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A Re-Imagined Senior Cycle

A response to Equity and Excellence for All

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In March 2022, Minister Norma Foley announced a “reimagined Senior Cycle” in response to repeated calls for reform of the Leaving Cert. The stated tenets of the proposed reform, as set out in the document entitled *Equity and Excellence for All: where the student is at the centre of their Senior Cycle experience* are to:

- empower students to meet the challenges of the 21st century
- enrich the student experience and build on what’s strong in our current system
- embed wellbeing and reduce student stress levels

The barriers between the Established Leaving Cert, the Leaving Cert Applied (LCA) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) will be removed and students who take the LCA programme will have the opportunity to take the established Leaving Cert Maths and/or a Modern Language. The link modules for the LCVP can in future be taken with any combination of subjects. All schools will be required to offer Transition Year. From 2024 onwards two

new Leaving Cert subjects, *Drama, Film & Theatre Studies* and *Climate Action & Sustainable Development* as well as revised curricula in *Biology, Chemistry, Physics, and Business*, will be introduced in “network schools”.

The new subjects and revised syllabi for other subjects will be rolled out to all schools later. According to the Minister, the decision to introduce new and revised subjects initially with network schools will provide “a real-time opportunity to learn from experience” especially in relation to assessment.

New and revised subjects will have 60% of the total marks awarded for the written examination paper with the balance awarded to another assessment component. From September 2023, candidates will take Paper 1 in Leaving Certificate Irish and English at the end of 5th year, instead of at the end of 6th year.

When launching the plan, the Minister emphasised that these reforms were driven in particular by student concerns

about the stress caused by the Leaving Cert exams. While they took account of the recommendations of the NCCA Advisory Report on Senior Cycle reform of May 2021, they went beyond those recommendations. For example, the 60%/40% split between the final written papers and the other assessment components had not been included in the NCCA recommendations, nor had the proposal that students would take Paper 1 in Irish and English at the end of 5th year.

RESPONSES TO EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE FOR ALL:

Major concerns were voiced by teachers of English and Irish about the proposal to schedule Paper 1 in English and Irish at the end of 5th year. Through their subject organisations, the *Irish National Organisation for Teachers of English (INOTE)* and *An Gréasán do Mhúinteoirí Gaeilge*, they asked for information on the underlying research leading to this proposal. INOTE stated that moving the exam to the end of fifth year “indicates a fundamental lack of understanding of the English curriculum and of why we study English”. They said that with the movement of Paper 1 in English it seemed the “educational value of the exam has been dismissed and replaced with the need to ease pressure for those looking for CAO points”. *An Gréasán*, in a letter to the Minister dated 5 May made a similar point. Ten other Irish language organisations, in a letter to the Minister on 11 July 2022, stated that the proposal to assess some of the skills (of the Irish syllabus) at the end of 5th year is at variance with good practice relating

According to the Minister, the decision to introduce new and revised subjects initially with network schools will provide “a real-time opportunity to learn from experience” especially in relation to assessment.

Shortly after the NCCA Advisory Report was submitted to the Minister in May 2021, it was considered by the Chief Inspector and senior officials in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Support unit (CAPSU) of the Department.

to integration in language teaching. They expressed the view that if the proposal is implemented, a fundamental review will need to be carried out on the subject matter to be examined in Paper One and on the content to be covered in the syllabus. They also sought clarification on the 40% of marks for an assessment component other than a final examination, pointing out that 40% of marks in Irish are already allocated for an oral examination.

WHAT LED TO THE ADOPTION OF THESE PROPOSALS?

An analysis of extensive documentation released by the Department in response to a Freedom of Information request from Conradh na Gaeilge in June 2022, provides evidence that the concerns expressed by INOTE and An Gréasán had been raised by the State Examinations Commissions some months before the Minister made her announcement.

Shortly after the NCCA Advisory Report was submitted to the Minister in May 2021, it was considered by the Chief Inspector and senior officials in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Support Unit (CAPSU) of the Department. They were anxious to find ways of introducing some early assessment changes – which might include some Leaving Cert exams at Christmas of Year 6.

During the following months, the issue of splitting the Leaving Cert exams was discussed at length at meetings in the Department. Senior officials from the State Examinations Commission (SEC) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) were asked for their views on decoupling Paper 1 and Paper 2 in Leaving Cert English, Irish and Maths. The SEC advised against any such decoupling. They indicated that such a move would not be appropriate since the Leaving Cert syllabus in all three subjects was an integrated one.

They pointed out that if such a move was being considered, each of the three subjects would require careful examination and consideration would have to be given to how any such change would impact on students and teachers and it would certainly require a review of the subject syllabus/specification. They also pointed out that bringing forward Paper 1 to an earlier date would impact negatively on boys given their relative level of maturity. But in spite of the SEC's reservations, the proposal to bring forward the timing of Paper 1 in Irish and English was pursued and by December the decision had effectively been taken to move Paper 1 and 2 in Irish and English to the end of 5th year.

It is not clear from the documentation released under FoI why the advice of the SEC was not taken and who decided that Paper 1 would be taken at the end of Year 5. We know from a

talk given in November 2021 at a JMB conference that Dalton Tattan, Assistant Secretary in the Department with responsibility for CAPSU had reservations about any such proposal. Both he and Andrea Feeney, CEO of the SEC cautioned against precipitate changes in the timing and assessment of the Leaving Cert. Feeney pointed out that out of 41 Leaving Certificate subjects, only 14 are examined entirely via an end-of-year exam.

Tattan cautioned on calls for more continuous assessment and warned that a lot of assessment, happening on a regular basis, could turn out to be just as stressful for pupils and might not suit all students. He warned that continuous assessment could lead to the fragmentation of learning, that a student assessed on a component at the end of fifth year could think "finished with that now, I don't need to know that ever again. I can close the book". Referring to the international picture, Feeney said she wasn't sure if other jurisdictions, which had opted for more continuous assessment, had gotten things right. And on "the vexed issue of College entry and the points race", she warned against swapping one set of problems with another; replacing the current system with one that placed pressure on students throughout fifth year too.

SIMILARITIES WITH RECENT SENIOR CYCLE REFORM IN OTHER EU COUNTRIES, E.G. FRANCE

The document *Equity and Excellence for All* states that in future, each Leaving Cert subject will have externally moderated teacher-based assessment and that the NCCA and the SEC will research and explore how teacher-based assessment will be constructed. An analysis of curriculum and assessment in other countries shows that there are some resemblances between these proposals and, for example, the reforms introduced recently in France.

In the new French Baccalaureate (Bac), examined for the first time this year (2022), the emphasis on final examinations, which had accounted for 100% of the marks in the past, has been reduced and assessment now consists of 60% for final examinations and 40% for ongoing assessments. At the end of the penultimate year (Première) students take a French language and literature exam in June, as the first part of the Bac. They are tested on their written skills and on an oral presentation of a text. At the end of the final year (Terminale) students take three written exams (in their chosen subjects) and one oral exam ("Grand Oral") about a personal project linked to a speciality subject.

Other EU countries also require students to sit a combination of school-based and final written examinations in order to qualify for their final school certificate. In some countries e.g. France, Italy, Spain and Austria an oral examination is also mandatory. The distribution of marks between school-based and final examination varies from country to country and while most countries set at least part of the final examination centrally, the mechanism for marking exam scripts also varies. In some jurisdictions, all marking is carried out externally (i.e. not by the students' own teachers) and in others, some elements of marking are carried out by the students' own teachers with external moderation.

However, in some English-speaking jurisdictions and in the International Baccalaureate, the balance has gone the other way. A number of examining boards in the UK have recently reduced the proportion of marks allocated to ongoing assessment and increased the proportion of marks for the final examination. One of the most widely respected exam boards in England, the OCR, now allocates only 20% of the marks in A level English to a non-exam component and in the case of the three Science subjects – Biology, Chemistry and Physics – the total marks are now allocated to final exams and the practical component is reported separately.

There is concern that it is becoming increasingly difficult to ensure that work produced by students outside the confines of an examination hall is their own unaided work. Students may have benefited from additional support from parents or tutors, not to mention from the internet or other sources. There is evidence that students from socially and economically advantaged families benefit more from such support than students from less advantaged backgrounds. Similarly, decoupling the Leaving Cert from third level selection systems and re-introducing a Matriculation-type exam (in addition to the Leaving Cert) would add an additional barrier to students from less advantaged backgrounds.

Referring to the issue of the points race, Andrea Feeney rightly warned against swapping one set of problems with another. Twenty years ago, the *Report of the Commission on the Points System* examined a wide variety of approaches used internationally for higher education selection. The report concluded that despite its shortcomings, the so-called "Points System" in Ireland was trusted by the general public and suggested that it was the least worst option available for higher education selection at that time. It warned against adopting approaches such as interviews, personal statements or SAT-type tests which were likely to put candidates from disadvantaged backgrounds at a further disadvantage and would widen the gap between them and their more advantaged peers.

REFORM OF LEAVING CERT SUBJECT SYLLABI WILL BE GRADUAL

A gradual approach will be taken to revising the syllabi of the various subjects in the reformed Leaving Cert in Ireland. In the first instance network schools will be invited to trial the new syllabi. Network schools will self-nominate; they will be spread out by type, size etc., representative of the different types and sizes of second level schools. The gradual roll-out of Project Maths more than a decade ago has been mentioned as a precedent. However, it should not be forgotten that the trialling of the Project Maths programme posed significant logistic challenges, challenges that would increase exponentially if a number of new Leaving Cert syllabi were being trialled simultaneously.

The earliest date by which the new subjects and the revised syllabi in the network schools will be examined is likely to be summer 2028. If the trials are successful and no unexpected glitches arise, this suggests that it will be at least the early 2030s before a totally revised Leaving Cert programme is rolled out and examined countrywide.

An extensive programme will be put in place to implement the changes. A Senior Cycle Reform Programme Delivery Board with an independent chairperson will be established to oversee and drive the changes.

WHO WILL DESIGN THE NEW SYLLABI?

Minister Foley has emphasised that the student voice will in future have to be heard when the curriculum is being reformed. She has already included a secondary school student representative on the board of the NCCA and has gone farther than anyone expected by announcing that the new programme will be "co-created by students and teachers". This is an unusual innovation – while the student voice may be important, it is difficult to see how secondary school students who have no expertise in curriculum development and who have only begun to encounter learning at Leaving Cert level would be in a position to play a meaningful role in co-creating the curriculum.

An extensive programme will be put in place to implement the changes. A Senior Cycle Reform Programme Delivery Board with an independent chairperson will be established to oversee and drive the changes. A dedicated implementation group including the Inspectorate, the NCCA, the SEC and the teacher support services will be set up to implement the actions and the changes will be supported by resources. It is not yet clear whether the current NCCA Subject Advisory Groups will have a role in developing the revised specifications, although it appears that they expect to reconvene this autumn. Since syllabus development requires an input from subject as well as pedagogical specialists, it is important that both subject and pedagogical expertise are included on whatever group or groups are tasked with developing the new syllabi.

DESIGNING THE LEAVING CERT SYLLABI

In the document *Equity and Excellence for All* it is stated that in the future "particular attention will be paid to the design of the curriculum documents". Hopefully, this statement means that a more appropriate design template for new syllabi and their assessment will be adopted than the template currently used by the NCCA. The current template is a skeletal one – consisting of an overarching curriculum framework, with individual subject syllabi described solely in terms of Themes and Learning Outcomes. The current template provides no detail about the depth of treatment required for each topic or theme nor does it provide pedagogical guidelines or provide assessment criteria / performance indicators.

While Learning Outcomes are helpful when designing curricula, they have their limitations. They are usually written at minimum / threshold (i.e. pass/fail) standard. As stand-alone statements, they do not provide information on the depth of treatment required for a subject, content knowledge is usually sparse and they provide no guidance as to how student learning can be graded (in the Leaving Certificate from the highest grade H1 to the lowest grade O7). In the case of subjects which are offered at two levels – higher and ordinary

– learning outcomes alone do not provide an adequate distinction about what students are expected to achieve at each of the two levels. Unless they are rigorously written and are accompanied by additional information on content and depth of treatment etc., learning outcomes alone can result in a dumbed down and superficial curriculum, lacking in depth – what Andreas Schleicher of the OECD described as “a mile-wide-and-an-inch-deep-curriculum”.

The revised Junior Cycle specifications (designed using the standard NCCA template) were introduced gradually during the past decade and were examined for the first time this year (2022). While initially these new syllabi were cautiously welcomed by teachers and stakeholders, their vague and imprecise nature and the lack of clear assessment criteria, grade descriptors or performance indicators resulted in confusion and frustration among students and teachers. From a teacher's perspective, trying to interpret the specifications was like trying to assemble IKEA flatpack furniture without the assembly instructions.

While teachers were promised support and guidelines, through continuing professional development to be provided by the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), the overwhelming view of teachers was that the CPD courses provided were inadequate, particularly as regards assessment.

Sample papers were made available only months before the final examination and initial feedback from teachers based on the Junior Cycle examination papers in June 2022 suggests that in some subjects the exam papers bore only a limited resemblance to the sample paper. It would also appear that in some subjects the exam questions did not align with the learning outcomes, leaving students and teachers frustrated and angry.

The NCCA is currently undertaking a review of the new Junior Cycle curriculum. In addition, the ASTI and a number of subject associations have surveyed their members about the Junior Cycle curriculum and its assessment. Preliminary results suggest that there is a lot of unease among the teaching profession about aspects of the new Junior Cycle and teachers generally believe that no change should be introduced in the Leaving Cert until a full review of the new Junior Cycle is completed and published.

In a well-designed syllabus there should be clear and constructive alignment between learning outcomes, subject content, pedagogy and assessment. To achieve this, the syllabus should be planned in an integrated way taking account of, and making transparent, all these elements from

the very start. Failure to align these elements, especially in a high-stakes programme like the Leaving Cert which is nationally examined is destined to lead to confusion and frustration among students and teachers.

The NCCA has argued that learning outcomes are widely used internationally in curriculum and programme design. While it is true that learning outcomes are increasingly included as an element in the design of curriculum in other jurisdictions, this author is not aware of any other jurisdiction in which only themes and learning outcomes are used to describe a curriculum which is externally assessed and certified. Having examined the Senior Cycle curriculum in twelve different jurisdictions as well as the Diploma curriculum of the International Baccalaureate no such examples were found. In every jurisdiction where students are assessed by a national examination at the end of Senior Cycle, details on course content, depth of treatment and pedagogical approaches, as well as on performance indicators and assessment are provided for teachers.

In its report on Leaving Certificate Reform entitled *Learning for Life*, in May 2022, the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education and Science in Ireland recommended that modularisation should be introduced for all Leaving Cert subjects. It also recommended that the revised syllabus for each subject should be much more detailed, stating:

As part of Senior Cycle reform, a key priority for the Department of Education must be that the revised syllabus for each subject is far more detailed, with comprehensive instructions for teachers. The Committee recommends that the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) reviews the proposed design of the new specifications to ensure teachers are properly supported and students are taught to the highest professional standards.

This author fully concurs with this recommendation.

CONCLUSION

The proposals of the Minister for Education, Norma Foley, on the reform of Senior Cycle were long-awaited. The Advisory Report of the NCCA on Senior Cycle reform, which was the result of extensive consultation undertaken over a number of years, had been submitted to the Minister in May 2021. Calls for reform had been growing for over a decade and these were strengthened by the fact that during Covid restrictions in 2020 and 2021 an alternative had to be found to the written Leaving Cert exams at the end of sixth year.

Many students felt that the calculated grades system that operated in 2020 and which was an option in 2021, was preferable to the traditional terminal examination. The student voice carried more influence than ever before and the title of the Minister's decision paper *Equity and Excellence: where the student is at the centre of their Senior Cycle experience*, reflects this.

Some of the more significant proposals of *Equity and Excellence* were not based on the Advisory Report of the NCCA. The proposal to schedule Paper 1 in Irish and English for the class

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No reference was made in *Equity and Excellence* to the fact that fewer than one-third of Leaving Cert subjects are currently examined entirely by end of final year exam, nor was any indication given as to how existing assessment components (e.g. Oral Irish which is currently weighted at 40% of the total Irish mark) would fare in the reimagined Leaving Cert.

of 2023 onwards at the end of fifth year (with no change in the specifications for either subject) was met with dismay by teachers of those subjects. Their subject associations, INOTE and An Gréasán, wrote to the Minister pointing out that the proposal was at variance with good practice relating to integration of language and literature in language teaching. Documentation released under Freedom of Information shows that when the suggestion to split the timing of Papers 1 and 2 was first mooted by the Chief Inspector in August 2021 and subsequently discussed at meetings of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Support Unit of the Department of Education, cogent arguments against the proposal were expressed by the State Examinations Commission, including the argument that such a split could significantly disadvantage boys, given their level of maturity. But these concerns were not heeded. Neither was the proposal, that 40% of the marks for every subject will be allocated to an assessment component other than the final examination, based on the NCCA Advisory Report.

No reference was made in *Equity and Excellence* to the fact that fewer than one-third of Leaving Cert subjects are currently examined entirely by end of final year exam, nor was any indication given as to how existing assessment components (e.g. Oral Irish which is currently weighted at 40% of the total Irish mark) would fare in the reimagined Leaving Cert.

What is clear from *Equity and Excellence* is that full-scale

curriculum and assessment reform of all subjects for the full cohort of Leaving Cert students will not happen before 2030. Changes will be introduced gradually. In the short term, some subjects will be trialled by network schools. Based on the learnings from the trials, revised subject specifications and assessment will be rolled out to all schools.

Given the commitment by the Minister that particular attention will be paid to the design of the curriculum document, it is hoped that the skeletal design template currently being used by the NCCA for new and revised subject specifications will be cast aside; that the recommendations of the Oireachtas Committee of Education, Further and Higher Education and Science that revised specifications for each subject will be far more detailed than is currently the case will be accepted; and that the proposed assessment criteria and guidelines will be available at the same time as the consultation process on the new specifications is initiated.

The structures proposed for the implementation of the Senior Cycle reform agenda are complex and multi-layered. A Programme Delivery Board and an Implementation Group will be set up in addition (it is presumed) to the existing Subject Advisory Groups, the Senior Cycle Board and the Council of the NCCA. How these various bodies will interact with each other and ultimately with the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Support Unit (CAPSU) of the Department of Education will be interesting to observe.

As the documentation referred to in the earlier section of this paper shows, CAPSU plays a key role in the ultimate decision made by whatever Minister for Education is in power who, in accordance with legislation, will be the final determinant of the new and reimagined Leaving Cert.

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Plassey shipwreck, Inis Oirr, Galway
Photography by Kay O'Brien