

Dear Ciarán,

Your correspondence (email, letter, and survey findings) was forwarded to the Chief Examiner for Leaving Certificate Mathematics and Leaving Certificate Applied Mathematical Applications, who has asked me to issue the following response.

Thank you for your correspondence regarding the particular assessment arrangements for the 2021 Leaving Certificate Mathematics and the 2021 Leaving Certificate Applied Mathematical Applications examinations. As you may be aware, the Department of Education, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, and the State Examinations Commission collaboratively considered what further adjustments to the Leaving Certificate examinations would be most appropriate, to take cognisance of the further disruption to teaching and learning due to the extended period of school closure in 2021. The aim of these further adjustments is to lessen the load for candidates, as far as is reasonably practicable, both in their preparation for the written examinations and on the day of the examination. Information on these further adjustments has now been published.

You raise three main issues in your letter: two with respect to the Leaving Certificate Mathematics examination, and one with respect to the Leaving Certificate Applied Mathematical Applications examination. These are addressed in turn below.

With regard to the Leaving Certificate examinations, you suggest that, in order to achieve a suitable reduction on the load for students, either an entire topic or sub-topic should be excluded from the examination, or “the questions should be designed so that students can individually achieve this [reduction in learning] by choice. This would necessitate questions on topics being asked in isolation, without crossover from various sections and multiple strands over both papers.” These suggestions were both addressed explicitly in the correspondence from the SEC on 24/11/2020, and are addressed again here in light of the Further Adjustments document.

With regard to your first suggestion, the original Assessment Arrangements documents noted that schools have significant autonomy in determining how to sequence and pace learning for students in their schools. Thus, students in different schools would be expected to have met different material at different times in their course of study; as a result, it would not be appropriate to implement a centrally-prescribed adjustment of the curriculum, such as the exclusion of an entire topic or sub-topic from the examination.

With regard to your second suggestion, the Mathematics examination papers as they have been constituted over the last number of years are a reflection of the conception of mathematics espoused in the syllabus, that is, something that is composed of interconnected rather than discrete strands. Furthermore, many topics in the syllabus are interdependent, with the boundaries between such topics necessarily not clearly defined. The questions on the examination papers (in particular in Section B) reflect this, often drawing on multiple topics within one question. In general, it is not envisaged that this will change for 2021 – instead, the questions with which candidates will be presented in the 2021 examination papers will be similar in style to those in examination papers from the last number of years. (In fact, the Further Adjustments document is clear in stating that, given that we are now late into the two years of the Leaving Certificate programme for the candidates for 2021, an underlying principle has been that the further adjustments should be done in such a way that the examination papers remain as familiar as possible to candidates.)

However, this does not imply that the full course needs to be covered in the usual level of detail, particularly given the level of choice that candidates will now have. For example, at Higher Level, candidates will be required to answer four questions from six in Section A, and two questions from

four in Section B. The level of choice is particularly high in Section B in order to take account of the fact that this is the section in which the questions tend to be longer and to draw more on multiple topics – in this section, candidates now only need to answer half of the questions. This is a very high level of choice – particularly in a context where, in previous years, there was no choice on the examination papers – and should be sufficient to appropriately reduce the load on students, while maintaining the style of question to which students have become accustomed, and which is aligned with the broad aims of the syllabus.

(It is noted that the level of choice in Section B goes well beyond what very many of the respondents in your survey suggested (noting that 8.6% felt that candidates should be required to answer 75% of the questions in Section B, while 45% felt that candidates should be required to answer 60% of the questions in this section). When combined with the 42% of respondents who felt that the level of choice now introduced is the most appropriate, it is notable that the level of choice for Section B at Higher and Ordinary levels is in line with, or more generous than, that proposed by at least 95% of your respondents.)

Finally, with regard to the Leaving Certificate Applied Mathematical Applications examination paper, you propose that candidates be allowed answer any four questions from the five on the exam paper, rather than question one and three other questions. A decision was taken by the DoE, NCCA, and SEC that, rather than adjusting the examination papers, an increased scaling factor of 1.25 will be applied to the mark of each candidate. This has the benefit, for these candidates, of preserving the familiar overall structure and detail across all of their examinations, while also providing a very substantial intervention to compensate for disruptions to their learning. While candidates will still be required to answer question one, the nature of this question (i.e. ten short questions drawn from the course as a whole), along with the nature of the Mathematical Applications module descriptors themselves (with many of the basic mathematical ideas recurring throughout the course), means that it is envisaged that the scaling factor will be sufficient to take account of specific content that candidates have missed as a result of disruptions to teaching and learning caused by extended school closures, even allowing for the fact that candidates must answer question one (along with three other questions).

Kind regards,

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