair and are better able to focus and approach stands with suitable questions, but this is not the case for all students.

Students felt that improvements to careers and guidance could be made by conducting *'parent and subject choice meetings... this could be conducted between parents, teachers and students and this perhaps may show options of courses and entry requirements'*. As a result parents would be more aware of entry routes. Some schools have meetings for students about applying for the CAO, but not about entry routes into certain career paths (i.e. when selecting their Leaving Certificate subjects).

## Assessment

In the schools visited, the main methods of assessment in Transition Year are projects, reflective journals and portfolios. In the online survey, 78% of students said that they kept a reflective journal or portfolio.

There were mixed opinions about project work. Students enjoyed doing the work at the start of the year as it was a different method of learning, compared to assessments in the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate. *'5th Year is repetitive taking down notes from PowerPoint or textbooks and focusing on the exam'*. As the year progressed, students felt that there were too many projects, and that the content and layout of each project was similar and repetitive.

Students felt that due dates for class projects clashed at the end of terms. This placed pressure on students and they felt it was supposed to be a relaxed year. Opinions of students were sometimes negative about projects; *'just we were in the computer room half the time. The assignments were pointless, nothing you could use now'*.

Students said there should be alternatives to traditional projects such as voice recordings, video recordings, taking photographs of a scene etc. Students thought that these assessment activities could be carried out using mobile phones/cameras/tablets etc which most students would have access to.

Portfolios are another aspect of assessment used in many schools. It is a record of what students do throughout the year, and serves as a method of reflection for the student, while also providing feedback for teachers. Students feel portfolios are useful to look back on during the year and can also help when compiling a CV. This record reminds students of what they have completed and participated in during Transition Year.

In the focus groups, students stated that they did not like how their portfolio can be used to assess them. They think that parts of the portfolio should be kept for personal use and they should not get marked on it. They also feel that marking their reflections restricts what is written.

Some students who didn't maintain portfolios believe that it would be a good component to be introduced into their Transition Year Programme. However they didn't think that it should be used as an assessment technique but rather to record progress. It would give more structure to the Transition Year Programme and allow them to see what we had done during the year, *'it would also prevent students from saying that we did nothing'*.

In a small number of schools, Transition Year students must participate in compulsory evening study. Students felt that there was no need for study in the evening as they had no set exam classes. Time spent on study could be used in a

more productive way such as playing sports or extra-curricular activities, though a small number of students acknowledged this may be a good idea at the end of the year so they are able to concentrate and focus on academic work again.

In a number of schools, Transition Year students are given written tests in certain subjects. Students feel that tests should be carried out in other formats. Students felt that if you get a bad grade within a subject, it may deter you from doing the subject for the Leaving Certificate.

Students felt that presentations were a good method of examination, but not just making a poster presentation. This made them *'feel like primary school that we are just sticking things together. It's annoying. It's a lot of time wasted'*. They felt that PowerPoints, video recordings or oral presentations were better methods.

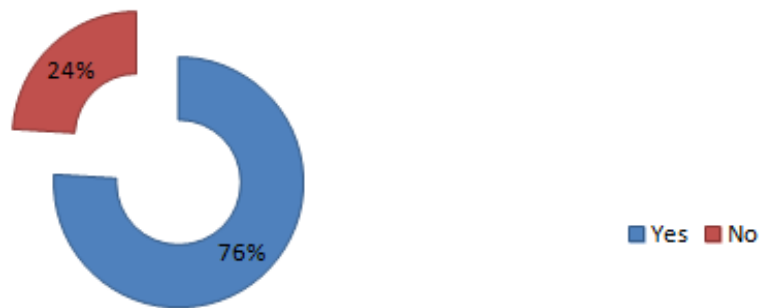
Assessments can affect negatively on outcomes of Transition Year students; *'the year was supposed to be a confidence booster. If you fail Transition Year then it can impact negatively on your train of thought', 'what's going to happen in 5<sup>th</sup> Year if you can't even do Transition Year'*.

Students feel that there should be more group work and that classes need to be made more interesting. Students would like teachers to use different teaching methods and styles in the classes instead of just notes or typing using the computer.

A minority of students in the focus groups felt that certain methods are used or emphasised by teachers, and that teachers tried to connect with students by teaching towards their

preferences. This can result in some methods being used too much, or making an enjoyable technique boring.

Did you keep a reflective journal or portfolio to evaluate your own learning throughout the year?



it feels like primary school  
that we are just sticking  
things together. It's annoying.  
It's a lot of time wasted



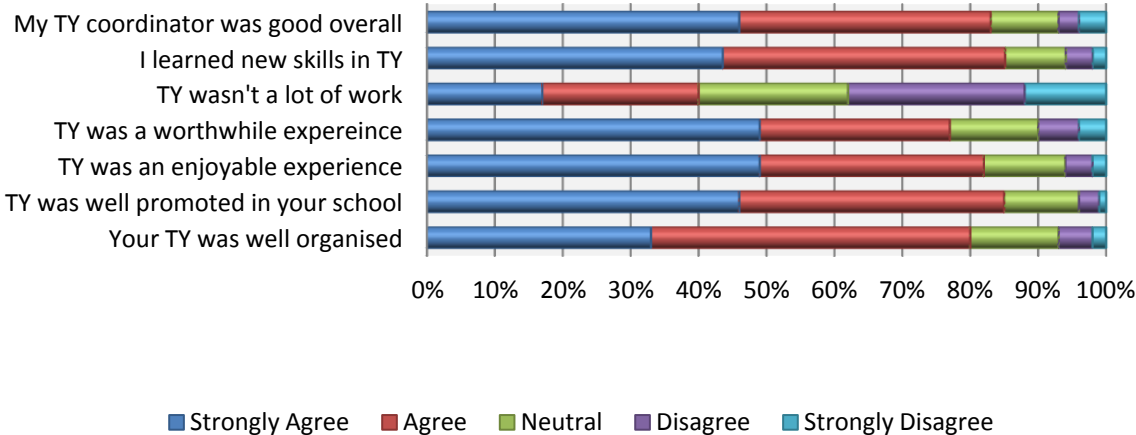


# Overall Opinions of Transition Year

The overall response as regards students' opinions on Transition Year Programme content was very positive, as seen in responses from the student survey:

- 85% of students feel they learned new skills
- 85% of students agreed that their Transition Year Programme was well promoted in their school.
- 83% of students agreed that their Transition Year Coordinator was good overall.
- 82% of students enjoyed their experience within the Transition Year.
- 80% of students either strongly agree or agree that their Transition Year was well organised.
- 77% of students also felt that Transition Year was a worthwhile experience

How do you feel about the following statements?





Junior course parents  
teachers get layer  
experience  
tificate  
Gaisce results better try research good able option  
sport  
time trips  
focus progress chance curriculum majority  
choice  
-ordinators learning modules  
within  
another  
make  
co-ordinator  
teacher  
schools  
opinions

mentioned  
school classes  
location methods straight small  
survey activities see career  
education interesting content like help  
group less meetings life English just enough  
seen

On

ear

## Feedback from TY Coordinators

Students' feedback, opinions and discussions have highlighted interesting views of the Transition Year Programme. To get a better understanding, we also conducted interviews with Transition Year Coordinators who are in contact and conversation with students on a daily basis.

We also surveyed Transition Year Coordinators about their views of the Transition Year Programme.



# Programme Format in Schools

Not all the Transition Year coordinators interviewed taught subjects within that year grouping. Contact and relationships with students varied between schools and consisted of one or more of the following:

- a) Transition Year coordinator held meetings/ assembly with students
- b) Transition Year coordinator went on trips with Transition Year students
- c) Transition Year coordinator taught a module/ subject to the class.

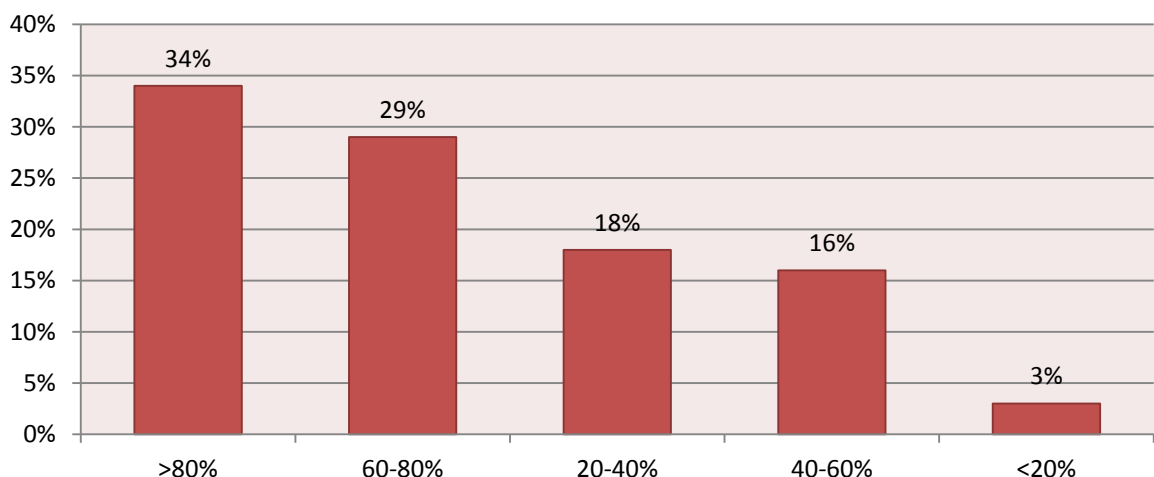
The Transition Year coordinator position within schools varies from being designated as a (A or B) post of responsibility to a special duty teacher to a voluntary placement position. Each coordinator mentioned how they enjoyed coordinating the course but that there was also hard work and endurance involved.

In some schools where the year was optional, coordinators mentioned that they encouraged some students to progress straight onto 5<sup>th</sup> Year. Some of these students did not enjoy school and coordinators felt that 5<sup>th</sup> Year was the best option available for them.

Most schools had a process for entry into Transition Year. There would be an information evening during which current Transition Year students would show work created through the year. Teachers would also have a display showing content and ideas of class structures which they would be teaching. Students then make an application for entry into Transition Year. These applications are processed by the school and in the majority of cases; students are accepted into Transition Year.

The data collected from the online survey shows the average uptake of students participating in Transition Year. The responses showed that for 63% of TY coordinators, 60% or more of the students in each year group opted to do Transition Year.

What percentage of students take part in the programme?



Teachers felt that there were a number of reasons why students decided to progress straight into 5<sup>th</sup> Year. These were:

- a) Financial reasons such as families not being able to afford trips and the Transition Year student levy
- b) The negative connotation that some people associate with Transition Year being a doss: that nothing is done during the year.
- c) That nothing would be done during the year.
- d) Students want to get out of school faster.
- e) Peer pressure as friends progressing onto 5<sup>th</sup> Year so other students follow.



Parent and subject choice meetings this could be conducted between parents, teachers and students this perhaps may show options of courses and entry requirements



## Work Experience

Transition Year coordinators had mixed opinions of whether work experience helped students to choose subjects or careers for the Leaving Certificate. This varied noticeably depending on location of schools. Schools in rural schools had higher numbers of students unable to find work experience in areas of interest. Students, who live in urban areas and have access to public transport, had larger amounts of business and job opportunities to choose for work experience which influenced their careers and Leaving Certificate subjects.

## Finance

Some Transition Year coordinators stated that finding information on activities for Transition Year can be difficult. There are certain companies which over-charge for activities. A document compiled by Transition Year coordinators with telephone numbers, places and ideas would be useful. This document could provide fresh ideas, encouraging more TY coordination and indeed making the coordinators feel less isolated. There is a document currently on the website of the Professional Development Service for Teachers, but more detailed information would be of greater value to Transition Year coordinators.

Transition Year coordinators described how they received a large amount of information in the post.

This includes different information about workshops and other services provided by charities and businesses in exchange for a financial fee.

Transition Year coordinators described how rare it would be that a charity, business or workshop would offer their services voluntarily and instead most were seeking financial payments which could limit who they could invite to the school.

## Strengths of TY

There were a number of strengths of the Transition Year Programme raised by coordinators. Sampling of subjects was seen as a good opportunity for students. This allowed them to make suitable choices for the Leaving Certificate. As a result of subject tasters, some students chose different subjects which they had not done for the Junior Certificate.

Transition Year coordinators also stated that students who do Transition Year become mature. *'Teachers have said they have noticed this within 5<sup>th</sup> Year classes when students enter the room, sit down and are ready for work'*. Some Transition Year coordinators feel that students have gotten rid of their 'overall mischief' and have gotten to have some fun within Transition Year. There is less conflict and a different atmosphere, as a result, in 5<sup>th</sup> Year.

Students who have done Transition Year are also more assertive, able to



offer opinions and less reliant on their teachers. They are known to have become more self-directed learners. This is compared to students who progress straight from 3rd Year to 5<sup>th</sup> Year, who may find it harder to settle within classes.

Some Transition Year coordinators feel that *'the exam tail wags the curricular dog'* in second-level education, and that this should be the other way around. Transition Year is an opportunity to do this, where teachers can make their own curriculum to what is best suited for their students' needs and to the facilities available in the locality. The Transition Year curriculum allows the education system to move towards a more student centred approach. Until this year, within the Junior Certificate framework, there was little project based work which meant that students did not gain the skill of independent learning.

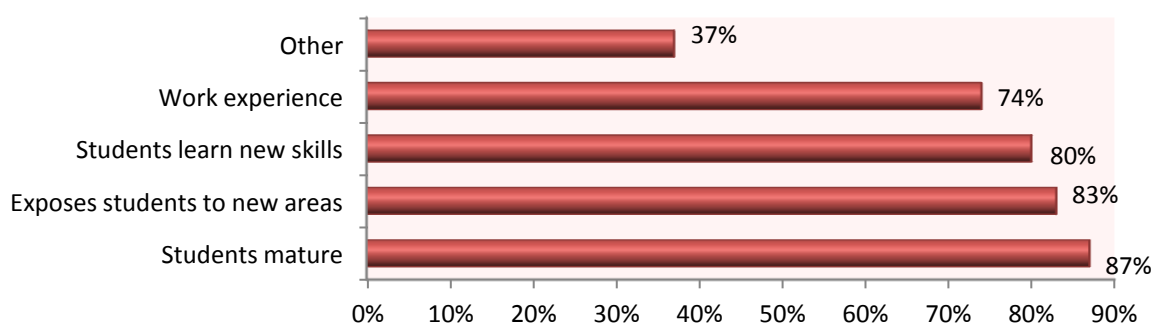
Transition Year helps students to become independent learners through research projects. Students

have to investigate themes instead of just reading content from a book or on PowerPoint format.

There was consensus among teachers that Transition Year does not impact negatively upon students, but instead provides the student with enhanced personal development and skills. The benefits which a student gains from Transition Year are not always experienced straight away but if you talked to students a few years later, they would be able to discuss the broad amount of benefits they gained from participating in the Transition Year Programme.

Strengths of the Transition Year Programme were also identified in the online survey which can be seen below. Transition Year coordinators felt that students being exposed to work experience, new areas of society, learning new skills and maturing were all strengths of the Transition Year Programme.

In your opinion what are the main strengths of the TY programme? Select all that apply...



Teachers have noticed this within 5th year classes where students (who have done TY), enter the room, sit down and re ready for work (to a greater extent than students who didn't do TY)



# Weaknesses of the TY Programme

Transition Year coordinators stated that there are some weaknesses and improvements which could be made to the Transition Year Programme. Lack of funding can result in Transition Year coordinators being unable to fulfil their plans for the Transition Year course. In some cases, Transition Year coordinators have to reduce trips/workshops and activities as there is not enough funding available. The amount of funds available to schools depends on student numbers. A larger amount of students within the programme results in more funds available and the costs of activities being reduced per person.

Some schools gather feedback from teachers through Transition Year meetings chaired by the Transition Year coordinator. At these meetings opinions of teachers are collected with the aim of improving the programme. Some teachers said a problem with the year was that students were not in classes as much as they would like them to be. During the year there would be different trips, workshops and guest

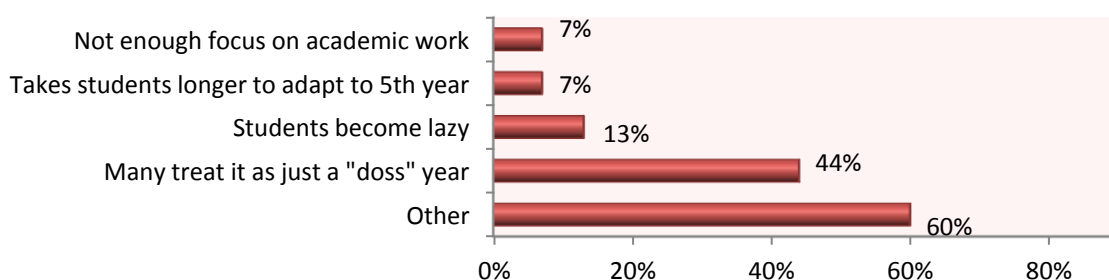
speakers which results in students missing class contact hours.

Transition Year coordinators would like more support and collaboration within the school and also from the Department of Education and Skills.

They feel that communication with other staff members in their own school and also with other schools would help to improve Transition Year. Feedback may provide insights into potential improvements that the Transition Year coordinators may not think of themselves.

Although work experience is of benefit to students, there is one minor drawback highlighted by some Transition Year coordinators. Students may pick up a part time job which can be of financial benefit to students and good for their CV, 'however in 6<sup>th</sup> year we would like to see them finish their part time job as it can affect their academic study. The Leaving Certificate requires a large amount of time and the part time job gained from work experience will restrict the time available for study'.

In your opinion what are the main weaknesses of the TY programme? Select all that apply...

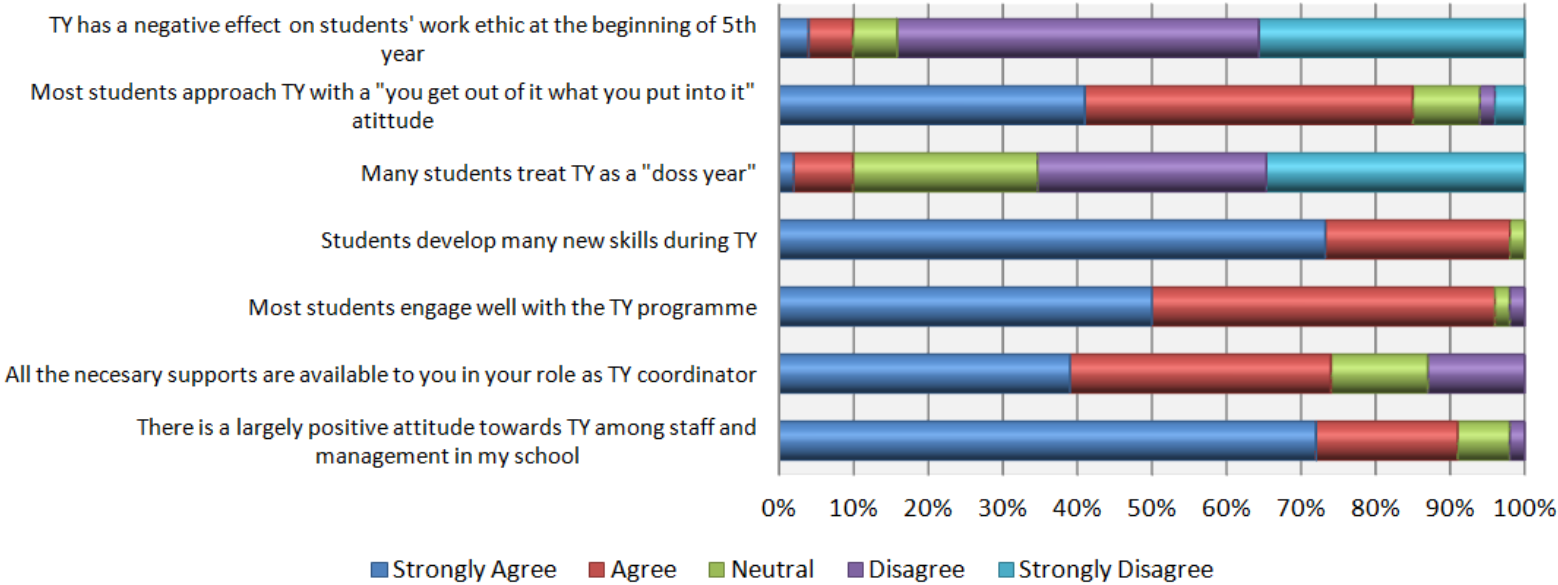


# Changes to TY Programme

Teachers suggested a number of items which could help to improve the Transition Year Programme.

Some felt that certifying students' awards for Transition Year could be improved which would help to motivate students, especially if there was an official award from the Department of Education and Skills.

Please rate the statements below...



## Transition

Year was fun but it's  
now time to start focusing.  
I have had enough of  
the fun and want to get the  
Leaving Certificate over



## Conclusion

Students stated that they enjoyed Transition Year as it is not as repetitive as other years. The classes change constantly, there are interesting short courses, different guest speakers and trips. Students are also moved between different groups for different activities. To keep Transition Year a lively and interesting year, students felt that it needed to be refreshed on a yearly basis. Improvements and changes could be made through feedback from students, teachers and parents every year.

Whilst carrying out this research, there were some students from other countries enrolled in either Transition Year or 5<sup>th</sup> Year who participated in the focus groups. These included the United Kingdom and Germany. These students agreed that Transition Year was a good year and feel that there should be something similar on offer in their home countries. This shows the quality of commitment being placed into organisation of the Transition Year Programme.

Students did feel that improvements could be made to the Transition Year Programme. Survey responses showed that 89% were happy that they did Transition Year. The survey responses also showed that students enjoyed their Transition Year Programme with 49% strongly agreeing and 33% agreeing.

It has also been observed that improvements to the current system are being made on a continuous basis both locally and nationally.

The overall consensus of students and Transition Year coordinators is that Transition Year needs to be maintained within the second-level education system, something which 98% of teachers surveyed agree with.

However, there are ways in which the programme could be improved to make it a better experience for parents, students and teachers.

# Recommendations

- Ensure that the Transition Year Programme is available but optional for all second-level students.
- Schools should hold Transition Year information sessions for 3<sup>rd</sup> year students to allow them to make an informed choice about whether or not the Transition Year Programme would be a good choice for them.
- Previous class groups should be mixed to allow students to build relationships with different students in their year. Similarly, activities between different schools should be encouraged so that relationships are built outside of the students' own school community.
- The cost and budget of Transition Year needs to be made clear to all students and parents. In cases where costs need to be reduced, some trips could be made optional so that students can opt in or out.
- Where possible, decisions about activities, trips and classes should be made between students and teachers so that all parties are fully committed to these. This would also help to make students feel like it is 'their' Transition Year.
- Different methods of learning and assessment should be used as much as possible, though there is also an appetite among students that they get tasters for Leaving Cert subjects so this may not apply in these instances.
- Assessments should take place in various ways, minimising the use of more traditional formats in favour of projects and presentations, which should be done in a variety of formats (written, spoken, video, audio etc).
- Due to a lack of prescribed material and textbooks, more modern technologies such as tablet computers may be a viable resource to use to aid students' learning.
- Tighter constraints and monitoring of work experience needs to be conducted by schools so that all students benefit from a valuable experience and useful feedback.
- Schools in rural areas may need to become more flexible about work experience arrangements (such as timing) as students often have less

choice locally than students in urban areas. Financial supports may need to be put in place to support transport etc for these students.

- Schools should use a portfolio as a method of recording activities, though this should not be used extensively as an assessment method.
- There should be some form of formal award given for completion of the Transition Year Programme from the Department of Education and Skill to give value to the programme and to motivate students.











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