



OLLSCOIL NA
GAILLIMHE
UNIVERSITY
OF GALWAY

Timing of Leaving Certificate Oral Examinations

Opinions and Perspectives of Parents, Students, Teachers, Examiners and Schools

Executive Summary (extracted by SEC)

Emer Davitt, Breandán MacGearailt, Dr. Fiona Concannon, Professor Gerry MacRuaric & Professor Michal Molcho.
School of Education,
University of Galway.

July 2024

1. Executive Summary

1.1. Introduction

The central objective of the study was to explore parent, student, teacher, examiner, school management and other opinions about the most suitable timing for the Leaving Certificate Oral Examinations from 2024 onwards. The report is divided into two sections as there were two phases of the research. The first phase conducted in October/November 2023 comprised an online survey asking respondents to choose an appropriate timing for the oral examinations in the future and to reflect experiences of recent years. The second phase of the research involved a multisite case study, completed in April/May 2024, where school communities were asked to reflect on their experience of the oral examinations in Easter 2024. As the two sets of data reflected different experiences and the research was conducted using differing instrumentation the results will be presented within this report in separate sections.

1.2. Background to the Survey

As noted above the survey was conducted to gain an insight into the opinions of stakeholders in relation to the most suitable date for the Leaving Certificate orals going forward and the experiences of parents, students, teachers and management in relation to recent examinations up to Easter 2023.

The key areas we will report on in Section One are:

1. The most favourable timing for the Leaving Certificate Oral Examinations.
2. The reasons given by the various stakeholders for their choice.
3. The perceived challenges and opportunities related to the Leaving Certificate Oral Examinations during Easter time on students, teachers, schools and others.
4. The perceived challenges and opportunities relating to the Leaving Certificate Oral Examinations during school time on students, teachers, schools and others.

This report provides a summary and synthesis of the survey responses of the participating students, parents, teachers, examiners and school management as well as any other interested parties.

Irish and English language versions of the survey were housed on a commercial survey website compliant with GDPR requirements. The online survey was initiated on 20th October 2023 and closed at one am on the 13th November 2023. Demographic questions were included across each section of the survey. A cross-sectional research design (i.e. the survey was administered at one point in time) was employed where respondents were asked to choose a most appropriate timing for the exams in the future and also those who had been involved with Leaving Certificate Oral Examinations were asked to retrospectively reflect on their experiences of the Leaving Certificate Oral Examinations during the Easter Holidays and during school time, whichever was applicable. Along with a range of closed-ended questions, the survey included open-ended items that offered all the respondent sample the opportunity to describe in their own words their opinions, experiences and perspectives on the oral examinations. Respondents were recruited via a number of pathways including: the NPC database of parent affiliates; the ISSU database of young people, social media channels targeting parents of Senior Cycle students, teachers, and primarily language teachers as well as examiners and others. Other channels also used included the University of Galway news webpage and Twitter account; direct email to all second level schools in the country, and through personal and organisational contacts of the research team.

Students under 18, were accessed solely through their parents; that is, parents provided informed consent for their young person to participate in the online survey, after which, the child provided their own informed assent, and then initiated the relevant section of the survey.

The quantitative data from the survey were analysed using descriptive statistics combined with parametric and non-parametric inferential statistics. Data from the open-ended questions of the

survey were analysed using content analysis approaches. The final sample ($N^1 = 11,220$) was comprised of parents (10%), parents with a student Under 18 (12%), students under 18 (6%), Students over 18 who have completed the Leaving Certificate (29%), Students over 18 who are yet to complete the Leaving Certificate (13%), teachers and teaching examiners (22%), examiners who are not currently teaching (1%), principals and deputy principals (3%) and others (4%).

1.3 Main findings of the Survey

Majority preference for Leaving Certificate Oral exams to take place prior to Easter and during term time

The majority of respondents (53%) reported that they would prefer to have the Leaving Certificate Oral Examinations prior to Easter and during term time. All of the categories of respondents were in agreement with this as the most appropriate time for the oral examinations with the exception of the Principal and Deputy Principal cohorts who expressed a preference for oral examinations during the Easter break.

The reasons behind this choice for all cohorts other than the Principal and Deputy Principal cohorts stemmed from the collective need for a break for all involved - students, teachers, parents and management alike. It was seen as vital for the wellbeing and mental health of students, particularly in the face of the considerable stress experienced throughout the final year of school. The second most prevalent theme emerging from this section pointed to the need for a sufficient gap between the oral examinations and the written paper. Many respondents emphasised that scheduling oral assessment prior to the Easter holidays is crucial, as it provides a necessary separation of school terms and allows students time to rest and refocus before the upcoming stage leading into the written examination period. Additionally, the role of school support emerged as a third factor. It was believed the teachers, guidance counsellors and exam aides would be readily available to students during term time to support and guide them through their orals. Moreover, the availability of physical resources such as transportation, study classes and peer support might be lacking during the Easter period.

Preferences for Leaving Certificate Oral exams to take place outside of term time and during the Easter holidays

23% of respondents reported that they would prefer to have the Leaving Certificate Oral Examinations outside term time during the Easter holidays.

The prevailing theme evident across the entire cohort pertained, once again, to the need to allocate time for focused study. It was proposed that the Easter holidays would afford an opportune period for concentrated and purposeful preparation for the Leaving Certificate Oral Examinations. Respondents further cited advantages such as a more peaceful school environment, which would alleviate pressure and stress on students, while concurrently minimising disruptions to teaching and learning.

Notably, Principals and Deputy Principals emerged as the sole cohort favouring this particular timing. Their rationale centred on the significant benefit of limiting disruption to teaching and learning during the holiday period. They contended that, by aligning the oral examinations with the Easter holidays, the need for substitution for teachers acting as State Examination Commission (SEC) examiners would be obviated, and students would not miss out on crucial instructional time in their absence.

¹ N refers to the total number of respondents or responses to a particular question on the survey.

Preferences for after Easter

Just less than 23% of respondents reported that their choice would be to have the Leaving Certificate Oral Examinations during term time but after the Easter holidays.

Reasons associated with this choice were similar to those relating to the preferences expressed for the pre-Easter option and included: student wellbeing and the need for a break to rest, relax and focus on study for the orals. It was noted by many also that the students had more time to prepare and study including the two weeks of the Easter break. A number of respondents across the cohorts mention that support would be available to them in schools from teachers, management and their peers. Finally, many noted that having the Leaving Certificate Oral Examinations after Easter would ensure that it would not clash with other elements of the examination system such as projects, practical's and written examinations.

Other

Less than 1% of respondents chose the other category with relation to the timing of the Leaving Certificate Oral Examinations. 176 respondents chose 'Other' as a response option stating various alternative preferences, the most common of which included: holding these oral examinations before or after Easter depending on how it fell; before Christmas; at the end of fifth year in Senior Cycle; or at other varying points during Senior Cycle.

Perceptions of those who engaged with Leaving Certificate orals during Easter in 2022 and 2023

Parents and students who were involved with the Leaving Certificate oral examinations during Easter in 2022 or 2023 reported overall satisfaction levels that were evenly distributed between the "very satisfied" and "satisfied" options, and the "unsatisfied" or "very unsatisfied" options.

When parents were asked to assess various statements regarding the impact of the Leaving Certificate orals during Easter, the primary concerns centred around the increased difficulty of attendance and the unavailability of teachers to support students during this period. Students agreed that the timing of the examinations made it more challenging to attend, acknowledging both the logistical difficulties and the absence of teacher support during that crucial time. However, there was also a large proportion of students who noted that the quieter school environment was of benefit to them.

When teachers were questioned about the challenges and opportunities presented by the timing of the Easter exams in 2022 and 2023, the predominant themes that emerged included the necessity for teachers to be available during holidays to support students, heightened teacher stress levels, an increased workload, constraints on teachers' ability to conduct examinations, less support from management, and challenges in relation to student absenteeism during this period.

Examiners and non-teaching examiners, pointed out that the most prevalent challenge was teachers being unable to conduct examinations. Additionally, they identified increased workload, heightened stress levels, and reduced management support as other notable challenges.

When Principals/Deputy Principals were asked about the opportunities and challenges relating to the orals during the Easter period in 2022 and in 2023 the most common themes highlighted were less distribution to classes and less substitution related issues.

Other who responded to the survey highlighted issues similar to those encountered previously including examinations impinging a much-needed break for all, the lack of support available in schools during this time and also less disruption to teaching and learning during the Easter break period.

Perceptions of those who engaged with Leaving Certificate orals in term time prior to 2020

When the Parent cohort were asked to reflect on the period before 2020, when oral examinations were conducted during term time, many highlighted the primary benefit of access to teacher and peer

support. Additionally, they noted the positive impact of the regular school environment on their students during that time.

Students displayed a high level of satisfaction with this timing and also noted that the availability of teacher and student support impacted positively on their experience at this time.

Teachers and examiners observed that conducting oral examinations during term time resulted in lower stress levels and increased support from management. Nevertheless, a significant number highlighted the primary challenge as their inability to work as examiners during this period, with many also expressing concerns about the absence of teachers due to the exams.

Non-teaching examiners, when posed with the same question, pointed out the presence of more supportive management and an overall reduction in stress during term time, while also noting the challenges associated with teachers missing classes.

When Principals and Deputy Principals were asked similar questions, they noted challenges with substitution and teachers missing classes as well as the disruption of classes as the most common issues.

Other Suggestions/Comments

The majority of respondents to this question reiterated their choice for the timing of the orals and repeated their reasons for this choice. There were a number of other unrelated themes that emerged also which included general comments about the running of the oral examinations, renumeration of personnel connected to the oral examinations and more general topics such as the Irish language curriculum and the examinations process.

1.4 Key learnings from the 2022/2023 period

There are a number of key learnings which emerged from the responses in relation to the examination period in 2022 and 2023.

One of the key benefits of having the oral examinations during Easter time highlighted by all cohorts related to the quieter less stressful environment which were available to student in 2022 and 2023.

An area of challenge highlighted by many respondents related to the time frame which students had to do their oral examinations during Easter. Many noted that the oral examinations were too close together with students having to complete two or three oral exams over a period of a number of days. In contrast to this, some spoke of their experience prior to 2020 noting the longer time frame, where the examinations are held over a two-week period to be more beneficial to them. In light of this it would be of benefit to schools and students that guidance would be produced in relation to the spacing of examinations over the period of assessment.

1.5 Background to the Multi-Site Case Study

As noted above, this research study is a continuation of the initial report on the Timing of the Leaving Certificate Oral Examinations, completed in November 2023. This phase of the research, commenced in April 2024, employed a multisite case study approach. The primary objective was to attain a deeper understanding and additional clarity regarding the experiences of parents, students, teachers, and school management following the completion of the Leaving Certificate Oral Examinations during Easter 2024. Additionally, the study aimed to assess opinions on the most appropriate timing for the Leaving Certificate Oral Examinations from 2025 onwards. The key areas we will report on are:

1. The experiences of the various stakeholders across the sites in relation to the Oral Examinations which took place in 2024.
2. The perceived challenges and opportunities which the Easter timing afforded to these stakeholders.
3. The most favourable time for Leaving Certificate Oral Examinations going forward.
4. The perceived challenges and opportunities in relation to this chosen time.

This report provides a summary and synthesis of the survey responses of the participating students, parents, teachers and school management. In some cases teachers also held the role of examiner and their opinions were also noted.

Due to time constraints in relation to the gathering of data, a convenience sampling approach was used to engage schools in this research phase during April and May 2024. Eight schools in total took part working with three researchers from the team. Schools were contacted through direct email, phone calls and messaging. Focus groups and individual interviews were used to gather the data, primarily in person with the exception of two interviews which were conducted online via Zoom. In a small number of cases messages and emails were sent detailing stakeholders opinions when they did not have the time to engage directly with the research. Interviews lasted in the region of ten minutes where focus groups lasted between 10 and 22 minutes. All participants were given an information sheet and a consent form prior to engaging in the research. All students who took part were over 18.

The final sample included 8 schools and participants which consisted of students (42), teachers (32), school management team (10) and parents (10). As parents were not on site at the data gathering stage it was more challenging to connect with them, emails and messages were sent to encourage participation but there was limited engagement.

1.6 Main findings of the Multi-Site Case Study

Majority preference for Leaving Certificate Oral exams to take place prior to Easter and during term time

Similar to the findings reported in Section 1, a slight majority of participants expressed a preference for oral examinations to be conducted during term time although the preferences in this phase of this study for this option were less conclusive. As was the case with the first phase of the study, the only group to unanimously oppose this term-time preference were the Principals and Deputy Principals, who favoured keeping the exams during Easter time. The main reason cited by students, parents, and teachers who reported term time as their preference going forward related to student wellbeing, with many emphasising the need for students to have a break to rest and recuperate. Numerous students noted that holding oral exams during Easter disrupted their part-time jobs and other commitments such as sporting activities and holidays. Many also highlighted the exhaustion following the exams and the necessity for downtime before the final busy term. Parents shared these concerns, emphasising the need for a complete break due to the stressful academic load on their children. Teachers concurred, stressing the importance of rest and recuperation for both students and themselves. Another key challenge for these cohorts related to the scheduling of the examinations. Many teachers noted that they only received notice of the specific dates a week or so prior to Easter, this left students waiting and wondering about whether they had to reschedule commitments such as work or holidays. Linked to this also was the pressure on teachers and/or exam aides to ensure that students didn't have examinations on consecutive days. This scheduling was challenging and was heavily dependent on open communication between subject departments in schools. The majority of students themselves noted the scheduling as a challenge. Having too many examinations within a short few days was exhausting for many, and yet many maintained that they wanted them finished early in Easter so that they could have a full break. Teachers were uncertain as to who's role it was to schedule these exams, and many were unaware that a second exam aide could have been employed to help with the scheduling and the daily support of students.

Examiners were more divided about the timing of the Leaving Certificate Orals going forward. A recurrent theme here also was linked to the need for a break between school term and oral examinations with many noting that they were exhausted leaving school on the Friday to head into a week of oral examinations that resulted in a 12-day working week for many teachers which was unsustainable for many. Many teachers and examiners were not happy with the oral examinations occurring on a weekend, and specifically on a Sunday.

In line with Section 1, school management were, for the most part, opposed to the idea of the examinations returning to term time. This relates mainly to the lack of substitution cover for teachers who may be examining and to more general disruption to classes and school life.

Preferences for Leaving Certificate Oral exams to take place outside of term time and during the Easter holidays

Although a slight majority indicated a preference for holding the Leaving Certificate orals before Easter, the opinions were more nuanced compared to the views expressed in the first phase of the study (see Section 1). A significant minority of students, parents, teachers, and examiners also recognised the benefits of conducting the assessments during Easter. High-achieving students, in particular, appreciated the opportunity for focused study with fewer distractions, and they found the quiet, calm school environment advantageous. This timing allowed them to attend the exams without missing other classes. Most students were satisfied with the support provided by their schools during this period and did not feel it was necessary for their language teachers to be present. Access to school transport was not an issue for many. While not ideal, parents working from home were more flexible for this one-off occasion if the need arose.

Parents echoed many of the opinions of the students noting the quiet environment and limited distractions as an advantage to their students. Few were perturbed in relation to transport apart from in a small number of cases where the examinations schedule changed at the last minute.

A small number of teachers noted that there were advantages to the Easter timing which included less disruption to classes and the fact that they were finished before the last term allowing for concentrated time for the written papers. A key issue was highlighted by students, teachers and examiners related to the examiners' 'student briefing' prior to the commencement of the oral examinations. Many noted that this had been a very important part of the examination process in the past as it put students at ease and its absence created a gap in student support.

Several examiners also discussed the benefits to them of the Easter timing. Many noted that they would not be afforded the opportunity for the Professional Development that this type of examination work provides if it were being held during term time due to the challenges with substitution in a number of schools. Many noted that the Easter time also suited some examiners due to patterns of term-time childcare and other school commitments absent during the Easter break.

Management were very strongly in favour of the oral examinations remaining during Easter time. This related to the lack of availability of substitutes to cover for those teachers who would be examining if it were to be held during term time. They also noted the calm environment and the lack of disruption meant that the examinations were, for the most part, less stressful and less dramatic for most. With regard to the issue of students not attending for examination, it seemed that this issue was a challenge in all schools not solely in schools with DEIS status. However, in the majority of the schools within this study, steps were taken to ensure that all students, particularly the more vulnerable, were contacted and collected, where need be, to ensure attendance. The majority of those students who did not attend had been absent from school for lengthy periods during the previous term and it was unlikely they would have attended if the examinations were held during term time.

Very few preferences for after Easter

Very few of the participants across all of the cohorts were in favour of having the oral examinations after the Easter holidays. The exception for this was when Easter fell very early. Most noted that having the oral examinations during Easter meant that students had a natural break and were ready to focus on the written papers in the last term. Also, many noted the heavy workload of the last term which includes practical and other examination deadlines.

Other

A small number of respondents noted that oral examinations should be held at alternative times during Senior cycle. The end of fifth year, Christmas or February of Leaving Certificate Year were mentioned as alternatives by a few.

Notable comments

A number of other issues were noted by participants across the cohorts. This included the lack of awareness with regard to the extra examination aide granted by the State Exams Commission (SEC) for 2024. Many of the teachers, examiners and management were unaware that such a role existed. There was also uncertainty about the duties of the primary examination aide in relation to the scheduling of the examinations within the schools. The lack of notice to schools in relation to the days of examination was also a challenge which impacted students who were travelling home or on holidays.

1.7 Policy implications of both the Survey and Case Study Data

The responses from the survey data in phase one indicate a clear preference for future Leaving Certificate Oral Examinations to take place prior to Easter and during term time or during Easter. The analysis identified some divergence between school leaders, teachers and parents and students in relation to the strength of this preference but all concurred that it was in the best interests of students for these examinations not to take place after the Easter break.

Responses from the case study research indicated similar opinions but with less conviction regarding a clear preference for future Leaving Certificate Oral Examinations. Although a small majority of respondents across the cohort of students, parents, teachers and examiners opted for prior to Easter timing, this was less clear than had been in the first phase of the study. Very few students reported a poor experience with the oral examinations during Easter time in 2024, and many could see the benefits that the Easter timing affords. Teachers were more vocal in their choice for a return to term time examinations due to student support and many were unaware of the new supports and arrangements that were available for 2024. The analysis clearly identified dichotomies of opinion among school leaders, with many noting the importance of the Easter break for student wellbeing while at the same time agreeing that the new arrangement was more beneficial to all.

The main challenges with returning to Leaving Certificate Orals during school time relates to the difficulties which arise in relation to substitution and supervision and the disruption of student learning due to teachers being released from school to examine elsewhere. All cohorts in the case study noted this and acknowledge the challenge this would create.

In light of the persistent shortage of teachers, specifically in the field of languages, and drawing upon the suggestion presented by Harford and Fleming (2023) advocating for the continuation of examinations outside regular school hours, it is imperative to formulate a comprehensive strategy for all school based assessments, particularly in the light of proposed changes to assessment envisaged by Senior Cycle reform. This strategy might encompass a detailed plan for assisting school administrators in mitigating potential disruptions to the teaching and learning process during assessment activity.