

Sir,

On Tuesday 29th March Minister Norma Foley announced a number of changes to the Leaving Certificate, the most immediate of which is the introduction of Leaving Certificate exams at the end of Fifth Year. One of these exams is English Paper 1.

The movement of this exam to the end of Fifth Year indicates a fundamental lack of understanding of the English curriculum and of why we study English.

The Minister's announcement also said that 'the student is at the centre of their Senior Cycle experience' and that students will 'develop their interests and skills'. The movement of English Paper 1 undermines those statements.

The NCCA Advisory Report (p. 12) states that the Leaving Cert should 'help[s] every student in senior cycle to become more autonomous and independent, and more fully themselves, with views and perspectives on their lives and on society'.

The core element of the study of English, from Junior Infants to the end of Sixth Year, was the development of individual student voice in whatever creative expression (or 'creative thinking' NCCA Advisory Report page 23) they find best suits them. I say 'was' as, with the movement of Paper 1, it seems that the educational value of the exam has been dismissed and replaced with the need to ease pressure for those looking for CAO points.

It is worth noting that the paper 1 skills are developmental, they grow over time. This means that there will be no reduction in "hard study" of texts for those students that sit the paper in Fifth Year.

Now that vital last year of maturation - where students are exposed to a variety of voices through study of various texts for Paper 2, where students experiment in the time available to them over the two years, where students hone their writing skills - has been compromised. It has typically been in the forum of Paper 1 that students 'reflect their evolving sense of self' (NCCA Advisory Report page 21). One of the Guiding Principles for a redeveloped Senior Cycle is to cultivate 'creative and innovative thinking' in students (NCCA Advisory Report page 24). This will now stop at the end of Fifth Year.

Consequently, this move may result in students feeling under pressure to commit to a level of examination far earlier, with many being unwilling to "chance" the Higher Level paper so early. This would likely be felt most acutely in our DEIS schools, where excellent work is undertaken to support and motivate students over the course of two years. The result is the same: student voice and creativity are being undermined.

I do not want to be misunderstood: reform of Senior Cycle is indeed to be welcomed in its vision to provide greater inclusivity and flexibility in education for all students. The NCCA's Senior Cycle Advisory Report explicitly draws attention to the time needed for the curriculum development work necessary and the implementation of the changes.

In light of the broader plan to reimagine Senior Cycle, the Minister's 29th March announcement appears short-sighted. One imagines that, in time, the English syllabus will be revised in line with the changes to all subject specifications and this first change may need to be revisited. Not to mention the adaptations which may arise from the suggested 40% continuous assessment element and indeed the impact on English of new subjects like Film, Drama and Theatre Studies.

Why then the rush for students to sit the English Paper One Leaving Cert exam at the end of Fifth Year in 2024? Our young people deserve a well thought out Senior Cycle, not one which will chop and change, adding to their stress.

We at INOTE (Irish National Organisation for Teachers of English) ask Minister Foley to reconsider this action and allow students to fully develop their voice, their creativity, and their individuality, the very elements that should be at the centre of English, a subject she once taught.

Yours,

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