

Predictability in the Irish Leaving Certificate Examination

Working Paper 4: Teachers’ and Students’ Perspectives

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Contents

Introduction	2
Interview Design	2
Methodology	2
Pilot study.....	2
Semi-structured interviews.....	3
Sample.....	3
Participants and procedures.....	3
Data Analysis.....	4
Coding of the interview data	4
Teachers: emerging themes and key findings	5
Students: emerging themes and key findings	19
Conclusions	28
References	29
Appendix A: Information sheet and consent form for adult participants	30
Appendix B: Information sheet and consent form for students.....	33
Appendix C: Teacher interviews and codebook.....	36
Appendix D: Student focus groups interviews and codebook.....	37

¹ Department of Education and Skills (2013) *Supporting a better transition from second level to Higher Education: Key directions and next steps*. 27 March. (<http://www.education.ie/en/The-Department/Re-use-of-Public-Sector-Information/Library/Announcements/Supporting-a-Better-Transition-from-Second-Level-to-Higher-Education.html>)

Introduction

The current report details the fieldwork carried out among teachers and students in schools within the Republic of Ireland. Methodological procedures involved in the development of the interview schedules, sample of schools, fieldwork and the coding and analysis of the qualitative data are presented. The main goal of the fieldwork in schools was to explore issues about the relative predictability of the Leaving Certificate (LC) examinations, and how this interacts with the learning process in and outside of the classroom, by interviewing both teachers and students in a sample of different schools across Ireland. Questions were asked about teachers' preparation and teaching strategies for the LC examinations, their views on how the LC examinations influence their subject, teachers' and students' views on the predictability of the examinations, and views on effects of the examinations upon teaching and learning. To address these broad themes, we investigated the following research questions:

1. How predictable are examination questions in the Leaving Certificate in Ireland?
2. Which aspects of this predictability are helpful and which engender unwanted approaches to learning?
3. What are the syllabus and assessment design phenomena associated with predictability?
4. What subject-specific phenomena are associated with predictability?
5. What kinds of examination preparation strategies do teachers and students use? Which of these are influenced by the predictability of the examinations?
6. What kinds of learning are the examinations intended to promote?

In addition, we discussed some of the findings from the survey of the students to understand more about how they could be interpreted. The main finding of the analysis is reported elsewhere.

Interview Design

To be able to access the schools, it was decided that the interviews should be designed to last for not more than 30 minutes for teachers and 40 minutes for students. All interviews were also conducted in the schools' opening times, while students were attending the schools for their classes. Fieldwork was conducted in 17 schools and colleges, selected to represent different learner settings. A total of 83 interviews were conducted: 70 interviews with teachers and 13 small-group interviews with students (see Table 1). The field schools were divided between a team from Oxford University and a team from Queen's University, with a total of six researchers involved in the fieldwork. Fieldwork was carried out over six weeks between September and October 2013.

Methodology

Pilot study

The first school served as a pilot for the interviews. Changes were made to the interview schedules following the pilot to improve the clarity of the questions and to focus more upon the research questions. The interview schedules were shortened; for example, questions relating to students' experiences on the examinations more generally (as opening questions) were reduced. Data from

this school were integrated with those from the other schools, as the changes to the schedules were minimal and they were semi-structured.

Semi-structured interviews

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed, partly based upon the literature review in Phase A, the examination of the exam material in Phase B, and the preliminary analysis of the survey results. The semi-structured interview was chosen because it allows the researcher to follow up and respond to the topics in the situation and to explore new ideas (Merriam, 1998), an approach which is particularly suitable in the present research study investigating predictability. Open-ended questions were asked to make students and teachers reflect upon the topic predictability, while probes and clarification were used to support the conversation and clarify that the interviewer interpreted the responses correctly. Both students and teachers were asked to come up with examples when giving their answers.

Before the interviews, teachers and students were asked to read an information sheet about participating in the study and were also asked to give their written consent to allow us to record and transcribe the interviews (see Appendix A and Appendix B). Of all students and teachers interviewed, one teacher asked not to be recorded, and the researcher then wrote notes during that particular interview.

The teacher interview protocol was divided into two sections: the first asked general questions of predictability and what impact the LC would have on teaching and learning, while the second part asked for subject-specific questions related to predictability. The student interviews asked students about the LC across all six subjects, with a focus upon how students were experiencing preparing for their exams, strategies used, support, and whether they believed the exams were predictable or not.

Sample

Participants and procedures

Interviews were conducted from 5 September to 9 October 2013 in 17 schools (see Table 1). The schools were randomly sampled from a list of 691, after removing 18 schools that either (1) did not have students sitting LC exams in 2014 or (2) in which all students study all subjects in Irish. The list was received from the Educational Research Centre in Ireland through the State Examinations Commission (SEC), who also assisted OUCEA with the sampling process. Originally, we randomly selected 12 schools with an additional 12 replacement schools. From the original list of 12 schools, seven agreed to participate, while five refused due to different reasons such as workload and participating in international test surveys. Five schools from the replacement list were then included in the sample. In addition, we had to include another five schools, to have enough teachers in design and communication graphics (DCG) and economics. Very few schools offer all six subjects, so the research team had to specifically target schools that offered DCG and economics to have enough interviews in these subjects. In Table 1, schools 8, 9, 14, 15 and 16 are additional schools selected for interviews of economics and DCG teachers. As one teacher in each subject domain was sought in each school, it was suggested to schools that their principals nominate the individual teachers to participate, in instances where there was more than one teacher of a subject in the school.

A letter from SEC was distributed to the selected schools, explaining the purpose of the research study. Two researchers then contacted the schools by phone and agreed the visits. The principal in each school selected students for interviews after the following criteria: equal number of boys and girls in the mixed schools and, preferably, both high and low achievers. Most importantly, all students would sit for the LC in June 2014, and they were aged from 16 to 18 years old.

Table 1. Number of interviews with subject teachers and students

School Subject	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	Total
Biology	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	1	1				1	12
Economics		1			1			1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1		10
English	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	1	1				1	12
French	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	1	1				1	12
Geography	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1	1	1				1	12
DCG	1		1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	1			1		1	12
Student Focus Groups	1	1	1	1	1	1	2			1	1	1	1				1	13
Total	6	6	6	6	7	6	6	2	2	7	7	6	6	1	2	1	6	83

Data Analysis

Coding of the interview data

The interview data were transcribed and coded according to the principles of Miles and Huberman (1994) using NVivo software (Bazeley & Richards, 2000). A list of codes was developed by the research team to address the main research questions for this part of the study. First-level codes were created to capture predictability in each subject, teachers' and students' attitudes to predictability, impact of the LC on classroom teaching and practice, and impact of the LC on student learning. The coding schedule included explanations for the collators on how to code the interviews (see Appendix C and Appendix D). A team at Oxford was set up to code the interviews, involving four research assistants in dialogue with the team at Queen's. Two researchers coded 10% of the interviews separately before checking for inter-rater reliability on four codes. The first-level codes for both teacher and student data were then explored to consider emerging themes and key findings for this phase of the research project. For the purposes of reporting, these first-level codes have been collated under the main research questions so that the qualitative data can align with the other quantitative data from the survey as well as the examinations material data. The aim is to give a rich and detailed picture of the complex concept of predictability as it specifically pertains to the Irish LC.

Four coders conducted the analysis. Training was carried out on the codes prior to the beginning of coding. Coding was then conducted on a small number of interviews and discussion of the codes then took place. Adjustments to codes were made following discussion to clarify the codes and to focus them where necessary. A small number of minor changes were made to the codes.

Interviewees often made contradictory statements regarding the predictability of the examinations, which made the coding difficult relating to the research question on whether the LC examinations were predictable.

Teachers: emerging themes and key findings

As the working definition of predictability used within this project makes clear, this is a complex and complicated issue to consider. Teachers were engaged with the topic of the research and many expressed real interest in the project and were pleased that they had been asked to take part. They represented a very committed and attentive group, with a real passion for helping their students achieve the best results they could within the contexts of the LC examination and its role as the major qualification system within Ireland. While the interview questions developed initially focused on discussing aspects of LC examination questions that were predictable, broader aspects of the LC examinations, such as the syllabuses, examination papers and marking schemes, were discussed. These were not only considered by the researchers within interview question prompts but also emerged from teachers' own views and opinions in relation to considering predictability as a whole.

How predictable are examination questions in the Leaving Certificate in Ireland?

Teachers were inquisitive as to our definition of what 'predictability' meant, so sharing the working definition used for this project with them was an effective way of stimulating conversation and spurred teachers to think about aspects of predictability as they are defined and discussed within the research literature. The data showed that there was no definitive answer to this question. While teachers intimated that there were elements of the examinations and examination questions that they felt were predictable, they were keen to point out that this was not the case across all aspects of the subjects they taught, nor was it that any one subject was more predictable than others. Predictability seemed to be very much related to the particular content areas within subjects, particular topics across syllabuses and certain types of questions (details of these are discussed further below). However, these elements were balanced out mainly by the breadth of content and knowledge included in LC syllabuses which had to be 'covered' in the two-year LC cycle, the structures of questions asked and how these had developed and improved over years of LC presentations. One general point that came through across all six subjects was the relationship between predictability and how 'new' the syllabus was. So, for example, teachers of both DCG and geography particularly considered that older LC syllabuses in these subjects had been more predictable (in terms of the nature and structure of questions) than newer ones, and felt that the newer examinations and syllabuses were 'far superior' to the old versions, suggesting that the changes implemented were now trying to encourage students to think more and make connections between different aspects of the subject. Teachers across all six subjects were in agreement that the ordinary level within the LC in their subject was more predictable than the higher level.

For those teachers who felt there was a level of predictability about the LC in their subject, it was considered that this was not wholly a bad thing; a certain level of familiarity with examination questions, their demands and structures, was ultimately helpful to teachers in guiding what is taught to students to focus their learning:

a certain amount of predictability I think is welcome. I think that students need it for loads of different reasons. I think that being able to predict the structure of an exam, that's really very important for students (*English Teacher 8*)

Respondents considered that perhaps the topics that appeared every year on examination papers were more predictable than the questions asked within those topics. This may not be surprising given that such topics make up the syllabus and exam papers select from these topics year on year,

but there was a sense that perhaps particular topics recurred more often. So even though some syllabuses had changed (like DCG), a lot of the topics were still the same as those covered on the older syllabuses, and patterns of questions related to particular topics could still be identified:

In DCG there are certain questions that come up some years and not other years...as a teacher of course we teach the whole syllabus, but we do focus a little bit more on what we feel is going to come up, and so far on the DCG course it has been quite predictable in what is going to come up each year (*DCG Teacher 2*)

Similar issues about common year-on-year patterns were raised by English teachers, with particular reference to the poetry and short-story sections of the examinations. With regard to the poetry sections, respondents suggested that students and teachers can easily look for patterns and trends in the choice of poets likely to appear on the examination, to the extent that it is quite a strategic move on the part of students to do this. One respondent suggested that students are even highly influenced by national debate on the matter, and that in May of each year the prediction of what poet will come up becomes a national sport:

you have 'Paddy Power' betting coming up to the month of May as to what's coming up on the exam paper and you know students tend to take that then as gospel and, if Paddy Power is giving five to one odds that Sylvia Plath is going to come up, they take it as gospel and they start dividing up the work and cutting corners (*English Teacher 5*)

For those teachers who were less inclined to agree that their subject was predictable, the breadth of the LC syllabus was considered the main reason why what would be on the examination could not be guessed at year on year. Completing the course was considered a huge task and one that teachers suggested dominated their time in the classroom.

It's [geography's] very broad and very hard to narrow down in terms of the topical questions or anything – you can't because there's so many statements of learning that have to be covered in the syllabus that just doesn't allow for any shortcuts. And therefore then the exam itself obviously isn't predictable (*Geography Teacher 6*)

There was a clear indication that examination questions now were too 'jumbled up', incorporating too many topics and different aspects of syllabus content within single questions for it to be possible to predict with any certainty what questions would appear in the examination:

we find there's very little predictability in it...that puts a lot of pressure on students as the syllabus has to be covered completely. And that is a problem, because you can't say what question 1 or question 2 is going to be on any one paper...what can happen is you can have part of the question on one topic and the second part of the same question on a completely different topic, so they've mixed up the questions pretty well (*DCG Teacher 10*)

Generally, however, across the 72 participants there emerged a more mixed than definitive answer to the question of predictability of examination questions. Predominately, teachers considered that perhaps parts of the examinations and the questions set were predictable, but that other aspects of the syllabus and the assessment of the subject were not predictable, and that making sure they covered the course and prepared their students in the best way possible for these high-stakes examinations was part of their job. If they were predicting any aspects of the LC examinations at all

for their students they were only dealing with the situation as they saw it and adapting to the national system within which they had to work:

I think there are two aspects to it [the Leaving Certificate] – one is the actual education and the value of the subject [economics]...but then also there's the exam. And I think that's the same for every subject – you're exam training, but you're also educating. Sometimes one can kind of hamper the other. But the whole time it's a balancing act between the two... you're not just drilling towards a predictable exam, you're educating them and broadening their knowledge at the same time, hopefully
(Economics Teacher 2)

Moreover, teachers did not discuss questions alone in relation to this issue, but continuously raised the interconnectedness between the questions, the syllabus, the examination papers and their associated marking schemes. This will be discussed in more detail below. However, one additional resource that teachers added to this collection of important examination artefacts required to teach for the LC was 'the book'. This is not a definitive 'book' for every subject, but a colloquial name given to those textbooks, produced by private publishers, that bring together the syllabus for the subject (presented across the chapters) and also past examination papers with associated marking schemes. Every teacher mentioned 'the book' in their subject, with many disclosing that they taught the chapters of these books as a way of getting through the course and used them in conjunction with past examination papers and marking schemes sourced from the SEC website:

I think no matter how well you cover it...the child has to know the biology from one end of 'the book' to the other. I think the questions they ask, the topics they ask, are the same every year. However, the way the questions are asked, they ask questions on every chapter. There aren't chapters you can leave out in my opinion. *(Biology Teacher 13)*

Which aspects of this predictability are helpful and which engender unwanted approaches to learning?

Respondents mentioned many aspects of predictability that were seen as helpful. Teachers considered that seeing what questions had been asked in previous years on examination papers, and making sure students were prepared for what was to come, was 'doing their job' and 'attending to their brief'. The aspect of question format and layout was considered as a predictable element of the LC examinations, but in a positive way. Teachers suggested that a pattern that had emerged over recent years was to scaffold the question so that the beginning sections of the question were perhaps less difficult than later ones. This approach was seen as bringing out the higher order skills in students, which the LC should, and teachers were pleased to see these types of questions appearing on LC papers. They were aware that the redesigning and updating of syllabuses was cutting out more familiar aspects of predictability, such as question spotting and similar topics appearing year on year. This mixing up of questions and syllabus topics allowed for some unpredictability to creep in, which was also welcomed:

It's predictable in the sense that, yes, we know the type of questions that are going to be asked, we know the exact format with two comprehensions and the number of essays and so on that are going to be asked – we know that, that doesn't change. But as regards the content, it is becoming less and less predictable; we can do topics

with them, but they're coming up with more and more abstract topics for the essays. (*French Teacher 7*)

There was a keen sense also that higher level examination questions were changing and this left a degree of uncertainty as to how some topics would be presented or considered on papers. With this level of uncertainty, teachers felt it more and more their duty to try and eradicate approaches to learning adopted by students, such as rote learning of large volumes of knowledge, preparing model answers to questions and 'learning off' chapters from 'the book' in the subjects under examination. They also felt that they had a responsibility to ensure that students were aware of the synoptic nature of more and more questions that were appearing on the examinations.

Elements of predictability also enabled teachers to prioritise their teaching of the syllabus in what they felt were two very time-rushed years for students. Respondents suggested that there was a case for some predictability for students as it made them feel comfortable going into the examination knowing that very few surprises would ensue. Consequently, teachers would train students to write in particular styles and provide them specifically with the skills to answer particular types of questions. There was a sense from respondents that particular areas of the syllabuses appear on examination papers again and again over the years but that these are core elements of the subjects and students need this core understanding to do well, not only within the LC but also at third level.

Teachers did reflect on aspects of predictability that they thought perhaps engender unwanted approaches to learning. One of the main issues raised was the size and breadth of the syllabuses in the six subjects studied. There was agreement across the range of teachers that the syllabuses for the LC in the majority of the subjects were very broad and that this in itself forces a narrowing down of what is taught within the time frame. This practice then engenders in teachers a tendency to review past papers and to seek out patterns of type and focus of questions, to enable them to see not only what has been asked in previous years but also what had not been asked on examination papers. It is in these ways that teachers, who are under pressure to get all the work finished within what in reality is 18 months of teaching time, start to place an increased emphasis on both topics that are common across years of examinations as well as those that may not have been around for a while. The use of 'the book' also forces an element of teaching to the examination, with teachers and students alike working through these books to make sure they are responding in the ways suggested by them, and those which have been successful for other students in the past.

What are the syllabus and assessment design phenomena associated with predictability?

The syllabus of each subject (perhaps bar economics, given that the syllabus for this particular subject is a brief outline) was seen as the guide to what needed to be taught; this was used closely in teaching and in planning lessons throughout the fifth and sixth years of study. Respondents suggested that syllabuses acted as good teaching guides and, using the boundaries of the syllabus to form the limits of what was taught, these documents actually worked well for planning what needed to be taught, and in knowing what was expected of them as teachers. These also helped students understand what subject knowledge they were required to have, as many teachers discussed and shared these expectations with them:

So while I say that, I do feel it's necessary to have parameters, that the syllabus is necessary; it's there, it has to be...it's good to have a guided syllabus because it standardises the whole thing (*Biology Teacher 12*)

the syllabus was changed, and, you know, everybody knows now what's expected, and what's expected of you as a teacher, and what's expected of you as a student, and the syllabus is crystal clear...and that's perfect (*DCG Teacher 2*)

Many teachers felt that how their subject was presented within the syllabus was realistic, yet the breadth of syllabuses was seen as both problematic as well as positive. Many teachers suggested that the breadth of content covered, and the range and variety of both the knowledge and skills included, offered a good grounding in the subject as well as offering different areas of interest and focus for different children. Moreover, since the syllabus was so broad in scope, teachers felt that they were not restricted to teaching narrow topics and content, and that they could adapt this both to modern day examples and to more advanced aspects of their subjects.

And the syllabus doesn't restrict you in that sense. It is open to allowing you to talk about any kind of current affairs, any topics that come up in Ireland or around the world or whatever...so it doesn't limit us (*French Teacher 9*)

Respondents recognised attempts by the SEC and examiners to keep syllabuses up to date, relevant and interesting. The use of real examples meant that even if the stem of the question, in terms of command words, showed some degree of predictability, the content or example used to frame the questions did not. This meant that students were required to maintain an awareness of current political, economic and social affairs in order to consider and frame their responses to the majority of questions.

However, even with all these positive considerations, the breadth of syllabuses was also presented as a challenge in terms of the size and the range of material to be covered. Teachers suggested that the higher level syllabuses within their subjects were 'full on' and students would fail if they did not work consistently and follow the entire syllabus:

I definitely would use the syllabus in my teaching, yeah, in every single question that I would do. I try to limit the amount of questions that the lads have to do, but in terms of syllabus it's definitely bang, bang, bang, make sure everything is covered (*DCG Teacher 7*)

Respondents did, however, suggest that such coverage could be narrowed in particular ways, forcing teachers to focus more specifically on those categories of content, knowledge and skills that are considered within 'the book'. They also noted that teaching is geared towards what tends to be in the examination, as opposed to embracing the breadth of syllabus and working outside the confines of what is presented in the examinations year on year. Thus the breadth of the syllabus actually forces a narrowing down of itself to make sure core elements are covered within constrained time frames:

It probably has to be narrowed and restricted because we can't keep thinking outside the box, because there's so many boxes we could think outside of (*Biology Teacher 7*)

Teachers were also aware that, for some of their subjects, syllabuses had not changed for a considerable time. For example, the economics syllabus had not been changed since 1996 (although change was mooted in 2006). The reality of this, then, was that examinations determined what should be taught:

the problem is the syllabus hasn't changed, the written syllabus hasn't changed, but in fact it's the...opposite has happened – the exam is determining the syllabus; if you look at some of the questions from earlier years they're completely different to what's being asked in recent years (*Economics Teacher 3*)

Thus teachers argued that examiners had been introducing new and up-to-date aspects of the subject within examination questions even though the syllabus had not changed. Teachers suggested that examinations were moving the subject forward and that examiners were forcing change in the teaching of the subjects at the school level, through the questions being asked and the nature of the content required to answer these questions. Indeed, teachers seemed to indicate that, for some subjects, there were clear curriculum and teaching messages being channelled through the examination papers because of the time lag in syllabus development and change. Thus, within some subjects, it is not the syllabus that is determining the teaching but the examinations, which are forcing change in the content and knowledge that teachers impart.

Across a range of subjects (especially French and economics) teachers felt a definite gap between the syllabus as published, the intentions of the examinations, their focuses and demands (especially within particular questions) and the objectives of the subject as laid out by the Department of Education. Teachers argued that the goals of the subject as set out in official documents and national subject criteria were not reflected in examination papers and questions; the operationalising of the subjects through exam papers and the curriculum messages within the examinations were more 'real' for teachers and their students and therefore needed to be heeded:

there's a big gap between the syllabus and the objectives in the Department of Education and the papers that they produce. Do you see what I mean?...they [DE] say they want them to have this broad perspective and function in the world and yet there's an awful lot of demand on the student to do writing, writing, writing, writing, without anything more than a sentence-long stimulus or a picture to get you thinking (*French Teacher 1*)

Thus how the subject is described within the specified objectives from the Department is very different to the subject that teachers and students experience in the school/examining context. Such a context can present a narrow and superficial subject that becomes out of date due to lack of ongoing syllabus development and is differently constructed for ordinary and higher level LC examinations.

As with other aspects of this research, respondents were mixed in their approach to marking schemes and their use within their teaching. Some teachers did not use mark schemes as a matter of course, and perhaps brought them into their teaching at a later time in the two-year cycle of the LC, using them at mock examination times to help students work out where they had gone wrong and where they might need to focus their revision and further study. For others, marking schemes were very much part of their teaching toolkit:

So not only are they being drilled with the marking scheme from me – they're drilling others with it as well, so that they have to get to grips with it...so they're correcting each other's work according to the marking schemes. So they're totally immersed actually in the marking schemes. That has scared me now that I'm actually reflecting on it...everything they do is marking scheme, marking scheme, marking scheme (*English Teacher 8*)

In the main, teachers across all subjects reported that they use the official marking schemes that are sent out to schools (and downloaded from websites) in their teaching. Reasons as to why they do this were numerous and included providing clarity in what is required, highlighting the importance of wording in questions, helping students draft careful responses and keep closely to accepted definitions of particular key concepts, working as a marker of standards required, and letting students know that they are on the right track:

At the end of the day, as far as I'm concerned, my job is to get the very best...(A) to do the best I can for myself, and (B) to help my students to get the very best they can. And if I don't know exactly where points are going and my marks are going – how can I channel them then to know exactly what to do? (*Geography Teacher 3*)

Many teachers reflected that they not only used the marking schemes with students, but encouraged students to use the marking schemes too in their own study and homework. This was happening more often now, with marking schemes available so easily from websites and with study aids:

I would show [students] the State Exams' website – there's marking schemes and we would mark it in class ourselves and see what the students got marks for...I think it's good for kids to see that and they can do it at home themselves, go onto examinations.ie...the State Exams' website is very user friendly and students can use it (*Biology Teacher 13*)

Teachers generally felt that the marking schemes were transparent and showed how rigidly marks were applied. Respondents felt that using the marking schemes was particularly helpful nearer the actual time of exams and teachers suggested they used them more often in the sixth year so that students were fully aware of how marks were allocated:

But, when push comes to shove, as Sixth Year goes on and I show them [students] the marking schemes literally off the examinations.ie website and we'd go through them and I explain how the marking scheme works, and in Sixth Year when I'm marking all of their written work or their work in general, I will strictly abide by the marking scheme so that they'll see their language skills, they'll see their communication skills, they'll see where they're going up, where they're going down (*French Teacher 9*)

If this was an aspect of predictability, in terms of what marks would be awarded for certain responses, then teachers saw this as an aspect of fairness in the marking schemes. They felt that using these alongside the other examination artefacts actually provides a structure for student feedback and gets rid of the 'myth' that student responses to questions have to be perfect.

Respondents tended to agree that it was easier to discern aspects of predictability with marking schemes of questions with smaller mark tariffs. When questions had large mark tariffs (50 marks, 70

marks, 80 marks etc) then teachers were less certain what marks were being awarded for and this produced a lesser sense of being predictable. With large–mark-tariff questions, teachers suggested that more detail would help in determining what type of responses were rewarded; on reviewing students’ scripts along with marking schemes, some teachers suggested that some examiners liked particular responses more than others, and that the published marking schemes for the larger tariff questions were more vague in terms of what was required than for smaller mark questions:

I find them [the marking schemes] good...sometimes they might say ‘name something, give an example’ and in some questions it’s a very specific one-word answer – one-line definition or whatever...but then in certain sections they might say just that vagueness of ‘named example’ – and then that’s up to you to determine what that is...from the teaching point you hope that you’re on the right track of what the answer is, and you would presume you were. There is a few of those that are a little bit vague, but in general, particularly in biology, it’s gone very specific (*Biology Teacher 12*)

In fact, some respondents suggested that the published mark scheme and the way in which some questions were finally marked did not always match. In this respect, teachers felt there was little support from SEC for interpreting marking schemes more generally as it was not always clear what was being rewarded. Teachers recalled instances of a lack of differentiation between students who had given what they felt to be important answers and those giving peripheral answers. They also felt that students’ own individual styles of expression were not being rewarded, leading teachers to feel that they have to teach the right and acceptable sort of expression to students so that they do not miss out on marks.

What subject-specific phenomena are associated with predictability?

Within the complex discussions about their own particular subjects and the issue of predictability, teachers of biology, geography and economics constantly addressed the content-driven nature of the syllabus and how this content was then examined through question papers and marking schemes:

The higher level biology is a very, very difficult course...it’s full going ahead. There’s no time to do anything that isn’t on the curriculum, but as well as that it requires a huge amount of work from the student...we study seven subjects and the student knows a little about a lot of subjects...there is a huge amount to learn and honestly there is no chapter...in that ‘biology book’ that you could safely leave out (*Biology Teacher 13*)

While teachers of DCG, English and French also raised content issues in relation to these three subjects, they tended to be more engaged with the skills-driven nature of their subjects in terms of principles/concepts (DCG), writing styles and written expression (English and French), and vocabulary (French):

Knowing how to do a question over and over and over again has very little positives in DCG. It’s all about ‘do you understand the principles’ (*DCG Teacher 5*)

Teachers of DCG and geography agreed that they welcomed the project and fieldwork elements in the new versions of the syllabus respectively. However, they were slightly concerned that although each school could plan and carry out with students their own work in order to meet the demands of

these project elements, they acknowledged that the tasks suggested and the format of these projects were becoming quite similar year on year, so that they and their students know the types of task that would be the focus of the project. They felt that this was leading to write ups and presentations of projects becoming formulaic and predictable.

French and economics teachers considered the difficulties they encountered around their need to teach their language vocabulary and economic concepts within the contexts of current affairs. They suggested that being able to move 'off the syllabus' to include up-to-date events and scenarios, as well as using authentic materials and resources for students, was a creative and interesting way to teach. They felt that this made their subjects less predictable and also relevant to students in their everyday lives. However, they also felt pressurised then to consider a wide range of vocabulary, events and current affairs in their teaching. In addition, they acknowledged difficulties in modelling good responses for students, as such questions regarding current affairs appear within examinations but teachers are not always sure what they will be or how they will be asked:

We don't know what level of language is going to be in it, other than it can go from quite doable to quite challenging depending on the year...we can give them the language skills to react to anything, to give their opinion, to give, you know, a reaction to whatever, but if they don't have the vocabulary necessary for the topic, the picture, the image that appears in front of them, you know, they're stumped straight away (*French Teacher 5*)

While they recognised that this uncertainty was fundamental to providing unpredictable examination papers and examinations, and keeping students 'on their toes', they were also concerned that students are faced with some difficult contexts in which to apply their learning of concepts and their range of vocabulary, as they found that the difficulty of the questions varied from year to year.

Teachers did feel that they wanted to instil in their students a love and enjoyment of their subjects and felt that by the end of a two-year course of study students should be well equipped in the fundamentals of the subject and higher order skills needed for third-level education. Respondents generally felt that these goals are met within the LC cycle but that working towards a high-stakes examination tended to restrict the nature of subjects, and present restricted and curtailed versions of subjects rather than how they should be enjoyed and understood. In this respect, teachers felt that the LC was no different to other examinations systems that they were aware of, and the ways in which examinations demand particular ways of learning and present the subject compartmentalised into components across papers were greatly influential in how the subject was seen and understood by students:

Twenty-five percent of their result is for the oral, so their 12-minute performance is a quarter of their result. Another 20% goes for their listening skills and the remaining 55% are divided between the reading comprehensions and the three written tasks which they have to do. Do I think it's fair? Yes, especially for the student who's going to go on to a university study course. They need to have all of these skills. From a language perspective do I think there's enough emphasis on being able to speak the language? Most certainly not, most certainly not (*French Teacher 2*)

Again, teachers were mixed in their responses as to whether they thought students developed a broad understanding of the subject through the LC experience. For many teachers, the narrow window of learning in the LC cycle (effectively 18 months given the timing of final examinations in May of the sixth year) did not allow students to get a broad understanding of their subjects, only a foundation in the fundamentals as there is 'no time for anything that isn't in the curriculum':

we study seven subjects [unlike the English system] and the student knows a little about a lot of subjects (*Biology Teacher 13*)

Teachers also suggested that 'the book' gave a very narrow representation of the subject by compartmentalising knowledge, skills and content into chapters, with varying degrees of importance given their year-on-year presentation in the examinations. However, within the confines of timing and breadth of syllabus to cover, respondents did feel that the subjects as presented within the LC courses were enjoyable and challenging, and relevant to modern-day life in Ireland. Many of the questions and tasks within the examinations did allow students to apply theoretical concepts to a 2013 context. Thus for many teachers the nature of the subject was not static but continuously changing, although these changes seemed more pronounced through the nature of examination questions than through syllabus development and updating. However, for those teachers of subjects that do not have a coursework element (biology, French, English, and economics), there was concern that a two-/three-hour examination at the end of two years to assess all the learning that students have tends to skew the subject and make the subject and the examinations more predictable than they perhaps have to be. Teachers suggested that such a model of examining does not tell whether students really know their subjects, as such a system forces the regurgitation of facts and well-rehearsed skills, which teachers then feel they have a duty to teach so that their students can pass the examination.

Teachers were also asked to reflect on how the LC impacted on their teaching of their subject and their teaching strategies more generally. Respondents offered many insights into the ways in which their own philosophies about subject knowledge and the pedagogy of their subject were affected (either enhanced or diminished) by the limits and demands of the LC syllabuses. There was a clear indication from teachers preparing young people for these examinations that they may affect what they do (eg following the syllabus, getting through content), but not always how they do it; the LC syllabus might structure teaching but this was not always seen as necessarily benefiting students across the board.

Thus teachers did agree that they taught towards the format, structure and style of examination questions and shared their understandings of the messages given within marking schemes of what responses are required and what are of value. They indicated that how they end up teaching can seem like spoon-feeding students but they are conscious that 'students want points, parents want points'. Teachers were also conscious that they are racing against the clock to get syllabuses covered, and are feeling constrained as they are often unable to deviate from their lesson plans into relevant day-to-day issues:

I suppose the programme is so long, maybe too long would be my criticism...it's too much...too much. I mean I find I'm racing, and it would be lovely to have some time to stop and do some project work...to have time for more exploratory work, like research, within the class. But unfortunately, realistically, there just is not the time

to do that...or to focus on something that's happened currently (*Geography Teacher 2*)

Many teachers showed us their own analysis of the types of questions that come up year-on-year and they felt they were fulfilling their duty as teachers by sharing these analyses with students. Several teachers whom we interviewed were markers for examinations in their subjects. These teachers indicated that this gave them an important insight into how questions and examination papers were marked and where emphases were placed by examiners. All these teachers then use this insight in their teaching. Thus teachers are very much focused on the examination and are mindful of the types of questions that appear on examinations. Teachers, to varying degrees, share these insights with students and steer students towards particular questions and topics that may appear so that these examinations are not a 'total blank slate for them going in'. Discussions with teachers did, however, highlight their desires for students to leave school/college with a deeper understanding of these subjects and their relevance to life and further and higher education, but as one teacher indicated, 'at the end of the day, it's the exam, it's the paper, it's the points':

[because] absolutely we're very exam focused in Ireland. Like the point system is all-reigning, all-supreme...students are more obsessed with the point system than the teachers are (*English Teacher 6*)

Thus the emphasis on using those strategies identified above; due to what teachers called the 'reality check' of high-stakes examinations, and the significant consequences attached to these examinations for students, teachers are forced, to varying degrees, to teach to the exam:

I'd have seen students here over the years who are absolutely like sponges and want everything...every piece of information they can get from you towards their grade in the exam...the exam is the holy grail, it's the be all, it's the end all – it's really up to the teacher to bring in everything else along the way, to show all the shades of life, all the shades of humanity, and try and give them something else to take away as well...but at the end of the day their focus is on the exam (*English Teacher 3*)

However, respondents indicated that, within these confines and constraints, it was the teacher's role to show light and show shade – to illuminate the subject as much as possible for students and to help students develop the ability to form their own views, as autonomous learners, and to instil in them a love of the subject that will stay with them at third level and beyond:

what we're trying to do in English is trying to create creative individual people who can find their own voice in a world where their voice can get drowned out pretty quickly...so it probably depends on the teacher's approach too. But when I'm teaching to the exam I'm still teaching to your individual opinion, because that's what's rewarded in the exam (*English Teacher 8*)

What kinds of examination preparation strategies do teachers use? Which of these are influenced by the predictability of the examinations?

Teachers suggested a number of examination preparation strategies that they use within their classrooms. These focused around aspects of examination structures already mentioned in this report: the use of examination questions and past papers; the use of associated marking schemes; the use of 'the book' (ie published textbooks aligned to the syllabus); the sharing of model answers and responses; students' use of extra tuition and support, including the use of 'grind schools'. There

was a definite sense that given the high-stakes nature of the LC and the culture of the examination system in Ireland, teachers would be foolish not to use question papers and marking schemes in order to prepare young people for these examinations.

Making students familiar with examination questions, their structure and format, was a key strategy used by teachers. The extent to which they used questions and papers varied, with some teachers using them with students as soon as they entered the fifth year and others leaving the intensive use of such strategies to the final year, with some suggesting that as it gets closer to the examination it is 'paper, after paper, after paper; every paper ever created gets focused on'. This was in order to simulate the examination situation, so that students would be prepared not only in terms of content and knowledge learnt but also in examination-taking techniques such as time spent on questions, format of the sections of the paper and dealing with the demands of the increasing difficulty of the paper within each section. It was suggested that the regular use of questions makes students focus on what is required and that the teaching is then geared towards the demands of the LC:

Well, I mean, you're geared to the Leaving Cert. At the end of the day you've one goal in sight, and that's the Leaving Cert. So you would go through past papers, and as I do a topic I would probably give them questions off the Leaving Certificate because...they have to know how to read a question, how to interpret a question and to see where the points are. So it is all exam based at the end of the day, and it does guide you in your teaching and learning [(Biology Teacher 10)]

Sharing with students the format, structure and phrasing used in questions was considered the rule rather than the exception. In this respect teachers felt that there was a certain level of predictability in there being only certain ways to ask about some fundamental concepts and content areas. Some teachers had reviewed at least ten years of questions and past papers in order to review patterns of question presentation as well as to make sure students understand the demands of certain command words within questions (eg explain, discuss etc) and what is required when these words appear. Again, marking schemes were used in a number of ways, similar to how questions were used. Teachers used the marking schemes of individual questions with students in activities of peer assessment and emphasised the need for students to be accurate in their answers, especially in scientific language (biology, for example). Teachers explained that they used marking schemes with students in order to highlight the importance of wording, definitions, and style of responses. They do this by unpacking the elements of questions so that students can see where they are falling down and ensure that they do not miss any vital marks associated with required responses:

They will have at least the past ten years' formal [?] marking schemes by the time we've finished with it. There's the time to do it and they end up with a big thick folder. It's at that stage of your training this is how you answer the question – if there's 25 marks going, you make sure you have at least 5 points that, you know, state and explain, state and explain – that part of it is training, that's getting them to format their questions in certain ways, and not to write an essay even if it's a good essay. To get that five, then get that five, and [inaudible] that five. That unfortunately is...part of our job in every subject (Economics Teacher 2)

One interesting comment suggested that inspectors, in conversations with teachers, advocated the use of marking schemes with students so that they are well rehearsed in how questions are going to be marked. The use of 'the book' was very much aligned to the use of questions and marking

schemes. The use of model answers, pre-prepared essay responses and learning of particular phrases that could be used on answers were also seen as key examination preparation strategies. This was particularly the case in French for orals and learning key phrases and grammar in advance as well as preparing short stories and essays in English to use in question responses. These model answers were used in conjunction with a focus on topics and content areas that were considered certain to come up, and some respondents suggested that students were going into the examination with essays 'pre-learnt, pre-prepared and 100% rehearsed'. Not all respondents worked with students in this way, but those that did suggested that they wanted their students to go into the examination with 'something to grip on to'. Teachers were also aware that there is a market in model answers, with students accessing this market either online or through extra tuition and support opportunities:

I think there's a market out there, I think there's a black market for trading notes among students, that's what I'll tell you, you know, I think there is a black market out there, I think, you know, kids are compiling notes or they're doing their own notes and they're selling them online, you know, whatever...but they're feeding on a contagion of panic (*Economics Teacher 1*)

Generally teachers supported students seeking extra tuition or support. Not all agreed that students needed this extra support but acknowledged that there was perhaps a peer-pressure effect for students to seek this even if it was not wholly necessary. Some of the schools involved in the research put on extra tuition for their own students to access, as they were aware that not all students have the economic and financial capacity to avail themselves of extra support or 'grind schools' and therefore this extra support was only available to those students who could afford to go. It was suggested that actually the affordability for some students of this extra support takes away from the equality aspects of the LC examination being the same exam for all students. Teachers reported experiences of their own students using 'grind schools' and had mixed views about these opportunities. Generally it was felt that such facilities had a negative effect in that they gave students a false sense of security about succeeding in the LC, suggesting that such support can enable some students to do very little throughout their time at school and then focus on the final examination by attending such institutions. Teachers were concerned that the materials generated by such institutions (notes, model essays etc) were seen as key resources for students to obtain, more so than teachers' resources shared with students in classrooms:

Lots of students going to [names popular grind school]...are literally just going to get the notes as if they were the golden fleece...the kids would be well able to write themselves or write the bones of themselves, but they didn't have the confidence to know that. Instead they prefer to learn off these notes, which are brilliant if used like notes whereby they give them ideas to then use in their own essays, but learning stuff off...and then the whole notion for kids who can't afford grinds...it's like, well, they're going to get the As. It sort of undermines the whole Leaving Certificate (*English Teacher 13*)

Teachers suggested that they often felt at a loss when parents and students were pushing for extra tuition and support. They were very clear that the demand for extra tuition and support (especially from 'grind schools') was driven by the points system, with students well aware that if they wished to be selected for courses, such as medicine, they need at least an A2 in all their LC higher level subjects.

What kinds of learning are the examinations intended to promote?

Again, teachers were mixed in their responses to the consideration of how the LC impacts on students' learning and how elements of predictability affect this learning. Many teachers from across the six subjects were confident that the LC does assess appropriate ways of learning and that the focus of an examination gives structure and purpose to the learning taking place in the senior cycle. Not only does the end-of-course examination give students something to aim towards, the nature of courses and what is required to be learnt at this phase of education provides a good balance of general education in the subjects as well as a focus on higher order skills, such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation, reflection and thinking, alongside understanding and knowledge of a wide range of subjects.

Teachers of geography and DCG also suggested that the project work components within their subjects teach students new skills and greater independence of learning as well as allowing for creativity and freedom for students in presenting their project work for examination:

I think it [the DCG syllabus] works well overall; I do think it works well as a way to teach new skills...the project gives great independence to students, it allows them creativity, freedom ...whereas the pure exam system really doesn't for DCG...so that's the great thing about the project (*DCG Teacher 1*)

Teachers of French, English and economics suggested that the nature of their subjects within the LC allowed students to learn not only for the examinations but also for life, for modern day understandings of culture and social affairs. Teachers of biology were less inclined to think that current LC examinations in this subject allowed for more freedom and relevance for students, and suggested that perhaps the long-awaited new syllabuses for the sciences would attend to modernising the subject for students. Teachers were in agreement that students could not do extremely well in the LC if they relied solely on rote learning; students need to have opinions, be creative, and apply their knowledge, not just memorise it, to succeed at the most demanding questions and get the best results:

The essay is only worth 25% – I think it should be worth way more than that, because that's where they're actually thinking, that's where their talent or what they've learnt about themselves and their opinions can show...I think going forward into society we need people in the world who have an opinion on all kinds of different things, and are able to argue and back themselves up – not little kind of sheep following the flock...So even on a societal level I think getting students to think about everything – about the world and their opinions is far more beneficial than learning about...Shakespeare...now don't get me wrong...that is hugely important...but it depends what we're trying to do...who was heroic there or...you know and comment on that too (*English Teacher 8*)

Teachers were well aware, however, that the LC does affect learning in more negative ways. They suggested that they are often in a battle against wider societal perceptions regarding the value of high examination grades, which are driven into students from influences outside school, such as the home. This 'battle', they suggest, ends up with students only doing what is needed for the examination and brings out a 'what can I leave out'/'what will come up'/'do I have to learn this' culture among their students. Thus the types of learning strategies that teachers suggest students

then employ to cope with the pressures of the LC across a number of subjects tend to be narrower than what teachers would wish for them or what is desired by syllabus/subject aims and objectives.

Respondents identified the learning of facts and set topics, the recalling of knowledge and the learning of set essays or oral responses as common learning practices prioritised by students, yet also unfortunately promoted by the nature and style of LC examinations, as there was a sense that the examinations are more weighted towards the learning and recalling of facts and knowledge. Such approaches to learning were also forced through the impact of timing – how much time was available to teach the course and when in the LC cycle the examination actually occurred. This issue of timing was related heavily to the amount of material to be covered in each course. There was a sense from respondents, across all six subjects, that there is a lot of information to know and this dominated what was learnt and how it was learnt. Teachers felt that this happened at the expense of learning for understanding and the promotion of higher order thinking skills, which teachers acknowledged were just as important for success. Teachers indicated that they were only too aware that the pressure on students to do well forces them to learn in particular ways; in this respect they become ‘strategic’ learners, doing what is necessary for them to get through. Thus they fall into a trap of rote learning:

it’s that old kind of Jesuit phrase, you know, ‘Repetition is the key to success’ – that’s really what it seems to me – learn, learn everything, practising their diagrams, writing out stuff, learning their poetry, learning their quotes...like the standard in the Shakespearean question and the poetry question is very high, because they’re learning everything there, you know (*English Teacher 3*)

Teachers recognised that they were also complicit in supporting these types of learning practices as they saw merit in helping students to structure answers, wanting their students to be as familiar as they could with the style and demands of questions. However, they were clear that students cannot learn all of what is required by the LC by rote and that teachers make it a priority to use examination questions and past papers to foster the learning of application and opinion:

I try to get them to draw conclusions themselves as to the style of the question that would appear, and it’s important for them that they’re familiar with the style of question, that they’re not meeting a question that they’re not familiar with in terms of presentation and layout, which throughout the Leaving Cert is quite consistent...you need to state, explain and follow with an example, and that’s something that is very, very central to the standard of answering, the style of answering, and it’s something the students struggle to a degree to adapt to, because they’re of the opinion that they have to write reams and reams of essays (*Economics Teacher 7*)

Students: emerging themes and key findings

In presenting the student data, we do not follow the research questions systematically, but aim to give an indication of young people’s views regarding the research questions and the main themes within these questions: the predictability of LC questions and examinations; the elements of predictability that might have helpful or unwanted impact on their learning; the examination preparation strategies that they use and which are affected by perceptions of the predictability of the LC examinations. We also asked them generally what they felt was the impact of the LC on their educational experiences. Responses to these themes are detailed below.

How predictable are examination questions and papers in the Leaving Certificate in Ireland? Which aspects of this predictability are helpful and which engender unwanted approaches to learning?

Within the student focus groups we used an adapted version of the working definition of predictability (see Figure 1). We worked with this adapted version so as to share with students, as we did with the teachers, notions of what predictability meant within particular contexts, but also to capacity build with them an understanding of the sorts of issues that we were interested in exploring with them. This stimulus proved helpful in focusing ideas on the main aspects of what the project was about.

Figure 1. Adapted definition of predictability for students

Some people say that examinations (like the Leaving Certificate exams) are too predictable and so they have a negative impact on students' learning. When an exam is seen as predictable in a bad way, it usually means that students and teachers are able to predict the types of examination questions and topics that will come up each year, as well as the kinds of answers that will be given good marks. This can mean that teachers teach to the exam and students are able to rote learn the subject-specific material that they are taught. So, in this kind of exam, students do not have to learn the entire curriculum or have a deep understanding of a subject to be able to answer questions and do well. This can also mean that every year the exam paper assesses the same knowledge and skills and doesn't measure the appropriate knowledge and skills that give students a better understanding of the subjects they learn.

Like their teachers, students gave mixed responses both to their reflections on the above definition and to the detailed question in the interview. As with teachers, students suggested that there were elements of the examinations and examination questions that they felt were predictable, but this very much depended on the subject, and that some aspects of some subjects were more predictable than others. So, for example, of the subjects under consideration in this research, students thought that more practical subjects, like DCG, were less predictable, as were those subjects that demanded the learning of a large amount of content, such as biology, geography and economics. French and English were seen as more predictable, in relation to oral topics being learnt by rote for the former and the selection of poets and pre-prepared essays for the latter. These comments were not unlike those aspects of predictability of the LC examinations highlighted by teachers.

Students suggested that if examinations were predictable, this was not always a bad thing. They realised that certain aspects of subject content and syllabus topics were core and consequently had to be examined, so it was not surprising that they came up every year. Having an element of predictability also helped with learning the broad variety of subjects that they had to study (most students taking six, seven or eight LC examinations in one sitting) and with getting to grips with the range of subject knowledge they were expected to have:

it's a good thing to have something that's predictable because we don't want everything to be a total mess. Like there's eight subjects, some schools are doing even more...so a little bit of predictability is very good because we can study that and we can get the points for it. (*Student Focus Group 4*)

Thus an element of predictability was welcomed as it enabled students and their teachers to focus on those aspects of the syllabus that were bound to come up in the examination, rather than 'wasting time', as they saw it, on syllabus content that would not appear. Furthermore, focusing on topics and associated questions gave students clear indications of key definitions and responses that needed to be included in their answers in order to optimise marks; students were keen to make sure they used words and phrases in their responses deemed acceptable by examiners in order to gain (and not lose) marks. They rehearsed their answers by looking at the types of responses that had been given good marks in the past. Students also indicated that certain formats of questions were similar every year, even though the content of the questions might vary. For example, the comprehensions in French were outlined several times to show that even though the range of contexts given for these comprehensions might come from a vast choice of contemporary issues, the genres of writing required were well known and well rehearsed by students and their teachers. A certain level of predictability, then, was seen as beneficial, as it gave students confidence in knowing what topics and associated questions were likely to appear year-on-year:

I think that makes you more confident if you know what's coming up in your exam, it makes you feel like you're not going in blind...so I think predictability...benefits you sometimes. I think it's good. *(Student Focus Group 14)*

Students considered the courses they were studying to be very broad and as a consequence they had to cover a large amount of material across a number of subjects in a relatively short space of time. This issue of breadth of subject raised opposing attitudes to predictability from students. On the one hand, some students suggested that courses were so broad that they could not predict the entire examination with any comfortable degree of certainty; students still needed to cover the whole course, to learn as much detail of the syllabus and core topics as they could, because 'nothing was 100% foolproof'. Students considered that anyone trying to predict what would come up in this way was taking too much of a risk with their chances of success. Respondents suggested that they and their peers are very clear about how serious the impact of the LC is to their life chances, so it is not in students' best interests to pick and choose what to learn for the examination. On the other hand, the breadth of subjects was forcing some students to engage with predicting what types of questions and content might appear, mainly because time was of the essence. Students across all the focus groups indicated very clearly that they felt there was just too much content that they were expected to learn across the two-year cycle. Therefore, engaging in some predicting of examination questions and topics was a reality of doing LC examinations:

But you need to have predictability because the courses are too big...to learn it all, there's no time...I'd like to live in a world where I didn't have to predict my exams, but it's what I'm going to have to do. *(Student Focus Group 13)*

Respondents reported how their teachers discussed with them patterns of questions and topics appearing or not appearing year on year, and then made some predictions with them based on these analyses. Yet the data indicated that identifying patterns or trends of syllabus content and the spotting of possible examination questions was not as easy to do as it might have been in previous years. Reasons given for this were related specifically to the changes in syllabuses, the changes in format and structure of questions, and the mixing up of topic/content areas on questions with multiple sections that assessed knowledge and skills from a cross section of the syllabus. The overall sense from students was that 'the days of predictions are kind of gone'. Thus students were keen to

point out that if the LC is predictable it is not so in any easy way that reduces the amount of work they have to do or the amount of course material they have to learn:

Like it's predictable in the way that you know certain topics are emphasised more than others, but that doesn't mean that it's still not hard to learn. It's still hard to retain all that information 'cos there is so much information to retain...even though it's predictable, there's still so much you have to learn that it isn't easy (*Student Focus Group 8*)

What kinds of examination preparation strategies do students use? Which of these are influenced by the predictability of the examinations?

Students discussed a number of examination preparation strategies that they use either individually and/or with their teachers in the classroom. These strategies reflect those mentioned by teachers (see above): use of examination questions and past papers; use of marking schemes; use of 'the book' (ie the published textbooks that they use with each subject); use of model answers and essays; obtaining extra tuition and support, including the use of 'grind schools'. Students also mentioned using revision guides and study aids that are produced by the same publishers who produce the textbooks, as well as educational websites supported by both official educational departments and commercial companies.

In terms of past papers and questions, students indicated that these were used with them in class in generally constructive ways. They help students identify what is expected in terms of responses, as well as the types of questions that they will come across in the examinations. Students had mixed experiences of when their teachers started to use past questions with them, some indicating that they used them more in the sixth year and others reporting that they had started to use them from the beginning of their fifth year. Respondents suggested that they had used past papers in all subjects but that the extent of use was very much down to individual teachers. Overall there was general agreement that the use of past questions and papers intensifies towards their mock examinations early in the sixth year and towards the end of the course, in final preparations for the examinations.

Students suggested that, in order to deal with the large volumes of content and knowledge needing to be learnt for examinations, they were inclined to learn a range of different types of responses 'off by heart'. These included essays, model answers, definitions and lists of key words. Examples were given of selected essays about particular poets and poems being learnt in advance in English, as well as six or seven essays being learnt in Irish, to respond to set questions. Lists of key words and phrases in subjects like biology and chemistry were also given as examples of content that students make themselves familiar with, as they see these being rewarded positively by examiners. Furthermore, in French, students learn topics by rote for letters, notes and diary entries. Such strategies were considered normal in order to be well prepared and to gain marks:

the exam papers are really helpful because you can see...what they've done...and what's expected to come up...You get sample answers and you learn them...off by heart and reuse them, or you can take points if you're confident enough to make your own essay out of it. (*Student Focus Group 12*)

However, as the quote above shows, students were also aware that they needed to use these answers wisely and that regurgitating such answers back to the examiners would not get them the

best marks possible. They would, however, help students in knowing what is required and knowing all the 'bits of information you needed to get a good result'. Students also indicated that they were very familiar with marking schemes, and that such familiarity was a necessity in knowing exactly what was required for a good response. They indicated that detailed knowledge of marking schemes by all students was only fair; everyone should know about them, what they looked like and what they entailed. This way every student in the country knows what marks are available and what different questions are worth. It was highlighted that marking schemes were used in a number of ways. First, they were used not only to help students structure their responses but also to help them understand how the question would be marked, that it would be marked in a particular way and that they needed to know how this was done:

We've kind of looked at marking schemes, because sometimes you know it's marked in a certain way and you have to answer questions in that way. So, like, for chemistry they have lists and you have to have something out of each list to answer the question. *(Student Focus Group 3)*

Then in terms of the marking scheme all of the questions are divided into different points, so when we're learning material we learn it all so that it just appeals to the examiner who will just give you the points rather than any other sort of way. *(Student Focus Group 2)*

Second, marking schemes were used to indicate how 'valuable' a question or section is in terms of marks and this tended, then, to indicate its 'worth', not only in relation to how much needed to be written but also in terms of the amount of time a student spent learning this material or revising this aspect of the course:

in English there'll be certain questions that you get 20 marks for...that sort of gives you an idea of how much you need to write then...but, for example, you might write one page and a quarter for a 20-mark question, but if it was a 15-mark question you'd write about one page. So it's [the marking scheme's], you know, how much emphasis you need to put on it or how much effort *(Student Focus Group 2)*

you get the past exam papers, and see the marks. Like we know that say in French, reading comprehensions is [sic] worth 30% overall...so we know what's more important than other sections, so you aim for the points [marks] there. *(Student Focus Group 2)*

A third way in which marking schemes were used was to indicate how much time should be spent answering each question. Students suggested that working through questions and marking schemes allowed them to learn the 'time' of each question. This meant that they looked at the examination as a whole, worked out how much time they had to spend on each question, how this time then related to marks available, and how they should spend their time wisely in order to optimise marks achieved. This notion of time was raised especially in relation to subjects like biology and geography, where students felt that there was an awful lot to cover in one two-/three-hour examination:

And they [marking schemes] kind of, like, divide out the time...show you how to divide the time between the marks, so you're, like, making the most of the marks available. So they give you a guideline, of how much time to spend...say for an English essay...you'd maybe spend an hour on the essay. But if you spend much

longer than that, you won't have enough time to do the rest, so they just kind of give you a guideline (*Student Focus Group 3*)

Along, then, with past papers, past questions and marking schemes, students also discussed other examination strategies that they employed in order to maximise their success. They talked about their use of 'the book' in each subject and how they used the chapters within these books to guide their study as well as learning the summaries of chapters. This specifically helped them in focusing on what content they felt they had to learn. They indicated that the books were also used in class to structure end-of-topic tests and revision of units of work. The size and price of these books were subject to some criticism, as students reflected there was extra work needed in condensing their textbooks, and at over 300 pages per book, this was no easy task. They were also deemed costly at over €30 each. One focus group offered the research team information on a particular alternative set of books, written specifically for students and which some of them used, and suggested these books were more succinct, at approximately a third of the length and a third of the price (retailing at €10 each). Students also discussed getting extra support for their studies through the use of 'grind schools' and extra tutors. The support of extra tuition enabled students to have one-to-one focus with a teacher, something that did not happen that often at school, with teachers rushing through topics to get the course covered as well as dealing with mixed-ability classrooms. Students suggested that in 'grinds' schools/courses tutors would teach directly to the examination, that they emphasised exactly what had to be done to answer particular questions and supplied students with different perspectives as well as short-hand notes, revision materials and tips for getting extra marks:

I think they're really good...like teachers [in grind schools] would teach to the exam more so than they do in school. So it's way more exam focused...

It's also another opinion of a teacher and their outlook of the exam as well...different teachers teach different methods...a grinds teacher they can teach you the method that you need. (*Student Focus Group 10*)

Students were well aware, however, that attending grind schools and having extra tuition was expensive, and recognised that not all students could afford to avail themselves of this extra support. Students indicated that they felt bad about asking their own families for this financial support but felt they had to in order to do the best they could. Respondents suggested that having access to all the different support and materials that were available to help with doing well in the LC was an expensive business all round:

S1 you're buying books as well, and then grinds...and then you don't want to ask your parents for that kind of money.

S2 You can feel bad about it, like. But sometimes they can be annoyed about it but they know it's what you need. But you still feel bad about asking all the time for this money.

S3 Sixth Year is one of the most expensive years. (*Student Focus Group 12*)

What kinds of learning are the examinations intended to promote?

Students were asked to consider how the LC impacted on their learning and what types and approaches to learning they thought the LC encouraged or demanded of them. Overall the answers

to these questions were not wholly positive. While published objectives aspire to affect the types of learning the LC is intended to engender, the data emerging from students show approaches to learning that might be classed as narrow and focused solely on the test. However, students believe that the learning strategies they adopt, like the examination strategies outlined above, are the best for enabling them to succeed and get the points they need to move on to the next level.

Respondents discussed at length how they thought, for the most part, examinations were a test of recall rather than of understanding. They did acknowledge that for some subjects, and for some units within subjects, understanding was necessary and definitely needed for the top grades. However, there was a sense that students believed they could get through examinations in certain subjects without having to understand what they were writing about, at least not to a degree of depth that might be expected by examiners and their teachers:

I think that you don't have to really understand it [course material]...you just try and remember, like, certain topics, but you don't have to understand it...you just remember certain definitions. (*Student Focus Group 14*)

Thus students felt that what was being tested was their ability to remember rather than their learning and that this was not going to benefit them in the long run:

Like there's a difference between memorising and understanding something, and being able to regurgitate something on the day without really even understanding what you're writing. And I think that's the key to what the Leaving Cert is at the moment. (*Student Focus Group 13*)

When students were asked to share what approaches to learning they enjoyed most, activities such as practicals, projects and fieldwork came up as examples of when learning seemed related to their interests. They tended to show an enthusiasm for those subjects, such as DCG and geography, that had project and fieldwork components that contributed to the overall marks they received. They suggested that not only did components like these allow them to research their own answers to the task and conduct investigations, but that having marks already gained for these elements meant they had something to fall back on when going into the examination. They also saw these types of courses as being more modern and up to date, using new teaching techniques and having some relevance to their everyday lives:

- S1 DCG is good the way it is.
- S2 Yeah, it's very modern, it's a very modern course, and...they integrate computing into it as well as drawing.
- S3 It's really practical, hands-on, kind of you're always doing something.
- S4 Yeah. And what's brilliant about it is there's a project that has 40% allocated to it, so you have potentially 40 points out of 100 points already submitted before you actually go into your exam in June. (*Student Focus Group 2*)

Beyond these practical components, students suggested that generally the rest of the LC examinations were all about rote learning (as discussed above) and 'cramming' material to be regurgitated on the day of the examination. There was acknowledgement that some of their

teachers were trying to help them 'learn for life', to expand what was in the syllabus and apply the content being taught to wider debates and affairs, but students felt ultimately that their teachers were forced to teach in particular ways and they were then forced to learn in a rote fashion:

I think it also greatly depends on your teacher...like there are teachers who will teach you for life, or there are teachers that will teach you for an exam. Like my [subject] teacher is fantastic, she's just wonderful – she teaches us the whole little 'Did you know?' bit in the book she'd go into, because she thinks it's important for us to know. *(Student Focus Group 13)*

S1 The learning is adapted to the way that the exams are I think...like the teachers have to teach like that, because it's the only way to get...it's not the teachers' fault like...

S2 They'd obviously love to give us, like, a bit of craic or whatever, group discussion, but they can't because we have to get the points *(Student Focus Group 2)*

Students did, however, acknowledge that particular types of questions within some subjects were testing their ability to have and show an opinion. They understood that such questions were trying to assess their skills of interpretation, of analysis and evaluation, and in doing so were seeking to test their 'intellectual ability and not just their memory'. Students were aware that, to get good marks on those questions that attracted larger point tariffs, they also had to do well on these 'opinion' type questions:

But if I go home and literally eat the page and learn it off and then regurgitate it in an exam ...but like that...that just doesn't really say much. *(Student Focus Group 7)*

Whereas in Religion it's all about your opinion, how you interpret something, and the more detail, the more critical analysis you can give in an essay, the higher you do. So you have to understand what you're doing, you can't have somebody teaching you just facts. *(Student Focus Group 13)*

Generally, though, students' perspectives on the issues of how the LC impacted on their learning and how it dictated their approaches to learning suggested that the 'tall order' of success was to cover large amounts of syllabus content in class, to learn significant amounts of course material in a short space of time, to then be tested on this learning and apply this material across various contexts and topics, and to do this across seven or eight subjects:

I can only speak for myself, but I'm more kind of learning how to get as many points as possible, not trying to learn to get knowledge out of the subject...all I want to do is get as many points as I can to get to a college course. *(Student Focus Group 8)*

Finally, students were asked what they thought of the LC generally and its impact on their educational experiences and day-to-day lives. Like perspectives from other students of similar ages and from other jurisdictions, the students we met considered that the LC examinations took over their lives and, for the most part, their fifth and sixth years in schooling were dominated by these examinations to the exclusion of other pastimes and activities. Some students even suggested that a focus on these examinations went further back, into their early days of secondary schooling, and continued to dominate their choices and experiences through their school careers. For some

students the LC was seen as being a positive experience, one that ‘motivates you to do well as your future career depends on it’. However, the majority found the focus on the LC all-consuming and this, along with the desire to achieve their goals, creates huge amounts of pressure for students and influences what and how they learn:

So you kind of spend more time stressing than you do studying these days...you sort of have to make your plan for yourself to learn everything – and that’s a lot of things to learn *(Student Focus Group 1)*

Students also suggested that the LC, in its present form, doesn’t really take all students’ aptitudes into account, that it is too academic and that there is too much pressure on young people to get high scores across too many subjects, all of which they may not like, enjoy or need to the same extent:

It’s already specified, you kind of are forced to do seven exams even though, I mean, most of the subjects you’ll never even look at again. That’s pretty much it. *(Student Focus Group 1)*

The issue of the number of subjects studied and examined came up frequently as an issue of concern. Students suggested that the number of subjects, along with the points system, were probably the two most influential reasons why they learnt material specifically for the examinations and adopted the ways of preparing for the examinations as outlined above:

It’s really the point system that’s the flaw with the Leaving Cert. Like obviously the amount of subjects is ridiculous, but the points is what gets people, and that’s why the Leaving Cert has become so much more pressurised; it’s because it’s not just an exam, it’s like your future. Like you know it’s the doorway to your future, so I think that needs to be addressed. *(Student Focus Group 13)*

Students also voiced concerns about the majority of LC assessments consisting mainly of one-off examinations, lasting two to three hours, and happening over a period of two weeks at the end of their sixth year. The timetabling of the examinations seemed to exasperate them; they were incredulous as to why anybody thought it was beneficial for students to have to cram two years of work into an incredibly short time frame, as well as having to do two or three demanding examinations in one day. Such timetables, they suggested, did not give them a chance to show themselves at their best across the range of subjects studied. When asked what they would like to see changed about the LC, the timetabling of examinations came up frequently as one thing that needs to be reviewed:

S1 It’s two years of your life stuck into two weeks.

S2 ...two weeks of stress and probably a lot of crying. *(Student Focus Group 12)*

Thus the impact of the LC system on young people in Ireland, its structure and format, should not be underestimated. While the aims and objectives of the system are to engender positive learning outcomes and prepare young people for the world outside of school, the reality is that young people are consumed with optimising their performance on these examinations and see this as the main goal of their schooling. They do not see this as necessarily their fault, only that they are reacting in the best ways they know how to what they see as the demands of the examinations system, their teachers and parents, aligned with the demands of the points system. The following interaction from

one focus group seems to cover succinctly how the young people we interviewed ultimately feel about the examination system they experience:

- S1 There's huge pressure mounted on this one examination, like we've only two weeks to do, you know, six, seven, eight or nine subjects, and it's a very short time frame to do such a huge amount of work.
- S2 And it's such a pressured time, if the exam doesn't go your way, like that's it, that's two years of work just...
- S3 Gone.
- S4 ...wasted.
- S5 Like if someone was very ill for the two weeks, you know, they wouldn't be able to partake in the exams, they'd have to repeat the whole year; there'd be no mercy at all. (*Student Focus Group 2*)

Conclusions

This report has presented in detail the rich and varied perspectives of teachers and students on the concept of predictability as it is understood in the contexts of schools in Ireland. From the data, it is clear that there is no definitive answer to whether the Irish Leaving Certificate is predictable or not; the notion is too complex and varied across subject boundaries and teaching and learning contexts. Ultimately, for teachers and students the notion of 'predictability' was not one that they seemed to 'own'; they saw it as an issue of interest to the policy maker, the politician, but not of immediate importance to them in their everyday experiences of preparing for these examinations. The experience of the Leaving Certificate is very different for teachers and for students. Teachers ultimately focus on the subject that they teach, thus they experience the Leaving Certificate **within** their subject. They work with students on past papers, past questions, marking schemes and course materials within their subjects and teach as best they can to prepare students well for the LC in their subject. In this respect the boundaries of the LC for the teacher are very much aligned to what the subject demands and the extent of the syllabus in this subject. For students, however, the experience of the LC is of a number of subjects (six, seven, eight) to be taken all at the same time. Thus their experience is **across** subjects, and in this respect the boundaries of the LC for the student are the extensive range of demands that each subject makes of them in order that they meet the same standard in each. It is the tensions between the 'within subjects' and the 'across subjects' perspectives of the LC that perhaps cause the narrowing of the curriculum to occur, as well as teaching and learning to the test to flourish. Such tensions become manifest through the views of teachers, that recall of knowledge alone or narrowing of the curriculum will not lead to success in the Leaving Certificate, being misaligned with those of students, who believe they must rote learn large tracts of material or select particular aspects of the subject syllabuses in the Leaving Certificate programme in order to succeed. We need to look at the interactions between teachers' experiences and students' experiences in order to fully understand how predictability, or the perception of predictability, plays out within the LC examination system, if we wish to reduce the unwanted effects it can create.

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Appendix A: Information sheet and consent form for adult participants

Investigating Predictability in the Leaving Certificate Examination

Information sheet for adult participants

What is the project about?

The aim of this project is to establish the predictability of Leaving Certificate. The international research on assessment typically shows that transparency of the requirements has a positive effect upon student attainment. However, there are questions in many countries about whether transparency has gone too far. In this research, we incorporate what is known on the effects of high-stakes testing upon teaching and learning and we also investigate some of the claims made in the media about the Leaving Certificate. The State Examinations Commission is funding this project. The researchers are from the University of Oxford and Queen's University Belfast.

What will the project team do?

In the first phase, assessment specialists and senior examiners who are experienced with examinations at this level in other countries will conduct a review of the examination materials. Six subjects will be included (English, economics, French, geography, biology and graphics and design). In the next phase, interviews with teachers of these subjects will take place in schools across Ireland on the effects of the Leaving Certificate upon teaching and learning. The team will collect students' views on preparation for, and taking, the examinations, through questionnaires and focus groups.

What do I have to do?

If you decide to take part in the project you will be asked to participate in an interview which will take place in your school/college. This should take around 60 minutes. As you have given your time, we want to make sure that we don't miss anything you say and so we will ask if we can record the conversation, but it will be your choice to say whether this is all right or not.

What happens if I change my mind?

You are free to withdraw from the project at any time. All you need to do is to let a member of the research team know.

What happens to my personal details?

We are very interested in your opinions but the identity of the person giving them is of no interest to us. We will only use your name to contact you. All your details will be treated as confidential and will not be passed to anyone outside the project. They will only be seen by members of the project team. You will not be named anywhere in any report from the project. We will ensure that all the information you give is kept securely. Any paper information will be kept under lock and key and electronic data will be password protected and only available to the project team. We will comply with the Data Protection Act as well as the Universities of Oxford and Queen's Belfast's codes of conduct for data protection.

How long will you be using my opinions?

The SEC will get a report which uses the views of all people from the schools and colleges which have taken part. This report will eventually go to the minister of education with recommendations about the predictability of the Leaving Certificate and how it might change.

Who can I contact if I have any questions?

If you have any questions about this research, please contact Dr Therese Hopfenbeck at the University of Oxford.

Investigating Predictability in the Leaving Certificate Examination
ADULT CONSENT FORM

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet relating to the Predictability in the Leaving Certificate Examination project.

I _____ volunteer to participate in an interview for the above named project.

I consent to my data being collected, stored and used by the research team for the purpose of the research (TICK as appropriate):

- 1. reporting
- 2. dissemination
- 3. publication
- 4. presentation

I agree to the interview being taped and the recording being used as an aid to data collection (TICK as appropriate):

I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and from participating in this research at any time (TICK as appropriate):

Signed: _____ Date: _____

IN CASES OF WITHDRAWAL OF CONSENT:

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Appendix B: Information sheet and consent form for students

Investigating Predictability in the Leaving Certificate Examination

Information sheet for young people

What is the project about?

The aim of this project is to find out how predictable the Leaving Certificate is. We know from research in other countries that it's important that pupils have enough information about how they will be assessed in examinations, so that they know what to revise and how to prepare. However, some people are worried that this has gone too far. They believe that the Leaving Certificate examinations are becoming too predictable and so young people are not learning enough and/or using the right kind of skills. You may have seen or heard this discussed on TV or in newspapers. The purpose of this research is to find out from teachers, students and examination experts whether there is any evidence to support the claim that the Leaving Certificate is too predictable. The State Examinations Commission is funding this project. The researchers are from the University of Oxford and Queen's University Belfast.

What will the project team do?

The first step will be for experts in examinations to look at the Leaving Certificate examination materials. Six subjects will be included (English, economics, French, geography, biology and graphics and design). The team will also collect students' views on preparation for, and taking, the examinations, through questionnaires and focus groups. In addition, interviews on the effects of the Leaving Certificate upon teaching and learning will be conducted with teachers from across Ireland.

What do I have to do?

If you decide to take part in the project you will be asked to participate in a group interview with 6 or 7 other students in your year group. This interview will take place in your school/college. The group interview should take around 60 minutes. As you have given your time, we want to make sure that we don't miss anything you say and so we will ask the group if we can record the conversation to help us with recall, but it will be your choice to say whether this is all right or not.

What happens if I change my mind?

You are free to withdraw from the project at any time. All you need to do is to let a member of the research team know or tell the contact in your school.

What happens to my personal details?

We are very interested in your opinions but the identity of the young person giving them is of no interest to us. We will only use your name to contact you about the focus group. All your details will be treated as confidential and will not be passed to anyone outside the project. They will only be seen by members of the project team. You will not be named anywhere in the final report. We will ensure that all the information you give is kept securely. Any paper information will be kept under lock and

key and electronic data will be password protected and only available to the project team. We will comply with the Data Protection Act as well as the Universities of Oxford and Queen's Belfast's codes of conduct for data protection.

How long will you be using my opinions?

The SEC will get a report which uses the views of all young people and teachers from the schools and colleges which have taken part. This report will eventually go to the minister of education with recommendations about the predictability of the Leaving Certificate and how it might change.

Who can I contact if I have any questions?

If you have any questions about this research, please contact Dr Therese Hopfenbeck at the University of Oxford.

Investigating Predictability in the Leaving Certificate Examination
STUDENT CONSENT FORM

I _____ volunteer to participate in a focus group for the above named project.

I consent to my data being collected, stored and used by the project team for the purpose of the research (TICK as appropriate):

- 1. reporting
- 2. dissemination
- 3. publication
- 4. presentation

I agree to the interview being taped and the recording being used as an aid to data collection (TICK as appropriate):

I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and from participating in this research at any time (TICK as appropriate):

Signed: _____ Date: _____

IN CASES OF WITHDRAWAL OF CONSENT:

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Appendix C: Teacher interviews and codebook

PREDICTABILITY IN THE IRISH LEAVING CERTIFICATE Teacher Interviews & Codebook

Research Questions	Interview Questions	Related Codes
(other)	IQ1. How long have you been involved in teaching for the Leaving Certificate?	Experience with LC
RQ1. How predictable are examination questions in the Leaving Certificate in Ireland?	IQ2. Do you think the subject areas covered by the exam questions are predictable?	Exam Predictability <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Predictable • Not Predictable • Mixed Response
<p>RQ2. Which aspects of this predictability are helpful and which engender unwanted approaches to learning?</p> <p>RQ3. What are the syllabus and assessment design phenomena associated with predictability?</p> <p>RQ4. What subject-specific phenomena are associated with predictability?</p>	<p>IQ2. Do you think the subject areas covered by the exam questions are predictable?</p> <p>IQ4. Do you use the syllabus in this subject? How do you know what curriculum to teach?</p> <p>IQ10. Can you tell me whether/how you use the marking scheme in teaching? Do you find the marking scheme transparent generally?</p>	Predictable Phenomena <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Predictable Elements of LC • Syllabus Phenomena • Marking Scheme Phenomena
RQ5. What kinds of examination preparation strategies do teachers and students use? Which of these are influenced by the predictability of the examinations?	<p>IQ3. What impact do you think the Leaving Certificate has had on your teaching practice?</p> <p>IQ4. What impact do you think the LC has on [subject]?</p> <p>IQ5. What effects do you think the LC has on how students learn?</p>	LC Impact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exam Prep strategies • LC Impact on <i>Teaching</i> • LC Impact on <i>Subject Knowledge</i> • LC Impact on <i>Student Learning</i>
(other)	IQ9. Do you have any suggestions as to what changes (if any) should be made to the LC? Are there ways that you think it could be improved?	Suggested Changes
(other)	(throughout)	Other Subjects <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irish • Business • Project Maths

Appendix D: Student focus groups interviews and codebook

PREDICTABILITY IN THE IRISH LEAVING CERTIFICATE Student Focus Group Interviews & Codebook

	Part 1 – GENERAL PREDICTABILITY VIEWS	Related Codes
1 RQ: What kinds of learning are the examinations intended to promote?	<p>What are your views on the LC generally? You might like to think about your responses in relation to specific subjects (eg study subjects):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Do you think the exam tests the appropriate kind of learning? → Do you think it assesses skills of application and evaluation as well as knowledge? → Do you think it allows you to obtain a broad understanding of the subjects you are learning? → Does the LC assess what you have learnt in class? → Do you think you can do well in the exam if you haven't fully understood all the topics that you have learnt in class? → Are you able to predict what comes up in the exam? 	<p>Student attitudes to LC. Examples of students liking or disliking LC; what do they think is good about it, or bad about it?</p> <p>Impact of LC on student learning. Examples which show student views on how the LC affects how they learn.</p> <p>Positive impact of LC on student learning. Examples which show student views on how the LC affects how they learn positively.</p> <p>Negative impact of LC on student learning. Examples which show student views on how the LC affects how they learn negatively.</p>
2 RQ: How predictable are examination questions in the Leaving Certificate in Ireland?	<p>SHOW DEFINITION OF PREDICTABILITY/ASPECTS OF VALIDITY.</p> <p>In your experience do you think the subject areas covered by the exam questions are predictable?</p>	<p>Student attitudes to LC predictability. Are they predictable? What aspects are predictable? Subject predictable? Question format predictable?</p> <p>Student positive attitudes to predictability. What is helpful about predictability? What do they report as positive about predictability?</p> <p>Student negative attitudes to predictability. What is unwanted or negative about predictability?</p>

<p>3 RQ: What kinds of learning are the examinations intended to promote?</p>	<p>In thinking about the subjects you study and how you like to learn:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → What approaches to learning do you think work best for preparing for the Leaving Certificate? → Does the way that you learn for the LC reflect how you like to learn generally? → Is this the same for each subject? 	<p>Student experiences of approaches to learning in LC classrooms. Examples of the activities, approaches they experience in LC classrooms.</p> <p>Student preferences in approaches to learning. Examples of what they like about the learning they experience. Examples of what they want to happen in their classroom that does not happen.</p>
<p>4 RQ: What kinds of examination preparation strategies do teachers and students use? Which of these are influenced by the predictability of the examinations?</p>	<p>What kinds of support help you prepare for your exams?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Eg prompt – past examination questions, model answers, revision guides, text books? → Have your teachers or tutors worked on examination techniques with you? → Are you getting extra support or thinking about getting extra support? For example: → Extra tuition, attending grind school, grind school websites? 	<p>Examination preparation strategies. In class. Outside of class. Views of examination preparation strategies, positive and negative.</p>
<p>5 RQ: How predictable are examination questions in the Leaving Certificate in Ireland?</p>	<p>Every summer there is considerable media coverage of the LC results (about its predictability and value):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Have you noticed any of these stories about the leaving certificate? → What are your views about them? Do you agree/disagree with them? 	<p>Image/value of LC (student). Examples which illustrate student attitudes to LC predictability in media.</p>
<p>6 RQ: Identify issues to be addressed in an Irish context in relation to levels of problematic predictability identified in the Leaving Certificate Examination.</p>	<p>For future students taking the LC:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Do you have any suggestions as to what changes (if any) should be made to it? Are there ways that you think it could be improved? 	<p>Suggestions for change (student)</p>

THANK YOU FOR TAKING PART. IT IS ENORMOUSLY HELPFUL TO HAVE THE VIEWS OF STUDENTS INCLUDED IN THE DATA FOR THIS PROJECT AND WE REALLY APPRECIATE THE TIME YOU HAVE GIVEN TO US OUT OF YOUR SCHOOL DAY.

Proposed Code
<p>1. Student attitudes to LC. Examples of students liking or disliking LC; what do they think is good about it, or bad about it?</p>
<p>2. Impact of LC on student learning. Examples which show student views on how the LC affects how they learn, the classroom practices associated with the LC. Including, positive impact of LC on student learning: examples which show student views on how the LC affects how they learn positively. Including, negative impact of LC on student learning: examples which show student views on how the LC affects how they learn negatively.</p>
<p>3. Student attitudes to LC predictability. Are they predictable? What aspects are predictable? Subject predictable? Question format predictable? Including, student positive attitudes to predictability: what is helpful about predictability? What do they report as positive about predictability? Including, student negative attitudes to predictability: what is unwanted or negative about predictability?</p>
<p>4. Student preferences in approaches to learning. Examples of what they like about the learning they experience. Examples of what they want to happen in their classroom that does not happen. Examples of classroom practices they prefer.</p>
<p>5. Examination preparation strategies. In class. Outside of class. Views of examination preparation strategies, positive and negative.</p>
<p>6. Image/value of LC (student). Examples which illustrate student attitudes to LC predictability in media.</p>
<p>7. Student suggestions for change. Examples of suggestions from students on how they would change the LC, or how they think it should be changed.</p>

