

Education

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Could this be the end of the Leaving Cert as we know it?

Many now believe there will no going back to our high-stakes, exam-obsessed system



Peter McGuire

Teachers will predict the grades of their own students and there will be no Leaving Cert exam – if you'd suggested this at the start of 2020, teachers, parents, students and the Department of Education would have assumed you were sleep-talking through a vivid Leaving Cert dream.

The Covid-19 crisis changed everything. The cancellation of 2020's Leaving Cert exams came in the middle of an ongoing process of senior cycle reform which has seen students, teachers, parents, unions, education officials and policymakers acknowledge that the current system of one big bang terminal exam needs to change. So, could all of this be the final nail in the coffin for the Leaving Cert as we know it?

"The pandemic has shown there is a capacity to be flexible and agile when it comes to policy," says Dr Emer Smyth, research professor at the Economic and Social Research Institute, which worked with teachers and parents across 42 pilot schools to gather views on the Leaving Cert and senior cycle. This process ran alongside research carried out by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) which gathered student views.

"Parents and teachers see positives in the current senior cycle including subject choice and transition year," says Smyth.

"The challenges are well rehearsed: stress, the high-stakes nature of the exam, the lack of follow-through from the junior cycle programme, the neglect of life skills and the emphasis on academics which can squeeze out more authentic forms of teaching and learning that don't cater for special educational needs or less academic students."

In the reform process, the two teacher unions – the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) and the Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI) – have indicated an openness to change but insisted that whatever happens, future exams must remain State-certified and externally assessed, while students must also have anonymity to protect against conscious and unconscious marking bias.

After the long battle over teachers refusing to assess their own junior cycle students – a battle they won – there's no real appetite on the part of education authorities to push back here.

Consensus

The unions have a written guarantee from the Department of Education, backed up by the caretaker Government, that teachers are providing predicted grades on a one-off basis only because of the current pandemic, and that they won't be expected to do so in normal circumstances.

And yet, the general consensus from union officials, teachers and school principals is that calculated grades have gone relatively smoothly.

"It was a response to an unprecedented threat," says Prof Damian Murchan, head of the school of education at Trinity College Dublin.

"The pandemic will concentrate minds on senior cycle reform. We know that there is faith in the transparency and fairness of the system, notwithstanding challenges around rote learning and pressure on students. I think there will be alterations but perhaps nothing too fundamental.

"Open-book exams with longer time limits or modifying exams into assignments have happened at third-level and for school end-of-term exams, but could they happen for State exams? I doubt it: State exams are higher-stakes than teacher-made tests and instituting them online would be difficult."

Ultimately, only a new education minister will have the authority to drive forward and implement permanent changes.

"We were already moving towards a different type of Leaving Cert and the pandemic has shown that the current approach is not sustainable," says one high-

ly placed education source. Another senior figure points out, however, that this year's approach was agreed between students, teachers and parents and a reformed senior cycle should have the same level of engagement and consensus.

In this regard, the pandemic has cemented the centrality of the student voice through their representative body, the Irish Second-Level Students Union.

"The student voice was strong, coherent and expressed in an articulate and considered way," the insider says. "The ISSU was very effectively represented by [president] Ciara Fanning and [student voice development manager] Alison Dervan.

Wide consultation

"Their stance was not merely positional; they properly participated in the deliberative process. And it shows that, whatever reform comes about, the Department of Education has learned from the junior cycle debacle: [reform] won't come after a battle but after wide consultation and consensus. It might move like a glacier, but glaciers never stop moving."

Before senior cycle reform ploughs ahead, incoming sixth years have a more pressing concern: they've missed months of school, so will any allowances be made when – or if – they sit the exam in 2021?

"Every classmate I have talked to has the same worries," says Alice Matyschenko (17), a student at Colaiste Pobal Setanta, Dublin 15. "We're worried about the silence from the Minister for Education when we have missed nearly three months of school, a semester without access to teachers. I'm lucky that our school is advanced in terms of IT, but what about students in rural areas or schools that haven't used IT before? Most teachers have been amazing but we have fallen behind."

An Instagram post from "5th Years

■ A review of the senior cycle is being carried out by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

PHOTOGRAPH: MARK STEDMAN/ROLLINGNEWS.IE

not Forgotten" has received over 16,000 likes while, at time of writing, a petition has nearly 15,000 signatures.

Adam Lambe (17) from Monaghan and Rokana Segiet (17) and Riona Nolan (17) both from Carlow are on SpunOut.ie's youth action panel.

"They all say that fifth years are on edge and want to see provisions put in place to help them.

Lambe says that many think calculated grades may be used next year if the virus resurges. Segiet says that ongoing assessment should be introduced from September and form a key part of a revised senior cycle beyond that. Nolan says that the department needs to engage with schools and listen to them.

Challenges

"The full curriculum can't be delivered if students don't have full access to workshops and labs," says John MacGabhann, TUI general secretary.

"A plan needs to be in place sooner rather than later. Do we decide not to deliver a particular element of a course? If so, what about those that have concentrated on that element up to now? Or will they modify the structure of papers to allow for a greater element of choice so those who have done that element are not disadvantaged?"

"This solution would recognise the autonomy of teachers to approach the course in the way that best meets their students' needs.

The Department of Education in a statement said it is aware of the challenges faced by fifth year students at this time. "In the context of schools reopening in September, guidance will [be issued] to schools on the logistical and curricular arrangements to be put in place. This will include advice to schools on how to provide for the learning needs of all year groups including fifth-year students as they continue their studies in September."

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Ask Brian



Your questions answered by education analyst Brian Mooney. Email askbrian@irishtimes.com

My daughter got a disappointing Hpat. Should she rethink?

Q My daughter was hoping to study medicine in September but has just received a disappointing Hpat result. She is now unsure how to proceed with her CAO application as she has to complete it in time for the July 1st deadline. What would you advise?

A You did not indicate what score your daughter received in her Hpat test, so I'm not certain she is totally out of the reckoning to secure an offer this year. If anything, there are a few reasons to be a bit more hopeful this year compared to others.

Firstly, even though the number of undergraduate CAO places on offer for medicine is capped – at around 483 – this number is enhanced by the numbers of international students who annually register as medical students in our five medical faculties. With many of these students unlikely to arrive this year, it will be a matter for the Higher Education Authority (HEA) to decide whether to increase the numbers of medical places made available to domestic students, on a one-off basis, to bring class numbers up to their normal levels.

A second reason for hope is that a significant number of this year's CAO applicants may have reservations about commencing third level in 2020 due to the restricted nature of college life. If this becomes a reality, CAO entry points for courses could drop.

Many people are under the misapprehension that CAO points are set or predetermined by faculties or



“**Numerous medical deans have confirmed to me that being a successful doctor has no relationship to Hpat performance**

colleges. In reality, it is determined by the supply and demand of places.

From your daughter's perspective, one negative may be that the ability to fill seats in lecture theatres is the last thing that colleges will be able to plan for in September. In medicine, as in many other paramedical, nursing, scientific, computing, architectural and engineering, etc. courses, the centrality of practicals and laboratory work will mitigate against offering increased numbers of places.

I can assure her that if her heart is truly set on becoming a doctor, a modest Hpat result should not deter her ambitions.

Numerous medical deans have confirmed to me that being a successful doctor has no relationship to Hpat performance. It's just a test which is still used in Ireland, even though it has been abandoned in many other parts of the world.

Your daughter can always decide to pursue another degree of her choice, preferably scientific based; provided she secures a 2:1, she can apply to study medicine over four years through the graduate route.

She might also consider a medical degree at a European university. Those in northern Italy are attracting a growing number of Irish applicants. All lectures are through English and fees are quite modest. See eunicas.ie for more details.

Whatever she does, she should cover all eventualities in her list of ten CAO course choices by July 1st next.

Online

Check out our guide to the best home teaching and learning resources online: irishtimes.com/education

Ensuring all schools have a fair shot at third level



Malcolm Byrne Opinion

Why not guarantee a particular number of third level places to each school?

There is no other country in the world where the final exam at second level dominates public discourse as much as in Ireland. Newspapers analyse why a certain poet did or did not appear on a particular paper while talk radio can

guarantee to get listeners going by mentioning any possible changes.

The Leaving Certificate has effectively grown into the entrance exam to higher education and to perceived opportunities in adult life. Asked about how a student performed in the exam, the answer is more likely to be expressed in the number of points acquired rather than the actual results.

This year, for the first time since 1925, tens of thousands of learners have not had to attempt to regurgitate information in a format that has changed little in almost a century.

While used as the determinant of entry to our universities, institutes and colleges, it has been criticised for decades as being inadequate to prepare students for third level and for life. The 1967 Commission on Higher Education expressed concern about it as a mechanism for college entry and pointed out that that this lack of preparedness was probably responsible for a high rate of failure in first year. The

1999 Points Commission warned of the negative impact on students' personal development.

The evidence also continues to show that students from more affluent backgrounds continue to do better in the Leaving Certificate and consequently are more likely to go to college and indeed, dominate the "high points" courses.

A report by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) last year found that, for example, 36 per cent of the medical student enrolment came from "affluent" backgrounds and just 3.5 per cent from "disadvantaged" backgrounds (and those figures did not include Trinity College).

Affluent backgrounds

The HEA has also observed that of students who achieve Leaving Certificate points in the 500-600 range (top marks), 28 per cent are from affluent backgrounds compared to just four per cent from disadvantaged backgrounds.

This contrasts with the figures for those scoring below 200 points – 22 per cent are from disadvantaged backgrounds compared to 7 per cent classified as affluent. Someone from an affluent background can expect a mean Leaving Cert score of 446 points in comparison to a mean of 368 points coming a disadvantaged position – a 78-point difference.

Students from fee-paying schools account for three in every 10 Irish undergraduates at UCD and Trinity while the proportion of students from DEIS ("disadvantaged") schools is at 8 per cent in Trinity and 6 per cent in UCD. The Institutes of Technology, by contrast, have a much more representative profile of the population at large.

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The decision to replace the Leaving Certificate this year with predictive grading is perhaps the least worst option in the circumstances. The health and safety of students and staff must be paramount. But it has given rise to many other concerns, particularly as we have never tried this before.

The Department of Education guidelines make reference to a process of standardisation which will mean that school results will be "examined and adjusted at a national level to ensure comparability across different schools and

that a common national standard is applied." The guidelines continue: "... the school sourced data will be combined with historical data through a process called standardisation in order to generate the calculated grade for the students in the subject".

This is the "bell curve" that will be crucial in determining the final result that schools and students receive. If "historical data" such as that cited above is used, then there is a real risk that students with real ability but who happened to attend schools with traditionally lower Leaving Cert results could lose out.

In Texas, in 1997, the then governor, George W Bush, signed into law what is commonly referred to as the "top 10 per cent rule". This provides that the top 10 per cent of every high school graduating class is guaranteed a place in a state-funded university. So, no matter how "disadvantaged" your school, if you are in the top decile, you will be offered a college place. The evidence has suggested that students admitted under this rule have performed at least as well as the general student body. It has also resulted in a more racially and socially diverse student body.

In Ireland, it is the higher education institutions that determine the admission criteria for their courses. To allay concerns that the predictive marking bell

curve may discriminate against those from disadvantaged schools, why not be innovative and guarantee a particular number of places to each school? This would be a clear recognition of the need for a more diverse student intake. In the long run, would it not be better for society if we have more doctors, lawyers and business people who come from less affluent backgrounds?

For a long time, we have allowed a bonus of up to 10 per cent for students who sit their exams through Irish. This was in part an acknowledgment of the lack of resources available to those studying in the first national language. We have also awarded bonus points for higher level maths to incentivise students to study that subject. To recognise the success of students studying in schools that do not have the advantages of those that are fee paying, we should consider making similar allowances.

Whatever happens, every student this year, given what they are going through and no matter their background, deserves an educational system response that is understanding and generous. They have to continue to be at the centre of all decision making.

Malcolm Byrne is a Fianna Fáil Senator from Wexford