

Philosophy for the Leaving Certificate

A proposal for introducing Philosophy as a Leaving Certificate subject

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Petition: <https://www.change.org/LeavingCertPhilosophy>
Survey: <https://forms.gle/TdhNkzuKLk9g5T2A9>
Website: <https://philosophyforleavingcertificate.com/>

Executive Summary

Ireland is one of the few Western European countries without a secondary-level Philosophy qualification, at exactly the moment the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is actively redeveloping Senior Cycle and has already shown it will add genuinely new subjects—Drama and Climate Action among them—rather than only revise old ones. Philosophy trains precisely the skills that Senior Cycle reform documents already say they want: building and evaluating arguments, weighing evidence, and writing clearly under time pressure.¹ Ireland has effectively piloted something similar within the last decade, with Politics & Society, and already has a small foothold with the Junior Cycle Philosophy short course. This document sets out the case, the evidence, a syllabus outline, and a realistic, low-cost path for a pilot that can eventually lead to Philosophy’s institution as a full Leaving Certificate subject.

Why Philosophy, and Why Now?

The addition of Philosophy fills a genuine gap in the curriculum. Irish second-level students currently receive little focused training in constructing an argument, telling valid reasoning from invalid reasoning, weighing competing ethical claims, understanding the processes by which they come to know things about the world and about the reliability of their own reasoning. These are skills used daily in law, technology, medicine, journalism, business and public life, regardless of a student’s eventual career. Training in philosophy is fulfilling, practical, and transferable to many other domains.

Senior Cycle Redevelopment is underway, and the NCCA has already demonstrated a willingness to introduce subjects that did not previously exist in the system, rather than simply updating established ones. Philosophy is an especially apt candidate as it aims to improve students’ critical thinking and reasoning skills, which are more relevant now than ever given the extreme popularity of generative AI tools.

Further, Philosophy is arguably one of the least expensive subjects the NCCA could add: it needs no laboratories, no specialist equipment, no capital investment, and there are substantial freely accessible resources online.² All that would be required is a curriculum, a training pathway for teachers, and an examination structure.

¹See the NCCA’s ‘Key Competencies’ for Senior Cycle Redevelopment.

²Notable examples include the SEP (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy) and the IEP (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

This *Can* Work

Politics & Society is the clearest proof of concept available within Ireland. It began, roughly a decade ago, as a genuinely new Leaving Certificate subject with no existing cohort of specialist teachers, and was built largely by teachers cross-training into it. It is now a fully established Leaving Certificate subject with its own exam papers, and it already engages directly with philosophers and political thinkers (albeit a particular, narrow subset) as part of its ‘key thinkers’ strand. It demonstrates that the NCCA can, and does, successfully launch subjects like this.

Ireland already runs a Junior Cycle Philosophy short course in some schools. This means that Ireland already has some curriculum-writing experience and a small existing cohort of resources and teachers with some grounding in the subject; this proposal is not starting from zero.

Outside of Ireland, it is easy to find numerous examples of successful second-level philosophy curricula. Notably, the UK has [A-Level Philosophy](#), Aotearoa New Zealand is in the process of [adding philosophy](#) to its second-level curriculum, France has the [Philosophy Baccalauréat](#), and other European countries—Italy, Finland, Germany, Poland, Spain, and others—similarly include philosophy in their second-level curricula.

Some Relevant Research

Irish precedent already exists

- This case has already been made in Ireland once. The Royal Irish Academy’s National Committee for Philosophy and Ethics submitted a formal proposal to the NCCA in February 2012 arguing substantially this case, recommending Philosophy as a Senior Cycle short course.³
- That 2012 proposal cites a 1991 ESRI survey of Irish school-leavers in which only 14% felt school had helped them apply good values in life, only 6% felt prepared to make socio-political decisions, and only 19% felt prepared to play a responsible part in society.⁴ The Junior Cycle now runs a 100-hour Philosophy short course, introduced in 2016.⁵
- Politics & Society—the clearest working precedent for what this proposal asks for—launched as a genuinely new Leaving Certificate subject in 41 pilot schools in September 2016; uptake grew from 867 students sitting the exam in 2018 to over 3,000 in 2025.⁶
- Former president Michael D. Higgins has repeatedly and publicly advocated for philosophy in schools, including at the launch of the Irish Young Philosopher Awards (November 2017) and at subsequent ceremonies, and has spoken specifically about philosophy’s role in countering ‘digital echo-chambers.’⁷
- The current Senior Cycle Redevelopment programme has already added two additions from outside the existing curriculum (Drama, Film and Theatre Studies; Climate Action and Sustainable Development), and every redeveloped specification now carries a minimum 40% non-written, externally assessed component. This assessment structure is notably well suited to a discussion- and argument-based subject like Philosophy.⁸

³Royal Irish Academy National Committee for Philosophy and Ethics, ‘[Proposal for Philosophy as a Leaving Certificate Subject](#)’ (February 2012). Its appendix also surveys how Philosophy is taught at second-level in Italy, France, Germany, the UK and the IB; this further supports the international-comparison previously raised.

⁴D. Hannan and S. Shorthall, *The Outcome of their Education: School Leavers’ Views of Educational Objectives and Outcomes* (Economic and Social Research Institute, 1991), as cited in the RIA proposal above.

⁵NCCA, [Junior Cycle Philosophy short course](#); full specification at [curriculumonline.ie](#).

⁶‘Ten years of Leaving Cert politics & society’, *The Irish Times*, 14 April 2026.

⁷Launch speech, 2017; 2019 Irish Times coverage; speech at a reception for Philosophy Ireland (echo-chambers remarks).

⁸NCCA, ‘[Schedule of senior cycle subjects for redevelopment](#)’; Department of Education, ‘[Senior Cycle Redevelopment](#)’.

Further primary research is now underway: Above all, what Irish employers, teachers, students, parents and philosophy graduates themselves actually think, alongside some other gaps in the evidence are precisely what secondary literature cannot resolve, because almost no one has asked them directly. To address this, the author is concurrently conducting an original survey-based research project, launching alongside this proposal, of secondary school students, secondary school teachers, current third-level philosophy students, philosophy graduates, philosophy academics, government officials, and professionals across law, business and other sectors. The aims are to establish, with Irish-centric data: (i) the level of demand among prospective students and their parents for a Leaving Certificate Philosophy option; (ii) philosophy graduates’ and current students’ own retrospective assessment of the subject’s career and personal value; (iii) practising teachers’ willingness and perceived readiness to teach the subject, complementing the workforce case made above; and (iv) employers’ views on the value of philosophical training and critical-reasoning skills, specifically within the Irish labour market. Findings will be published as a companion document to this proposal and incorporated into future drafts as they become available.

Labour-market outcomes

- **Starting and mid-career salary.** The American Philosophical Association’s analysis of PayScale data reports that philosophy graduates have both the highest early-career salary (\$52,600) and the highest mid-career salary (\$94,300) of any humanities major in the United States; higher than every other humanities field PayScale tracks.⁹
- **Low unemployment.** The Federal Reserve Bank of New York’s tracker of graduate labour-market outcomes puts philosophy’s recent-graduate unemployment rate at around 3.2%, lower than finance (3.7%) and computer science (6.1%); philosophy majors outperform several STEM and business fields on this measure.¹⁰

Standardised test performance

- **LSAT.** Law School Admission Council data for 2022–23 puts philosophy majors’ mean LSAT score second only to economics among majors with a statistically meaningful number of test-takers, ahead of every other humanities and social science field.¹¹
- **GRE.** ETS’s own current interpretive data (test-takers 2021–2024) puts philosophy among the highest-scoring intended graduate majors on Verbal Reasoning and Analytical Writing, of any field, not just any humanities field.¹²
- **GMAT.** Philosophy majors also rank third overall on the GMAT, ahead of most business-focused majors.¹³

Does philosophy training itself cause this, or does it just select strong thinkers?

- A large peer-reviewed causal study addresses this directly. Prinzing and Vazquez used records from 649,511 undergraduates at 804 US institutions (1990–2019) and controlled for incoming SAT scores and freshman-year dispositions. They found a noticeable selection effect (stronger verbal students are likelier to choose philosophy) *but also* a residual training effect: philosophy

⁹American Philosophical Association, ‘Data and Information on the Field of Philosophy’; underlying report: ‘Philosophy Majors After College’ (PayScale 2020–21 data).

¹⁰Federal Reserve Bank of New York, ‘The Labor Market for Recent College Graduates’; reported in CNBC, May 2025.

¹¹LSAC data as summarised by the APA: ‘Philosophy Student Performance on the LSAT’ (2023); raw tables at report.lsac.org.

¹²Educational Testing Service, ‘GRE General Test Percentage Distribution of Scores Within Intended Graduate Major Field’ (Table 3B).

¹³See, e.g., Eastern Michigan University Philosophy Department, summarising GMAC data.

majors outscored non-majors on the GRE Verbal by 33 points and the LSAT by 2 points *after* controlling for incoming ability, and ranked first of 57 majors on a composite measure of intellectual curiosity, rigour and open-mindedness ('Habits of Mind').¹⁴

Proposed Syllabus Outline

A four-strand structure, in keeping with how existing Leaving Certificate subjects are typically organised. Each strand pairs a proper philosophical field with the accessible, real-world questions it addresses:

- **Strand A — Logic & Critical Thinking:** validity and soundness, common fallacies, informal reasoning, an introduction to argument-mapping and proof.
- **Strand B — Ethics & Social Philosophy:** major ethical frameworks, applied to contemporary case studies in both personal and public life.
- **Strand C — Epistemology & Philosophy of Science:** knowledge, belief and evidence; evaluating methods of knowledge acquisition; distinguishing science from pseudoscience; what are the limits of science?
- **Strand D — Metaphysics & Philosophy of Mind:** the nature and structure of the world; what is real? Personal identity and free will; can machines think?

Assessment would combine a terminal written paper with a 40% Additional Assessment Component (AAC)—a research project, portfolio, or structured oral discussion, externally assessed by the State Examinations Commission—in line with the standard the NCCA now applies to every new and redeveloped Senior Cycle subject.¹⁵

Teacher Availability

Philosophy's strands ensure some overlap in teaching interest and ability with other subjects. Philosophy's Logic focus overlaps directly with Mathematics and Computer Science; its Ethics focus overlaps with Religious Education, CSPE and Politics & Society; its Epistemology and Philosophy of Science focus overlaps with Physics, Chemistry, and Biology. A modest continuing-professional-development (CPD) conversion course—of the kind already used to bring teachers into Politics & Society—could qualify existing teachers, rather than requiring an entirely new hiring pipeline.

There is also a second, larger pool worth naming directly, which ensures the long-term sustainability of second-level philosophy teaching: Ireland, like most English-speaking academic systems, produces far more trained philosophers than the university sector can employ. In 2021, APDA found that only 34% of PhD graduates achieve a permanent academic position;¹⁶ a substantial proportion spend years in temporary lecturing, adjunct teaching, or postdoctoral positions before finding permanent academic work, if they ever do. These are, by definition, people with deep subject knowledge, teaching experience, and a demonstrated commitment to philosophy who currently have very few stable, well-respected places to put that to use. Further, the breadth of philosophy ensures that many of these potential teachers would be interested in and capable of teaching in adjacent subjects: philosophers of mathematics, philosophers of literature, philosophers of religion,

¹⁴Michael Prinzing and Michael Vazquez, 'Studying Philosophy Does Make People Better Thinkers', *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* (2025), doi:10.1017/apa.2025.10007; open-access version at [PhilArchive](#); accessible summary at [Daily Nous](#).

¹⁵See, e.g., Citizens Information, 'Leaving Certificate', on Additional Assessment Components; and NCCA/Department of Education materials on Senior Cycle Redevelopment cited earlier in this proposal.

¹⁶[Academic Placement Data and Analysis \(APDA\)](#), a project funded by the American Philosophical Association that tracks outcomes for philosophy PhD graduates.

philosophers of science, philosophers of language, and philosophers of logic & computer science could all take on additional subjects. A Leaving Certificate subject would not need to invent a teaching workforce from nothing; there is an existing, underused workforce already.

Addressing FAQs

- **Will there be enough teachers?** Yes. See Teacher Availability, above: existing teachers can cross-train via a CPD conversion course, as already happened for Politics & Society, and Ireland has a substantial pool of trained philosophy PhD graduates without permanent academic posts.
- **Will enough students choose it?** This proposal does not require Philosophy to become a large subject. A modest, sustained uptake—comparable to Politics & Society’s roughly 3,000 candidates in 2025—would already represent success.
- **Is it too abstract or academic for Senior Cycle?** The syllabus is built around concrete, accessible questions (can machines think? what is real? which arguments are sound?) rather than purely historical or textual study, and the 40% AAC rewards applied reasoning and discussion, not only written exposition.
- **Would it add pressure or cost to schools?** As mentioned above, no laboratories, specialist equipment, or capital investment is required, and the Transition Year pilot phase needs no full NCCA sign-off before a school opts in.
- **How would it be assessed?** As above: a terminal exam paper plus a 40% AAC, externally assessed by the State Examinations Commission, in line with the NCCA’s current standard for new and redeveloped Senior Cycle subjects.

Realistic Path

- **Phase 1** — one or more schools pilot a Transition Year Philosophy module using a shared curriculum framework. TY modules do not require full NCCA sign-off, so this can start almost immediately, alongside the petition and survey work described below.
- **Phase 2** — formal submission to the NCCA as part of the ongoing Senior Cycle Redevelopment consultation, using the TY pilot, the Junior Cycle short course, and the petitions and surveys as evidence of feasibility and demand.
- **Phase 3** — institution of a Leaving Certificate subject, following the precedent set by Politics & Society.

Immediate Next Steps

- Identify 3–5 schools willing to pilot a Transition Year Philosophy module.
- Gather survey evidence from students, parents, teachers, graduates and employers.
- Build a sample Transition Year module and teacher support pack.
- Secure endorsements from university philosophy departments and relevant education bodies and organisations.
- Submit a formal proposal to the NCCA as part of the Senior Cycle Redevelopment process.

What This Proposal Asks For

Each of the steps above depends on support from specific groups. Concretely, this proposal asks:

- **From schools:** one Transition Year coordinator or principal willing to pilot a module using a shared framework.
- **From teachers and their unions (ASTI, TUI):** a statement of interest in principle, and teachers willing to help shape a CPD conversion pathway.
- **From societies, organisations, and university departments:** formal endorsement and expert input on the syllabus.
- **From the public:** signatures on the accompanying petition, addressed to the Minister for Education and the NCCA; for those who have the time, participation in a survey to determine the viability and demand for the addition of this subject.

None of this requires Philosophy to become a particularly large subject. It requires only that the students who would choose it have the option; the same option students in many other countries already have.

About the Author

Robert Finan completed a First Class Honours degree in Philosophy at Trinity College Dublin in 2026, having started his degree in Mathematics and Philosophy before moving to the Single Honours Philosophy track. He holds an offer to pursue an MLitt in Philosophy at the University of St Andrews, and has published and presented research in the philosophy of logic, language and mathematics. This proposal forms part of a wider research and advocacy project examining the demand, feasibility and educational value of Philosophy at Senior Cycle level in Ireland, including the primary survey research described above. Contact: robertmfinan7@gmail.com • robertfinan.com

Appendix: Petition Text

Title: Add Philosophy to the Leaving Certificate

Target: Minister for Education; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

Ireland is currently redeveloping the Senior Cycle curriculum, and has already added new subjects such as Drama and Climate Action. We are asking that Philosophy be considered as part of this process.

Philosophy teaches skills that matter regardless of what a student goes on to do: how to build a sound argument, how to spot a bad one, and how to think clearly about ethical questions. Ireland already runs a Junior Cycle Philosophy short course, and has a strong recent precedent for introducing a genuinely new subject in Politics & Society, proving that this is achievable, not just aspirational.

We are asking the Minister for Education and the NCCA to formally examine the case for a Leaving Certificate Philosophy subject, starting with support for schools willing to pilot a Transition Year module.

If you agree that Irish students deserve this option, please sign and share.

<https://www.change.org/LeavingCertPhilosophy>