

Finding the missing link

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Is it time to sacrifice the sacred cow of Irish education - the Leaving Cert?

The knowledge economy does not begin in the workplace. It begins in the classroom. Despite recent developments to shift the focus away from the traditional Leaving Certificate model - namely the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) - the traditional Leaving Certificate remains central to Irish education and one could argue that it is its sacred cow. This is reflected by the high value placed on the traditional Leaving Certificate by Irish society which is largely due to the longevity of the examination, but also due to the common understanding of what it entails - exam structures, assessment and appeals procedures. Consequently, the results of this examination have substantial public credibility.

The traditional Leaving Certificate's centrality to Irish education has perpetuated a lack of guiding principle, producing an obsession with an intermediate aim - university entrance. The ideal purpose for modern education in Ireland, however, is to produce highly skilled, flexible people, potential leaders, entrepreneurs and participants in the knowledge society.

Today's examination system remained largely static for the 20th century, but was rigorous and could be applied, with limited alterations, to the process of determining university admission. A system created by universities to facilitate this process was the Central Applications Office (CAO), whereby university places are granted on a combination of prerequisites, quotas and student demand. The CAO, as former Trinity College Provost Watts

outlines, was created to eliminate nepotism. However, it now encourages an approach to education where students become points-maximising rentiers, as opposed to learners.

So what has the traditional Leaving Certificate really become? It has become a sacred cow and a publicly perceived gatekeeper to the good life. Those who excel, more often than not, assume university places in preparatory programmes for the protected sectors - medical, paramedical, legal, public and civil service. Entry into these protected sectors is seen as the main corridor to success and high income. Students and parents, therefore, see high points and entry to those university courses as the key to a secure future.

The CAO system has turned out to be poorly positioned to respond to what is blatant exploitation. Certainly, if the universities were to pick and choose there would be potential for much unfairness, whereas the State has a duty to ensure that citizens are treated fairly. Is it any fairer to put all trust in the traditional Leaving Certificate - which educationalists condemn and Ministers fail to reform - and the CAO? High points themselves have a clear signalling effect that becomes self-perpetuating: the higher the points, the higher the demand for high-point courses.

This also produces the opposite problem: a fall in demand or an increase in supply is perceived by the public as a sign of low standards because the points go down. The State, therefore sends, by proxy, a clear message to parents and students that all you need to do to get what you want is to "achieve the points".

The ability to obtain good points through so-called "grind schools" and "cramming", by focusing on regurgitation and not deep knowledge, is corrosive in many different ways. While overall higher education participation has increased, including historically under-represented demographics, it is still uneven and the barriers to high-points courses are high. Access programmes are useful, expanding access to a limited number of non-traditional

students, but they are, at the same time, an indictment of unresolved failures at the primary and secondary levels.

To those who see high points as the key to quality, ponder this: do all students learn in the same way? Should we ignore the plethora of international research on multiple intelligences? Do students learn best in isolation? Is one main method of written assessment reliable? Perhaps most importantly, does the leaving certificate effectively prepare students for "the real world" and inspire a love of learning, or does it encourage rote learning and predictable examinations?

Having a university cohort that has been educated in the traditional Leaving Certificate style - with no continuous assessment, no practical skills and memory-based - makes it extremely difficult for even the most engaged university lecturer to deliver the kind of education we need: students are rentiers even before they cross the campus entrance.

The current mathematics senior syllabus serves as a good example to highlight some of these issues. Research by Queen's University academics Elwood and Carlisle found that questions in traditional Leaving Certificate mathematics examinations were focused on "pure" mathematics and they were underutilising real-life contexts in questions. The National Council for Curriculum Assessment (NCCA) warned that such a lack of authentic assessment modes could result in "student alienation and disenchantment with the subject".

The global movement towards "realistic mathematics education" (RME), emphasising problem-solving in "real-life" situations, has been absorbed into the revised Primary School Mathematics Curriculum, but has as yet to permeate post-primary education. A new RME-driven initiative by the NCCA, entitled "Project Maths" is currently being piloted in a small number of schools. This project intends to address issues such as the transition from primary school and lack of "real-life" mathematics. Full replacement syllabuses are due in September

2012. Though laudable, Project Maths seems to be too little, too late, coming a decade after changes to the primary system.

Those familiar with the mathematics curriculum are acutely aware that for as long as an asterisk lies beside an "examinable proof" in the textbook, the mathematics learned by students will be determined by the regurgitation-driven traditional Leaving Certificate and not by the syllabus.

It is convoluted governance that fails the education system too. The Department of Education has overall responsibility for second-level education, but it is delivered by all sorts of different schools - community schools, VEC, religious, Gaelcholáistí - and the curriculum comes through the NCCA. However, the NCCA is reliant on the Minister to execute its recommendations. The CAO is a non-profit private firm owned by the universities and institutes of technology which is still distant from the Minister, as there is no direct link to it, and the NCCA has no link with the CAO. In a final governance conundrum, day-to-day administration of the exams is managed by the State Examinations Commission.

The traditional Leaving Certificate, buttressed by the CAO, is the quintessential sacred cow of the Irish education system. It is founded on an outmoded curriculum that has not reformed due to the acceptance, by the public and the powers that be, of a points "game" based on an untouchable exam based on ability to regurgitate, not on testing deep knowledge.

This system is further plagued by structures that dissolve authority and responsibility, eliminating any possibility of leadership or declaration of objectives.

If Ireland is serious about creating the much-talked-about knowledge society, it must reform its secondary curriculum and face reinventing the Leaving Certificate. It must make

Adapted from: *The Irish Times*. Monday 6th October 2008. <https://www.irishtimes.com/business/finding-the-missing-link-1.891939>. (Accessed 5th March 2019).

understanding, not the acquisition of points, the primary aim. We need leaders, entrepreneurs and able participants in the knowledge society, not rentiers.

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