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Leaving Cert reform – opportunities and challenges.

(Address by Professor Áine Hyland to the ASTI Annual Convention 2025 in Killarney. 22nd April 2025)

A Aire, a Uachtaráin Cumann na Meán Mhúinteoiri, a Rúnaí na Roinne Oideachais, a dhaoine uaisle, a chomleacaithe agus a chairde. Is mór an onóir domsa a bheith anseo libh inniu cun labhairt faoi na hathraithe atá beartaithe don Art Teist. Tá an-mheas agam ar ár múinteoirí, agus ar an dea-obair a bhíonn ar siúl acu gach lá. Mar is eol díbhb, bhí mé féin mar mheán múinteoir ins na seachtóidí agus cé go bhfuil alán athraithe tagtha ar an saol ó shoin, tá an t-ádh linn sa tír seo nach bhfuil athrú tagtha ar an ard-mheas atá ag an bpobal ar múinteoirí na hEireann agus ar an gclú agus ar an gcáil atá orthu thart faoin domhain.

Minister, President of the ASTI, General Secretary of the Dept of Education, fellow teachers, colleagues and friends. It is an honour and a privilege for me to be invited to speak at the opening of the 2025 ASTI Annual Convention here in Killarney. As I came into the INEC, I was delighted to meet many of my former teacher education students from my days as a teacher educator in University College Dublin and University College Cork.

The introduction by your President summarized my involvement in education policy and practice since I left school 65 years ago. I am in awe of the commitment and dedication of teachers, not only to their students in the classroom, but also outside the classroom, in debates, sports, school plays, musicals and projects such Sci-Fest and The Young Scientist, Junk Couture and numerous other initiatives. I feel there is inadequate appreciation of the number of teachers who in their own time and with no additional remuneration, attend union meetings, subject association meetings and conferences, meetings of curriculum boards and subject development groups, and contribute to the many consultative processes on various aspects of educational change undertaken on behalf of government. If I have one piece of

advice to Ministers and policy makers as a result of my membership of many of these bodies over the years, it is this: **Listen to the Teachers; Éist leis na múinteoirí.** It is the teachers who are at the chalk face, and who know what will work and what won't work in the school and in the classroom, We can all produce great reports (and I won't mention at this stage how much generative AI such as Chat GPT can help). Written reports are one thing – implementation is another - and when it comes to implementation, the devil is in the detail. And it is teachers who are familiar with the detail.

100 Years of the Leaving Certificate

In my written script I have included an overview of 100 years of the Leaving Certificate. However, in the interest of brevity, I don't intend to go through the history here today. I would just like to point out that the Leaving Cert has been with us for a long time and it is understood and trusted by the people of Ireland. It has been revised and updated from time to time, and will continue to require such revision and updating, but we should be careful not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Our education system, including the Leaving Cert, has served our young people and our country well. This is highlighted in the Programme for Government which recognizes the high quality of our education system and the extent to which our well-educated young people have contributed to Ireland's economic success. We can't afford to lose our reputation as a country which provides a well-educated young workforce. When I left school fewer than 20% of my age group sat the Leaving Cert and only 5% went on to university. Most of my peers in primary school emigrated and were unskilled and marginalized workers in the UK and the US, and sadly, they were often referred to as "the lazy Irish". Thankfully, that description of our young graduates is never heard today.

Now to talk about the Leaving Cert. A quick whistle-stop tour of the history of the Leaving Cert will give a context for the current discussion on Leaving Cert reform.

The Leaving Certificate was introduced in 1924 and examined for the first time in 1926. It succeeded the earlier Senior Grade examination which had been introduced under the 1878 intermediate education act for young middle class students who aspired to go to university. From 1878 to 1924, schools were paid based on the exam results of their students and as a result, examinations came

to dominate the curriculum. Payment by results was abolished under the new state in 1922, but examinations continued (and still continue) to dominate at second level.

When the Leaving Certificate was first introduced 100 years ago, fewer than 10% of the relevant age group completed senior cycle. By 1965, this had increased to about 20% of the relevant age cohort. Second level education was limited to those who could afford to pay fees or who were in receipt of a second level scholarship. It was not a meritocracy. When I was in secondary school in the 1950s, the nun in charge regularly reminded us that we were the "cream of the country – rich and thick!"

At that 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. Today there are over 40 subjects examined by the State Examinations Commission and there will soon be almost 50.

The introduction of free second level education and free transport in 1967 was transformative. Not only would enrolment more than double within a decade but the new Ireland envisaged by government would require an educated and skilled workforce. In a booklet circulated to all families in 1969, the then Minister for Education proposed that senior cycle would consist of a three-year programme. All students would sit the Leaving Certificate examination at the end of the second year and those who wished to progress to university would sit what was referred to as The Advanced Certificate the following year. At the time, it was hoped that the first Advanced examination would take place in 1972 but this did not happen. Instead, a Transition year option was introduced on a pilot basis in 1973. Policy focus during the 1970s was on ensuring that there were enough school buildings and teachers to cope with the growth in second level enrolments.

The numbers sitting the Leaving Cert rose rapidly 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 then being provided in vocational, community and comprehensive schools

as well as in (voluntary) secondary schools, had not changed significantly. Today almost 95% of our students are awarded a Leaving Certificate.

In January 1984, the Curriculum and Examinations Board (CEB) was established by the Minister for Education, Gemma Hussey. In its report *Senior Cycle: Development and Direction* issued in 1986, the board concluded 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 Curriculum and Examinations Board was disbanded in 1989 and was replaced by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Unlike the proposed statutory CEB, the NCCA did not have responsibility for examinations.

During the 1990s, LCVP and LCA were introduced. It was anticipated that the more practically-oriented LCA would attract those who might wish to pursue less academic and more practical courses or perhaps enter the workforce on completion of second level education. However, not all schools offer LCA and not all parents want their children to take this option so the proportion of students (less than 10%) who currently take LCA is lower than initially anticipated. The (established) Leaving Cert (including LCVP) is the choice of the vast majority of students.

In the 1990s, when the LCA and LCVP were introduced, almost all Leaving Cert subjects underwent major review and reform. While necessary updating has taken place from time to time, no major curriculum reform has occurred since then.

In summary, the Leaving Certificate has dominated our second level school system for over 100 years. Assessment is the tail that wags the curriculum dog. As long as externally assessed State examinations exists, the exams will largely determine what is taught in the classroom. Moreover, because teachers in Ireland have never assessed their own students for certification, they see themselves as advocates, not judges, of their students (as became clear when predicted grades were introduced during Covid).

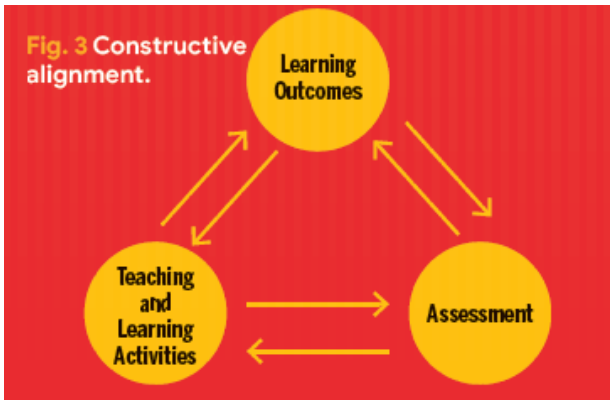
In my overview of curriculum and syllabus reform, I will start at the beginning of this millenium and look briefly at Junior Cycle curriculum after 2000.

The most recent major reform of Senior Cycle and of Leaving Cert syllabi took place in the mid 1990s, when Leaving Cert Applied and LCVP were introduced and most subject syllabi were updated and revised. The emphasis in the subsequent decades was on the reform of the primary curriculum and junior cycle curriculum. A new primary curriculum had been introduced in 1999 and the focus in the early 2000s was on the reform of Junior Cycle – a reform that was initially welcomed. However, inexplicably, the NCCA introduced a new design template (or "technical form of design") for Junior Cycle subjects – a template which was minimal and vague, consisting largely of a statement of Learning Outcomes for each subject. This template was justified on the basis that it reflected "international best practice" but research carried out by this author in 2014, found no evidence that any jurisdiction which had an externally public examination system used such a template. Perhaps the NCCA's decision to use a vague and non-specific design, was a veiled attempt to phase out an externally assessed exam at the end of Junior Cycle and to introduce school-based assessment, but if that was the intention it should have been made explicit and discussed with the education stakeholders. This would not have been the first time that the abolition of externally examinations at the end of junior cycle had been mooted. IN the 1970s the then ICE report recommended that externally assessed examinations at the end of junior cycle should be replaced by school-based assessment. This reform was also implicit in the reports of the Curriculum and Examinations Borad in the 1980s, but successive governments decided to retain externally assessed examinations at the end of junior cycle.

As regards the curriculum design, Learning Outcomes alone are never sufficient to define a curriculum or syllabus. Learning Outcomes should be clearly linked to subject content, to teaching and learning activities as well as to assessment. Assessment details (e.g. sample papers and grading criteria) should be provided at the same time as the syllabus details and the teaching and learning activities. The three elements of curriculum design need to be determined simultaneously, ideally by the same team, This did not happen in the case of Junior Cycle and it was therefore not surprising that teachers in

many subjects were frustrated by the new specifications. The following figure indicates how these three elements should be aligned:

Constructive Alignment in Curriculum Design



It was therefore no surprise to me that a survey carried out on behalf of the ASTI in 2022 stated as follows:

> *"It would be an understatement to say that there is a profound and universal concern among teachers about the capacity of the junior cycle subject specifications to prepare students for senior cycle curriculum … Learning Outcomes remain problematic. They are too broad, too vague and are lacking in guidance to the teacher on what students are expected to be able to do to show that they have achieved each learning outcome".*

And in relation to the revision of Leaving Cert subjects and the introduction of new subjects, the Joint Oireachtas Committee for Education, in two different reports in 2022 and 2023, stated that "*a key priority should be that the revised syllabus for each subject (should be) far more detailed with comprehensive instructions for teachers".* The Committee recommended "*that the NCCA reviews the proposed design of the new specifications to ensure that teachers are properly supported, and students are taught to the highest professional standards".*

Proposals for Senior Cycle Reform in 2004

In 2004, the NCCA submitted an ambitious set of proposals for Senior cycle reform to the then Minister for Education. 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 *P.E.* In 2005, the main NCCA proposals were rejected by the Minister who described them as a 'Rolls-Royce' model of change.

However, some aspects of the NCCA proposals went ahead. During the past twenty years new Leaving Cert. subjects including *Politics and Society: Design* and *Communications Graphics* and *Physical Education* were introduced. These subjects were introduced / piloted on a phased basis. Some existing subject syllabi were revised and additional assessment components, usually worth 20% of the overall marks, were incorporated. Today there are more than 40 Leaving Cert subjects examined by the SEC, including *Religious Education, Politics and Society, Physical Education and Computer Studies* as well as *Portuguese, Lithuanian, Polish and (Mandarin) Chinese.* Only 14 of the 43 Leaving Certificate subjects are currently examined entirely by an end-of-year examination.

Senior Cycle Reform – *Equity and Excellence for All* - March 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 it was proposed that Paper 1 in both Irish and English would be examined at the end of Fifth Year, but without a revision of the subject specifications. 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. 60% of the total marks in all subjects would be awarded for the written examination paper with 40% awarded to another assessment component (AAC). Importantly, it was envisaged that the roll-out of the new and revised syllabi **would be gradual and that the new syllabi would be piloted in network schools.**

Revised Leaving Certificate Proposals, September 2023

However, the Minister rowed back on some aspects of *Equity and Excellence* and revised proposals were issued in September 2023. The proposal for students to sit Paper 1 in English and Irish at the end of Fifth year was dropped. But the pace of change would be accelerated, and **the gradual / piloted introduction of new and revised subjects was removed.** No fewer than 9 new and revised Leaving Cert subjects would be introduced in 2025 and would be examined for the first time in 2027. Each of the new subject specifications would incorporate AACs which would be worth at least 40% of the final mark.

Leaving Cert Subject Specifications, 2024

Draft specifications for the new and revised subjects were circulated by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in December 2023 and feedback was requested by the end of February 2024. The design template was an improvement on the Junior Cycle design, and there was some variation in the approach taken by different Subject Development Groups. The timeframe for finalising the nine draft subject specifications was tight. The NCCA had indicated that the final meeting of the Subject Development Groups would take place in May to enable the subject specifications to be completed and approved by the Minister before the beginning of the 2024/5 school year. For many of us, this meant that our carefully produced responses to the draft specifications were never shared with the Subject Development Groups. In my own case, I spent the best part of a week reading all the draft specifications and I submitted detailed responses to three of them – none of which were shared with the relevant SDGs before the subject specifications were finalised. And when the NCCA produced a brief summary of submissions during the summer of 2024, none of the points that I (and others) had made, particularly about the AACs, were reflected in the summary.

Concern about 40% for AACs

The proposal that in each subject, 40% of marks would be allocated to an Additional Assessment Component (AAC) caused and continues to cause concern among some students, teachers, university representatives and members of the general public. This was particularly the case regarding Biology, Chemistry and Physics, where issues such as health and safety, inadequacy of laboratory facilities, equipment and resources have been highlighted. In this regard I understand that the teacher and university representatives on the

Subject Development Groups for these three subjects dissociated themselves from the recommendations that 40% of marks should be allocated to AACS.

It is notable that the State Examinations Commission itself, following a pilot project in 2017 about introducing practical assessment for Leaving Cert science subjects concluded that

> *It would not be safe to assume that laboratory facilities and equipment in schools are currently of a sufficient standard to support a rollout of this model of practical assessment without further investment, the scale of which has yet to be determined.*

The proposed Investigative projects in Biology, Chemistry and Physics will not now be directly assessed in the lab by external examiners, but an experiment will still have to be carried out by each individual student. They will then be required to write up a detailed report on the experiment and submit it to the SEC. As well as having concerns about the feasibility of 24 students in a class with one science teacher (and no laboratory technician) undertaking individual experiments, I would question whether a written narrative report is a valid way of assessing a practical experiment or investigative project? Moreover, the skills assessed by many of the AACs, especially in the Science subjects, are almost identical, so why require students to demonstrate the same skills in three or four different subject AACs?

Even where an AAC might well be desirable and feasible, as for example in *Drama, Film and Theatre studies,* challenges are likely to arise. The requirement for students and schools to write up and submit projects and/or reports for most if not all of their Leaving Cert subjects in the second term of the final year, around the same time as oral examinations are taking place for languages and music, is likely to cause considerable stress for students and teachers, not to mention for school principals and management who will have to ensure that the resources including computer hardware and software and internet access will be available to enable this gargantuan task to be successfully undertaken. And as more time will be spent on preparing the assessment tasks there will be less time for teaching and learning. And I can't even imagine the logistic challenge this will set for the State Examinations Commission which eventually have to grapple with both exam papers and AACs in almost 50 subjects!

40% of marks for AACs are likely to widen the Gap between those from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds and their more advantaged peers.

While I am not suggesting that the current Leaving Certificate provides a level playing field for all students, the introduction of 40% for AACs will inevitably widen the gap between the educationally disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers. The latter will have access to additional support from outside the classroom – from parents and relatives; from paid tutors; from access to resources and facilities which will not be available for the less advantaged. Regardless of how carefully a student's work outside a supervised examination hall is monitored, students with access to such additional support and resources will be at a considerable advantage when preparing their AAC.

Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI)

This concern is exacerbated by the availability and rapid development of Generative AI tools. Whereas less than two years ago, ChatGPT was almost the only accessible AI tool, we now have Deepseek; Microsoft Co-pilot; and there are built in AI tools in Adobe, What's App and other apps. It is widely accepted that it is virtually impossible to distinguish between text written by Chat GPT and text written by a human. How then can teachers verify or ensure that a student's project work is entirely their own work?

Exam boards in other countries, and higher education institutions in this country have already adjusted their modes of assessment in the light of the availability of Generative AI. Because of the difficulty / impossibility of ensuring that work submitted by a student has not been undertaken either in whole or in part by Generative AI, the marks allocated for essays or projects undertaken outside the supervised examination hall are either reduced or disregarded in final results. Written examinations, supervised in an examination hall have re-appeared as the assessment of choice in many jurisdictions and institutions.

A committee set up by the Irish government to report on the implications of AI has not yet come up with any solutions. The committee (which unfortunately did not include teachers) recently recommended that

Government should facilitate a national conversation between teachers and their unions/representative organisations, parents/guardians and their representative organisations, policymakers, technology companies, students and their representative organisations, and educational technology innovators.

We look forward to this discussion and debate in the near future.

Authentication of Student AACs

In light of the challenges of Generative AI and also given the high-stakes nature of the Leaving Cert, in my view, it is not realistic or fair to ask teachers to authenticate the work of their students. In a recent survey of more than 2,700 teachers carried out on behalf of the ASTI by RedC, almost 90% of those who took part said the new Leaving Cert AACs will create difficulties when it comes to authenticating students' work.

I fail to see why Leaving Cert students cannot be trusted to authenticate their own AACs. This is normal practice in further and higher education. Part of a student's education in senior cycle, including their education on the use of Generative AI, includes (or should include) ethical education – with an emphasis on the unacceptability of plagiarism or cheating in any form.

All Leaving Cert students are over 16 years of age, and many are over 18 years of age i.e. they are adults. A 16-year-old in Ireland is legally permitted to drink wine, beer or cider with a meal in a restaurant; legally have consensual sex; get married with their parents' permission; get a licence to drive a moped; claim social welfare benefits in some circumstances; open a bank account; get a full-time job. Surely if they are allowed to do all these things they should be trusted to authenticate their own AACs. An alternative might be to ask their parents / guardians to authenticate their work.

The importance of close collaboration between the NCCA, OIDE and the SEC

In Ireland, there are three separate bodies with responsibility for the three elements of curriculum design. The NCCA is responsible for finalising the learning outcomes and content of each subject; the SEC is responsible for assessment and OIDE provides upskilling and training for teachers and collaborates in preparing guidelines on teaching and learning activities. While having three separate bodies dealing with curriculum revision is not ideal, constructive alignment could in principle be ensured and confusion prevented if the three bodies work closely together and collaborate closely with teachers **before** any new curriculum is implemented.

It is reassuring that sample examination papers have recently been issued by the SEC and that teachers have an opportunity to comment on these samples. Preliminary guidelines on the AACs have also been issued but given the speed

of development of Generative AI tools, any guidelines will be out-of-date almost as soon as they are written.

What Should be Done

I will conclude by making the following suggestions.

1. The introduction of 40% of marks for AACs for subjects where teachers have identified AACs as problematic, should be postponed. The proposal in March 2022 that the new and revised specifications should be piloted in network schools should be revisited. This does not mean that the updated subject specifications should be delayed – everyone is in agreement that updating of specifications is required. However, AACs in the problematic subjects should be postponed pending the outcome of the piloting.
2. When issuing Leaving Cert student results in subjects which have AACs, the SEC should provide separately the students' results in the written examination and in the AACs. This will provide useful information for employers and for further and higher education institutions in assessing students' suitability for various courses. It will also provide a useful research database on which future decisions can be based. And where there is a major discrepancy between the grade in the written examination and the grade in the AAC, some further analysis might be carried out to ensure that both elements have been written by the same student.
3. Teachers should not be asked to authenticate students' AACs. Student self-authentication should be introduced – and if authentication by a legal adult is deemed necessary, parent/guardian authentication should be considered.