

# Examinations

There are times when we like to think that "*The one real object of education is to leave a man in the condition of continually asking questions*". But very soon examinations present a different reality.

As teachers, we very often take examination results personally, as if we, and not our students, sat the exams. While a huge number of factors influence the outcome of exams, and most of those outside our control, inevitably we feel the responsibility if some of our students don't do as well as we hoped. If we can identify any direct responsibility on our part, we adjust our teaching accordingly for future exams.

Examination results have another importance. They have a strong influence on the uptake of subjects at Leaving Certificate. Students and parents perception about the difficulty or ease with which grades are obtained at Junior Cert and Leaving Cert influence students' choices of option subjects.

## Adjusting Results

This can be clearly seen in recent years in the campaign to increase the uptake of students taking science subjects at Leaving Cert. It is clear that those who are promoting science believe that exam papers can be made harder or easier and that marking schemes can be adjusted to increase or lower grades. "*The difficulty of the current approach of silently relaxing the marking scheme in Physics and Chemistry is that the message is not getting through...*" (Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Science)

## Exam Results and History

In the case of History, exam results at Leaving Cert, but also at Junior Cert, have contributed to the decline of the subject at Leaving Cert. This year's Leaving Cert Higher level results compared favourably with other subjects (even though the failure rate is still high compared to Geography). But there has been a legacy of lower Honours results, especially at B and C grades, and higher failure rates which has created the impression of a 'difficult' subject - a subject with poorer returns relative to the effort put into work and study. More students have opted for other subjects where the grades appear more favourable.

A second effect has been amongst students who have continued with Leaving Cert History - some 'Honours' students have dropped to 'Ordinary' level. Since these students have no difficulty with the Ordinary level paper, this makes it more difficult to devise a marking scheme which will cater for both extremes.

The Ordinary Level results present a further difficulty. The very high failure rate (19% in 2002; 24% in 2000) is due in large part to the structure of the paper. Will the lessons here be applied to the new Leaving Cert paper?

## Junior Cert

But the problems at Leaving Cert begin at Junior Cert. Exam results here have also introduced distortions into the balance between Ordinary Level and Higher Level. At Junior Cert, the percentage doing Ordinary Level History has increased in the past 10 years and is greater than Geography. A third of Junior

Cert History students are now doing Ordinary level and this is a trend which must be reversed. The trend is at least partly due to the low Honours rate (70% ABC) and the relatively high failure rate (10%) in Higher level papers; indeed, the average failure rate has increased between 1995-1997 and 2000-2002. The perceived difficulties of the Higher level paper and course have pushed potential Higher level students into Ordinary level. This has knock on effects on the take-up of History at Leaving Cert as well as the quality of the answering.

## What can be done?

Exams (and individual questions) can be of 2 kinds; those that test what students know, and those that test what students don't know. If it is the latter, nothing can compensate for the shock to students on the day of the exam.

Adjustments need to be made to History exams to ensure

- a higher % ABC in Higher level Junior Cert
- lower failure rates at Higher and Ordinary levels Junior Cert.
- a lower failure rate at Leaving Cert Higher and Ordinary levels

At Junior Cert, there is a very fine balance between grades and all it takes is one 20 mark question (such as Q.4A(ii) in 2001) to cause difficulties. At Leaving Cert, it may be too late to change now in the last years of the old course, but the lessons must be applied in examining the new course. However, for whatever time is left in the old course there should be

- a continuation of the fair choice of questions at Higher level
- a fairer choice of questions in paragraphs and long answers at Ordinary level

## The New Leaving Cert Exam

It appears that the new Leaving Cert Ordinary level exam will be fairer than the present one.

- The Special Research Topic and maybe the Documents Question will be of help in improving grades
- The balance in the other questions has shifted in favour of the shorter questions - instead of the current system of 60% for long answers, 20% for paragraphs and 20% for short questions, this will change to 40% for long answers, 30% for paragraphs and 30% for stimulus questions.

However, it is more difficult to see how the balance in the new Higher level exam will work out.

The Special Research Topic will remain the same, though now with the advantage of being ready before the exams.

The Documents Question will depend largely on the documents used and the difficulty of the questions.

But the greatest problem is that instead of the current choice of 1 out of 5 to answer in each section, the new exam will have a reduced choice of 1 out of 3. This will pose greater difficulties for students and, all other things being equal, will lower grades. But that is what has been decided.

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