

Does the Leaving Certificate curriculum prepare students for third-level education?

Education & Design / Fine Art: Curriculum Studies



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“Find and discuss an example where curriculum (broad definition) has had a socially negative impact (past or present) in Ireland or elsewhere (countries/regions outside of Ireland, past or present)?”

Does the Leaving Certificate curriculum prepare students for third-level education?

I vividly remember my first day of 5th Year, back in 2019. It was time to get back to work after completing Transition Year, a year in which my school set much fewer expectations. As soon as I sat down for my first lesson, my teacher immediately set the tone. Dismissively, we were told that our efforts and work completed during the Junior Certificate no longer mattered. She told us to forget about it, and she wasn't the only teacher with that mentality. It quickly became clear that the Leaving Certificate 'points race' was the be-all and end-all of our academic studies so far. There was no hiding it once the results came out. High achievers were praised. Siblings of peers called out, named and shamed. Who got their points and who didn't.

In this essay, I will explore the detrimental effect of schools emphasising the need to succeed in the Leaving Certificate. More specifically, does the Leaving Certificate curriculum adequately prepare students for third-level education, or just maximising points? I have chosen this topic as it directly affected my schooling experience. As a high achiever, I worked hard in preparation for my Leaving Certificate exams. In response to my hard efforts I achieved 625 points, the maximum points that can be awarded. However, my points did not secure me a place at the National College of Art and Design. After completing secondary school, I attended the Drogheda Institute of Further Education to pursue a Portfolio Course. Only then did I earn my place in my dream course. Therefore, my experience allows me to question whether the Leaving Certificate actually prepares students for third-level education, or whether too much emphasis is placed on the points race.

The first argument I wish to put forward is the emphasis of the curriculum on points rather than preparation for third-level education. “As typically observed [10], students often respond to the question “How did you do in the Leaving Cert?” by saying how many points they got, and so make efforts to maximise their points” (Malone and

McCullagh, 2018, pp 31-32). I recall peers curating their Leaving Certificate subjects to gain the most points, rather than choosing subjects that fuelled their intrinsic motivation to learn. One student in my year, an excellent artist, chose Japanese over Art as one of his subjects. Leaving Certificate Art is notorious for being one of the most difficult subjects in which to achieve an H1. He believed that the Japanese exam had one of the smallest numbers of students sitting the final exam, ensuring him an 'easier' H1 once he learnt how to write the alphabet. "It seems likely that most students will aim to maximise their points, subject to the options available..." (Malone and McCullagh, 2018, p 32). If students' motivation is shaped by the 'points race' rather than intrinsic motivation to study a subject they wish to pursue after secondary school, a detrimental effect can be depicted. When a student does not enjoy a subject, they tend to memorise key concepts to be regurgitated. By contrast, when a student chooses a subject that they are passionate about, they can reach a much deeper level of learning. This, in turn, builds foundations of knowledge that they may wish to deepen in their journey through third-level education. This effect was one I also witnessed through the extracurricular lens, through the pressure not to participate in extracurricular activities. Said activities are vital, especially in terms of the hidden curriculum. These activities can serve as a form of stress relief for students under pressure, a chance for socialisation, or a break from the intensive Leaving Certificate curriculum. However, once in 6th Year, pressure was applied to abstain from extracurricular activities so we would not have to catch up on the work we had missed. This led to a large drop-out rate in my final year at school, due to the emphasis on performing in the classroom rather than in extracurricular activities, potentially missing out on sports scholarships in third-level education.

The second argument I wish to make for the Leaving Certificate's emphasis on points rather than third-level education preparation is through the current competitiveness of the curriculum's assessment. During the 2025 ASTI Annual Convention, Professor Áine Hyland recounted that "Most of my peers in primary school emigrated and were unskilled and marginalised workers in the UK and the US, and sadly, they were often referred to as "the lazy Irish". Thankfully, that description of our young graduates is never heard today" (ASTI Union, 2025). While this was meant as a positive, it highlights how competitive and stressful the final exams can be, suggesting that they have lost sight of their original purpose. When I

sat my Leaving Certificate, Art History and Appreciation lessons (now rebranded as Visual Studies) felt like constant preparation for the final two-hour exam rather than actual, deep learning. “High-stakes assessments encourage highly strategic (even if only in the short term) behaviours by students and teachers who want to get the best results” (Baird et al, 2014, p 28). My teacher felt this pressure, as she frantically predicted what would be on the course, feeling the competitiveness of the curriculum’s assessment; linking the high-stakes nature to the behavioural consequences of strategic learning rather than preparation for our educational futures. Pre-exam study involved long days spent studying, rare movement breaks, and no socialisation. Temporarily quitting sports in case you broke an arm, hand or finger and needed to avail of a scribe. When the exam eventually came round, what if, on the day, the questions weren’t meant for you? “The Leaving Cert is just summative and only portrays how you perform on a certain day” (O’Leary and Scully, 2018, p 16). What if you misinterpreted a question? I haven’t forgotten witnessing peers crying as the exam was too hard for them, ‘ruining’ their chances of gaining points all because they studied the predicted Insular Art when Pre-Christian Art was examined. There is no doubt that the points-focused curriculum creates a competitive environment, causing stress, reducing collaboration, and discouraging personal development outside of the classroom — skills necessary during third-level education.

So how can curriculum prepare students for college, rather than emphasising points? I sat my Leaving Certificate four years ago, and thankfully there are so many new and improved backup routes to every course available. This allows students of all ages to return to education to pursue the career they dream of without needing their points. Students no longer have to sit through the exams to reach third-level education. That being said, through reforming Senior Cycle, opportunities can be taken to allow students to choose courses they are passionate about, rather than strategically choosing and avoiding the competitiveness that the pressure of the ‘points race’ instils. According to Curriculum Online (n.d.), “A number of Leaving Certificate subjects are currently under various stages of review”, showing that there is potential for improvement in the Leaving Certificate curriculum. To further this statement, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) states that they wish to “scope the provision of further options in the areas of technical,

vocational, creative and professional learning” (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2022, p 34). This recognises the planned changes for assessment, indicating a shift towards skills, process and creativity, all of which suggest that the Leaving Certificate should better prepare students for third-level education rather than just for points. We can already see this reform being integrated through the new Junior Cycle and the introduction of Classroom-Based Assessments, which shows the endless possibilities of revolutionising the curriculum and restoring it to its original purpose.

To conclude this essay, I have recounted my first-hand experience of the effects of the emphasis on the importance of succeeding in the assessment structure of the Leaving Certificate curriculum, supporting my arguments with reliable sources. I have also countered my argument with possible solutions. In hindsight, the Leaving Certificate is not the be-all and end-all of our academic lives. I can see this clearly now having graduated secondary school just over four years ago. While I am proud of my academic achievements, my Leaving Certificate years were the most stressful years of my life to date. Part of me wishes I could go back and tell myself where I am today, and how I got here without needing my Leaving Certificate points.

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