CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Does the Leaving Certificate reward LOT (lower order thinking) rather than HOT (higher order thinking)?
Authors	Hyland, Áine
Publication date	2018;2018
Original Citation	Hyland, Á. (2018) 'Does the Leaving Certificate reward LOT (lower order thinking) rather than HOT (higher order thinking)?', in Baird, J.-A., Isaacs, T., Opposs, D. and Gray, L. (eds) Examination standards - How measures and meanings differ around the world. London: UCL Institute of Education Press, University College London, pp. 178-179.
Type of publication	Book chapter
Rights	© 2018, Jo-Anne Baird, Tina Isaacs, Dennis Opposs and Lena Gray. All rights reserved.
Download date	2026-11-07 03:44:06
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/17390



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Setting Standards in Ireland

(commentary by Áine Hyland on a case study by Hugh McManus, Assistant Head of Examinations at the State Examinations Commission, Ireland)

This is a very welcome and informative paper on setting standards in the public examinations system in Ireland. It describes the approach taken by the State Examinations Commission (SEC) in setting and marking public examinations and recognises both the strengths and weaknesses of the system.

The paper rightly points out that the public examinations system is held in high esteem by the general public in Ireland. The Leaving Certificate (LC) is used by all Irish higher education institutions to select incoming students – and given that Ireland has one of the highest transfer rates of students from second to third level in the OECD – this is a very important vote of confidence in the system.

The paper reflects the open and transparent approach taken by the SEC in recent years, which has been widely welcomed. Candidates can now view their marked examinations scripts following receipt of their LC results. Students also have access *(post hoc)* to the marking schemes used by the examiners. This has resulted in the unintended consequence of an undue focus by students and their teachers on marking schemes and their application. In the final year of secondary education, focus is often more on examination techniques than on scholarly engagement with the subject.

The paper addresses a number of the common criticisms of the Irish public examinations system. These include the inconsistency of standards across different subjects; the issue of grade inflation; and an inadequate emphasis in the LC on rewarding higher order thinking.

The fact that "standard-setting is conducted on a subject-by-subject basis" indicates one of the weaknesses of the system. This can result in an inconsistency of approach by different chief examiners and can exacerbate what may already be an intrinsic difference in the academic levels of students taking different subjects.

The challenge of maintaining consistency in grading standards over time is also addressed. In order to ensure that there is no significant discrepancy between the distribution of grades from one year to the next, adjustments are made to the marking schemes to achieve changes in the distribution of raw marks and grades. Historical reference scripts are generally not used for comparison, and judgments of comparability are implicit and subjective. This prevents

direct year-to-year comparison of standards and makes it impossible for an outsider to identify whether or not "grade inflation" has occurred. Having said that, there is no disputing the evidence that there is a high and consistent correlation between the results of students in the LC and their subsequent results in university examinations. This is a phenomenon that the critics of the LC marking schemes have failed to explain satisfactorily.

The paper recognises that "the most dominant issue of concern in recent public discourse … is the extent to which the examination is testing the right kinds of skills" and acknowledges that "it is frequently asserted that the examinations place too much emphasis on knowledge recall and not enough on higher order thinking skills". The 2014 report by Baird et al[1] on "Predictability in the Irish Leaving Certificate" recommended that consideration should be given to placing more emphasis on higher order thinking skills in the examinations, in keeping with international trends in assessment. In the view of this commentator, this is the most pressing issue which needs to be addressed by the SEC in any reform of the system. While recognising the challenges involved in assessing higher order thinking, the stakes are high. Future populations need to have critical, analytical, problem-solving and creative skills to enable them to engage with and resolve the many challenges facing society – whether political, social, cultural, economic or work-related. An examination system which rewards knowledge recall to the detriment of these higher order skills will no longer serve society adequately, if it ever did.

Áine Hyland, M.Ed., Ph.D., D. Litt.,
Emeritus Professor of Education
University College Cork.

18th Nov. 2017.

[1] J. Baird; T.N. Hopfenbeck; J. Elwood, D. Caro; and A. Ahmed. 2014, "Predictability in the Irish Leaving Certificate" OUCEA report 14/1.