

**Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research,
Innovation and Science**

Opening Statement – Leaving Certificate Reform

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Given the breadth of scope of the Committee’s current work on Leaving Certificate and Senior Cycle reform I am going to confine and my remarks to the committee to the issue of the reform of the Leaving Certificate examination and assessment options in that context.

The Leaving Certificate and The Educational Imaginary

There is little contestation about assessment practice across senior cycle. Building on the experience of junior cycle, nowadays most teachers use a wide variety of assessment approaches, students get feedback of different kinds, and they have opportunities to work in groups and provide feedback to each other on these collaborative tasks. All of these practices are underpinned by strong research evidence. However, the closer a student gets to the end of senior cycle and the Leaving Certificate examination, the more likely it is that this kind of rich, rewarding and evidence-based assessment gets displaced by practice for examinations, completion of pieces of coursework, a focus on examination questions, marking schemes and sample answers, and extensive revision with a view to recall under time constraints.

The research on this kind of assessment is less compelling. While summative tests with stakes can act as a motivator for some groups of students, in general, most students (indeed, most adults) find them stressful to some degree, with some students being more negatively impacted. With limited and narrow feedback provided (just letters and numbers) and an emphasis on representing learning in written or numeric format for the most part, in highly formal and ritualised settings, the completion of public examinations like the Leaving Certificate run counter to most of the research we have about assessment that supports student learning.

Why is this the case? Because public examinations – including the Leaving Certificate - are less artefacts of assessment and more artefacts of culture. Examinations persist because they are social rather than assessment process.

The Leaving Certificate has its current form not because it reflects best practice in assessment, or our most recent research insights in how to support learning and learners, but because it is culturally embedded. It persists, despite an annual liturgy of handwringing and head wagging about inequalities in class and gender, concerns for student wellbeing, and pernicious impact on the kind of learning and lives we want for young people, because it has become part of Irish social and cultural life – well beyond the school system. And for this reason, at the end of the annual liturgy as the procession of critics, myself included, moves back into the sanctuary of the academy or ‘commentariat’, we conclude that, in the end, ‘sure what else would we do’, and ‘sure look at the mess they made everywhere else,’ and ‘Amen, let us go in peace to do it all again next year.’

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (2004) uses the phrase ‘social imaginary’ to describe how people imagine their social existence, the expectations that they have of that existence, and the deeper normative notions and images that underpin these expectations. He uses the concept of ‘imaginary’ because ‘theory’ is associated with elites, whereas social imaginaries are carried by ordinary people in images, stories, legends and mythologies. Ireland has a very particular ‘imaginary’ of public education that shapes the development and enactment of policies and ongoing contestation and debates. Despite many current debates about the value of vocational knowledge and skills, our imaginary places a greater value on theoretical knowledge, one of the consequences of developing an examination system based on paper and pencil tests and one of the reasons why it persists. Another defining feature of our imaginary is a conviction that participation in tertiary education is a measure of personal, familial and system success. And another, often unspoken, is that ultimately, the Leaving Certificate does a reasonable job of sorting people into those who have earned and deserve success and those who have not earned it or do not deserve it often summed up as ‘it may be brutal, but it is fair’....

COVID 19 has many things to answer for. We won’t know for some time whether it did any permanent damage to the educational imaginary. It certainly re-enforced our sense of a system that places a high value on relationships and connections. But in 2020 we managed without any Leaving Certificate at all, and in 2021 with a version of the Leaving Certificate that had some remnants of the familiar, but notable radical departures, particularly in the agency given to students who in previous examinations sat in silence in serried rows in patrolled desks, but this time chose how they wanted to be assessed. Unprecedented. Unexpected. Untenable in our educational imaginary, but it happened. And Students progressed to higher and further education without doing a Leaving Certificate. So the cultural artefact of the Leaving Certificate, while it appears fixed and unshakeable, proved itself to be more fragile than we thought.

I'm something of a veteran of Leaving Certificate Reform; I've been the proponent of the slow and steady change. I've led the introduction of coursework, and helped design the revised system of grades and points designed to try to slow down an accelerating points race. And, here we are again, on the same themes, identifying the same challenges, ready to embark on a series of changes that will be the result of extensive consultation and probably have broad support, although I expect the students may be more vocal critics than heretofore. We will design an assessment system that will have a balance between validity, reliability and manageability and that will settle on a series of bearable trade-offs between

- public trust in the examinations
- providing a mechanism by which students can select courses in tertiary education
- supporting an inclusive system and opportunities for all learners
- the support of the teaching profession
- costs and manageability

And we will move on. And get ready for the next round of handwringing rituals.

Examining the imaginary?

UNESCO has just published the report on the International Commission on the Futures of Education. The report pulls few punches on the crises now faced by the human race and the planet, of which the ongoing pandemic is just the smallest, and proposes a new social contract – a new imaginary - that will deliver on the promise of quality education for all while also realising the transformational power of education to create sustainable futures for all. It's an interesting read for an educator, and for a policy maker. One of the most interesting propositions is that in the future education is going to have to concern itself not just with learning, but with *unlearning*. Looking to the future, suggests the report, education will need to support us in our need to 'unlearn human exceptionalism and possessive individualism' (p.59). If we were to make a similar proposition for education in Ireland, particularly in senior cycle, what might we want to 'unlearn'? What behaviours and attitudes does our current system 'teach' that may be contributing to the crises we now face; hyper-competitiveness; possessive individualism; compliance at the expense of creativity? We could think of others. According to UNESCO, the new social contract will be built on pedagogies that learn in and with the world, and that are founded on collaboration, co-operation and solidarity. What might a new educational imaginary for Ireland be founded on?

Given where we find ourselves, before we move on to the next edition of the Leaving Certificate that will further embed our current educational imaginary, should we give some time to considering

whether this imaginary is the one we want and need to get us through what are going to be the most challenging decades in human history? Addressing this question, at least putting our current educational imaginary through some form of examination, whether through the Citizens Assembly on Education as proposed by the current government, or another deliberative process, has never been more urgent for us.

If we don't at least question the current educational imaginary, then we are confirming for generations past and to come that it really is ALL ABOUT THE POINTS.

ENDS