



Date: 27/02/2020

Circular Number: 0017/2020

To: Boards of Management, Principal Teachers and Teaching Staff of Post-Primary Schools, Special Schools and Chief Executives of ETBs

Guidance on the Junior Cycle Subject Learning and Assessment Review Process

Introduction

Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) Meetings are an important part of the assessment of students' learning in Junior Cycle. This guidance has been issued by the Department of Education and Skills to assist schools in their effective organisation and implementation of the SLAR process. The guidance has been developed through detailed collaborative discussions involving representatives of the management bodies of second-level schools, representatives of the trade unions representing second-level teachers and officials of the Department of Education and Skills.

The guidance has been developed to be:

- Consistent with the provisions of the *Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)*, the *Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation (May 2015)* and the *Appendix to the Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation covering Professional Time to Support Implementation (July 2015)*; and
- Informed by the learning from on-the-ground implementation experiences of Junior Cycle reform among teachers, school leaders and managers over the period since the *Framework for Junior Cycle* was introduced.

Schools will be required to arrange SLAR meetings in accordance with this guidance from the school year 2020/21 onwards. Schools are also encouraged as far as possible to adopt and implement the guidance with immediate effect in the current academic year.

Summary

This circular:

1. Explains the purpose and nature of the Subject Learning and Assessment Review process within Junior Cycle;
2. Outlines a number of key principles that should inform the effective organisation and implementation of the SLAR process in schools;
3. Describes what happens during the SLAR process;
4. Outlines the roles of those involved in the SLAR process;
5. Describes the conditions that support the SLAR process;
6. Specifies a number of options, A or B or C or D, one of which schools must use to make arrangements for the holding SLAR meetings;
7. Makes clear how those schools choosing to use Option D to arrange SLAR meetings MUST notify the Department of that decision by 16th March 2020.

1. What is the Subject Learning and Assessment Review Process?

Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs) are best described as the occasions when the teacher assesses the students using the specific tasks set out in the subject specification. Although the assessment is similar to the formative assessment that occurs every day in class, in the case of CBAs the teacher's judgement on students' work is provisionally recorded, at which point the Subject Learning Assessment and Review (SLAR) process is initiated. On completion of the process, the judgements are finalised and used in the school's reporting to parents and students. The SLAR Facilitator has a key role in managing the process from its commencement through to its completion.

Students' CBAs should be undertaken within the timeframes provided by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The SLAR process facilitates teachers in preparing for and discussing the assessment of students' work with colleagues. This professional engagement and dialogue links assessment to planning for teaching and learning. It is important to consider the timings of subject CBAs in planning for/scheduling the meetings required as part of the SLAR process.

SLAR meetings are an important part of the assessment of students' learning in Junior Cycle. Through SLAR meetings:

- Teachers share and discuss their assessment of students' learning and achievement in each Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) and build a common understanding on the quality of students' learning, so that they can share and align their judgements regarding the standards achieved in line with national standards;
- Teachers engage in reflection on their professional practice and how teaching and learning in the school may be improved.

Because of the importance of these two complementary functions – building a common understanding of standards and teachers' professional development – a portion of the professional time (non-class contact time) provided within the teacher's contract is devoted to SLAR meetings.

2. Key principles that inform an effective SLAR process

The following principles should inform how schools put in place the arrangements for the SLAR process, including the holding of meetings.

Decisions about the holding of SLAR meetings are taken at the level of each school and these principles, agreed between the partners at national level, are designed to provide guidance for such local decision making within schools, as well as in cases where schools in a locality must coordinate decisions regarding the holding of SLAR meetings because of local circumstances, such as school transport provision.

2.1 High Trust Approach

Trust is a core component of relationships at school level. A high degree of trust is necessary to complete the process and operate SLAR meetings effectively. The high trust approach acknowledges that teachers and school management are operating the arrangements in good faith for the benefit of all concerned.

In a climate of high trust, school management and teachers work together to ensure that arrangements are agreed to maximise the benefits for learners and teachers from the professional engagement that takes place within effectively run SLAR meetings.

2.2 School Autonomy

School autonomy refers to the degree of flexibility that schools have to make decisions so that they can best address the needs of their students and the context of the school. In relation to the SLAR process, schools have autonomy, within national frameworks, guidance and the requirements of Departmental circulars, to make certain decisions regarding:

- How they plan for and complete the Junior Cycle programme of Classroom-Based Assessments; and
- The scheduling of SLAR meetings.

This autonomy is available to the school on the understanding that teachers and school leaders are accountable to students, parents, boards and the Department of Education and Skills to ensure that student outcomes in relation to Classroom-Based Assessments are reported within the national timeframes.

2.3 Professional Collegiality

The arrangements reached at school level in relation to the SLAR process will reflect the standards of professional practice set out by the Teaching Council in relation to working with teaching colleagues and student teachers in the interests of sharing, developing and supporting good practice and maintaining the highest quality of educational experiences for students. Teachers' engagement with the CBA and SLAR processes will also assist in developing teaching, learning and assessment strategies that support differentiated learning in a way that respects the dignity and the learning needs of all students.

2.4 Integrity of Tuition Time

All arrangements for Junior Cycle, including the holding of SLAR meetings, must ensure that, at all times, students have access to *the minimum* 28 hours of tuition time per week over the course of 33.4 weeks per school year.

3. What happens during the SLAR process?

Each Subject Learning and Assessment Review meeting is subject-specific and focuses on the Classroom-Based Assessment process as undertaken by the particular year group. The attendance of all teachers involved in teaching the subject to students in the group is mandatory. Other teachers of the subject in the school may attend the SLAR meeting in order to benefit from and engage with the professional collaboration and learning that occurs at the meetings.

Before the SLAR meeting the subject teacher will:

1. Review relevant NCCA annotated examples;
2. Assess students' work from their own students based on the Features of Quality in the assessment guidelines for the subject;
3. Record the descriptor that they believe should be allocated to each student. Teachers may also wish to record any other point that may be useful to refer to during or after the SLAR meeting;
4. Identify one sample of students' work for each descriptor, where feasible.

During the SLAR meeting:

1. Led by the Facilitator, teachers are invited to introduce samples of work that they have assessed;
2. This is followed by a discussion, led by the Facilitator, on the extent to which the student's work matches the relevant Features of Quality. If the judgement is confirmed, this is noted by the Facilitator. If there is lack of agreement, the Facilitator should share some relevant annotated examples;
3. At least two samples for each descriptor should be discussed. Each teacher should have at least one of his/her examples discussed during the meeting. Teachers will keep a note of the decisions made during the meeting for the students' work they have already assessed;
4. The SLAR meeting may identify for further discussion aspects of the learning of students and aspects of teachers' practice upon which it would be worthwhile for teachers of the subject to reflect upon further as part of their professional development.

After the SLAR meeting:

1. Teachers consider the provisional assessment of their students' work and where necessary make the appropriate adjustments to their provisional assessments;
2. The Facilitator generates a short report and submits it to the principal;
3. The Facilitator may ask teachers to contribute some of their examples of student work to a bank of examples.

4. Who is involved in the SLAR process and what do they do?

- **School Leaders:** are accountable for the overall implementation of the Junior Cycle in the school, including the use of professional time and the portion of that time required to complete the SLAR process. The school principal will work with the SLAR Facilitator(s) to ensure that the arrangements required to support SLAR meetings are agreed and feasible in the context of the overall needs of the school timetable, school calendar and the number of SLAR meetings to be scheduled within specific time periods. The Facilitator(s) will confirm the details of the meeting(s) and report back to the principal.

These functions, as exercised by the principal, may be delegated to a deputy principal in the school.

- **SLAR Facilitator:** For each SLAR meeting, one teacher of the subject will be allocated two additional hours by school management to facilitate the preparation for and coordination of the meeting. In advance of the meeting the Facilitator will consult with the teachers and the school principal to agree the meeting timing and arrangements, and put the necessary arrangements in place for the meeting. This includes, for example, the collection of samples for discussion and review at the meeting. When the meeting has been completed the Facilitator will submit a short report from the meeting to the principal. The agreed report will focus on the outcomes of the discussion of student work at the meeting.

- **Subject Teacher:** Once students have completed their CBA, their subject class teacher will carry out a provisional assessment of the students' learning as developed and evidenced by the CBA process, based on the Features of Quality. These provisional assessments may be modified in light of the discussions that take place at the SLAR meeting. The teacher will make a note of the descriptor allocated to each student and any other point they may wish or find useful to refer to during and after the SLAR meeting. This note will be for the teacher's own use. In preparation for the SLAR meeting, each teacher will identify one sample of student's work for each descriptor, where feasible, and will have these available for discussion at the meeting. Following the completion of the SLAR process the teacher will report on the descriptor awarded to each of their students using the school's reporting system/software.
- **Subject Department:** The selection of the SLAR Facilitator will be the responsibility of the school's management in consultation with the subject department teachers. To foster capacity building in each subject department the position of SLAR Facilitator will normally be rotated among the relevant teachers.

5. Getting the conditions right for the SLAR process

5.1 Building consensus about scheduling the SLAR meetings

- Schools should seek to reach a consensus at school level as to the scheduling and arrangements for SLAR meetings. In doing so, the following will need to be taken into consideration:
 - the timetable arrangements in the school;
 - the school calendar, including events and periods that may facilitate the holding of SLAR meetings (for example, teachers may be available for meetings when TY students are on work placement);
 - the State Examinations Commission (SEC) timetable;
 - the annually published windows within which schools can complete Classroom-Based Assessments, SLAR meetings and Assessment Tasks;
 - the requirement to provide a minimum of 28 hours of tuition time to students per week.

5.2 Avoiding over-assessment of students

- The principal will be responsible for ensuring that there is a balance in the scheduling of CBA assessments in order to avoid over-assessment for learners in short time frames and will take into consideration the workload of teachers and learners;
- In the context of avoiding over-assessment CBAs will substitute for other assessments currently undertaken in the school such as in-house examinations;
- The holding of any form of "mock" CBAs and/or "mock" Assessment Tasks must be avoided.

5.3 Scheduling and notice

- In consultation with the board, it is the responsibility of the school principal to organise all aspects of the school calendar, the timetabling of classes and the allocation of teachers to class groups. In organising the school calendar for CBAs, the principal will liaise with subject departments in relation to the mandated windows for the CBAs for their subjects;
- To facilitate effective planning at school level the SLAR Facilitator should consult with the teachers to be involved in the SLAR meeting and advise the principal of the date and arrangements that are being considered/put in place for the holding of the SLAR meeting. Generally, at least two weeks' notification is required for effective arrangement of SLAR meetings.

5.4 Reporting

- The SLAR Facilitator will provide a short agreed report on the SLAR meeting to the principal within a week following the conclusion of the meeting. Following the completion of the SLAR process teachers will finalise the descriptors to be awarded to students and upload the descriptors awarded to the school's reporting system/software.

5.5 Maintaining the integrity of student tuition time

- In agreeing the arrangements to be put in place for the SLAR meetings, school leaders and teachers are required to maintain the integrity of a minimum 28 hours of student tuition time per week throughout the school year.

5.6 Bundling of teachers' professional time

- The time required for SLAR meetings is supported through the bundling of professional time for which each full-time teacher involved in the delivery of Junior Cycle is normally provided with an annual allocation of 22 hours of professional time (40 minutes per week), with a pro-rata provision for part-time teachers.

5.7 Substitution

- Paid substitution may **not** be used to facilitate the arrangement of SLAR meetings other than where provided for in this guidance (i.e. to facilitate the attendance of a teacher in a single teacher department at a SLAR meeting in another school OR through the use of Option D below);
- Supervision and Substitution may **not** be used under any circumstances to facilitate the participation of teachers in SLAR meetings.

5.8 Where there is a single teacher of a subject in the school

- Where there is a single teacher of a subject in a school, the teacher can be facilitated to participate in a SLAR meeting with another school. This may take place using video conferencing facilities/Skype if available, or the teacher may travel to the other school. Additional paid substitution may be used to facilitate travel and attendance of the teacher at a SLAR meeting in these circumstances.

5.9 Reaching consensus and making decisions

- Schools should seek to make decisions regarding the SLAR process by consensus. Consensus in this context does not mean a simple majority or veto but is provided where general agreement and support has been granted for the option that is chosen;¹
- This approach to decision making should inform how the teachers of a subject should make decisions regarding the timing of their SLAR meeting;
- This approach to decision-making should also inform how all teachers in the school should make a decision on the option to be used from Section 6 below regarding the overall approach to scheduling of SLAR meetings;
- Where it is not possible to reach a consensus on any decision, final decisions in relation to the arrangements will rest with the board of management.

6. Options for scheduling the SLAR process and meetings

Each school **must** opt for **one** of the following arrangements (Option A, or Option B, or Option C or Option D) for the holding of all of its SLAR meetings. A decision on which option to be used will be made as described in section 5.9 above.

Option A

- Schools may choose to maintain or implement a timetable having four long days and one shorter day.
- This timetable will facilitate SLAR and other meetings relating to Junior Cycle to be held in the period following the conclusion of tuition on the shorter day, or at another time that does not impinge on student tuition time.
- Schools will be required to maintain the currently defined levels of student tuition time, i.e. 28 hours per week.
- Schools must not incur any additional costs through Substitution.
- Substitution and Supervision must not be used in facilitating SLAR meetings.
- A SLAR meeting will be a single meeting of approximately 2 hours duration.

Option B

- An agreement is reached at school level between teachers and management that SLAR meetings will be held at a time suitable to the teachers in the subject groups without impinging on tuition time.
- Should circumstances allow, a meeting, or portion thereof, may take place within normal school tuition hours.

¹ The term consensus as set out by Labour Relations Commission - January, 2011. The definition has informed decision-making at school level in the case of decisions on the use of Croke Park hours.

- Schools will be required to maintain the currently defined levels of student tuition time, i.e. 28 hours per week.
- Schools must not incur any additional costs through Substitution.
- Substitution and Supervision must not be used in facilitating SLAR meetings.
- A SLAR meeting will be a single meeting of approximately 2 hours duration.

Option C

- The SLAR process will constitute 40 minutes of preparation time from within a teacher's professional time, and a collaborative portion of a minimum of 80 minutes' duration, the latter to be held as a single meeting.
- Once students have completed their CBA, their subject class teacher will carry out a provisional assessment of the students' learning as developed and evidenced by the CBA process, based on the Features of Quality. These provisional assessments may be modified in light of the discussions that take place at the SLAR meeting.
- In preparation for the collaborative portion of the SLAR process, each teacher will identify one sample of students' work for each descriptor, where feasible, for discussion at the meeting. Each teacher will submit his/her samples to the Facilitator, together with a brief note on each sample of students' work showing their reasons for their provisional assessment of the students' work. This will support all relevant teachers in reviewing the samples of students' work in the preparatory phase.
- The Facilitator will assemble and make available the appropriate examples of student work and attached notes supplied by the subject teachers some days prior to the commencement of the collaborative portion of the SLAR process.
- Teachers will use 40 minutes of their professional time to access this material, examine the samples and attached notes, and familiarise themselves with their content.
- The balance of the SLAR process (a meeting of a minimum 80 minutes' duration) will be held at a time suitable to the teachers in the subject group, without impinging on student tuition time and without the use of any substitution.
- Schools will be required to maintain the currently defined levels of student contact time, i.e. 28 hours per week.
- Schools must not incur any additional costs through Substitution.
- Supervision and Substitution must not be used in facilitating SLAR meetings.

Option D

- SLAR meetings are held entirely during normal school tuition hours and the teacher allocation for professional time to the school is reduced to remove the equivalent of 8 hours of professional time per full time teacher (and pro-rata amounts for part-time teachers).
- Additional paid substitution is provided to facilitate attendance of teachers at SLAR meetings.

- Supervision and Substitution must not be used in facilitating SLAR meetings.
- The reduction in teacher allocation to the school may result in the loss of teaching posts in the school. Normal teacher re-deployment arrangements will apply in situations where the number of teachers working in a school exceeds the approved teacher allocation for that school.
- The allocation to individual teachers of teacher professional time available to the school may be prioritised by giving professional time to teachers of Junior Cycle only.
- A SLAR meeting will be a single meeting of approximately 2 hours duration.

7. Schools must notify the Department if they choose to use Option D

7.1 Schools choosing to use Option D above must notify the Department of this decision by 16th March 2020

- Circulars 0013/2020, 0014/2020, 0015/2020, advising post-primary schools of their staffing arrangements for the 2020/21 school year, include a **provisional** allocation of posts intended to support the provision by schools of 22 hours of professional time per full-time teacher of Junior Cycle per year, with a pro-rata provision for part-time teachers.
- However, where a school chooses Option D (see section 6 above), this option will result in the professional time for teachers – and hence the teacher allocation to the school – being reduced by the equivalent of 8 hours per full-time teacher, with a pro-rata reduction for part-time teachers.
- Schools choosing Option D MUST complete and return the attached form to the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit of the Department by the 16th March 2020.

7.2 Schools choosing to use Option A or B or C do not need to notify the Department

- Schools choosing to use Option A, or Option B, or Option C are not required to notify the Department of this decision.

7.3 Auditing of the use of teacher allocations and professional time

- The use of teacher allocations, including professional time for SLAR meetings, may be subject to audit. In cases where the holding of SLAR meetings is found to have impinged on student tuition time and/or where it has resulted in unauthorised additional paid substitution costs or unauthorised use of Supervision and Substitution, the teacher allocation for the school for the following school year will be reduced.

Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit
27th February 2020

Subject Learning and Assessment Review Meeting

Option Form

This form must be returned by 16th March 2020

NOTE: This form is only to be returned if your school is choosing to implement Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meetings in accordance with Option D as set out in this Circular. The terms of Option D are repeated below:

Option D

- SLAR meetings are held entirely during normal school tuition hours and the teacher allocation for professional time to the school is reduced to remove the equivalent of 8 hours of professional time per full time teacher (and pro-rata amounts for part-time teachers).
- Additional paid substitution is provided to facilitate attendance of teachers at SLAR meetings.
- Supervision and Substitution must not be used in facilitating SLAR meetings.
- The reduction in teacher allocation to the school may result in the loss of teaching posts in the school. Normal teacher re-deployment arrangements will apply in situations where the number of teachers working in a school exceeds the approved teacher allocation for that school.
- The allocation to individual teachers of teacher professional time available to the school may be prioritised by giving professional time to teachers of Junior Cycle only.
- A SLAR meeting will be a single meeting of approximately 2 hours duration.

School Name:

School Roll Number:

I hereby declare that the above named school will implement SLAR meetings in accordance with the terms of Option D of Department of Education and Skills Circular 0017/2020 and understand that the allocation of professional time to teachers in this school will consequently reduce from 22 hours to 14 hours per full-time teacher of Junior Cycle, with a pro-rata reduction for part-time teachers.

Principal Name: _____

Principal Signature: _____

Date: _____

Please return this form to:

Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit,
'SLAR Options',
Department of Education and Skills,
Marlborough Street,
D01 RC96.