CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	100 Years of the Leaving Certificate in Ireland
Authors	Hyland, Áine
Publication date	2024;2024
Original Citation	Hyland, Á. (2024) '100 Years of the Leaving Certificate in Ireland', Leader, Winter 2024, pp. 1-7.
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Rights	© 2024, the Author. Published by the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals.
Download date	2026-11-16 16:14:26
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/17153



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

100 Years of the Leaving Certificate in Ireland

(Áine Hyland's article for the Winter edition 2024 of NAPD's journal ***Leader*****)**

In 1922, the new Free State inherited an educational system which was un-coordinated and fractured, with three different Boards responsible for the three separate sectors of education - primary (national) education; intermediate (secondary education) and technical education. In 1924, the three sectors were brought together with one Minister and a single Department of Education (Minister and Secretaries' Act, 1924).

The Intermediate Board, 1878-1924:

The Intermediate Board was set up in 1878 and from then until 1924, the Board's examination system dominated teaching and learning in Irish secondary schools. Under a system of payment by results, there was a strong incentive for secondary schools to adopt the Board's examination syllabi. Throughout this period, there were three levels of examination – Junior Grade, Middle Grade and Senior Grade, with a wide range of subjects, and the syllabi for these subjects were prescriptive and content-based.

Introduction of the Leaving Cert in 1924:

Following Independence in 1922, payment by results was abolished and new Intermediate and Leaving Certificate programmes and examinations were introduced in 1924. The Leaving Certificate was examined for the first time in 1926. It had no prescribed texts, and open courses were introduced in language and literature subjects. Unlike junior cycle, where students were required to study (a) Irish or English, (2) Mathematics, (3) a second language and (4) either History and Geography, or Science or Latin or Greek, Leaving Cert students were free to select any five subjects, at least one of which had to be either English or Irish. In 1934, Irish became a compulsory subject for the Leaving Certificate and this requirement remained in force until 1973 when compulsory Irish was removed by Minister for Education, Richard Burke as a condition for the award of the Leaving Certificate.

Changes in the Leaving Certificate in 1942

In 1942, following pressure from teachers, supported by the then Taoiseach Eamon de Valera, open courses were dropped and set texts were re-introduced. As had been the case since 1878, no overarching philosophy or framework for Leaving Cert was provided in the annual *Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools.* But not all subjects were of equal value and this was significant for scholarships and for selection for teacher training and civil service posts, all of which used the Leaving Certificate raw scores to draw up an order of merit list. Higher Irish, English and Mathematics were worth 600 marks (Elementary Maths was worth only 300 marks); Latin, Greek, History, Geography as well as Domestic Science were worth 400 marks; French, German, Italian and Spanish as well as Science, Commerce and Music were worth 300, and Drawing was worth only 200 marks. Almost all subjects

were examined at either Pass or Honours level; the standard for passing a subject was 40% on the Pass paper or 30% on the Honours paper, and for an Honours grade, 50% was required. The inspectorate in the Secondary Branch of the Department of Education was responsible for setting the syllabi, and for setting and marking the examination papers. From 1926 until 1969, Leaving Certificate papers were marked on an individual mark basis and results were issued in the form of percentages. The certificate which they were awarded indicated whether candidates got a Pass or Honours in each subject.

The Report of the Council of Education on the Curriculum of the Secondary School 1962

A Council of Education was set up by Minister for Education Richard Mulcahy in April 1950. Its report on the secondary school curriculum, published in 1962, 'approved generally of the existing regulations which provide the framework for the junior and senior cycle curricula', stating that the 'ultimate purpose of secondary schools in Ireland is to prepare their pupils to be God-fearing and responsible citizens'. It affirmed that 'liberal or general education (i.e. an all-round formation of the faculties) is the immediate object of the secondary school'. The Council considered that 'a well-balanced course of general education is one having humanist and other subjects as its basic core, the balance being in favour of the humanist group'. The report saw no need to reform the curriculum at either junior or senior cycle. At a time when free second level education had become the norm in other European countries, the report dismissed the suggestion that such a reform should be implemented in Ireland, describing free secondary education for all as 'utopian'.

The Investment in Education Report 1965

Within a very short period, however, the findings of the report of the Council of Education were challenged by the *Investment in Education* report. The report, published in 1965, highlighted the limited nature of the curriculum of Irish secondary schools. It pointed out the relatively low number of students (especially girls) taking science subjects and the low number of boys taking modern languages. In the context of a country which was hoping to develop its international industrial and business focus, the findings of the *Investment in Education* report indicated that curriculum reform would have to be a priority.

The report highlighted the fact that there were only about 12,000 students taking the Leaving Cert., i.e. less than 20% of the relevant age cohort. A pass Leaving Certificate was accepted by the NUI as satisfying university entrance requirements but only about 5% of the relevant age-group entered university. At this stage there were 25 subjects available for the Leaving Cert. Almost all were examined solely by a written examination at the end of senior cycle, apart from an oral Irish examination which had been introduced in 1960 and a practical examination in a small number of subjects such as Music and Art.

From 1969 to 1991, Leaving Certificate results were issued in the form of grades (on a seven-point scale):

Grade Descriptor	Percentage Marks achieved
A	85 - 100
B	70 < 85
C	55 < 70
D	40 < 55
E	25 < 40
F	10 < 25
NG	< 10

Curriculum and Examinations Board 1984-1986

Free second level education had been introduced in 1967 and the numbers sitting the Leaving Cert had risen from fewer than 10,000 in the early 1960s to almost 40,000 in 1980. Although the composition of senior cycle students was more diverse than before, the senior cycle curriculum which was now being provided in vocational, community and comprehensive schools as well as in (voluntary) secondary schools, had not changed significantly. While a Transition Year option had been introduced in 1973 - a one-year non-exam focused programme at the beginning of senior cycle – it was provided on a pilot basis in only a small number of schools.

In January 1984, the Curriculum and Examinations Board (CEB) was established by the Minister for Education, Gemma Hussey. *Inter alia,* the board was asked to "consider how the Leaving Certificate could be broadened in scope and in the range of skills and qualities measured, or whether it should be replaced by an alternative assessment system". Its remit also included "formulating proposals for alternative senior-cycle programmes, including programmes geared to preparation for work and those incorporating work experience and/or work simulation". The Board was also asked to consider appropriate forms of assessment and certification relating to each course.

During the consultative process and its subsequent deliberations, the CEB considered a number of options at senior cycle. One option was a general Leaving Certificate at the end of the second year of senior cycle with a Higher Leaving Cert at the end of third year for students considering university education. Another option was a number of different specialised senior cycle pathways with different assessments and different qualifications. In its report *Senior Cycle: Development and Direction* issued in 1986, the board made no specific recommendations, concluding only that "the Leaving Certificate programme will continue to cater for the majority of senior cycle students …. and should therefore be adapted to cater for the increasingly diverse needs of students entering senior cycle".

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment - *Transition Year, LCVP and LCA*

In 1986, the coalition government of Fine Gael and Labour fell and Fianna Fáil came into power the following year. The Curriculum and Examinations Board was disbanded and was replaced by a new board – the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), which was eventually given statutory status in 2001. Unlike the proposed statutory CEB, the

NCCA did not have responsibility for examinations. While the NCCA was to advise the Minister on curriculum and assessment at all levels, including senior cycle, it had no role in setting or marking the Leaving Cert examinations. This continued to be the role of the secondary inspectorate until 2003 when the State Examinations Commission was established. The separation of responsibility for curriculum and for the implementation of assessment was an unfortunate decision, which has implications for the Leaving Certificate and for senior cycle students and teachers to the present day.

Following the publication in the early 1990s of the Culliton report on Enterprise and Employment, which raised concerns about a qualified workforce for enterprise and industry, the spotlight was once again on the senior cycle programme. Some employers favoured the introduction of two distinct senior-cycle tracks (i.e. academic v. technical) as existed in some EU countries (e.g. Germany). However, the Irish government did not adopt this approach but instead introduced the option of a vocational focus by adding two link modules to the established Leaving Cert programme. This option, designed to help students develop business and enterprise skills as well as interpersonal vocational and technical skills was called the Leaving Cert. Vocational Programme (LCVP). Today, about 30% of students choose this programme. A further option, the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) was introduced in 1995 for students who might be at risk of early school leaving. It offers a combination of general courses and vocational preparation courses, and the structure is cross-curricular rather than subject-based. LCA is provided on a modular basis and assessment includes practical tasks as well as written examinations. Fewer than 10% of senior cycle students take the LCA. The majority of senior cycle students (more than 60%) continued to take the (established) Leaving Certificate programme.

In 1992 a more refined 14-point grading scheme was introduced to the Leaving Certificate and this remained in place until 2017:

Grade Descriptor	**Percentage Marks achieved**
A1	90 - 100
A2	85 < 90
B1	80 < 85
B2	75 < 80
B3	70 < 75
C1	65 < 70
C2	60 < 65
C3	55 < 60
D1	50 < 55
D2	45 < 50
D3	40 < 45
E	25 < 40
F	10 < 30
NG	0 < 10

Curriculum and Examination Reform 2000-2009

The State Examinations Commission, set up as an agency of the Department of Education by statutory order, assumed responsibility for the operation of the State Certificate Examinations from the Department of Education from 2003 onwards. The following year, an ambitious set of proposals for senior cycle reform was issued by the NCCA. The proposals envisaged the abolition of the LCVP, the merging of Transition Year and the Leaving Cert and the restructuring of the curriculum to include transition units and short courses and the unitisation of subjects to allow for a range of assessments over the two or three years of the senior cycle. It also raised the possibility of developing new subjects such as social and political education, drama and sports studies. It recommended that the Leaving Cert should have a greater emphasis on key skills. In 2005, the main NCCA proposals were rejected by the then Minister for Education Mary Hanafin who described them as a 'Rolls-Royce' model of change.

However, some aspects of the NCCA proposals went ahead. In 2007 *A Key Skills Framework for Senior Cycle* was published and shortly afterwards new courses in Politics and Society and Design and Communications Graphics were introduced. Some existing subject syllabi were revised and additional assessment components, worth 20% of the overall marks, were added to some subjects, including History and Geography. Proposals for revised syllabi for Leaving Certificate Physics, Chemistry and Biology proved controversial with science teachers. The draft syllabi which were provided in the were perceived as vague and lacking in detail with inadequate information about assessment. Questions were raised about the model of curriculum reform and implementation which was adopted by the NCCA which placed greater emphasis on skills development and less emphasis than previously on knowledge. While the approach aimed to increase "teacher agency" by providing greater flexibility within each syllabus, it failed to address the implications of such flexibility for a public national examination such as the Leaving Cert. which was externally set and marked.

Although the NCCA did not proceed with the revision of Leaving Cert. science subjects at that time, other developments occurred at senior cycle, including the addition of some new subjects. By the early 2020s, more than 40 Leaving Cert subjects were examined by the SEC, including Religious Education, Politics and Society, Sports Studies and Computer Studies. A number of additional languages were also examined, including Portuguese, Lithuanian, Polish and (Mandarin) Chinese. Additional assessment components were incorporated in many subjects. It is notable that currently only 14 of the 43 Leaving Certificate subjects are examined entirely by an end-of-year examination. In most subjects the proportion of Leaving Cert marks allocated to an additional assessment component is 20%, apart from Irish where the proportion of marks for the oral examination is 40%.

In 2017 a less detailed grading scheme (this time on an 8-point scale) was introduced – a grading system that is still in place:

Grade Descriptor	**Percentage marks awarded**
H1 / O1	90 - 100
H2 / O2	80 < 90

H3 / O3	70 < 80
H4 / O4	60 < 70
H5 / O5	50 < 60
H6 / O6	40 < 50
H7 / O7	30 < 40
H8 / O8	0 < 30

New Proposals for Senior Cycle Reform 2022

In March 2022, Minister Norma Foley announced a "reimagined senior cycle" in a document entitled *Equity and Excellence for All: where the student is at the centre of their Senior Cycle experience*. Under these proposals the barriers between the Established Leaving Cert, the Leaving Cert Applied (LCA) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) would be removed. All schools would in future be required to offer Transition Year. From 2024 onwards two new Leaving Cert subjects, *Drama, Film and Theatre Studies* and *Climate Action and Sustainable Development* as well as revised curricula in *Biology, Chemistry, Physics, and Business,* would be introduced in "network schools" and would be rolled out to all schools later. New and revised subjects would have 60% of the total marks awarded for the written examination paper with the balance awarded to another assessment component. And the Minister proposed that from September 2023, candidates would take Paper 1 in Leaving Certificate Irish and English at the end of 5th Year instead of at the end of 6th year. This latter proposal was dropped within a short time, as without detailed syllabus reform, such a proposal could not be implemented.

An article by this author, *A Re-Imagined Senior Cycle,* in the autumn 2022 edition of Leader responded to the proposals put forward by the Minister for senior cycle reform and a subsequent article *Assessment and Equity for Excellence?* in the Autumn 2024 edition of Leader addressed the issue of increasing the proportion of Leaving Certificate marks for an additional assessment component to 40%. At the time of writing this article, apart from the proposal to require students to sit Paper 1 in Irish and English at the end of Fifth Year, the other proposals are proceeding in spite of the concerns of many teachers, students and academics. It is too early to say what consequences these reforms will have for senior cycle.

The Leaving Certificate and University Entrance

Much of the criticism of the Leaving Certificate in recent decades has focused on the backwash effect which university entrance requirements have on teaching and learning in senior cycle. While the Leaving Certificate has been used for almost a century to determine whether students meet the entry requirements for universities, an alternative matriculation examination and other selection processes were used by the National University of Ireland and by Trinity College Dublin until the 1970s.

Following the introduction of free second level education in the late 1960s, the numbers applying for university places grew rapidly and in the early 1970s the then five universities came together to set up a Central Applications Office (CAO) to deal with the increasing applications. Initially the CAO applied different selection criteria for the different

universities but as more higher education institutions joined the CAO, entry requirements were streamlined and formalised.

The history of the setting up of the CAO, and its development are in many ways inextricably linked with the Leaving Certificate, especially from a student and parent point of view. Space does not allow this article to discuss and unravel the complexities of the CAO system and its inter-relationship with the Leaving Certificate. That will be an article for another day!

THE END