

State Examinations throughout 2022

An unparalleled year for second-level education

This article explores the State examinations in 2022, the highs and lows, the changes and outcomes. It makes particular reference to the exam crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, grade inflation and the CAO, and of course the long-awaited Leaving Certificate reform announcement.

Exam uncertainty and the Covid-19 pandemic

Without a doubt, 2022 was a whirlwind of a year for students sitting the State examinations. From exam upheaval to Leaving Certificate reform, it was a year filled with uncertainty. The Covid-19 pandemic was still hanging above us, and with Christmas just passed, cases were rising quickly.

Among other questions this raised was: Can the State exams go ahead? As expected, the media went haywire. The issue of State exams was everywhere – in every paper, on every social media platform, you simply couldn't avoid it. It was a discussion being had in every Irish household.

As things stood, the exams had already been given adjustments in September 2022, such as more choice on papers. Notably, the Minister for Education, Norma Foley, promised that there would be 'no cliff edge for the students in terms of grade inflation' (Michael, 2022).

Meanwhile, the Advisory Group on Planning for State Examinations was deep in discussion. Students, parents, teachers and principals, management bodies, and government officials were all represented (Government of Ireland, 2021), and advocated on behalf of their constituencies. Surveys held by the Irish Second-Level Students' Union (ISSU) had 41,000 responses, and surveys by the National Parents Council Post-Primary had over 5,000; these called jointly for the State exams to go ahead in a hybrid model, similarly to those held in 2021 (NPCpp, 2022).

The Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) called for a full return to all State exams (TUI, 2022), as did the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) (ASTI, 2022). What made this year unique was that some Junior Cycle students had never sat a State exam and therefore had no experience of them, but they also had no recorded grades that could be used for standardisation. This was used as an argument both for and against a full return to exams as normal.



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These discussions continued until 1 February, when Minister Foley announced what could be considered a middle ground: further adjustments to the State exams. These adjustments were widely welcomed by students, parents, and teachers alike.

2022 State exam results and the CAO

On 2 and 8 September 2022 we saw the promise of 'no cliff edge for the students in terms of grade inflation' come into practice, with the results of the Leaving Certificate and CAO issued to students. These grades, as promised, were no lower than those in 2021, but they came with their own problems.

2022 saw 84,321 students apply to the CAO. More than half of these students received their first choice offer, but many universities had to resort to random selection in allocating these places because of the high points received.

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Simon Harris, announced additional places in high-demand courses such as Medicine and Dentistry, a welcomed move. Unfortunately, even with additional places, many students were left without offers in these subjects due to the high demand and random allocation (O'Brien, 2022).

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Long-awaited Leaving Cert reform

Perhaps the biggest and most unexpected announcement in 2022 was that of Senior Cycle reform. On 29 March, Minister Foley announced her ambitious plans to gradually change Senior Cycle and the State exams, to begin in 2023/24. These changes included the addition of new subjects (Drama, Film, and Theatre Studies; and Climate Action and Sustainable Development), and new curricula for the subjects currently available.

Another notable change was the revised assessment method. Subjects will be assessed using additional components worth 40% and a written exam worth 60% (Government of Ireland, 2022) – a change that education stakeholders have been seeking for years.

For all these ambitions, however, we saw a much-awaited reform of the CAO system left behind. Fifth-year students in 2023 will sit the Irish and English paper 1 exams, but there is still little information available about how this change will work. There is no doubt that these new changes are simply a starting point, not the final destination.

2022 was a notable year for education. From the impacts that Covid-19 had on the system to the announcement that changed the State exams forever, it's a year that won't be forgotten.

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