

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM OIDEACHAS, BREISOIDEACHAS AGUS ÁRDOIDEACHAS, TAIGHDE, NUÁLAÍOCHT AGUS EOLAÍOCHT

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SCIENCE

Dé Máirt, 16 Samhain 2021

Tuesday, 16 November 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 11 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 11 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Rose Conway-Walsh,	Aisling Dolan,
Alan Farrell,	Rónán Mullen,
Jim O'Callaghan,	Pauline O'Reilly.
Pádraig O'Sullivan,	
Marc Ó Cathasaigh,	
Aodhán Ó Ríordáin.	

I láthair / In attendance: Senator Victor Boyhan.

Teachta / Deputy Paul Kehoe sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

The joint committee met in private session until 11.30 a.m.

Leaving Certificate Reform: Discussion (Resumed)

Chairman: I remind members to ensure their mobile phones are switched off for the duration of the meeting as they interfere with broadcasting equipment even on silent mode. Are the minutes of the meeting of 9 November 2021 agreed? Agreed.

On behalf of the committee, I welcome Dr. Anne Looney, executive dean of the Institute of Education, Dublin City University, DCU; Professor Michael O’Leary, prometric chair in assessment and director of the centre for assessment research, policy and practice in education at the Institute of Education, DCU; Dr. Jim Gleeson, adjunct professor at the school of policy and practice, DCU; Professor Áine Hyland, professor emeritus in education, University College Cork; Professor Tom Collins, emeritus president of Maynooth University; and Professor Gordon Stobart, emeritus professor of education, University College London.

Our witnesses are attending to discuss leaving certificate reform. The format of the meeting is that I will invite Dr. Looney to make a brief opening statement, followed by Professor O’Leary, Dr. Gleeson, Professor Hyland, Professor Collins and, finally, Professor Stobart. This will be followed by questions from members of the committee. Each member has an eight-minute slot to ask questions and for the witnesses to respond. As our guests are probably aware, the opening statements will be published on the committee website following the meeting.

Before beginning, I remind members of the long-standing practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. Witnesses are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable, or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of a person or entity. Therefore, if their statements are potentially defamatory about an identifiable person, they will be directed by the Chair to discontinue their remarks.

I invite Dr. Looney to make her opening statement, to be followed by the other witnesses. I impress upon them that I will be asking them to conclude their remarks after four minutes.

Dr. Anne Looney: Given the breadth of scope of the work of the committee, I will confine my remarks to the issue of the leaving certificate examination and the assessment options in that context. There is little contestation in respect of assessment practice in senior cycle. Building on the experience of junior cycle, most teachers in senior cycle use a wide variety of assessment methods and give good feedback to students. Students get a chance to work in groups and they 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 rich, rewarding and evidence-based assessment gets displaced by practice for examinations, completion of pieces of coursework and extensive revision with a view to recall under time constraints. The research on this kind of assessment is less compelling. Although summative tests with stakes can act as a motivator for some groups of students, most students - and most adults - find them stressful to some degree, with some

students being more negatively impacted than others. In fact, the completion of public examinations such as the leaving certificate run counter to most of the research we know in respect of assessment that supports student learning.

Why is this the case? It is 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 processes. We still have the leaving certificate not because it reflects best practice in assessment, but because it is culturally embedded. Despite an annual liturgy of hand-wringing and head-wagging about inequalities in class and gender, concerns for student well-being and pernicious impact on the kind of learning and lives we want for young people, it persists because it has become part of Irish social and cultural life. For this reason, at the end of the annual liturgy of hand-wringing, the procession of critics, including me, moves back into the sanctuary of the academy or commentariat and concludes that, in the end, sure what else would we do, and sure look at the mess they have made everywhere else, and let us go in peace and do it all again next year.

The Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, uses the phrase “social imaginary” to describe how people imagine their social existence. He says that social imaginaries exist in the minds of ordinary people - in images, stories, legends and mythologies. Ireland has a very particular imaginary of public education. Despite many current debates about the value of vocational knowledge and skills, our imaginary places greater emphasis on theoretical knowledge, one of the consequences of developing an exam system based on paper and pencil tests. Another defining feature of our imaginary is a conviction that participation in tertiary education is a measure of personal, familial and system success. An often unspoken of feature 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, a view that is often summed up in one of my favourite phrases: “It may be brutal, but it is fair”.

I will move to the end of my statement in deference to the time constraints. I am something of a veteran of leaving certificate reform. I have been the proponent of the slow and steady change. I led the introduction of coursework and helped design a revised system of grades and points and yet 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 that 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 listed in my written submission.

UNESCO recently published the report of 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. The report proposes a new social contract – a new imaginary - that will deliver on the promise of quality education for all. 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, the report suggests education will need to support us in our need to unlearn human exceptionalism and possessive individualism. If we were to make a similar proposition for education in Ireland, particularly in senior cycle as we consider the leaving certificate, what might we want to unlearn? What behaviours and attitudes does our current examination teach that may be contributing to the crises we now face and stopping our ability to solve them? There is hyper-competitiveness, possessive individualism and compliance at the expense of creativity. We could think of oth-

ers. According to UNESCO, the new social contract will be built on pedagogies that learn in and with the world, 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 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 and at least putting our current educational imaginary itself through some form of examination, whether through the Citizens' Assembly on education as proposed by the current Government or through another deliberative process, has never been more urgent for us. If we do not 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.

Professor Michael O'Leary: I thank the committee for the invitation to attend. I wish to focus my comments on the issue of assessment options for senior cycle. There is broad consensus in the research literature that high-quality educational assessments are underpinned by several key principles. The first is that all assessments should be designed to support accurate, consistent and fair decision-making in respect of the progress and achievement of all learners. The principle that all assessments contain measurement error means that single assessments are a poor basis for making high-stakes decisions about learners. Think about that. That is a fundamental principle of assessment. In addition, while assessment systems provide information to many stakeholders, including policymakers like the committee, learners are the most important users of assessment information. For this reason a balance needs to be struck between assessments that support learning and those that measure it. The positive consequences, negative consequences, or both, that derive from the use of an individual assessment or an assessment system mean we must always consider the fallout or what happens when we implement these assessments. We need to make judgments about quality.

These principles underpin the arguments outlined in my submission and in what I am about to say and why I think the certification of achievement at the end of senior cycle needs to be based on the outcomes of a broad range of assessment approaches. I offer four proposals for consideration. The first is exams spread out over fifth and sixth year with reduced content that, in time, move from paper-based to computer-based so that the power of digital technology can be leveraged to broaden the scope of what can be assessed with exams. The second is continuous assessments that involve a combination of tasks externally set and marked by say, the State Examinations Commission, SEC, but also tasks assessed by the student's own teacher. The third is the collective judgment of in-school teams of teachers about the achievement of students across the key skills framework for senior cycle. That must count for something. It cannot be on one side of a certification page that does not count the same as physics and maths. My fourth proposal is perhaps the most radical thing I am going to say today. It consists of an element of student self-assessment contributing to decisions around the grading of some assignments and, in particular, competences associated with the key skills framework. Data from all four modes of assessment would support a more balanced system of certifying achievement at the end of post-primary education in Ireland.

However, there are obstacles. There is no magic bullet with assessment. It is a difficult thing. The potential for over-assessment and increased workloads and stress for students and teachers is a threat that needs to be considered when evaluating the proposals I have written about. My last point has been said many times. The current relationship between the leaving

certificate examination and the CAO points system poses a formidable barrier not just to what I am proposing but to what many others are proposing as well.

Dr. Jim Gleeson: I thank the Chairman for inviting me to make this submission. The brief I have had from the clerk since last February has been focusing on the curriculum-assessment relationship as it is. Unlike the previous two presentations, that is the focus it will have.

The good working relationship between the Department, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA, and the SEC facilitates the development of assessment standards. While the NCCA is currently replacing its subject syllabuses with curriculum specifications, 29 of the 37 leaving certificate subjects remain in syllabus form. Due to the paucity or indeed absence of curriculum objectives in subject syllabuses, the development of performance standards therefore depends mainly on inference. The clear focus of curriculum specifications on the other hand is on higher- and lower-order student learning outcomes stated in behavioural terms. While this facilitates the development of performance standards, the move away from content is a cause of concern to teachers. The specific specifications also include information about assessment modes and criteria. The relationship between these curriculum documents and classroom implementation can be rather distant due to the complex nature of assessment and the backwash effect of examinations. It is noteworthy that senior cycle is now the only sector where students take terminal examinations after two years' work.

When the joint Oxford University and Queen's University research team analysed six leaving certificate subject exams in detail, it found three of them to be problematically predictable. Students also felt the exams were predictable while teachers did not. The predominance of lower-order outcomes emerges when you see that many students believe the exams are over-reliant on recall while teachers believe the content-heavy subject syllabuses we have encourage teaching to the test and the textbook. Draft marking schemes are prepared in conjunction with exam papers. However, since our grade parameters are fixed, when grade distribution problems arise the only option is to adjust the marking schemes. The SEC believes these problems are indicative of issues with the examination rather than the student cohort, so using expert judgments and statistics, that is, attainment referencing, it compares the attainment of the cohort in question with previous years' cohorts and candidates are then graded on their overall attainment rather than the performance standards for that subject.

Other than their value in CAO points, the meanings of particular grades are not capable of definition. In the interests of their relationships with students, teachers see their role in assessment as being advocates rather than judges. This is not necessarily an either-or dilemma but change can only happen under certain preconditions and where the authenticity of student responses is assured. That is a really important point. Ethical aspects of assessing one's own students for national certification are of direct relevance to the Teaching Council's code of professional conduct and the whole issue of teacher professionalism. There are obviously important lessons to be learned from the assessment arrangements used during the pandemic, from the implementation of the junior cycle framework and from the leaving certificate applied, LCA. For valid curriculum reasons the LCA was ring-fenced in 1995. In my opinion and with some experience in this field, one would need good reasons to change that arrangement.

In conclusion, might I say to the committee that when confronted with NCCA proposals for reform in 1995, the political establishment at that time demurred? The ball is in the committee's court.

Professor Áine Hyland: I am going to focus briefly on two issues, namely, the reform of

the leaving certificate and the current specifications for the revision of subjects. In reforming the leaving certificate, I strongly favour additional forms of assessment for every subject that could be carried out during, and not at the end of, the two-year senior cycle, so that by May or June of the final year, students would already have completed at least 50% of leaving certificate assessments. Assessments undertaken during the school year could be done under teacher supervision and sent to the SEC for assessment. This could, for example, include English and Irish essays as well as some of the questions on unseen aspects of the leaving certificate in other subjects. The subject syllabuses, or specifications as they are now called, could be modularised, as is now the norm in most higher education courses, with assessment carried out at the end of each module. Third level students have found this considerably less stressful than everything being examined at the end of the final year. Some assessments could take place at the end of fifth year and others could take place around the time of the Christmas tests in sixth year or at other times during the final year. There should be plenty of choice on the exam papers and not the narrow focus, and guessing game, that currently exists for many subjects. In my view, external assessment should be the norm. A student's own teacher should not normally be asked to assess his or her students for certification purposes. To conclude on that aspect of it, while we should not throw out the baby with the bathwater, we need to seriously rethink how the leaving certificate assesses, examines and certifies.

I have other points in my submission but I will move on to the final point on the current specifications. Even though the Minister has not yet announced whether there will be the leaving certificate as we know it, the NCCA is going ahead with revising subjects in a new way and introducing new syllabi or specification, as has been mentioned. For example, the recently introduced specification for Irish at junior cycle is problematic and I have written about it previously. Some members may have read that. The proposal has been strongly criticised and opposed by Irish language organisations and Irish teachers. Even though the Minister has not announced her proposals, the NCCA is proceeding with revising the individual subject syllabi. There is considerable concern among subject organisations and teachers about the format or template being used by the NCCA to design the new subject specifications. While the design template may be suitable for school-based programmes or courses that are not externally assessed, it is not suitable for a programme or course that is externally assessed and a high-stakes examination such as the leaving certificate. The specifications are skeletal and lack clarity. They contain only themes and learning outcomes with no detail on the material to be taught, teaching approaches, literature, texts or assessment. There is no information about how the course content will be aligned with assessment to ensure national consistency and coherence. Under the Education Act 1998, the role of the council is to advise the Minister on both curriculum and assessment so I would argue that any change in curriculum should be accompanied by very clear guidelines and explanations of how it will be assessed. This current revision is an opportunity for the council to go back to the drawing board and look at assessment in light of the points I have made.

If we are talking about international evidence and best practice, I have examined the syllabi of 12 countries and jurisdictions, including the International Baccalaureate, to see if any other country provides such a skeletal outline for its individual subjects and have not found a single country where we are talking about a public examination externally assessed. I would argue that the NCCA should adopt international best practice and provide full information for teachers, students and, where appropriate, textbook producers, well in advance of the new specifications being introduced.

Chairman: I now invite Professor Collins to make his opening statement.

Professor Tom Collins: My first point is that I do not think it is possible to have a discussion about assessment reform without discussing curricular reform. The two cannot be decoupled but assessment is the tail that wags the curricular dog. The task of reform then begins with decisions regarding assessment. As has been observed by Professor Looney, as the two-year senior cycle comes to a close, all involved in the cycle become consumed by the looming examination. It seems to me that the assessment debate might begin with the question of what it is hoped to achieve in the senior cycle, what needs to be given currency in the assessment process and what can be ignored for the purposes of assessment. but it should be borne in mind that what is ignored in assessment in upper second level comes also to be ignored as a serious curricular endeavour. This may be worth referring to discussion in a deliberative process such as Professor Looney referred to. The assessment debate, therefore, begins with questions concerning what the student needs to know on completion of upper second level, what the student should be able to do and how the student should “be” in terms of sense of self and as a member of the wider society. The learning agenda, therefore, might be summarised as one concerned with knowing, one concerned with doing and one concerned with being.

It is true that the traditional upper second-level focus has greatly emphasised knowing, has placed much less emphasis on doing and has offered little on the issue of being. This was reflected in, and reinforced by, the assessment approach, which relied largely on a written, terminal and summative exam that rewarded rote learning, cognitive intelligence, application to study and compliance. This assessment approach has usually ignored the usually formative dimensions of the extracurricular, whether in sport, artistic pursuits such as drama and music, which can consume a school in its transition year activities, for example, or other social activism by the student, all of which provide immensely formative opportunities for those students who participate. The fact that this activity is outside of the scope of assessment has meant that its potential contribution to realising the wider goals of the upper second-level experience has been greatly diminished.

However, there are other problems with this approach to assessment. The odds are stacked against poorer students and less well-resourced schools in this apparently fair process. The appearance of fairness legitimates the outcomes; the winners feel they deserve their results and the losers likewise feel they got their just desserts so those who come out on top are under no obligation to reflect on the starting-out advantages they had in the academic race and those who come out on the bottom are unaware that they were hamstrung from the outset. An intergenerational stasis emerges here where, even in a context of all boats rising, the small boats still stay small.

This becomes all the more problematic when leaving certificate results are used as the basis for progression to higher education. It is this role that now underpins the “high-stakes” nature of the leaving certificate - a characteristic it once had by virtue of the fact that most people finished their formal education at this point. However, most people now progress to higher or further education, which means that the programme of study and outcomes there now become much more important in allocating employment and career opportunities displacing the leaving certificate role in this regard. The points system, therefore, has a number of important implications for upper second level. First, it means that the programme is conducted with one eye on third level such that the developmental needs of the child at this stage in their education are subordinated to the requirements of third-level entry. Second, it crystallises the inequities that underpin second-level outcomes in third-level opportunities. In this way, it reproduces existing categories of winners and losers from the parental generation and transforms inherited status into achieved status whether that is achieved success or achieved failure.

Chairman: I must ask Professor Collins to conclude.

Professor Tom Collins: Finally, the better-off who fail to hit their desired points level are increasingly able to circumvent this hurdle. So it is difficult to conclude other than reform of second level becomes possible only if the connection between second-level outcomes and third-level entry mediated through the points system is severed.

Chairman: I now invite Professor Stobart to make his opening statement.

Professor Gordon Stobart: My contribution will be to bring a comparative perspective to the leaving certificate discussions. It draws on my recent research report for the OECD on a comparative review of the Scottish senior secondary examinations. Ireland was one of the assessment systems reviewed in this.

The value of a comparative approach is as a reminder that there are many ways to assess senior secondary students. One of the problems of being embedded within a historic system is that we think that is the only way it can be done. It is a case of “you’ve got to do it this way”. One of the key variables in this is the relative trust placed in teachers by society and the willingness of teachers to play a part in assessment. Ireland is very distinctive in this respect in the lack of teacher contribution to senior secondary assessment in terms of certification. As Dr. Looney pointed out, exam systems reflect the history and culture of the societies in which they occur. When historically embedded, as the Irish system has been for a century, and where the English and Scottish systems have been going since the 19th century without much change in the architecture, they are difficult to change radically. When parents and their parents have been through the same system, there is a resistance to change.

An educational system’s curriculum may see more radical reform as it responds to social change, as we may have seen across the world. Most changes reflect a broadening of the knowledge and skills that 21st century education requires. As we speak, France, New Zealand and Norway are all introducing new curricula to address the wider range of skills now required. We can change the curriculum but we find it much harder to change the assessment. As more students continue in education, the senior secondary cohort becomes more diverse and requires a wider range of assessment approaches. In many systems, including the Irish system, there is an increased role for vocational education. In France, we have the *Baccalauréat professionnel*, and in Norway, 50% of students take a vocational strand.

The Irish leaving certificate can be located within the British historical tradition, as opposed to the American, French and other traditions. The emphasis in this is on national subject-based external examinations at 16 years and 18 years. Most other cultures only examine at 18 years now. The exam system is nationalised and central, and it is based on unseen papers which have not been pretested, which we can contrast with the more psychometric approaches such as that of America. The system requires open-ended responses marked by trained examiners, and these are very distinctive to this British tradition. Ireland is unique within this system for having fixed-grade boundaries, with grades always against a certain mark. Elsewhere, these may shift according to the perceived difficulty of the paper. However, this fixed boundary is not unusual in other systems, such as those of France and North America.

Teacher assessment contributing to the final grade plays a limited role in the British system or no role in Ireland’s case, I understand. In other systems it plays a central role, and in Norway 80% of the marks are determined by the teacher. Even in the *Baccalauréat professionnel*, the French teacher contributes with marks derived from continuous assessment. Information

technology currently plays a limited role in examinations yet offers the potential for broader and more imaginative assessments.

Chairman: I ask Professor Stobart to conclude his remarks.

Professor Gordon Stobart: Yes, I am just finishing. We now have technology that can be seen used in other countries, such as Norway, that can broaden what can be done within an examination, including online resources and the like and electronic portfolios.

My obvious message is that Ireland is not alone in wanting to be responsive to 21st century. The question is how to effect this social shift that would allow the assessment system to play its part.

Chairman: Thank you. Deputy Ó Ríordáin will speak first. I thank Deputy Conway-Walsh for accommodating him. She will follow Deputy Ó Ríordáin.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I appreciate my colleagues facilitating me. It is hard to know where to start every week because all of us feel quite strongly about this matter. As has been said, if the odds are stacked against the poorer students, one would feel like setting fire to the whole thing immediately. Who wants it to stay as it is? We cannot find anybody willing to come in front of the committee to tell us that this should remain absolutely unchanged, so I am trying to think who would such people be. The grinds schools want the system to remain absolutely as it is because there is money to be made. There are the schools that like to present themselves as being academically superior and high on school league tables. There is an appalling journalistic insistence on throwing out completely untested data on schools; even the Department of Education does not like it and will not produce it under freedom of information. So who is the system benefiting?

I am interested in what the witnesses said about teacher involvement and how it is more usual across Europe. A number of years ago, we tried to change the junior certificate and there was massive resistance. There was the use of terms like “banning history”. The leaving certificate does not just strangle young people; it also strangles subjects, as people who care about history might know. My understanding is 54,000 students every year do junior certificate geography and history, 23,000 do leaving certificate geography but only 11,000 do leaving certificate history. That is because students are afraid of the exam because it is a heavy and arduous written exam.

How do we get from where we are to what we want to achieve? In all this, there is a scenario of certain schools not offering certain subjects at certain levels. I gave statistics last week indicating there are 31 schools in the Republic of Ireland where no student does higher-level Irish for the leaving certificate and 39 schools where no student does higher level maths. I may have my subjects mixed up but there are approximately 30 or 40 schools at second level where not a single student does honours or higher-level English, Irish or maths. The process is stacked against poorer students.

With the assessed grades system over the past two years, we have learned that we can have proactive teacher involvement in assessment, with agreement. It was not perfect and it was done as a firefighting measure because of the pandemic but surely within it there is potential for changing our mindset. How do we learn from what has happened over the past two years and how do we make a difference now? The witnesses are absolutely right in saying there is an intergenerational attachment to the exam because anybody from middle Ireland who has suc-

cessfully negotiated second and third level feel there is nothing wrong because it was fine for them. They want their children to be protected by the system that was successful for them. If people have not been successful through it, they will not have as strong a voice.

How do we learn from the past two years and the matters raised by the assessed grades model, imperfect and all as it is? Is this our one opportunity? If we miss it, we may be another 20 or 30 years before we have this discussion again.

Professor Michael O’Leary: The Deputy raises the fundamental question regarding how to bring about change. I offer this as something to think about. In 2017 there was the presentation of a notion that teachers are vehemently against being involved in the certification of their own students. That idea was in the ether and we saw placards that spoke about fairness and so on. People in newspaper articles argue that teachers abhor the notion of being involved. I want to counter that by giving the committee some data from a piece of research we did in DCU. We asked an agreement question based around “strongly agree” and so on. It asked: “As a result of having been involved in the calculated grades process in 2020, in my school I feel more positively disposed to being involved directly in assessing my students for certification purposes.” Of those surveyed, 30% of teachers agreed with that statement. I do not believe those voices have been heard. I do not hear them but they are there some place.

While I must add the caveat that this was a relatively small study of some 750 voluntary samples, there was a group of teachers who agreed with that statement. Of the remainder, 62% of teachers disagreed with the statement and 9% were undecided. If we add the undecided 9% to the 30% who agreed with the statement, we have a 60:40 split. That 60:40 split was also the evident in the responses to the statement: “I believe that teachers’ involvement in assessment for certification purposes would lead to fairer outcomes for the students in my school.” Perhaps the Deputy is referring to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Of the respondents, 36% agreed with that statement, 48% disagreed and 16% were undecided.

I just want to put those findings out there to show that it is not all negative. We will, I hope, do a follow-up study on the accredited grades. We want to check on those data because it was a surprise to me to find that one in three teachers were saying that this had changed their minds about being involved in certifying their own students. I do not believe any teacher wants to be solely involved in that process - that is not what they are saying - but something certainly happened in 2020 and again in 2021.

Senator Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: There is a basis for the beginning of a conversation.

Professor Michael O’Leary: Yes, the beginning of a conversation.

Chairman: Does anyone else wish to comment on Deputy Ó Ríordáin’s question?

Dr. Anne Looney: I thank the Deputy. I would probably agree that this is the time. I describe myself as a veteran of leaving certificate reform. I was involved with some of the proposals that Dr. Gleeson spoke about, which were quite radical about reforming the senior cycle. At the time, however, there just was not the political will to drive those home.

How much will is there now for reform? The real risk is that we will find a balance - as my colleague referred to - between the various trade-offs that must be made in all public examinations, agree on them and then move on. In ten years’ time, however, we would be back again with the same issues and trends to which Professor Collins referred. A set of circumstances has presented itself for a more extended debate. Professor Stobart mentioned the cultural em-

beddedness and that we have an historical system that was borne out of the British system we inherited. We can tweak around the edges and definitely improve it, but the fundamental issues that arise will not go away unless we have a bigger debate. Even if we do add pieces of continuous assessment and modularisation, they will be colonised by people who will sell a deal to get students a better mark in the continuous assessment if they attend a two-day course for €100.

We must address some of those issues and, as a society, say that this is not good enough for our children or our teachers because it puts them under undue pressure. We need to have that bigger debate and we have shown that we can do that. It is time to do it around education.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank the witnesses for their submissions. My first question is for Dr. Looney. I get what she said in her paper, particularly around unlearning, which is a big challenge for us. She described herself as a veteran. The challenge for this committee is how to make this work and the weeks we have spent scrutinising all this information do not end up just adding to the information and conversation. We need to make something happen. We have a responsibility. There is a fluidity now around where we are at, given what has been presented to us in the context of Covid-19, and how quickly we made changes when we really had to make them. We must grab that. Let that be the legacy of Covid-19 with regard to education into the future and breaking with our historical education system, which does not serve us.

I note the point that students are more vocal critics than heretofore. Where will the political to act come from? How will student voices be heard and how will they have an immediate or medium-term impact? Perhaps Dr. Looney will address those two points first, after which I will address some questions to Professor O'Leary.

Dr. Anne Looney: The Deputy is correct about the students. What was achieved by students in Ireland around examinations during Covid-19 is gaining international attention. In other parts of the world students persuaded politicians to make changes. For example, the question of whether school-related data could be counted in exams was quite a big issue in Scotland. In Ireland, the mobilisation of students through the Irish Second-Level Students' Union and a student petition presented the Government with a clear alternative proposal around offering students a choice. They got that and it was not tenable for that to be set back. Students have tasted victory and know now that the student voice is not a token voice and they expect to be a voice at the table. They showed that they were right and offered something positive to the system.

Students have an expectation this time that they will be active partners at the table when it comes to discussions about where we go. They will expect their voice to be heard. When we listen to students, they strongly promote the idea of an assessment system that matches 21st century learning needs. It will be interesting to see whether that student voice is positioned as more conservative or more radical because students are not an homogenous group. Nonetheless, they expect to be heard. They are the new kid on the block. That is what will be different this time. We have the Irish Second-Level Students' Union. To be fair, the Government has engaged quite strongly with students in those deliberative processes, which is important.

On the issue of political will, if we listen to the body politic, for the first time, post-Covid, people are talking about the knowing, being and doing balance that Professor Collins mentioned. They are talking more about doing and being, as well as knowing. UNESCO is talking about being, collaboration, solidarity and the ability to develop resilience. All of these kinds of personal attributes are featuring much more significantly, even in how parents talk about their own children and how children and young people talk about themselves. Those two aspects are very significant. Most committee members, who are in leadership roles and are close to their

communities, are picking that up also. How we build on that to bring it to the debate will be significant. I believe the time is now.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I share that view and thank Dr. Looney.

I noted with interest what Professor O’Leary had to say. For the completeness of the discussion, it is important to note that he is the prometric chair in assessment and director of the centre for assessment research in UCD, which sells computer-based test development and delivery services to governments and government bodies. The company funding him is also involved in delivering the driving theory tests. Professor O’Leary might go back and have a word with it about that. It is important to note that.

Professor O’Leary proposes that students should self-assess their own progress. How would this be incorporated into a State-wide system?

Professor Michael O’Leary: I will deal with the prometric issue first. It is DCU, not UCD.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I meant DCU. Sorry.

Professor Michael O’Leary: Prometric is not the same as Promethean. Prometric, as Deputy Conway-Walsh says, is an international test delivery company. It is based in Baltimore, Maryland. It supports the chair in assessment in Dublin City University and also supports a PhD and doctoral student. I will make the very important point that Prometric has no part to play in any assessment in the Irish education system and has never asked me to be in any way involved or to say anything about the educational assessment system. In other words, Prometric has no say in any of the research I do in education. It is very important to me that that is noted.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I thought it would be important to give Professor O’Leary the opportunity to-----

Professor Michael O’Leary: Absolutely, and I appreciate the opportunity because it has been said publicly that I may not be a neutral voice. I did not appreciate that. Prometric does not influence me in any way in what I say.

As for student involvement, Deputy Conway-Walsh is absolutely right that the devil is in the detail. I just wanted to get that into the conversation. I suspect that it would be very difficult for any democrat to argue that the students should not have some say in their own certification. Students are well able to self-assess. They would have to be given certain skills to self-assess better. There are also areas of the curriculum, which Professor Collins highlighted, that involve those skills that are just not easily assessed through exams or even assignments. I am thinking about things like collaborative problem solving and about how important that notion is. “Working with others” is listed as a key skill. The point I was trying to make in my submission is that teachers and students have a role to play here and that students should have some say. I am not saying the students should give themselves a grade for working with others, but they certainly could be involved in determining what the grade will be by providing the evidence and having a debate with their teachers.

The second point is that groups of teachers, not single teachers, should make those decisions. That would get away from the idea of a single teacher being responsible for the grade. Certain skills in schools are cross-curricular. The history teacher, the geography teacher, the maths teacher, the physics teacher, all the language teachers and all the science teachers see the students working with others and communicating. Let us say a student is doing six subjects in

the leaving certificate. The teachers of those six subjects might sit down and make a collective judgment on that ability to work with others. I am also saying that that has to count for something. It cannot just be a token. It has to count for progression to third level, where working with others is a key skill people look for. I am not entirely sure about the exact detail of how this would play out but I wanted to present it as an idea for discussion.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I appreciate that. I have a couple of further questions but I have run out of time. I will come in-----

Chairman: I will come back to you, Deputy.

Senator Aisling Dolan: It is really important to recognise that we have DCU, UCC and NUI Maynooth represented today. I thank the witnesses for all their submissions on this topic.

Some of the areas we have been talking about relate to trust: trust in the current leaving certificate, public trust in the leaving certificate, trust in our teachers and trust with our students. There are many stakeholders. “Trust” is a word we are using a lot. Another word I wish to use is “fair”. Fairness is very important. The committee had a submission last week from people who spoke about areas of disadvantage where 26% or 27%, I believe, of students would go on to higher education. I come from Ballinasloe, in east Galway and Roscommon, and from an area Pobal designates as deprived. That means there are many single-parent families and many children there who may not go on to further and higher education for a myriad of different reasons. Is the leaving certificate fair? I have my own very strong opinions on that.

I am delighted to hear that Professor O’Leary compiled the study to which he referred. I am very happy to hear about the engagement of teachers. I understand that the study involved a sample of about 750. Professor O’Leary mentioned that 30% agreed with being involved in direct assessment and that they also felt there would be fairer outcomes for their students, particularly, perhaps, in DEIS schools and so on. Would Professor O’Leary like to speak a little more about that accurate, consistent and fair decision-making in the process? Could he point to one or two lessons we have learnt from accredited grades?

I thank Professor Stobart for his contribution. I was very interested to hear about France, New Zealand and Norway introducing new curricula. Professor Stobart talked about how we have to adapt to a digital future. He talked also about the high numbers taking vocational courses in Norway and said that 80% of marks there and in France are determined by teachers. How did Norway bring that system into place? Here in Ireland we are trying to promote the apprenticeship programme and the opportunities for further and higher education. We currently have a way lower bar in respect of apprenticeships. We have 60 apprenticeship courses, with another 18 to come on stream.

I wish to pose a question to Professor Looney as well. It is great to see she is a veteran of leaving certificate reform, as she mentioned. She does not look like a veteran. It is really important that she has been at the coalface to see about changes and bringing them forward. We can adapt and change. We are flexible. Why not take the best of what we have brought with us historically through the leaving certificate but also adapt it to make sure it is a fairer system and has the trust of everyone around us. Professor Looney mentioned the trade-off in that regard. I would like her to tell me her top three things we should hold close to our hearts as to what we will be looking at when it comes to leaving certificate reform.

Perhaps Professor O’Leary could answer first, followed by Professor Stobart.

Professor Michael O’Leary: For the sake of brevity, I will deal with the issue of fairness and, in order that I do not ramble on, I will just read out something I have written. The leaving certificate is fair insofar as everyone takes the same test under the same conditions. That includes anonymous marking. That is a fact. The public has confidence in the system, and that is important. However, students do not arrive at the testing centres with nothing but ability and a track record of diligent study separating them. Some had better teachers than others and some were able to avail of the benefits that economic advantage bestows - for example, grinds. Therefore, many of the problems students faced in 2020 and 2021, such as not having access to technology, not having a quiet space at home to study and so on, have been relevant to leaving certificate fairness long before the arrival of Covid-19.

Senator Aisling Dolan: That is very true. Access to grind schools and to private grinds is available to a certain number and cohort of students, which skews potential opportunities for students as a whole. Would Professor Stobart like to come in?

Professor Gordon Stobart: Yes. I go back to the point of us being embedded in a particular system. Going back to Norway, it was the teachers who wrested the exam system from the universities back in the 19th century. They wanted to be the centre of assessment. That tradition has carried through, so they are central. The related element is the vocational. Again, that is traditional in that the introduction of exams in England in the 19th century came off the professional examinations. Because written subjects and written exams were valued in the high-status professions, the education system took over and the vocational has always been treated as second fiddle to that. There is the idea that if you can do it, you should do it through the academic route. How we change that is an issue of making vocational tracks attractive and recognition in higher education and the like. Ireland has gone a long way with that with the vocational programme, but the status of that is problematic. If we can have apprenticeships and good destinations for vocational qualifications, that is well worthy of support.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I thank Professor Stobart. We can work on that aspect with our career guidance teachers. If Dr. Looney would like to contribute as well, I think a minute and a half remains.

Dr. Anne Looney: I echo my colleague’s comment regarding the issue of fairness. He is right. What needs to be done regarding protecting the examination has all the trappings of fairness, but it looks very different to learners in Roscommon, for example, than it does to those in Rathmines or Rathgar. It is not only the case because some students might enter the examination halls with some economic advantage, social capital or having had the benefit of grinds, it also involves all the messaging about consequences. Some students have heard messaging about the consequences involved not just in the run-up to examinations, but since they were ten years old. They have heard from their families and communities about what success and successful learning looks like and what kinds of learning we value as a society. Therefore, the examination itself is fair, in its own narrow context, but the situation starts to look very different when we broaden our perspective. To reiterate, it is not only about the messaging that happens on the way into the examination hall, but also the messaging which happens earlier in life.

Moving on to the subject of specific trade-offs, it is a good question about what kind of balance we want to have. We have high retention rates in upper secondary education. Our students stay on until the end of the cycle. This is part of our social imagination, in that we are really committed to education as a country. It is probably our downfall in some ways, because taxi drivers and supermarket workers talk about what poetry questions came up in the leaving certificate examinations. It is a national conversation. We put a high value on education, therefore,

but in senior cycle there are opportunities for more vocational education which would mean that we could move towards parity of esteem. I have overheard conversations where parents have been advising their children not to study certain subjects because it is harder to get a certain mark or because a subject is not as well regarded. Inevitably, those are the arts and vocational subjects, those subjects that students really enjoy and can engage with. Regarding some of these trade-offs, then, I think we could get a better balance with some of these subjects if we had a better quality of conversation in this area.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I thank Dr. Looney.

Chairman: I will allow Dr. Gleeson to come in and then we will move to the next member of the committee.

Dr. Jim Gleeson: I concur with what has been said by Professor O’Leary and Dr. Looney, but we must be realistic about the limitations of examinations. I have looked at the current system in some detail, and the content standards have to be inferred, in the cases of many syllabuses, because there is a lack of objectives or no objectives. The standards are not published, which again highlights the complexity of this issue. Questions underlie the use of attainment referencing, where the fundamental premise is that the issue is with the examination rather than the students. That, however, ignores other possibilities, such as teaching practices in schools, for example, which could be influential. Therefore, the issue here need not, necessarily, be the examination alone. My last point is that our marking schemes are only published after the event and that, in turn, only leads to more teaching to the test the next year. We must be realistic, then, about the limitations of public examinations, as against perhaps some aspects of continuous assessment.

Chairman: I thank Dr. Gleeson. I call Senator Mullen.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I am grateful to all the witnesses for their presentations and insights. There are many questions I could ask. Before I start, however, I looked up “Promethean” and it is probably no bad thing, because it refers to “being rebelliously creative and innovative”. Maybe it was the end that Prometheus came to that was on my mind earlier.

However, there is possibly something rebellious, creative and innovative about the suggestion that students could be involved in assessment. I would like to know what the other witnesses think about that proposal. At one level, it seems to make a great deal of sense because part of teaching people to understand would surely involve helping them to assess that aspect, including looking at concepts such as objectivity, checking for bias etc. We do, however, rub up against human nature in these situations as well. People are inclined to seek to advantage for themselves, inevitably. The question then is whether the suggestion put forward is doable. The proposer believes it is, and I will be interested to hear whether the other witnesses think it is necessary and possible.

The second aspect that I would like to ask the witnesses about, and I am happy to throw it open for whomever wishes to take this point up, is whether one of the biggest issues, if not the biggest issue, in this regard is that third level colleges are burdening the second level education system with the task of preparing people for CAO selection. Do the third level institutions not have enough resources themselves to undertake that job and should they not be tasked with doing it? That could include, if necessary, even postponing the beginning of the first academic year until the following new year. Does it not seem obvious, when we think of the amount of money that people spend on going to college and the amount of money the State spends funding

them, that the least we would expect would be that people would have to be interviewed and assessed to see if they are suitable for the courses they are applying for? Would doing that not free up energies and possibilities for the leaving certificate examinations?

The whole narrative that we have been hearing today has been about the system being broken. I do not necessarily disagree with that perspective but again I wonder, to some degree, if we are dealing with the inevitable reality of human affairs. Is a perfect system possible? Are we demonstrably worse than all other countries in this regard? Is it just that we have problems that we must solve in this area, just as those other countries have problems they need to solve as well?

Turning to what Professor Hyland, in particular, mentioned regarding the NCCA's reform of syllabuses, I gather there is a particular concern in the area of science, such as in physics, chemistry and biology. Mention was also made of Irish and agricultural science. What I have heard from people involved is that experts in teaching and the science people in the universities and at second level are pointing out problems with a vague prescription of learning outcomes, but that the NCCA is moving on regardless. Why is this happening? How does that situation connect with the agenda that we are here to discuss? Is this a problem connected with the problem we are talking about, which is enhancing student accomplishments and the outcomes in their lives? I thank the witnesses, and I am sorry that it is a long list of questions.

Chairman: I call Professor Hyland.

Professor Áine Hyland: I am happy to come in on those questions. On the question of students self-assessing, they do it already in the primary schools. Anyone here who has children or grandchildren at that level, will know that the primary schools always ask them to self-assess. It is on the report card and I always read it with interest. How that kind of assessment would be incorporated would be different beyond that level. I have used that method in group work at third level. It is tricky to do, and not easy to incorporate into a final mark. It can be done, though, where there are smallish groups and it is possible to engage with them. It would, though, be more difficult to do it in a national public examination.

Turning to third level education, I chaired the points commission and 22 years ago we made a recommendation, very similar to what Senator Mullen suggested, that there should be much less granularisation in first year. In other words, the suggestion was that students should apply in a more macro sense to macro courses. If that happened, the points would not be as they are now, in the sense of being so competitive. I do not want to go into explaining that aspect, but that recommendation was made 22 years ago. It was not picked up. It is for the higher education institutions themselves to decide on entry under legislation, of course. It is not a matter for the Government, surprising as that might seem. Under the Universities Act 1997, decisions on selection are entirely a matter for the higher education institutions.

I come from the generation where matriculation examinations were run by the National University of Ireland, NUI, and Trinity College Dublin, TCD. I would hate to go back to that situation because it meant that leaving certificate students then had to prepare themselves for three separate examinations: the leaving certificate, NUI matriculation and TCD matriculation. To be honest, the NUI and TCD matriculation examinations were totally arbitrary. There were no syllabuses and the professors used whatever they wanted.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I imagine there was nothing about interviews either.

Professor Áine Hyland: Exactly. I am afraid that interviews would disadvantage those who are already disadvantaged much more. The points commission report from 1999, which is a long time ago, addressed many of those issues in detail and looked at the positives and negatives. There was also widespread consultation. As Professor Looney mentioned, Ireland was not ready for change at that time. Nor was it ready in 2005 when Professor Looney came up with her proposals for a revised leaving certificate.

There is no perfect system. Ireland differs from some other countries because education has always been so high on the agenda and it has always been a social lifter. Most of us would come from rural and small farm backgrounds two or three generations ago, and over the generations the leaving certificate and education generally were what brought us to where we are. Whether that is good or bad, that is how it is perceived and that is why Irish people have such a respect for the education system and the leaving certificate.

I am equally puzzled as to why the NCCA is going ahead with revising syllabi while the Minister is looking at the proposals of the NCCA for an overall reform of senior cycle education. It may well be that the Minister and all of the decision makers, including those on the committee, will decide that there should be a better balance between the vocational and the academic, which we do not have. There are a lot of decisions implicit in the review and reform of senior cycle education. The NCCA should hold back. I am impressed by the teachers in subject associations. They have no other agenda and are willing to embrace change, but they do not know that there is little or no content in these new specifications. They are almost without content and there is no information on how they will be assessed. I am fully supportive of the Irish Science Teachers Association, the Irish Agricultural Science Teachers Association and the 12 different Irish language groups that are engaging in the consultation process on the revision of senior cycle Irish. Their concerns need to be listened to.

Professor Tom Collins: On the Senator's first question, it is useful to distinguish between formative and summative assessment. It is highly desirable that children, right up to leaving certificate level, would self-assess and peer-assess. Feedback from peers is a key part of the formative processes of assessment. Even learning how to manage feedback is itself an important part of that process.

The Senator asked a question about third level education which I addressed in my opening statement. Third level entry overwhelms second level and the senior cycle. I will go back to the earlier question of whether the process is fair. It is conducted fairly but we need to distinguish between the fair management of a process, on the one hand, and the outcomes, on the other. If we can predict the outcomes years before the examinations happen, which we can on the basis of socioeconomic background, then we know that the outcomes are not fair. That assumes a huge significance if those outcomes determine entry into third level education. It is not just gaining access that is at issue; it is also about gaining access to prestige courses, high earning programmes and the most desirable professional opportunities. For instance, if second level examination outcome is determining those routes, it means that entire geographic areas may well be disproportionately denied access to professions like medicine, law and veterinary. Entry into these professions is highly competitive but if the Dáil constituencies were to be reviewed and if it was found that the proportion of those doing medicine varied significantly from one constituency to another based on the socioeconomic structure of that constituency, then the Senator is answering his own question as to whether it is fair.

We need to find a different method for third level entry other than the second level exam. If we do not find that different method, then the possibilities for change in upper second level

education and for change to the exam become hugely constrained. Michael Sandel, a professor of philosophy at Harvard University, wrote about this recently. He favours the notion of a lottery because he says that every other system will be gamed by the better off.

Chairman: I have to stop Professor Collins there and bring in Deputy Ó Cathasaigh.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I wonder if Prometheus is the wrong person from Greek mythology to mention or if are we more like Sisyphus rolling the rock up the hill again. Camus said “One must imagine Sisyphus happy”, so let us undertake that with gusto. I found the presentations extremely informative. I wish the format was looser because there were so many points at which I would have liked to stop the witnesses and have asked them to explain particular points but the number of people involved would not allow that. I am particularly struck by Professor Looney’s idea of a social imaginary. I was thinking back to when the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, appeared on the “Late Late Show” when he was Taoiseach during one of the first Covid lockdowns. There was moral panic when he took a piece of paper from his pocket because our social imaginary is that we must know these things by rote. The idea is that you answer a question on Shakespeare but if the quote is not in your head you are not allowed to look at the text. That is a bizarre thing to ask a person to do. What kind of a measure is that? There is also a social imaginary that we have a meritocracy whereas in fact it is as Professor Collins said; it crystallises inequalities. Even though it is fair in some senses, it is not fair in so many other senses.

There are a huge number of things I would like to unpack but time will not allow me to do so. In the broadest sense, I wonder if we should look at the idea of splitting the summative part of the leaving certificate, if indeed it is summative because I think it only effectively quantifies that knowing element and that it does not touch the sides of either doing or being, and the matriculation element of it. Those are two separate purposes and we concentrate unduly on the matriculation element and it becomes extremely competitive. In medicine, veterinary or whatever else you need to be at a minimum standard in your academic capabilities but that may not be the best determinant of what kind of a doctor you will be, for example. We have all met doctors who might have been good with the scalpel but not fantastic in terms of their bedside manner, for example. On the other side of the coin, there are courses, which might not be as highly trafficked, for which the points intake is lower than the level of academic achievement that would be appropriate for the course.

If we decoupled the summative and matriculation elements, would we be able to state what the minimum academic standard is and that we would look at a students’ other abilities in the meantime? For example, we could look at students’ ability to engage in group work or to problem solve using social skills, which is incredibly important in a range of professions. Would that allow teachers to contribute in a better way? One of the things suggested in Professor O’Leary’s paper was that there could be a senior certificate. Perhaps there could be a teachers’ assessment in that. On the train up to Dublin, I was reading about a toolmaker and the idea of the person who is gifted with his or her hands and who is thinking about things in a particular way. I am not sure how that could be measured in the leaving certificate, whereas a teacher could tell you the student is a toolmaker and will be exceptional at it. I do not know if I have asked a question yet.

I want to give Professor Stobart the opportunity to expand on something he mentioned in his opening statement. In one sentence he stated that Ireland is very distinctive in terms of not involving teachers in the assessment process. I want to afford him the opportunity to expand on that, because he wants to free us a little from our own context. That would be welcome. I ask

the other witnesses to comment on the idea of decoupling the summative from the matriculation element.

I also want to give Professor Hyland the opportunity to expand on the idea of modularisation with a view to moving towards continuous assessment across the two-year cycle. I ask the Professor to outline how she thinks that would work in a secondary school setting. I will leave it at that.

Professor Gordon Stobart: My understanding, which may be wrong, is that teachers in Ireland say they do not want to examine their students. They are on the side of the students and want to teach their students, but they feel somebody else should examine them. I wonder if that needs some more investigation, partly because the teachers may then go off and examine other people's children. The notion that we separate teaching from assessment in that way may need some more investigation. Most cultures see a place for allowing teachers to make judgments. I think that feeds into that matriculation decoupling. If you have, as we do as part of the historic tradition, single subject examinations, it is very hard to introduce ideas like self-assessment or group contribution. Other systems have a much wider range. They are not reliant on single subject exams. The International Baccalaureate is one such example. There is a component of that that is about creativity, activity and service. It allows contributions in those areas to contribute to the certificate at the end. The same is true in the American system. You do not get into university simply on the basis of your points. You have to put in a lot more about your contributions, what you have done elsewhere, your teacher report and your grade point average from continuous assessment. That idea of broadening what is required to move on to tertiary education and the like allows these wider key skills to be brought into play. It will be the teachers who have to do that.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I put quite a specific point to Professor Hyland.

Professor Áine Hyland: On the modularisation, obviously, if a subject were to be modularised, it would have to happen at the point at which the curriculum was being revised. That is why I am disappointed the NCCA did not look at anything that was different. A certain approach was assumed and it is beginning to revise all of the syllabi along an assumed traditional approach. There has been no thinking outside of the box and trying to think of a new way of doing it. We had to do it in the university sector as part of the Bologna process. I was very involved in training the teachers in my own university in Cork over the past 20 years in revising the syllabi to ensure they were modularised and semesterised. It was an extraordinarily positive experience in which we all had to look at our own work, what we were teaching, how we would reorganise the courses into six- or 12-week modules and examine them at the end.

One would do the same thing with the leaving certificate. In some of the subjects, it would work; in some subjects, it might be more difficult. However, many of the subjects would, in fact, lend themselves to that. Starting in fifth year, and assuming there is a two-year leaving certificate programme involving a national externally assessed examination, the syllabi must be devised and planned in that way so that at the time the students sit Christmas tests, certain aspects would begin to feed into it, so that the students would be built up over the two-year period. I am assuming a lot of that marking would be done externally. I take the point Professor Stobart has made, but as I said, I have worked in the system for forty-odd years. I have waited to see if the teachers would change their attitude. I was one of the first members of the curriculum examiner board 40 years ago. We were all in favour of having the teachers assess their own students for certification. It has not happened. I am much more pragmatic at this stage. Since it has not happened, can we afford to wait another 40 years? My proposal would be doable now.

Dr. Jim Gleeson: On modularisation, it is where the leaving certificate applied programme is 25 years ahead of its time, with a semesterised system, the gradual accumulation of credit, a focus on skills rather than content, on subject integration, and on doing and being as well as knowing. However, I am very concerned about some of the talk I am hearing at the moment about taking away the ring fence around the leaving certificate applied programme until we know what is going to happen with the established leaving certificate.

Professor Michael O’Leary: I wish to make a brief point on the question of splitting the summative assessment from the progression element. I think, conceptually, it is useful to look at the leaving certificate as having three elements: an assessment element, a certification element and a progression element. All three can be split. If you were to split those three elements and approach each of them as a separate task, it would free up the process the Deputy indicated in the question he raised.

Senator Pauline O’Reilly: I thank all of our guests for attending today. I had to step out, but I was listening in my office. I thank them for their contributions. First, to Professor Collins, the argument about the education system is that its very function is to maintain social order and to control the social order. This offers us the opportunity to look at what social order we want and, therefore, what part education plays in that. I feel very strongly about this issue. I have guest lectured in pedagogy for several years. I see the students who come out of school and the narrow-mindedness of some of them. Others really want to explore things. The education system has worked for some, but the people on either margin are the ones who suffer. I told the Minister, Deputy Harris, last week that I do not think it is only about vocational skills and apprenticeships. I strongly feel people who are very gifted academically are also fundamentally failed by the system. That must be addressed. It is too easy to look at this as a question of developing apprenticeships or developing an education system around what our economy needs. That is not what education should be about; it should be about thinking. I enjoyed what Dr. Gleeson said about knowing, doing and being, from that perspective, because we do not know what the future holds.

A few questions came up about what others are doing and whether there is anything better out there. If COP26 has taught us anything, it is not to look at the lowest common denominator. We now have a chance. The programme for Government provides for a citizens’ assembly on education. This committee, the NCCA - faults and all that I recognise - and the Department are all doing work. There is a moment now where we could leap forward. We could be leaders and we could look at all of the problems. As Professor Looney has stated, when you think about the context we are in at the moment and the massive challenges nobody predicted, now is the opportunity to make these massive changes.

Professors Stobart and Hyland both made an interesting point on the willingness of teachers to move ahead with a different way of doing things. We have seen, during the pandemic, how the leaving certificate has changed. Students changed it, if you ask me. They had not done that before. There was a certain amount of that kind of difference in approach to assessment. Perhaps there is an opportunity there that we have not seen for the past 40 years. We should not forget that by being overly practical. While all of us, as thinkers and policymakers, want to be practical and have a practical route, we might also want a quite imaginative route. Those are my few thoughts on the matter. We are now having a fairly broad discussion. I would welcome further thoughts from the delegates. I have been very concerned about siloing generally since I entered politics. While I am concerned about different Departments doing different things, I believe the amount of siloing within one Department is incredible, as is evident when we look

at the work of the NCCA. As has been pointed out, that its work is being done at the same time as the kind of work we are doing makes absolutely no sense. How can we be persuasive? Since everything the delegates are saying will go on the record, how can they persuade people that it is critical that we break down the barriers, remove the opaqueness, stop infantilising individuals who are almost adults, regard teaching as mentorship rather than instruction, and assess what adults have managed to instruct almost-adults on.

Professor Tom Collins: I am happy that Senator Pauline O'Reilly raised the issue of high achievers. I would prefer to refer to people as "high achievers" rather than "gifted". The gifted population is really important but pretty small. On high achievers, the Senator has raised a really interesting point.

In the Centre for Assessment Research, Policy and Practice in Education, CARPE, in DCU, we carried out research in which we examined some of the reasons why Ireland, in studies such as PISA, is listed as having a lower proportion of students at the highest level of achievement than other countries that, on average, achieve the same as Ireland. We have fewer people than are predicted for us at the highest level of achievement. Part of the story comprises what we do with our 15-year-olds in school, the tasks and the nature of the learning we ask them to engage in. These are difficult to disentangle but I strongly suspect that what we do at the end of post-primary education has a big impact, even at 15 years of age, on not getting high achievers to the point where they should be. They are not achieving what they should.

Dr. Anne Looney: I want to speak on the issue of the transition from second level to tertiary education. The Senator mentioned the full continuum of achievement and ability in an inclusive system. An aspiration of our system is to be more inclusive.

Let me outline something of note in thinking about the transition from second level to higher education. Apropos of something Senator Mullen said, I work in the higher education space and, as such, am programmed to say we do not have enough resources to do everything we need to do; however, the emergence in Ireland of the tertiary sector, the changes coming in further education and training, the emergence of the new technological universities, and some changes in the way universities are working, driven by the human capital initiative, mean there is quite a shake-up in the range of offerings in tertiary education and pathways into it. DCU is home to Ireland's largest access programme and it also has students who enter through further education and training programmes and based on mature-entry criteria. We focus so much on the race for a small number of programmes in one or two institutions that get coverage in one or two newspapers that people believe there is a race. The vast majority of students get the course they want or list as second. They are very happy and do not end up changing. I include the cohort who did not do a leaving certificate examination, in respect of whom we are led to believe the world will stop revolving. Their first-year examination results were pretty much the same as they would have got had they done the leaving certificate examinations. Therefore, there are changes happening here that would give me cause for optimism.

Our system is the subject of considerable international interest. We are inundated with educational tourists who want to know how we are doing so much so well, why our students stay in the system and why they are broadly happy with it. In all of the conversations, the educational tourists end up scratching their heads over the leaving certificate examination. Although they say we are doing so much to work with students and change our system regarding inclusiveness and that we have a high-quality teaching profession, they end up almost aghast at the leaving certificate examination, as if to ask why we have not managed to address it yet. I am certainly with the Senator in asking whether this is the time for breaking down some silos and leading on

it. We could offer some insights that would have other countries examining what we are doing. We have the ingredients for it.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I thank all the guests for attending today. I found their contributions very interesting. I want to start with Professor Looney. I took on board her stimulating instruction to consider the educational imaginary. She is correct in stating the leaving certificate examination is really a social event and that it is embedded in Irish society. Every morning there is a leaving certificate examination in progress, there is significant coverage on the radio. When the results come out, there are photographs of children celebrating. My question may seem basic and ill-informed. Is it essential to have an assessment at the end of secondary education?

Dr. Anne Looney: It is a matter of providing students with a statement of their achievement as they move into and out of education. The junior certificate examination was previously the school-leaving examination; now 90% of the cohort stay on so it no longer has that function. Offering students a statement at the end of their education is probably done by most systems. How students are given that statement and what is done with it afterwards varies across systems, but generally at the end of the school system, a student should have some way of assessing what he or she has learned and getting some kind of recognition for what he or she has done. Most stages of education have some kind of assessment.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: The primary purpose of assessment, then, is to benefit the student in recognising what he or she has done.

Dr. Anne Looney: All quality assessment is focused on student learning. That is its first purpose. I would agree with that.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: It is not for the purpose of inducing learning assessment; it is to recognise what the student has done.

Dr. Anne Looney: Absolutely. If the assessment process is of good quality, then it is a motivator. We want students who want to do well in a test. In this regard, we should consider the number of students who said they really enjoyed the leaving certificate English examination because they had a choice as to whether they should do it, felt it was not the be-all and end-all and knew they had a calculated grade in the bag. They felt this because the stakes were lower. They liked the writing and enjoyed proving themselves. It was a really interesting moment.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: So assessment is essential for education.

Professor O’Leary and Dr. Gleeson both made the point that if we really want to achieve leaving certificate reform, we must, as Professor Collins said, sever the link between the leaving certificate examinations and entry to third level through the CAO points race. I have a tough question for Professor O’Leary: if we get rid of the link between the two, what should be the method by which people are admitted into third level institutions?

Professor Michael O’Leary: There are many good models we can consider. In France, anyone who gets the basic minimum qualification at the end of post-primary education is automatically entitled to higher education. Where there is a lot of competition for places, a university may accept people from the area closest to it, or it might hold interviews. We have some concerns about the latter. A student might have to provide additional evidence. In Sweden, for example, there is an assessment called the Swedish scholastic aptitude test, which is completely separate from what happens at post-primary level. We have models where for the most

part, once the student has the basic qualification or certification from post-primary education as regards ability to write in the native language, do mathematics, learn and think critically, most courses are open because they are not highly competitive. The problem happens at the competitive end. That is where the universities need to take some responsibility for the bottleneck and create an alternative to the CAO points system.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: If we manage to break the link between entry into third level institutions and the leaving certificate, what then would the leaving certificate look like? How would it be transformed by that?

Professor Tom Collins: It is a very interesting line of questions. I think back to 1967 when the primary certificate was abolished. I think 1967 was the last year it was conducted. That began a process for syllabus reinvention in primary level which has continued right up to the present day. Some of the assessment requirements are so tied in to such high stakes, that being access to third level. I would like to think that if that was removed, it would free up all the participants in second level education to engage themselves in a process of creative endeavour, which is largely precluded by the rigours of the exams at the moment. While it may be true that the competitive element only applies in some sectors of higher education, we should not underestimate the importance of the formation of ambition, which begins when a child is very young. We now know that a disadvantaged child is unlikely to aspire to the competitive professions and will have already set their targets within all the messages they receive about being low achievers. I do not fully accept the contention that because most programmes are not highly competitive the points system is not overwhelming second level.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I thank Professor Hyland for the practical suggestions contained within her report. I note, however, that while she says we should have 50% assessment prior to the terminal exam through modularisation, she thinks that should be done independently of the child’s teacher. Am I not correct in thinking that the student’s teacher is in a better position than anyone to assess the child? If it was the case that we could break the link between the CAO points race and the leaving certificate, much pressure would be taken off the teacher and the teacher would not be facing the obvious pressure that their decision is going to have a huge and consequential impact on what the child will do. Would Professor Hyland agree with that?

Professor Áine Hyland: There are a number of points there. Being pragmatic about the point regarding teachers not assessing their own students for certification purposes, that has been an embedded attitude among teachers. I take the point Professor O’Leary made that things may be changing now and that would be the ideal. I am more concerned to see something happening rather having what I have seen over the past 40 years or so.

I would have some concerns about a full decoupling of the leaving certificate from higher education. I have experience of the University of California system as I have two grandchildren in that university. They had to submit 14 separate pieces of evidence in their applications. We talk about stress but the leaving certificate is nothing compared to that. They had to submit all kinds of things like a video of their last football match or a tape recording of a music performance. There are so many pieces being taken into account. It is well-intentioned as it is an attempt to see the full child in a holistic way but it is very stressful for the students and totally difficult for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. That is my reservation.

At the time of the points commission there were a group of us who fully favoured what has been mentioned here today, namely, the lottery system. In other words, students would need to meet a certain minimum requirement for the programme that they are applying for and then all

those names would go into a hat and there would be a lottery. We got no national or political support for that idea. The national lottery system did not wash. There is a section about it in that report because it would solve many of the problems we are talking about.

As many of us have mentioned, there are really only a relatively small number of courses in third level that are driving the stress and are the high points courses, as they are now referred to. We looked at that and made suggestions that some of those could become graduate courses, rather than undergraduate courses, as is the case in some other countries. For example, that could apply to medicine and law and so on and all the students would go into a much more generic first year courses. We would then be close enough to the French system. However, the French system is a bit different because they have selection at the end of first and second year. The question is whether we are happy that our professors, who may have a vested interest, are selecting at that point. There is another issue there. There is no perfect solution.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: I welcome the witnesses. Like Senator Pauline O’Reilly, I was listening upstairs. Ordinarily we run out of questions but from listening to people I have no difficulty in finding questions today. It has been a great debate. I will start with Professor Hyland. She is in UCC and I am a former student of hers.

(Interruptions).

Chairman: Does she remember you?

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: I do not think she remembers. The real reason I want to begin with her is that she was on very important business in UCC at the weekend. She gave a citation to Don O’Leary, who we are going to meet next week. I recognise that Don got that honorary doctorate and I know it was a great privilege for him that Professor Hyland gave the citation.

Professor Áine Hyland: I should have mentioned that Don O’Leary runs the Cork Life Centre, which has picked up so many young people who have been failed by our own education system and brought them through successfully, against all the odds, over the last 15 years. We proposed that University College Cork should give him an honorary doctorate, which he more than deserved. He had been a republican prisoner, he started his own education in Portlaoise Prison and did wonderful work. He is an amazing man and I was delighted to do that.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: It is great to see Don’s work acknowledged. He would say himself that he did not come through a normal system. The leaving certificate is not a one-size-fits-all system and if there was ever a case for that, it is the Cork Life Centre. Last week I mentioned that I was a teacher for 13 or 14 years. I started to lose count after a period. I hated being asked questions like “Will this be on the test?” or “What are the chances of this question coming up?”. I welcome Professor Hyland’s comments about greater choice and testing what students know rather than trying to catch them out. We have all contributed to that over the years as teachers, educators, students, parents and policymakers. Professor Looney said earlier that it is culturally embedded in us that we are teaching to the exam and that that is quite evident.

My initial questions are for Professor Hyland because I know she has an interest in Irish as well. I have read her submission and followed her comments in the media. I taught one year of the junior certificate and I had serious concerns about the new L1 and L2 model. Professor Hyland has opinions on that herself and I would love to get them on the record. We are not

rewarding students who are taking higher level Irish in the current proposals. I ask Professor Hyland for her opinion on that.

Professor Áine Hyland: As it happens, I have a piece in *The Irish Times* today about the Irish syllabus. I have mentioned here the fact that under the new proposals from the national council there would be a distinction between schools - it is not clear whether it is schools or students but let us say it is schools - which are call L1 schools, in other words, schools teaching through the medium of Irish, such as Gaeltacht schools and other schools, and that there will be two separate syllabi, each at ordinary and higher level, in other words, there will be four new syllabi, but that the current foundation level programme will be abolished. That is a source of great concern for Irish teachers because the foundation level programme has been a very important programme for those who are not the high achievers - not the students we are concerned about when we are talking about higher education entry. At the other end of the spectrum, the concern is that in some Gaeltacht schools, for example, if they were required to teach the L1 curriculum, the higher curriculum, some of their students might not be able for it and that there would be problems there. The Irish language teachers, both those in Gaeltacht and Gaelscoileanna, are concerned, and the teachers in non-Irish language schools are concerned as well.

The proposal that we have suggested back to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA, is that it look again at the whole structure of what it is proposing, do not tie it necessarily into L1 and L2 schools, bring back the foundation course but add a fourth level or what we would call “the sárleibhéal” - the highest, higher than the higher level. That would be one option. Alternatively, we suggest it have a separate, much more advanced subject. We have talked earlier here today about the high achievers and those who have very high ambitions in a subject. There are a number of proposals being put forward by the Irish language groups. Unusually, all 12 organisations have come together. Because I come from an Irish-speaking background, I was working with them on this. We came up with this suggestion and they have all agreed to it. It is very unusual for 12 organisations to all agree to a proposal which is now being put to the NCCA and it is being asked to go back to the drawing board.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: I would have advocated for something similar to what the Professor Hyland has suggested for a long time, whether it is a Gaeilge fheidhmeach as an additional subject or bonus points, whatever the case may be.

Professor Áine Hyland: Exactly, for the fourth level.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: That is what we need to do for the sake of the subject-----

Professor Áine Hyland: I think so.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: -----and for the sake of fluency.

Professor Áine Hyland: It is getting a lot of support around the country.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: Yes. It is good to see.

I might open my other two questions to the rest of the contributors. In relation to educational disadvantage, in particular, that we were speaking about earlier, I might ask one or two of the speakers how they would reform the DEIS model if they had direct input. I taught in a DEIS school for 12 or 13 years and I see the benefits of the programme.

I have a question for Professor Stobart regarding the amount of subjects that we do juxta-

posed to those in England. It is something we spoke of last week. Is it the case that the Irish model has the right number of subjects being done or should we follow a course that may be happening across the water?

Chairman: Who wants to take it up?

Professor Áine Hyland: I certainly will. I very much take the Deputy's point about the DEIS schools and the fact that, as he will be probably aware, the Department has revisited the designation. There are a number of schools which meet the criteria but which have not yet been given designated status and they are not getting the additional resources. The other concern I would have is that almost 50% of children and young people from backgrounds that are disadvantaged do not attend DEIS schools.

DEIS schools are very much in clusters. As the Deputy will be aware, one will have a school that will get the designation because it has X% of students above a certain level who are coming from socially-disadvantaged backgrounds. Apart from that there are individual students, possibly, for example, Traveller children, who are not close to a designated DEIS school and are attending ordinary non-designated schools. There are no additional resources as such available for them.

The other issue is they often miss out on some of the special access programmes that are additionally funded in higher education. Many of the access programmes are targeted specifically to DEIS schools, which is a good thing, but then young people who are from disadvantaged backgrounds but are not in a DEIS school are not eligible for some of those. While I am supportive of what exists already for DEIS schools and, indeed, DEIS should be enhanced in some areas because some areas are very disadvantaged, there are individual students and some schools which should be in the scheme and are not in the scheme yet.

Chairman: I have a couple of questions and then I will go back to the other members for brief questions.

Continuing on from Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan's question on educational disadvantage, it is a huge issue in Ireland as well as in many other countries. Many children who come from disadvantaged homes do not go on to senior cycle or maybe they go into third year and drop off. Maybe it is because they have not got the confidence to go on for leaving certificate. If there was to be continuous assessment and if the leaving certificate was made easier for that type of student, do you believe there would be higher attainment by students from disadvantaged areas?

Professor Áine Hyland: I think so. We have to look separately at them. To some extent, some of the new access programmes have done that. For example, in UCC, which is the one I am familiar with, up to 15% of our places, and on some courses 25% of places, are set aside for early school leavers or students who have not done the leaving certificate, much less done well enough in the leaving certificate. They can bypass the CAO system. That is why I emphasised at the beginning that it is a matter for each university. They have the freedom to do that, for example, the programme that qualified Don O'Leary, that is, the youth and community work programme in UCC. Maynooth had something similar. Some 50% of the places on that programme were allocated for students who did not get the points in the leaving certificate. They either were early school leavers or mature students, or they had come through further education courses. There is much potential flexibility in the higher education system if they would use it to its full advantage. I do not know if that helps.

In fact, as Professor Looney stated earlier, on a lot of these issues it is worth looking at what is happening already. There is a lot happening already, sometimes on a small scale and sometimes not in the very competitive courses. Where we would have, say, 50% of places in youth and community available, there might be only 5% in medicine because it is difficult to get them to agree, for various reasons, to give more of their places.

Some of that has been going on for a long time but it is happening more and more now. Overall, between all the various categories of students, for example, students with special needs, students from educational disadvantage and students coming from further education, I reckon that approximately 20% of all higher education places are going to those students. Possibly, only 70% or so of all first-year places, or maybe even less, are available through the CAO. It varies a lot and there is a lot of flexibility there if institutions want to use it.

Chairman: I will ask Dr. Looney to comment on my original question and also the next one. I will ask Professor O'Leary to contribute as well, after Dr. Looney.

I like Dr. Looney's language when she said, "cultural obsession". It describes the leaving certificate exactly the way I would. It is an obsession. We knock people's confidence with the present-day leaving certificate. I refer to Deputy Jim O'Callaghan's comments when he said that for weeks before the leaving certificate, the exam is all over the media - print, radio, television. We frighten the bejesus out of an awful lot of students in the two months leading to the leaving certificate. From the minute they get up in the morning they are exposed to it. When they come home in the evening it is on the radio. It is in the print media and social media. It is everywhere. On the introduction of continuous assessment, as I said to Professor Hyland a significant number of students do not have confidence. They can come from the most well-off of backgrounds. Due to that lack of confidence, their real potential is not realised. It is caused by the cultural obsession, the points race in the CAO and issues like that. It is a mad, crazy situation. I ask the witnesses to comment on that and on the original question I put to Professor Hyland.

Dr. Anne Looney: The Chairman articulated how children from disadvantaged backgrounds can feel that school is not for them and they disconnect. What is the role of assessment in helping them to connect? Certainly, it is within assessment processes that give students multiple opportunities to achieve such as if students were told that their piece of work would count towards their exam and that they would have three attempts at it. On their first attempt, they would receive feedback and then they could work on it again and again. That could build a student's confidence rather than the once-off exam in a clinical hall where they get a result but do not understand how they got it. That could be a positive motivator for students.

In the context of where we now live, as I said earlier there is a risk that in introducing continuous assessment, each one could become like a mini examination. Just as the teacher is sitting down with a student providing feedback, someone else is doing a Saturday course offered by a company. We would have to deal with the cultural obsession issues. I certainly believe it would be more motivating. If one wants a sense of the cultural obsession - with due respect to my colleague, Professor Hyland, and Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - one can consider the conversation about Irish. At the same time, we are talking about the cultural obsession, we think a way to promote Irish is to tell some students that there are four levels of Irish and they will be doing the bottom level. I guarantee that the kids who will be doing the bottom level will be the kids the Chairman are talking about. Therefore, the whole philosophy of a common level and a wider pathway at junior cycle was about not messaging and not putting students in boxes too early and giving them multiple opportunities to succeed. Equally, the issuing of bonus points

is a very blunt instrument. Our cultural obsession is to reward the ones who work really hard and do higher level and give them a few bonus points because that is our currency for success. Changing our mode of assessment can change the way we engage with students around assessment. I am not preparing them for the test; I am working with them to help them achieve in a piece of continuous assessment. That could be a big motivator. A distracting argument people often make is that students will do the project at home and that will obviously involve bringing in some social capital. It needs to be an in-classroom discussion with learners. It needs to happen in schools. There are some really good examples of that happening in schools already but teachers feel they have to stop doing them when they enter the examination season. Therefore, it is a question of how do we strike that balance.

Professor Michael O’Leary: I want to make two quick points. I will remind people of what Dr. Jim Gleeson said about the leaving certificate applied programme. There are some really good practices in the programme. Not that many students do it but it speaks to a lot of what we are talking about in terms of reform. The second point is there is some anecdotal evidence from the involvement of teachers in certifying their own students from 2020 that a higher percentage of students from disadvantaged schools progressed into higher education. A couple of really good examples of that were picked up by the press. People said that they graduated 70% of their students into further and higher education for the first time in their history. That is amazing.

Chairman: I have another question that perhaps Professor Collins and Dr. Gleeson can comment on, in addition to a question for Professor Stobart.

Does either Professor Collins or Dr. Gleeson have an opinion on how we could incorporate the 12-month transition year programme into a leaving certificate final assessment? There is a large number of people doing transition year and there is a significant amount of positivity about it. An awful lot of students call it “the doss year” but I think it is far from a doss year because they learn a huge amount of common sense during it. If one wants to learn common sense, that is the year in which to learn it. Students go on work placement and gain experience and there is a huge amount they can learn in those 12 months. If we are to have leaving certificate reform and to have some form of continuous assessment - although I do not believe it is the be all and end all either - can we work the transition year into a final year assessment? Professor Collins can answer first and then Dr. Gleeson.

Professor Tom Collins: I agree with everything the Deputy has said in that it is a quality programme. It was formerly a problem - I am not sure of the current figures - that disadvantaged children were less likely to do it than the better-off children. Notwithstanding that, a lot of the work has been done on transition year. Dr. Gerry Jeffers, in Maynooth, for instance has done a major evaluation and has given a positive assessment of it. The risk with tying it into the leaving certificate is that it would kill all of that. That is the real risk to the possibilities for creativity and wandering outside of narrow instrumental purposes. If that is assessed, unless it is through the formative method we talked about earlier, it might change the character of the programme somewhat. I am interested in the concept of portfolios. Students can come out of transition year with a portfolio of achievement. That is something they can take with them to various places and is something they can look back on as a composite statement about themselves. I do not at all doubt the educational value of what the programme is doing. If it is used for summative assessment in the way we have approached summative assessment to date, I would be afraid that the entire aesthetic of the programme would be sacrificed in the context of the assessment protocols.

Dr. Jim Gleeson: I agree with much of what Professor Collins has said. As referred to earlier by Ms Tara Kelly, clerk to the committee in the online foyers, it is unfortunate that we are talking about leaving certificate reform rather than senior cycle reform. Having said that, many schools have domesticated transition year to a state where it is not recognisable as against what it was originally intended, and that is the nature of things. Arguably, the same situation has happened with the leaving certificate applied. My fundamental answer to the Deputy's question is that both transition year and the leaving certificate applied, LCA, in different ways, share a very different culture to the traditional leaving certificate establishment culture that Dr. Anne Looney and others have been talking about. We need to be very careful about interfering with those cultures because we could end up the poorer for it.

Chairman: In the context of the breadth of subjects available in the leaving certificate, does Professor Stobart consider there to be too many subjects available to students in the Irish system? Can it be said that if there were fewer subjects, there would be less pressure on students doing the leaving certificate?

Professor Gordon Stobart: I take it that typically there are about seven subjects in the leaving certificate. Is that right? If I take some of the earlier points that have just been made about the transition year, I would say we could do with fewer subject-specific assessments and have more other kinds of assessments in there. Rather than assess transition year, which I could see being a problem because it would quickly become an assessment issue, I would ask what the best of transition year is and whether we can develop it further within the leaving certificate in order that you would get this broader certificate at the end. The latter would be like the International Baccalaureate and the baccalaureate where there is philosophy, practicals and orals, among other things, that give us a better, wider picture of what a student can do. I am no fan of the English three A Levels because that narrows it down even more, and there is no other side stuff. It just allows students to drop maths, English or whatever they want and concentrate on three subjects, which is not a broad-based education at that stage. If I was looking at this from the outside, I might ask why not broaden the certificate. That may mean reducing some of the subject-specific components.

Chairman: I have a quick question for Professor Hyland. I do not want to be ageist in any way, but she has spoken about her vast years of experience. She compiled a report 30 years ago, and I can quote on that. Are we, in Professor Hyland's opinion, any closer to leaving certificate reform?

Professor Áine Hyland: Well, I hope we are. This has been going on for a very long time and Professor Looney, as former head of the NCCA, would also be aware of that. We are closer. The innovations that had to be introduced because of Covid have changed the environment. That certainly is true, and we are probably more ready than we ever were before. It is an opportunity to be grasped now. This committee will have a strong voice in advising the Minister to really think creatively and outside the box and do something different. We should not be let get on to the conveyor belt on which the NCCA currently seems to be - more of the same. We should not be doing more of the same. It is time for change and we are ready for it. There are many examples there.

Chairman: I have a question for Dr. Looney to do with the NCCA report. I have stated at meetings of the committee, and it is no secret, that I am very disappointed because the Department of Education has the NCCA report for a number of months now. It knows the important job of work we are doing at this committee. All of the members are really committed and have been fantastic in the questions they have posed. I am against the committee publishing any re-

port until the NCCA report is published. It would be very foolish of us to publish a report if we have not had the NCCA before us. The report cannot come before us because we are waiting for the Department of Education to publish it. If she can comment, will Dr. Looney indicate what she envisages?

Dr. Anne Looney: That question is unfair on so many levels. I would like to say is that-----

Chairman: What would Professor Looney like to see in the report?

Dr. Anne Looney: I was chief executive of the NCCA until 2015. While I am not up to speed with the NCCA's current work, I am up to speed with its ongoing commitment to consultation and contestation. As chief executive, I always said - and I know from the current chief executive, Arlene Forster - that the fundamental belief is that if there is no contestation, we might as well pack our bags and go home. It is very important that we, as a nation, engage in contestation on all of the issues, whether it is learning outcomes or the position of Irish. When we stop doing so, the school curriculum becomes something very frightening indeed. It is very important we have those debates. If the consultation on senior cycle is anything to go by, it is likely to map out a range of options from the relatively conservative and small scale to the more extensive. As Professor Hyland said, the pandemic has kind of changed the game and the dynamic around where we sit on education. There is a moment here that may mean that when the report is published, it may get a reaction not about being ready for more of the same but one that says we need to engage with a bigger range of change. Other than that, I have to be very up front and say, like other people on the committee, I have not seen the report.

Chairman: I will give each member three minutes and then ask for a very brief reply from the witnesses.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I will be as quick as I can. I ask the witnesses is for their thoughts on this year's leaving certificate. Covid numbers are rising. Should we have some form of continuous assessment such as there was last year for the leaving certificate? What concerns do the witnesses have for tens of thousands of leaving certificate students who are facing sitting an exam in June of next year? Professor Stobart said IT plays a limited role-----

Chairman: Professor Stobart has just left. I will get Deputy Conway-Walsh to get back to him.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I will continue because this was also in Professor O'Leary's submission. What would be the challenges in implementing a totally computer-based assessment system within the education system?

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I wanted to come back in on a couple of questions. Does Professor Hyland think we are better off making the decision on the Irish language assessment? Not us, because we are not making the decision. Could it be made after we have done this work and seen what the NCCA comes up with as a whole on leaving certificate reform or even a citizens' assembly? Even Dr. Hyland's suggestions and those from the group of 12 are based on the current model. I take on the board Dr. Looney's comments that it might be just more of the same and recreate disadvantage and this social order we know has huge problems.

I have just come from visiting Traveller halting sites yesterday. That is the very pointy edge and I would hate to think that coming out of this process that we do not really acknowledge that. We have said we do not want to lose the changes that have been made over the past couple of years for those who are disadvantaged and have seen a change. Not losing that has to be part

of this report. How do we hold on to that, while still acknowledging some of the challenges teachers have with the assessment model put in place for it?

We have not looked at leaving certificate applied that much. Significant reform could really take much from the leaving certificate applied model. I have not even considered it. Maybe we do not need to reinvent the wheel. The lottery has not really taken off. Probably the best way to change things fundamentally is to change that social set up, but is there a midway point which might have more support? It could include some form of meritocracy, even though I do not agree with that either because, fundamentally, there is no such thing. There are a million questions there.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I will start by thanking witnesses again. This has been entertaining, as well as informative and educational. As the lads said to St. Paul at the Areopagus, “We must have you back some time to tell us some more”. Perhaps a good context for that would be the NCCA report, when we see it. One word we have not used very much today is “competitiveness”. In other times and places when we talk about the education system and our assessment system, we talk about our economy and the need to stay competitive. Where is industry in all of this in terms of what it might want? Is it possible to craft a gentle senior cycle curriculum and assessment system that takes into account the very important issues of social justice about which all the witnesses have spoken, especially Professor Collins? At the same time, does it endanger or in any way put in issue the question of our competitiveness? I am not making a point; I am asking a question. Is there a tension or is any such suggestion imaginary?

Chairman: Deputy Conway-Walsh had a question for Professor Stobart. I will return to him after the other contributors have finished.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: It was on information technology and the opportunities and challenges around introducing IT into assessment.

Professor Áine Hyland: Senator O’Reilly made very good points. On the Irish language, my personal opinion is that until the Minister gives us her views and decisions on the NCCA report on the overall reform of senior cycle, which I assume will look at leaving certificate applied and so on, the individual syllabi should be changed. There will be major changes. I suggest that the NCCA freeze everything and hold back until it knows. Given what we have heard this morning, we might be optimistic that there may be some very exciting - I do not want to use the word radical - change. In that context, we might be looking at subjects in quite a different way.

Senator Mullen raised a point about competitiveness. Industry is represented on some of the NCCA committees, so its voice is heard. Some of the skills in the framework for senior cycle, with which the Senator may be familiar, take account of the voice of industry. We must keep reminding ourselves when people are critical about undue rote learning and so on that international employers are satisfied that the Irish people whom they recruit, both locally and internationally, do in fact have many of the skills and competitiveness that industry needs. Young people are quite competitive. While some may find the leaving certificate quite stressful, others quite enjoy the element of competition that is engaged. It is a very difficult balance and I take the point on how to satisfy everyone across the spectrum.

On the lottery, I do not know what there is halfway. We could be at a point of change now. The universities and higher education institutions can choose to have some courses chosen by lottery and others not chosen that way. Much of it is a case of logistics. The sheer numbers coming through, 60,000 annually, means that adding something extra is a challenge. The CAO

is done entirely by computer. There is no personal intervention between the marks and the places that are offered. Much of what we have discussed this morning would require personal intervention which, with 60,000 new entrants, is quite difficult. I know from interviewing in the very long distant past when we interviewed all students applying for teacher education that it was hugely demanding on time. The numbers then were nowhere near as high as they are today.

Chairman: I have to limit responses to one minute because we have to be out of the committee room by 2 p.m. in order that it can be sanitised before the next meeting.

Dr. Anne Looney: On next year's leaving certificate, there have already been adjustments to the examination around shortening papers, etc. I make a plea on behalf of the class of 2022 that there be no speculation. The last thing they want is people discussing whether there will be a leaving certificate. That would add greatly to stress levels. We know we can do it if required. We need to hold firm and stick with the plan we have. That is my view having observed some of the difficulties that were caused when people began to speculate about it.

Industry is represented on the NCCA, as Professor Hyland said, by representatives from a number of companies. It is interesting to see the discourse around what companies, industry and employers need now coalesce so much with what we talk about in education, namely, resilience, inclusiveness and creativity being as important as the ability to handle advanced calculus and algebra. There is very much a shared agenda in that regard and that is useful. There is also strong industrial support in Ireland for keeping a wide range of subjects for leaving certificate and keeping that breadth. That is seen as one of our advantages. We are one of the few systems where every student studies mathematics until the end of schooling. That is really important.

I was thinking about Senator O'Reilly's point about the lottery. I am intrigued by the idea of a qualifying point and that there would be a threshold of points, which would be the qualifications Professor O'Leary indicated we know are needed to succeed, for example, verbal skills, mathematics, etc., and that there could be a blended system where someone might reach a threshold and then enter a lottery for places. It would be worth the committee pushing the boat out in its deliberations and seeing what comes back in the wave of disdain. The first thing it will encounter is the fact that Irish people will not trust a lottery because someone is fiddling it somewhere.

Chairman: Not at all. That would never happen.

Dr. Jim Gleeson: Clearly, a lottery would have to have ground rules. The fine detail would be critical. I take Professor Hyland's point on interviews. We tried them out in Thomond College a long time ago. Reliability was a huge problem with interviews, with multiple interview panels involved.

On Senator Mullen's question on industry and so on, human capital needs have tended to dictate Irish education policy very strongly for many years. Of course, those needs are important but, as Professor Collins and others said, social capital is equally important and is being recognised as such, even at OECD level. As with all the balances we have been talking about, that is a critical balance.

I thank Senator O'Reilly for her remarks about the leaving certificate applied. As Professor Stobart said, both it and transition year give the possibility of beginning to reimagine the established leaving certificate. They can be the stimulus and the foundation of that. We need to look at them in that way.

Professor Michael O’Leary: I will address two points. First, we are some way off having a total computer-based leaving certificate programme. However, important steps have been made in that we have a new computer science programme where the examination is computer based. It is on the way, which is great.

Second, I would make a plea. Please, let us not forget what we learned in 2020 and 2021 about teacher involvement in their own students’ assessment. In my view, most teachers will know more about their students’ achievement than any exam or continuous assessment will be able to tell us or them. That conversation must not be shut down.

Professor Tom Collins: The main question I am left with at the end of this session is that I wonder about the extent to which the importance of the leaving certificate examination is derived from its role in allocating places at third level. If that role were removed, how would a leaving certificate exam stand in the public imagination and the significance it holds for the curricular experience in second level? Competitiveness is best served by maximising a successful outcome and successful encounter with school in the general population. We know that most children are happy in school at second level but about 25% are not. That 25% is predominantly working class. Male working class students in particular present a particular challenge. Subgroups such as Travellers, which Senator O’Reilly mentioned, are massively disadvantaged within the sector.

It is useful to think less of disadvantaged areas - around DEIS - than to think of disadvantaged people. However, it is always difficult to target disadvantaged people.

My final point is that reform in education drips slowly. It is very difficult. We were asked earlier who the winners are who are managing to block it. There are many winning in different ways under the current system, and the combination of those winners will probably make reform difficult, slow and painful.

Chairman: Will Professor Stobart make a final comment?

Professor Gordon Stobart: To be brief, I say “Amen” to everything Professor Collins has said. I found it very profound. Regarding the IT challenges, the irony is that most of our students can teach us about IT. They live in that digital world and the examination industry is well behind. What can we expect? Interestingly, students in university in Norway now do all their examinations online. It has spread to schools where in some of the examinations one can access resources online. In some, you can even go onto the Internet as a student online to find your answer. There is a world there where more adaptive and more imaginative examinations are possible and we trail the youth in that respect.

Chairman: I thank Professor Looney, Professor O’Leary, Dr. Gleeson, Dr. Hyland, Professor Collins and Professor Stobart for appearing before the committee. The discussion has been very informative and productive. I thank the witnesses for the exchange of views and for imparting their knowledge, expertise and insights regarding reform of the leaving certificate. It is very much appreciated. This is a huge body of work we have been and are doing over a number of weeks. As we continue our hearings, the different views that are available are getting even more interesting. It is very much appreciated. I also thank the members for their input.

The joint committee adjourned at 2.02 p.m. until 11 a.m. on Tuesday, 23 November 2021.