



Leaving Certificate Teachers' Grading and Marking Practices: report on the online consultation

November 2013

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

One of the outcomes of the joint HEA/NCCA conference on the transition from second-level to third-level education in Ireland (2011) was to explore options for making changes to the current 14-point Leaving Certificate grading system. Following a meeting of a number of experts on assessment, in October 2012, it was decided to conduct an initial small-scale consultation with teachers on their marking and grading practices. The consultation set out to gather information on how teachers mark and grade the work of their Leaving Certificate students in the classroom, in school tests and in pre-Leaving Certificate examinations, where these are organised. The results of this consultation will contribute to ongoing discussions about the impact of the current Leaving Certificate grading system on teaching and learning in senior cycle.

1.1.1 Methodology

An online survey (appendix 2) was designed and used to gather initial feedback from teachers on their grading and marking practices. The purpose of the survey was to establish some broad themes that could be further explored through more targeted consultation at a later date. The survey was published on the NCCA website (www.ncca.ie) and publicised through the website and through social media. The sample was self-selecting and it is recognised that survey responders may represent a somewhat distinctive profile among teachers, in that they were motivated to take the survey and in many cases to give extensive comments. 40% of the respondents examined for the state examinations. This represents a higher proportion than the general teacher population. Questions were designed to gather quantitative and qualitative data on grading and marking practices of teachers of students studying for their Leaving Certificate examination. As we were mainly interested in teachers' use of broad letter grades (A, B, C) and the current Leaving Certificate grades (A1, A2, B1, B2, B3 etc.), data was not sought in this survey on comment-only marking.

The online survey opened on December 14th and ran until 20th January.

1.1.2 Consultation survey analysis

Dr Josephine Boland, Senior Lecturer in Education in the School of Medicine and Dr. Pádraig MacNeela, Lecturer at the School of Psychology, NUI Galway analysed the survey data and contributed extensively to this report.

1.2 Demographic characteristics

Two-hundred and forty teachers completed the survey, almost all of whom were subject teachers (97.1%). Over one-third (37.5%) taught multiple subjects across Subject Code categories (e.g. History and Irish, or Geography and English). See Appendix 1 for subject codes used for the purpose of the quantitative data analysis.

Nearly one in ten (9.2%) did not specify a particular subject. The most common single subject area was Humanities (English, history), representing 14.2% of teachers. A similar proportion (8.3% each) reported teaching Maths (Maths, Applied Maths), Languages (Irish, French, German, etc.) or Arts (predominantly music). The next three categories were indicated by 5.0% or less of the group: Sciences (5.0%), Practical Subjects (4.6%; metalwork, IT, Home Economics, Woodwork, etc.), Business (4.2%; business, Economics, Accounting, LCVP Link modules). One teacher (0.4%) indicated the Social Sciences category as a single subject designation.

The teachers reported on whether they are SEC examiners for the Junior Certificate (20%), the Leaving Certificate (22.9%) or the Leaving Certificate Applied (4.2%). Twelve teachers reported assessing across more than one of these categories. A large majority (74.6%) of the teachers marked pre-Leaving Certificate examinations.

2 Overview of feedback strategies

There was considerable diversity in the feedback strategies used. The options in the survey for respondents to choose from were:

- I. Percentage marks
- II. Percentage marks and a comment
- III. Leaving Certificate Grading system (A1, A2, B1, B2, etc)
- IV. Leaving Certificate Grading system and a comment
- V. Broad Letter Grades (A, B, C)
- VI. Broad Letter grades and a comment.

Feedback practices were surveyed, in the context of Leaving Certificate (i) Homework, (ii) In-school tests, (iii) Pre-Leaving Certificate examination. While not offered as a separate option in the survey, the most consistent pattern, apparent from the qualitative responses, was the use of *Comments* across homework, in-school tests and pre-LC examination. *LC Grades* were particularly commonly cited in relation to pre-LC examinations. Apart from for homework, *Letter Grades* had restricted use as a feedback strategy. Nearly all respondents (96.7%) reported using marking schemes available from www.examinations.ie for classroom or assessment purposes.

2.1 Feedback strategy 1: percentages

Percentage with a Comment was cited by over half the teachers in relation to homework and in-school tests. In the case of homework, 8.3% of the teachers used both *Percentage* and *Percentage with Comment* to give feedback while 43.8% used *Percentage with Comment*. Far fewer teachers reported using a percentage on its own. *Percentage with Comment* was even more common for feedback on in-school tests. In the case of the pre-LC examination. As with subsequent tables, Table 1 reports on 240 teachers in reference to homework and in-school tests, but Table 1 reports only on the 189 teachers who reported marking pre-LC examinations.

As with the following tables, attention is drawn to common responses. Cells in Table 1 are highlighted by bold text and shading if the proportion of teachers in a cell is 25% or more.

	Homework	In-School Test	Pre-LC Exam (n=189)
Neither strategy	45.8	29.2	50.8
Percentage	2.1	9.2	8.5
Percentage with Comment	43.8	55.8	38.6
Both strategies	8.3	5.8	2.1

Table 1: % of teachers who reported use of % based feedback strategies

2.2 Feedback strategy 2: Leaving Certificate grades

Compared with the *Percentage* feedback strategies, *LC Grades* were used less extensively. As was the case with percentage-based feedback, the most common variation on *LC Grade* feedback was to give a *LC Grade and Comment* to students. The only occasion where *LC Grade* alone achieved common use was for pre-LC examinations (see Table 2), where 23.8% of teachers gave a *LC Grade* alone, 33.3% gave a *LC Grade and Comment*, and 3.7% used both grading strategies.

	Homework	In-School Test	Pre-LC exam (n=189)
Neither strategy	63.7	56.3	39.2
LC Grade	5.4	10.0	23.8
LC Grade with Comment	25.4	29.6	33.3
Both strategies	5.4	4.2	3.7

Table 2. % of teachers who reported use of LC Grade feedback strategies

2.3 Feedback strategy 3: letter grades

Letter Grade was a much less evident feature of feedback than *Percentage* or *LC Grade*-based strategies. Table 3 demonstrates that 90.4% of teachers did not report any use of *Letter Grade* feedback for in-school tests while 95.2% did not report this form of feedback following pre-LC examinations. The most common use of *Letter Grade* was when given with a comment in response to homework (22.9% of teachers).

	Homework	In-School Test	Pre-LC exam (n=189)
Neither strategy	71.3	90.4	95.2
Letter Grade	2.1	2.1	2.1
Letter Grade with Comment	22.9	6.3	1.6
Both strategies	3.8	1.3	1.1

Table 3. % of teachers who reported use of Letter Grade (LG) feedback strategies

2.4 Combinations of more than one feedback strategy

Teachers commonly reported using more than one form of feedback strategy. Table 4 displays the percentages of teachers who reported each combination of feedback. The most straightforward groups are those who used one form. Thus, over three in ten teachers reported using percentage-based strategies only when giving feedback on homework, nearly three in ten used Percentage-based strategies only to feed back on pre-LC examinations. Nearly half of the sample relied on *Percentage Only* strategies for in-school tests (47.9%).

	Feedback Strategies	Homework	In-School test	Pre-LC exam (n=189)
1	%	31.7	47.9	29.1
2	LC	17.5	24.2	42.9
3	LG	16.3	4.2	1.6
4	LC and LG	2.1	0	0.5
5	% and LC	11.7	17.5	17.5
6	% and LG	6.3	2.9	2.6
7	%, LC and LG	4.6	2.5	0.0
0	None of these	10.0	0.8	5.8

Table 4. Use of one or more types of feedback strategies

The proportion of teachers relying on *LC Grades* (either alone, with comments or both) was particularly high when feeding back on pre-LC examinations (42.9%). Significant numbers of teachers also reported using *LC Grade* strategies only for in-school tests (24.2%) and homework (17.5%). The only area of work where *Letter Grades* were relied on was Homework, with 16.3% of teachers reporting using Letter Grade strategies only.

Moving on to the use of combined feedback strategies, the most common combination was of *Percentage* and *LC Grade* strategies. Over one in ten teachers reported using these two forms to feedback on homework while nearly two in ten used them to feedback on in-school tests and pre-LC examinations. Combined use of *LC Grades* and *Letter Grades* was uncommon as was the case with *Percentage* and *Letter Grades*. Very few teachers reported using all three feedback strategies.

It should be noted that some teachers reported using none of the strategies identified as options in the survey. This was most evident in relation to feeding back on homework, as 10.0% of teachers reported using none of the strategies. This does not mean that they were giving no feedback, as written comments were referred to by a number of these teachers in qualitative comments. The proportion of teachers not selecting any of the feedback strategies was considerably lower for in-school tests and pre-LC examinations, from 0.8% to 5.8%.

3 Feedback strategies and subjects taught

Distinctive patterns in the use of feedback strategies may have arisen due to the characteristics of the subjects taught by the teachers who responded to the survey.

3.1 Homework

Percentage-based strategies were the most commonly used form of feedback among the different subject groups. It was particularly relied on as the sole method of feedback on Homework among teachers of Maths (40% of these teachers), Business (40%) and Languages (45%). Reliance on *Percentage* feedback strategies only was less common among Humanities teachers (20.6%), whereas this group relied more on *LC Grade* feedback strategies (41.2% of these teachers). That was the highest proportion of teachers in one subject reporting use of *LC Grade* feedback only, followed by Languages teachers (30.0%) and Science teachers (25%).

The largest single group of teachers were those who teach multiple subjects. A noticeable trend can be seen among these teachers for using *Percentage* feedback strategies (33.3% relied solely on these strategies when feeding back on homework). A combination of strategies was evident among a few of the subjects. One quarter of the Science teachers reported using a combination of *Percentage* and *LC Grade*-based strategies to give feedback on homework. Practical subject teachers reported the most variation, with a similar proportion (27.3%) reporting feedback based on *Percentages*, *Letter Grades* or *Percentage and LC Grades*.

3.2 In-school tests

In the case of feedback on in-school tests, 75% of Maths teachers, 70% of Business teachers, 60% of Languages teachers and 54.5% of Practical subject teachers reported using *Percentage Only* based strategies. Reliance on these strategies was not quite so high in several other subjects, although still extensive, including Science (41.7% of teachers), Arts (45%) and among teachers of multiple subjects (43.3%).

Only in the Humanities was there more reliance on *LC Grade* strategies than on *Percentage*-based feedback. Half (50%) of the Humanities teachers used *LC Grade* strategies only when giving feedback on in-school tests, compared with 26.5% who reported using *Percentage*-based

strategies only and 14.7% who reported using *Percentage* and *LC Grade*-based feedback. Although less often relied on than percentages, LC Grades were still relatively commonly cited as the basis for feedback by teachers of Science (25% of these teachers), Languages (25%), Business (20%), Practical subjects (18.2%) and by teachers of multiple subjects (25.6%). Arts teachers were distinctive in that 40% reported using a combination of *Percentage* and *LC Grade* feedback for in-school tests.

3.3 Pre-Leaving Certificate examinations

Subject-specific patterns can also be seen among the 189 survey respondents who mark pre-LC examinations, with a greater emphasis on use of *LC Grade* feedback in this context. *Percentage*-based strategies were relied on as the sole source of feedback on pre-LC examinations by half the Maths teachers as well as by one-third of teachers of Practical subject teachers and Business. Over three in ten (30.6%) of the teachers of multiple subjects used *Percentage* strategies only along with 27.8% of teachers of Arts subjects.

The pattern of Humanities teachers relying more on *LC Grade* feedback is confirmed here, with 64% of these teachers using *LC Grade* strategies alone when feeding back on pre-LC examinations. The use of LC Grade strategies was particularly common among teachers of Languages (69.2%), Practical subjects (55.6%) and Business (55.6%), as well as among teachers of multiple subjects (41.6%). These figures represent the highest use of *LC Grade* strategies in giving feedback. The use of these strategies to feedback on pre-Leaving Certificate examinations is to be expected considering that it maps most closely to the Leaving Certificate itself.

4 Use of marking schemes

4.1 For planning classes and assessment

Nearly all respondents (96.7%) reported using the marking schemes available from www.examinations.ie for some purpose (see Table 5). Responses to the two class-based uses were grouped together following the survey. These refer to using marking schemes to plan classes or as a classroom tool. Just over a quarter of the teachers reported not using marking schemes for either of these purposes. By far the most common purpose was to use marking schemes as a classroom tool. Over half of the teachers (56.4%) reported using marking schemes for this classroom purpose only.

	% of teachers
Neither strategy	26.7
Planning class	0.8
Classroom tool	56.4
Both strategies	15.8

Table 5. % of teachers reporting use of marking schemes from www.examinations.ie to plan class or as a teaching tool

A clear preference emerged for the use of marking schemes as a methodology in student assessment, with 52.9% of teachers reporting using marking schemes both to plan tests and prepare students for the Leaving Certificate. Approximately one-fifth of teachers used marking schemes for Leaving Certificate preparation (22.5% of teachers), a more popular application than use for planning tests only (7.5%). Most commonly, both strategies were used (53.1%) and 17% reported using neither strategy.

	% of teachers
Neither strategy	17.1
Planning tests	7.5
Leaving Cert preparation	22.5
Both strategies	52.9

Table 6. % of teachers reporting use of marking schemes from www.examinations.ie in to plan tests or for preparing students for the LC

4.2 Use of marking schemes by subjects taught

There were some notable variations in the use of marking schemes for classroom purposes. Half (50%) of the Maths teachers reported not using marking schemes for either planning classes or as a classroom tool, while 45% used marking schemes as a classroom tool. There was a similar pattern among Science teachers, with 41.7% not using marking schemes for either strategy and 41.7% using schemes as a classroom tool. Three in ten (30%) of the teachers of multiple subjects reported neither strategy and 54.4% reported using marking schemes as a classroom tool.

Much smaller rates of non-use were reported among teachers of Humanities (17.6%), Languages (15%), or Business (20%). In each case there was a very high reported use of marking schemes as a classroom tool (Humanities: 58.8% of teachers, Languages: 80%, Practical subjects: 90.9%, Business: 80%). Teachers of Arts subjects were distinctive in that 40% reported using marking schemes for both class planning and as a teaching tool, with Humanities teachers next most likely to report this (23.5%).

There was less variation by subject in the use of marking schemes for student assessment purposes, for planning tests and preparing students for the LC. In nearly all cases a majority of teachers of each Subject reported using marking schemes for both purposes. The highest figure in this regard was for Arts teachers, 75% of whom used marking schemes for both planning classroom tests and preparing students for the LC and Science teachers (equivalent figure of 66.7%). Approximately half of teachers of Humanities, Maths, Practical subjects, Business and multiple subjects reported both purposes. The lowest proportion occurred with Languages teachers (35%).

The same proportion of Languages teachers reported using marking schemes for LC preparation but not for planning class tests. The same strategy of using marking schemes for LC preparation and not for class tests was reported by between 15% (Arts) and 35% (Maths) of teachers in other subjects, including 20% of teachers of multiple subjects. Comparatively few teachers reported using marking schemes for planning class tests and not for LC preparation (e.g., 11.8% of Humanities teachers). The highest proportion of subject teachers not using marking schemes for either assessment-related purpose was in Languages and Business (30% of each group of teachers). The next highest figures were for Practical subjects (18.2%) and Humanities (17.6%).

4.3 Use of feedback strategies and marking schemes by teachers who mark for the State Examinations Commission

As part of the survey, the teachers reported on whether they were State Examinations Commission (SEC) examiners for the Junior Certificate examinations (JC), the Leaving Certificate Examinations (LC), or Leaving Certificate Applied examinations (LCA). Twelve teachers examined on more than one of the State examinations, mostly as a JC LC examiner. Ten were LCA examiners. The small number of teachers who assessed the Leaving Certificate Applied or multiple examinations does not justify an analysis based on these categories. While acknowledging there was minor overlap in membership of the two categories, we therefore report on the JC examiners (n=48) and LC examiners (n=55) in this section. These groups are compared with teachers who were not SEC examiners (n=141). Following the same presentation as previous sections, the following tables present the percentage of teachers in each category by feedback strategy (Homework, In-School Tests, pre-Leaving Cert examinations) and feedback modality (Percentage, Leaving Cert Grades, Letter Grades).

We also note that not all teachers marked pre-LC examinations. In Tables 7-9 those who did not mark pre-LC exams are included in the "Neither Strategy" category. In Table 10, feedback strategies on the pre-LC are reported only in relation to those who marked these examinations.

4.3.1 Use of percentage feedback strategies by SEC examiners and other teachers

Table 7 demonstrates that LC examiners favour use of *Percentage* feedback less than JC or non-SEC examiners. This was reflected in feedback given on Homework and In-School Tests, particularly in relation to use of lower use of feedback based on *Percentage and Comments*.

	Junior Cert Examiners (n=48)			Leaving Cert Examiners (n=55)			Non-SEC Examiners (n=141)		
	Home work	In-School Test	Pre-LC exam	Home work	In-School Test	Pre-LC exam	Home work	In-School Test	Pre-LC exam
Neither strategy	35.4	29.2	62.5	50.9	40	60	47.5	26.2	60.3
Percentage	4.2	4.2	4.2	0	9.1	9.1	2.1	9.9	6.4
Percentage & Comment	47.9	58.3	31.3	36.4	41.8	23.6	44.7	59.6	33.3
Both strategies	12.5	8.3	2.1	12.7	9.1	7.3	5.7	4.3	0

Table 7. Use of Percentage-based feedback strategies. % use by feedback strategy and examiner status

4.3.2 Use of LC grade feedback strategies by SEC examiners and other teachers

Table 8 shows that *LC Grade* feedback was more popular among JC and LC examiners than among non-SEC examiners. The tendency of these teachers to use *LC Grade* feedback was especially evident in relation to LC examiners, particularly in relation to pre-LC rather than Homework or In-School Tests.

	Junior Cert Examiners (n=48)			Leaving Cert Examiners (n=55)			Non-SEC Examiners (n=141)		
	Home work	In-School Test	Pre-LC exam	Home work	In-School Test	Pre-LC exam	Home work	In-School Test	Pre-LC exam
Neither strategy	52.1	41.7	43.8	49.1	38.2	32.7	71.6	63.1	59.6
LC Grade	8.3	16.7	25	7.3	18.2	30.9	3.5	7.1	14.9
LC Grade with Comment	35.4	37.5	31.3	34.5	38.2	30.9	20.6	25.5	22.7
Both strategies	4.2	4.2	0	9.1	5.5	5.5	4.3	4.3	2.8

Table 8. Use of Leaving Cert-Grade feedback strategies. % use by feedback strategy and examiner status

4.3.3 Use of letter grade feedback strategies by SEC examiners and other teachers

Table 9 gives an overview of how SEC examiners and other teachers made use of *Letter Grade* feedback. There was little use of *Letter Grades* across all three groups, with one exception. *Letter Grade and Comment* was somewhat common as a Homework feedback strategy, among non-SEC examiners only.

	Junior Cert Examiners (n=48)			Leaving Cert Examiners (n=55)			Non-SEC Examiners (n=141)		
	Home work	In-School Test	Pre-LC exam	Home work	In-School Test	Pre-LC exam	Home work	In-School Test	Pre-LC exam
Neither strategy	83.3	85.4	97.9	76.4	90.9	94.5	64.5	91.5	96.5
Letter Grade	0	4.2	0	1.8	1.8	1.8	2.8	2.1	2.1
Letter Grade with Comment	16.7	10.4	0	14.5	5.5	0	29.1	5	1.4
Both strategies	0	0	2.1	7.3	1.8	3.6	3.5	1.4	0

Table 9. Use of Letter-Grade feedback strategies. % use by feedback strategy and examiner status

4.3.4 Overview of feedback strategies by SEC examiners other teachers

The overview given in Table 10 sorts teachers by examiner status (Junior Cert, Leaving Cert, and non-SEC examiners) and their use of combined feedback strategies. For non-SEC examiners, the use of *Percentage* feedback strategies were the most prevalent approach to feedback, especially for In-School Tests. The use of *LC Grade* strategies was the second most prevalent approach, and is notably lower than among JC and LC examiners. For Homework feedback, *Letter Grade* strategies were the second most prevalent choice for this group of teachers (22% used *Letter Grade*). There was a low frequency use of certain combinations across all three groups of teachers (*LC Grade* and *Letter Grade*; *Percentage* and *Letter Grade*; *Percentage*, *LC Grade* and *Letter Grad*).

	Junior Cert Examiners (n=48)			Leaving Cert Examiners (n=55)			Non-SEC Examiners (n=141)		
	Home -work	In- School Test	Pre-LC exam (n=36)	Home work	In- School Test	Pre-LC exam (n=48)	Home work	In- School Test	Pre-LC exam (n=108)
%	27.1	31.3	19.4	25.5	32.7	20.4	32.6	55.3	34.3
LC	14.6	22.9	44.4	29.1	34.5	51	14.2	22	38.9
LG	6.3	6.3	2.8	9.1	5.5	2	22	2.8	0.9
LC & LG	2.1	0	0	3.6	0	2	1.4	0	0
% & LC	27.1	31.3	30.6	12.7	23.6	20.5	7.8	12.8	13.9
% & LG	8.3	4.2	0	5.5	0	2	7.1	3.5	3.7
%, LC and LG	2.1	4.2	0	5.5	3.6	0	5	2.1	0
None of these	12.5	0	2.8	9.1	0	2	9.9	1.4	8.3

Table 10. Use of one or more types of feedback strategies. % of teachers by examiner status for each area of marking

There were three commonly used feedback strategies among JC examiners. Although *Percentage* strategies were among these, they were relied on less than was the case among non-SEC examiners. Leaving Cert Grades were more commonly cited by JC examiners. The use of both Leaving Cert Grades and Percentages was the most consistent common type of feedback strategy among Junior Cert examiners. Reliance on Leaving Cert Grades alone varied across the types of feedback.

LC examiners were similar to JC examiners in placing more reliance on Leaving Cert Grades as a form of feedback. Thus, for these examiners, Leaving Cert Grades were relied on by between 50.9% - 73.5%, depending on whether the feedback was on homework, in-school tests or pre-LC examinations (on their own or in combination with another form of feedback). The figures for Junior Cert examiners were comparable (45.9%-75%), while for non-examiners the use of Leaving Cert Grades varied by 28.4%-52.8% across the three areas of student work. Teachers who are not examiners appear to use LC Grades less often in giving feedback.

4.3.5 Use of marking schemes to plan class and as a teaching tool, among SEC examiners and other teachers

SEC examiners made more use of marking schemes, for planning classes or as a classroom tool, as indicated by Table 11. Only 12.5% of JC examiners did not use marking schemes for planning class or as a classroom tool. The figures for LC examiners were similar to those for non-

examiners (27.3% and 30.5%, respectively). JC examiners were more likely to report using marking schemes for planning their classes and as a classroom tool (27.1%, compared with approximately 15% for the two other groups). Among all three groups the use of marking schemes as a classroom tool was by far the most frequent response, with very few teachers reporting using them only to plan class.

	JC Examiner	LC Examiner	Non-SEC Examiner
Neither strategy	12.5	27.3	30.5
Planning class	0	1.8	0.7
Classroom tool	60.4	54.5	53.9
Both strategies	27.1	16.4	14.9

Table 11. % of teachers reporting use of marking schemes from www.examinations.ie to plan class or as a teaching tool, by type of use and examiner status.

4.3.6 Use of marking schemes to plan tests and for Leaving Certificate preparation, among SEC examiners and other teachers

Table 12 demonstrates that JC examiners were also more likely to use marking schemes from www.examinations.ie for planning tests and for Leaving Cert preparation. Only 8.3% of this group did not use one or other of the two strategies. Two-thirds of the JC examiners utilised both strategies. By comparison, LC and non-SEC examiners gave similar group responses. The use of marking schemes for LC preparation alone was more common for these two groups. Across all three groups, it was uncommon to use marking schemes for planning tests alone. The highest percentage of teachers using neither strategy was highest among non-SEC examiners (19.9%).

	JC Examiner	LC Examiner	Non-SEC Examiner
Neither strategy	8.3	14.5	19.9
Planning tests	8.3	10.9	6.4
Leaving Cert preparation	16.7	25.5	22
Both strategies	66.7	49.1	51.8

Table 12. % of teachers reporting use of marking schemes from www.examinations.ie for planning tests and Leaving Cert preparation. By type of use and examiner status.

5 Rationale for strategies adopted

5.1 Feedback provided on homework

Eighty per-cent (n=192) of the teachers gave a written response to explain why they use a particular strategy to give feedback on homework. Most of the qualitative commentary from respondents was made in response to this particular feedback category. Accordingly, some of the comments made can be taken to reflect general attitudes to providing feedback on student work.

Although often adopting different feedback strategies, the respondents stated that their approach had a developmental purpose that benefited students. Individual teachers could justify their own approach, and cite student preferences, even though there are some contradictions among the different viewpoints expressed.

It was clear that many teachers valued the contribution that written comments make to feedback. This was most clear among teachers who gave comments only rather than using a percentage or other classification form of feedback. Moreover, some of the other teachers suggested that, although they themselves made use of grades or percentages, these strategies could undermine the learning potential that comes with written comments.

The respondents reported thoughtful approaches to feedback, whether the approach used was a single option from among the percentage or grade-based strategies, or was based on multiple options, or on comments only. The typical rationale given for the feedback approach adopted included reference to formal strategies, marking schemes, and student involvement.

5.1.1. Use of comments only (homework)

Teachers who used *Comments* only and no percentage or grading system gave several reasons for adopting this approach. This teacher identified that, provided the comments are meaningful, students will respond better to this approach:

No marks, just a comment on homework. I think students respond better to comments, especially when feedback can help support their learning. The comment must be meaningful and not just "good work". If the homework is not good I limit my feedback to two things to improve for next time.

Giving comments only ensured that feedback was used for learning rather than focusing solely on a mark:

I find if you just give a mark, the students judge their performance on this rather than using the homework as a tool for learning, they use it constantly as a form of assessment and do not look over mistakes and correct/learn from them. I feel it would be doing them a disservice not to address the marking scheme however.

This teacher went further and described grades as a stressor:

No marks, comments or corrections only. No grades want to encourage them to try work and not feel pressure for grades in homework.

A number of teachers referred to the survey not including an option for 'Comments Only' as a feedback strategy:

Assessment for Learning approach to homework - i.e. comment only. Not one of your options???

Developmental purposes

Teachers who used *Comment Only* for feedback on homework articulated a developmental rationale, that giving comments only helped students identify improvements and gave encouraging acknowledgement of positives:

Comment is useful to show students where they achieved well and how to improve and to encourage attempts at homework even if a student finds it difficult.

Student involvement is cited here as an advantage of relying on comments:

This I believe follows the principle of showing students the areas that are incorrect and gives them the responsibility to make the necessary correction.

This teacher framed their feedback approach as a formal, student-centred strategy, one which students were involved in choosing:

I use assessment for learning. I use a feedback comment approach. Students have the option of grades 3-4 days after their feedback. However very often they can predict their grade based on feedback. My sixth years opted for a feedback approach only and we are finding it very successful.

Although there was little contextualisation overall of homework feedback strategies to specific Subjects, this example does show how the use of comments could be differentiated by Subject:

Until January of sixth year I give an effort mark of from 1-5 and thereafter I apply leaving cert criteria - in English. In music I mark the paper as is marked in Leaving Cert - it is more simple - like maths - it is either right or wrong - not so obvious in English. I comment copiously.

5.1.2. Use of percentage-based feedback only (homework)

Teachers who used *Percentage*-based feedback only cited several advantages - as encouraging, accurate, and easy for students to interpret:

I like to use this approach as it gives a more rounded view and I try to boost the students confidence.

This gives them an accurate assessment of their work.

Simple information and easy for the student to digest.

This example shows a teacher articulating their feedback approach of using Percentage-based feedback in a specific context, that of summative homework assessment:

For developmental assessment of work, a comment only, for summative checking of understanding in HW assignments I might use %, always according to SEC criteria. Never mix them. I explain all this to the students, they get it after a few rounds!

The value of written comments was commonly remarked on, extending here to depicting comments as the most important part of Percentage-based feedback:

I feel that with homework simply grading or giving a percentage does not teach the students anything. I prefer to focus on comments - where the students' strengths lie and where they need to improve and how that improvement could be facilitated.

Some tension was evident in relation to using a percentage, because it could detract focus from the comments:

I would rather give a comment only but we do provide them with the marking scheme and success criteria so they need to see what they got and think about why and if they agree/ disagree. That's the ideal, unfortunately some students see the mark and don't take advice in comment on board. For this reason, I don't give percentages on each piece of work.

Developmental purposes

The respondents described several distinct developmental purposes for using Percentage-based feedback. At the most general level this meant giving feedback to show students how they were doing:

Students need to know clearly where they stand.

Comments could be used in this context not just to inform, but to transmit motivating, positive messages:

I think comments are essential. They are a means of communication and mean even more to the student when written. Great to get the chance to tell a pupil that you recognise they are working very hard and doing well but good too to let them know at times that their efforts are not enough and they need to improve.

The use of tools for organising comments was described throughout the survey responses. These include methods to organise formative comments, to provide encouraging feedback, and to frame feedback in light of marking schemes:

2 stars and a wish I always begin feedback with a positive comment. I highlight one or two issues which need addressing. I suggest something for next piece of work. letter grades (ABC...) mean nothing really. They need to know how to improve.

Able to use past Marking Schemes to give accurate/accountable results while also directing pupils on how to improve work.

Use of comments and percentages

Giving a Comment with the Percentage mark was felt to be complementary by many

respondents:

Marks and comments combined enable students to understand how their work might be improved or indeed to see what aspects of their work are very good and why a particular method/approach works.

There was also variety in how comments and percentages were valued, as demonstrated in these two contrasting statements:

Feedback on where students are going wrong (or doing well) is more important to me than grades.

No sense in vague and generic comments.

Specificity as a particular advantage

One particular advantage cited by respondents who used percentage-based strategies only was the precision of the feedback provided:

Precise marks allow both the students and myself to assess exactly where they are and what they need to work on to improve.

This teacher relates the precision of a *Percentage* to encouraging student motivation to improve:

Students can see exactly how close/far they were from a particular grade, i.e. 69%.

In parallel, grade-based strategies were perceived as less precise:

Range of grades is presently too wide, though there is talk of going back to broad old grades (A, B, C, etc.).

Student expectations

Student preferences were cited to justify the use of percentage-based strategies only:

Some-times I try comment only marking but the students do not respond well to this and moan if they don't get a percentage. If it is just normal homework I sometimes just use comments.

5.1.3. Use of Leaving Certificate grade-based feedback only (homework)

The advantages cited by those who used *LC Grade*-based feedback only on homework were similar to those cited by teachers who used *Percentage*-based feedback:

Grade to give indication for exam prep and comment to motivate and advise students for their next attempt.

Developmental purposes

The underlying purpose of *LC Grade*-based feedback was to orient students to their current achievement and where they need to improve:

So that they know where they stand and are given a comment to improve on next time.

The 'two stars and a wish' approach was referred to across different homework feedback

strategies, here described in the context of LC Grade-based feedback:

I also use the two stars and a wish approach so that students have a comment that they can work on for the next exercise. I don't always use grades for homework though - frequently it is a comment (two stars and a wish) - I also set homework assignments where I am grading.

AFL was cited here, as it was by teachers using percentage-based strategies:

I like to use AFL - give constructive feedback, positive reinforcement and set targets for improvement. I will not put a grade on every piece, I will always put a comment on work. I comment /annotate as I move through a piece. I find that I will see more progress in a student's work by using this method.

Although rather little Subject-specific discussion was evident, here the use of feedback and LC Grades are cited as successful for teaching English:

Students look at marks first certainly but also get used to having detailed feedback and a chance to do exercises with the comments taken into account....this has worked very well at lc higher level English.

As with the other feedback strategies, there was a value placed on giving written comments, sometimes over the Grade itself:

I give comments to provide targeted feedback to students.

This teacher is clear in describing specific advantages associated with the Grade and with the Comment:

Grading system: because it empowers the student to frame their knowledge when it comes to external modes of assessment other than learning for knowledge. Comment: because it clarifies and or guides student for future participation in State Exams with a view to improving performance and it also acknowledges the students' endeavours.

Realism as a specific reason

One specific rationale given for using LC Grades was that this mirrored the Leaving Cert itself ("realistic to what they will expect in the exam"), and could therefore be a helpful way of building up to it:

It gives feedback to the student on how the answer would score in the LC examination and why it was given that mark.

Here this teacher is highly focused on the LC criteria and shapes feedback around these expectations:

Trying to get the students to see the value of their answers in terms of what is required for the exam. there is no use giving them marks for attempts that won't be rewarded by the SEC.

Nevertheless, there was a breadth of practice described. The next teacher refers to LC marking

as a framework:

I like to show students where they are at as regards the Leaving Certificate marking seem but I think the comments and questions I pose on their papers are more important.

Influences from schools and parents

There were a few references made to schools and parents as direct influences on using the LC Grading approach to giving feedback on homework:

Parents have demanded that this approach to marking be adopted within the school and it was supported by management.

This teacher describes balancing the demands of the school and parents with their own pedagogical approach to using feedback for a developmental purpose:

The Grade is required by the ethos of the school and the parents demand it. I use the system (English) as it is fair and clear and relates in a defined manner to the exam that the students are preparing for. I have always written clear and structured comments, positively couched, with indications as to how the particular answer/s could be improved, be more detailed or better structured.

5.1.4. Use of letter grade-based feedback only (homework)

The advantages cited for relying on *Letter Grade*-based feedback strategies on homework recall those associated with Percentage or *LC Grade*:

Gives them context and comments direct them to areas for improvement

Students have an idea how the standard of their assignment compares to the Leaving Cert.

One advantage particular to *Letter Grades* was of providing relatively specific feedback without becoming overly focused on the Leaving Certificate:

I like students to see what general grade they are achieving, however I don't want them to get too bogged down on the Leaving Certificate being the only thing in life.

For this teacher, *Letter Grades* were better than percentages for a similar reason:

Students learn more from comment & if exact percentage mark is given they tend to focus only on that.

Developmental purposes

Here a teacher identifies the *Letter Grade* as giving a 'ball park' approximation that was not threatening, which when combined with comments was especially helpful to struggling students:

Encourage the weaker students with low confidence, to give a ball park figure of how they are and comment on things they need to revise or relearn.

This teacher offers another supportive function arising from the broader range of *Letter Grades*

compared with *LC Grades*, thus enabling teacher support for progressive improvement:

I regard homework as trial work and rehearsal work, therefore I mark it 'roughly' rather than precisely. I want to encourage the students to improve, to retry a task etc. so I prefer to give a general broad grade to show that this is the category which their task is in, then at least they're content with a broad 'C' or 'B' but they know that they have more work and practise to do to reach their desired subgrade.

Letter grades and comments

Letter Grades were used with comments in a variety of ways. This teacher differentiated the use of *Letter Grades* as a feedback strategy to be used at pivotal points, relying on comments at other times:

Generally use comment only marking for homework and grade midterm/ Christmas assessments.

Although this teacher gave *Letter Grades*, they emphasise the use of comments as the critical component of the feedback:

Comments help them to improve, as there is no point in telling someone that they are wrong if you don't show them (a) where they are going wrong and (b) how to improve.

This attitude was described by other teachers ("mainly comments on how to improve or where the student is losing valuable marks"). It is clearly voiced here:

I consider the comment to be the most important part of the feedback as it can act as way to provide positive reinforcement of learning and identify challenges to be addressed by the student. The grade provides an overall indication of the quality range of the work.

As with the other feedback strategies, a differentiation was made of the purpose achieved by the grade and the comment:

I use the broad grade so that the student has an idea of the level they are working at and the comment to inform student on how to improve level.

5.1.5. Use of feedback based on Leaving Certificate and letter grade (homework)

A combination of *LC Grade* and *Letter Grade* was remarked on by this respondent who described tailoring the form of feedback given depending on the homework task:

My marking system depends on the nature of the homework, however as exam comes closer and practice answers and tests become more exam orientated I. Mark accordingly to give them an idea of where they realistically are in terms of a LC mark.

The rationale given for using these two forms of feedback in a dynamic process is clearly articulated here, based on the need to match feedback strategy with the type of work being

marked:

Because homework is often a question and answer type of work, as it's factual, it's often right or wrong, so I prefer to give an overall grade rather than try and break it into percentages. When LC students start doing exam papers for homework, I mark them according to the marking schemes and give marks out of 10, 20, 50 or whatever was awarded for the original question.

A similarly thought-out approach is described here, referring to combining grades with personalising comments:

When giving a question from an exam paper as homework, I follow the LC grading system. This helps students familiarise themselves with the official marking schemes and to understand how accurate their answers must be. The comment personalises the impartial marking scheme applied and is used to either encourage, congratulate or point students towards the area/s they should concentrate on. Broad letter grades and a comment are used when the homework is not a previous SEC exam question.

5.1.6. Use of feedback based on percentage and Leaving Certificate grades (homework)

The advantages cited for using *Percentage* and *LC Grade*-based feedback strategies for homework included clarity and guidance on improvement:

Comments direct students on how to improve their work. Grades allow them to see where they are at and allows them to compare to their previous test results to see if they are improving or disimproving.

The choice of *LC Grade* or *Percentage* was explained by a number of these teachers:

When I'm slightly short on time I'll go with the A1/A2 system ... I always give some comments on constructive ways to improve or what I really liked.

Developmental purposes

The developmental purposes for using this combination of feedback strategies is familiar from other responses, in providing students with a clear measure of their performance:

It helps them know where they stand with the subject. Students want to know if they're putting enough work in and where and how they should improve on the grade.

Similar methods of providing constructive comments were cited here as well:

I prefer to use the 2 stars and a wish system. Where I structure my comments with two good points and a point that could be improved upon.

Comments, grades and percentages

This Arts teacher described a progression during the Senior Cycle from percentage-based feedback to *LC Grade*-based feedback:

In 5th year I prefer to mark the students work with a % and a comment based on my own marking scheme. I prefer to mark the work to the leaving certificate grading system in 6th year as it gives the students a more accurate mark.

The value attached to including *Comments* with *Letter Grades* and *Percentages* is illustrated here by this teacher, who expresses frustration in the belief that students do not engage with them:

Suggestions for improvement through comments gives individual feedback to students. While I continue to write comments always, I find that the vast majority of students don't read them except for the occasional very motivated students

The teacher's frustration highlights the concern expressed by others about the priority attached to *Grades* and *Percentages*. There were comparatively few examples of student involvement and engagement in the marking process. This example depicts marking as a shared undertaking:

I also give them frameworks for marking and get them to mark each other's work. At the end of a project we assess all the work together by hanging it on the wall and having a class evaluation.

Realism

The comments made by teachers who used *LC Grading* only were reiterated here, that it is important to have a realistic sense of the type of feedback given in the Leaving Certificate itself:

It makes sense to get students used to what their examiner will expect of them and how their examiner will approach their work. When preparing for one's driving test, one finds out what the tester will be looking for.

Student expectations

Student expectations were described as a shaping factor by several teachers who used this combination of feedback strategies:

Gives students and parents the feedback they demand - anything less and you leave yourself open to criticism from parents and students that you are not doing your job.

5.1.7. Use of feedback based on percentage and letter grades (homework)

The use of *Percentage* and *Letter Grade* feedback strategies for homework was depicted as the best choice by those teachers who used them:

As students don't really understand LC grading system. I also feel it is incessant to have a grade a1 or a2 an A grade should be an A grade it's unfair on students.

Several references were made to adapting the feedback given depending on the nature of the assessment given to students, conveying a thoughtful combination of feedback strategies within resource restrictions:

Use the above depending on the subject matter and type of question. Time constraints can also come into play.

Developmental purposes

As with the strategies reported above, there was felt to be a significant advantage in combining

a grade with a comment:

The comment is important to give the student feedback whilst I find the grades do help to focus students on improving. It prompts questions like "what do I need to do to get from a "c" to a "b" and so forth.

For this teacher, the breadth of the *Letter Grade* was cited as an advantage:

It allows more room for the student to learn, the broad grade i feel, lets them know where there work is but the comment shows them where they are going wrong and how to improve it. I write comments within the work so they have to read over it again.

Set beside these articulated reasons for why the strategies used were the best fit, several comments were made about pressure from the school:

Because that's the way the school wants us to do it.

Student expectations

Those teachers who referred to student expectations framed their choice of feedback strategies as a response to 'what the students want'. This teacher describes adopting a combination of feedback strategies, balancing the preference of students for an exact percentage with the work associated with generating a precise score using a marking scheme:

My students prefer percentage marks (to now their exact score) so I often give them it if it is a short piece of work. If I take up a lot of revision work then I opt for the broad grade and comment as I don't have the time to do a detailed marking scheme and I am mainly interested in seeing the effort that they put in.

5.1.8. Use of feedback based on percentage, Leaving Certificate and letter grades (homework)

Highly articulated responses were given by teachers who described using all three strategies named in the survey to feedback on homework. This teacher refers to following whatever strategy was the best fit to the specific task:

No one preferred approach as my preference is irrelevant. What is important is whether the marking system I use is appropriate to the exercise in question. I choose accordingly.

The next teacher described a similar assessment-led approach to giving feedback on homework in the context of teaching English:

It depends on the topic, i use marking schemes for exam questions for higher level senior cycle English which i display with students on the data projector and discuss with them, if i give questions myself I may give an 'a' or 'b' looser type grade with a comment-it depends on the context of the questions you give students, (I only currently teach junior cycle history).

For this teacher, all three strategies were likely to be used during the course of the year:

I use all of the above throughout the year. I don't think it is useful to give a mark without a comment. Sometimes I give a comment without any mark. However, I strongly believe that there is a need for marking and grading sometimes, alongside a comment.

Developmental purposes

The developmental purposes cited by teachers who used all three strategies were familiar from the responses made by other teachers, including an emphasis on valuing comments:

I prefer to use a simple comment praising the student work, singling out the good points and then pointing out the errors - in the composition exercises students need decent feedback allowing them to improve over time – it's a learning process over the two years.

5.2. Feedback provided on in-school tests

There were three primary approaches to giving feedback on in-school tests, which are explored below at a qualitative level. Percentage-based feedback was the most common, followed by the use of Leaving Certificate-based feedback, and a combination of *Percentage* and *LC Grades*. Across each of these teachers acknowledged the importance of *Comments*.

5.2.1 Percentage-based feedback strategies (in-school)

Percentage-based strategies were the dominant mode of giving feedback on in-school tests. Although less elaborated that was the case with the equivalent discussion of homework, there was a similar thematic structure to the descriptions given by teachers:

As above. I try to maintain a consistent approach.

As above – students need direction and as they are involved in an exam orientated system in-school tests can be used as a multiple learning tool.

Thus, advantages cited for using *Percentage*-based strategies to feed back on in-school tests were to give orientation and a base for students to identify improvements they should make:

Gives an exact figure as well as constructive feedback to pull the grade up.

The students need clarity, positive feedback and encouragement to work on weaker skills

Developmental purposes

The use of the *Percentage*-based feedback strategies was in the context of a clearly articulated position on the part of the teacher, often grounded in marking schemes and the Leaving Certificate:

Students can see clearly where they have done well, thus encouraging and motivating them to keep going. Written work in English can be difficult to assess, therefore by using specific criteria and marking schemes, I can reduce subjectivity. Where students score poorly, my comments will help them to address the problem.

Use of comments and percentages

Comments were acknowledged to have a strongly supportive influence. Here this teacher illustrates that comments contextualise the meaning of a mark for the student:

The comment with the percentage allows me acknowledge where effort has been put in which is not reflected in the raw score. A 60% mark for a very good student is a disappointing result. A 60% mark for another student may be an excellent result. The percentages make no allowance for ability. The comment allows the number be contextualised.

For this teacher, comments had the potential to communicate valuable encouragement:

The comments are to help them improve, encourage them and praise them, as appropriate.

This teacher identifies comments as having the main developmental purpose whereas percentages were functional:

Comments are the only way the student can see how to improve. Percentages are required for report cards, and expected by students/ parents.

However other teachers referred to preferring to rely on the percentage itself:

In tests, the grading has to be more specific, so that students can see where they are going wrong.

The percentage provides a familiar criterion for students and allows comparison with homework grades to estimate if knowledge has gone into long term memory and genuine understanding. No comment is generally given as it is usually self-evident where marks were lost.

I don't have enough time to write a comment. The deadlines for correcting are too short.

Students can quickly convert to LC grades. Comment informs and evaluates and gives areas to improve

A balanced perspective on using *Percentage* and *Comment* was possible too, here in reference to them having complementary purposes:

Both allow them to reflect on their work, from two different perspectives.

More precise to give exact mark in maths. Comment is useful to show students where they achieved well and how to improve.

Here comments are described as necessary as there was a transition in marking schemes:

The comments are very important for feedback and learning. LC grading system in a state of flux at the moment for the maths so there is no point in attempting to use it.

Precision

As with remarks on the practice of giving *Percentage*-based feedback on homework, several

teachers wrote about percentages having a specific function of precision:

This gives them an accurate assessment of their work

Student/school expectations

Besides the developmental rationale given for the use of *Percentage*-based feedback, teachers also described external factors that influenced their choice. Here student expectations are described:

Students wish to know roughly how they are achieving and expect in an in school test to get useful information about themselves

The school was also an influencing factor:

The percentage mark gives a good picture of current state of progress for a leaving Certificate whilst also marking out expectations for improvement through the comment. It is also demanded by the school so that a full picture of a student's position can be assessed.

5.2.2. Leaving Certificate grade-based feedback (in-school)

Similarities were frequently noted in the rationale for *LC Grade*-based feedback strategies for in-school tests and homework:

The same reasons as above. Students will know what standard their work is at in the L.C. grading system and can use the comments to identify the strengths of the work and how the answering can be improved.

The main advantages attributed to *LC Grade*-based feedback were to give orientation, a base for improvement and insight on the marking process:

It prepares them for their exams, and shows them where they stand.

Because the students need to understand the breakdown of the marking system, where they gain/lose marks.

Developmental purposes

It was felt to be a service to students to show them where they are performing in relation to the Leaving Certificate grading system:

I want to see how the students measure up using the national standard of assessment. Teachers and students need to know the reality of where the student is in terms of the national standard.

Comments and grades

Here a complementary perspective is taken on the use of a *Grade* and *Comment* system:

In school tests are a stepping stone to the final exam. By using the LC grading system, students are experiencing how they will be marked in final exam. However coupled with a comment, this system allows them to analyse their work and look at areas for improvement.

This teacher identifies a preference for using comments but felt that students want to have the *LC Grade*:

A comment is required in order to make students aware of where they did well and where they need to improve. ... I also use the LC grading system as this is something I have noticed that the students themselves want. I feel my students use it as motivation to continue to do well or in most cases to improve their work.

This teacher has a specific rationale for the use of *Grades and Comments*:

Grading system: because it assures the student as to how they are progressing with the current Exam System ... Comment: because it guides areas or skills for improvement to participate successfully at a micro-level.

Realism

As with the use of *LC Grades* in the homework context, several teachers identified *LC Grades* as giving a realistic feel to the feedback provided on in-school tests:

As it is representative of the actual exam.

Student involvement

There were occasional references made to involving students very actively in the feedback process, as with this example:

I ask them to write their own summary comment after the test script has been returned and they have checked their answers out. I may also do some self, peer or group marking on some questions as the groups get more confident, after the initial shock most students like marking first their own, and eventually, each other's work.

Expectations of students, schools and parents

While the choice of feedback strategy was largely portrayed as an individual, professional decision, there were comments made about external pressure to use *LC Grades*:

I give them a grading system, as I feel they want to know the grade, did it reflect the amount of study they put in

Demanded by the pupils and the school. When we tried an experiment of allocating comments only this was unacceptable to the parents and the school.

Not preferred option. Would prefer just a comment and constructive criticism. Expected to put grade from students, parents, system.

5.2.3. Percentage and Leaving Cert grade-based feedback (in-school)

Teachers referred to earlier answers given on the homework response:

As with homework; I believe homework is about building up to the exam and an important element of doing well in the exam can be fully understanding the marking scheme.

The specific advantages attributed to using a combination of *Percentage* and *LC Grade*-based feedback were noted as including accuracy, personalised feedback, and the ability to see strengths and weaknesses:

Allows a personal assessment for each student and allows them to chart their progress towards the state exam.

Comments, percentages and grades

Comments were perceived as an important addition to *Grades* and *Percentages* alone in giving students advice on how to improve:

It helps them know where they stand with the subject. Students want to know if they're putting enough work in and where and how they should improve on the grade. I usually write in one thing that they can improve on for next time with some encouragement and praise where possible.

In addition, there was evidence of frustration over lack of attention paid to comments by students:

While I continue to write comments always, I find that the vast majority of students don't read them except for the occasional very motivated students. I question that comments may only be a waste of time in most cases. However, I will continue to do so for the sake of the small minority that bother to read or learn from them.

One teacher who used several feedback strategies identified the advantage of having a high level of precision when using percentage feedback:

It gives the student a precise idea of how they are doing. A broad grade C could mean 55 or 69. I want to let them know if they are just making a C grade or if they could be pushing themselves for a B grade. It also gives them a realistic idea of how they are doing.

This teacher described using a varied approach based on marking, due to the time pressure involved in giving individual feedback:

When giving a class test I generally follow a marking scheme similar to the Leaving Cert questions ... I use such tests as a formative assessment method. It is also an opportunity to show students how the questions are marked in the state exam. ... the school's computer system for recording results automatically converts this into a grade according to the Leaving Cert system. ... I also give feedback to the class generally ... This is my preferred approach because it allows me to give them feedback and is time efficient. ... it is simply not possible to give detailed comments.

In this case, varied forms of feedback are provided on the same test:

I will always give a percentage, and LC grade and comment for tests. In school tests are part of both the formative and summative assessment processes. Without a comment there is no way for the student to learn from their work and to move forward. Without a mark they are not being given a realistic impression of their objective ability and progress.

Here there is a reference made by a teacher to a subject-specific influence on which specific feedback strategy will be utilised:

Depends on the nature of the test. For French, it might be a language test which is most appropriately marked using percentages. For English, longer essay tests are marked as per L Cert scheme and done under exam conditions (time frame allowed in exam)

External factors

The environmental factors contributing to the choice of strategy by teachers who used Percentage and Grade-based feedback referred to the LC examination and the students' preference for feedback that fitted with this to the maximum extent possible:

They have to sit the LC eventually; they might as well know where they stand.

Students at leaving cert tend to be very focused and want specific feedback that is related to the state exams that they will sit. I comment in line with AFL guidelines.

It is the standard way of marking the digital results for the Christmas, Summer, Mock exams in our school.

Students demand it.

5.3 Feedback provided on pre-Leaving Certificate examinations

5.3.1. Percentage-based strategies (pre-LC)

Percentage-based strategies were commonly used to provide feedback on pre-Leaving Certificate examinations. The reasons cited earlier in reference to Percentage-based Feedback are broadly applicable here. A number of teachers simply referred to earlier answers when asked why they use Percentage-based feedback for pre-LC examinations ("as above"). The main advantage of this type of feedback strategy was that it enabled students to know where they stand:

It's good practice for the students.

Comment is valuable at this point re time management, structure and relevance of answers etc.

Percentages were described as having the flexibility of providing precise numerical feedback as well as being amenable to translation into a Grade by students themselves:

Students are well able to generate LC grades from percentage marks at this stage.

5.3.2. Leaving Certificate grade-based strategies (pre-LC)

This was the most commonly used type of feedback strategy for pre-LC examinations. Teachers commonly made reference to answers they gave to earlier questions when describing the reason for using this form of feedback ("*as above*").

The combination of comments with the Leaving Cert Grading system had a particular meaning. It was felt to be important to mirror the type of grading used in the LC as the students were at this stage close to the 'real thing':

There is no point using another system when they are attempting to sit. An exam as like the leaving cert as possible.

This recalls the 'realism' used to justify LC Grade feedback in homework and in-school tests. Consequently comments were structured with this aim in mind:

As these examinations are direct preparation for sitting the State examinations in June I feel it is necessary to afford the students the opportunity to see how their papers will appear corrected in the actual Leaving Certificate. I do however also refer to the areas of strength and weakness and where the grade could be improved.

Yet comments were still important for giving direction and encouragement:

It makes no sense to me to mark a pre Leaving Certificate with anything other than the Leaving Cert grading system. A relevant comment then adds meaning to that grade for that particular student.

This teacher describes giving verbal feedback through work with individual students, in conjunction with feedback from the standard LC Grade:

I use the Leaving Certificate Grading System (A1, A2, B1, B2, B3, etc) and also speak to each student individually regarding their exam, where they went wrong and what they can do to improve.

As with the other forms of feedback strategies, there was some variation on the role comments played in feedback. Those teachers who did not give individual or extensive feedback comments to students could also justify their approach:

So they have a realistic understanding and expectation of what the real LC will be like. It is designed to be a preparation, so it should be very similar. Direction throughout more so than comments as they are essential for improvement.

I don't mark my own students' mock exams but I do mark other students in the school. I would rarely leave a comment on their tests as it is too personal and is not done in the real Leaving Cert. I would instead issue the teacher with a set of general comments to relay to the students.

5.3.3. Percentage and LC grade (pre-LC)

The other feedback strategy commonly used with pre-Leaving Certificate examinations was the combined use of Percentages and Leaving Certificate Grades. There was some reference to earlier answers to explain this choice ("*for the above stated reasons*"). Similar benefits were associated with this approach as with each method separately ("*Allows them to clearly see their strengths and weaknesses*").

Teachers who used a combination of feedback methods conceived of the pre-LC examination as another assessment method alongside others used to promote student development:

Although the exams are of more importance to the students, I don't treat them any differently to their other in-house tests. They are still part of both the formative and summative assessment techniques.

This teacher offers an insight on the rationale for their use of both percentage and LC Grades as part of a well-developed approach to feedback:

I grade the exams and give percentage marks as well as the LC grading system. The class is given a general feedback on what went well and what needs to be worked on. Students can learn from the success and mistakes of others. ... My priority at this time is ensuring that students do not lose heart if their mark is not what they had hoped.

The following statements from teachers provide information on the external factors that shaped the choice of feedback strategy, including the pressure of workload:

... Last year I had to correct 180 pre-exam scripts at both Junior and Leaving Cert levels for example. With a young family to look after also I don't get a chance to do any school work until 9 pm.

In 6th year all they know is the "exam" and points.

5.4 Marking schemes

In the classroom, marking schemes were predominantly used as a tool for teaching (56.4% of teachers). In the assessment domain they were used for both planning class tests and Leaving Cert preparation (52.9% of teachers). Many teachers used marking schemes for both teaching and assessing, but others used them for teaching only and some for assessment only. Relatively few teachers did not cite some use of marking schemes for some purpose, although several of these respondents did make reference to them at some point in the teaching and learning process:

I think they are invaluable, especially in technology subjects, for example the LC construction syllabus does no mention anything about sustainable design or energy saving techniques, yet the exam is based on these questions.

5.4.1. Evaluation of marking schemes

A wide range of positive evaluations of marking schemes were offered ("*Examinations.ie is a very useful teaching tool*"). This extended to comments that marking schemes were essential in order for students to ground themselves in the expectations that would be applied in the LC ("*it is necessary that students understand the marking scheme that will be used on their work*"). Here a teacher describes marking schemes as a 'gold standard':

I find these very useful as a teaching tool

These are the only way students will learn what is acceptable as no book has ALL the correct definitions.

5.4.2. Shortcomings of marking schemes

Some shortcomings of marking schemes were offered. These included the suggestion that not all schemes were fully reliable or sufficiently detailed:

It always irritates me that the L Cert Higher Level schemes are far more detailed than the Ordinary Level schemes. Private mock exam companies frequently provide superior marking schemes.

This is an examples of shortcomings in marking schemes being linked to specific subjects:

I think the marking schemes do not always reflect the difficulty of the question- especially in the project maths marking schemes.

This teacher framed marking schemes as a guide rather than a prescriptive definition of answers:

They are used as a guide. However, I always tell my students that marking schemes can and do change and an answer that may be acceptable in one year may be insufficient to get full marks in another year.

This teacher describes marking schemes as having a negative influence on students to produce rote answers:

Many students use them to copy their answers for homework and learn nothing this way ... if you use them with the students you can get them to realise their mistakes and learn in the process - if they have already read the answers on the net they tend to not listen properly.

5.4.3. Use of marking schemes for teaching

Teachers reported the use of marking schemes as an in-class teaching tool to help students

prepare for exams:

I use them on the data projector to correct exam papers and to allow students see how the papers are marked. This helps them focus and time their exams.

I use the MS to teach exam techniques, correct exam question, teach vocabulary, etc.

The marking schemes gave additional detail and information than was otherwise unavailable:

The syllabi are too vague in terms of learning outcomes in many subjects. Marking schemes provide some insight into the depth of treatment expected. It would be much more useful if the syllabi were less vague. This is more of an issue with LCA.

Marking schemes provided a resource to ensure that teacher marking was in keeping with the SEC:

These are a key teaching tool for me and are how I know to grade in line with the SEC.

However there was diversity of opinion, and this teacher describe marking schemes more as a framework:

I use them as a guideline but never follow them religiously, I find the 'etc.' after each list of possible points very important as students often have different, equally valuable points to make and once they are well supported I will accept them.

One particular application of marking schemes was in guiding assessment of homework, to enable efficient grading and feedback:

They are great as a time saving device when correcting listening and reading comprehensions, vital in my mixed level class as we're shorter on time than those who are lucky enough to have separate H and Ord level classes. ... In French, marks can easily be lost for reading comprehensions, as very precise answers are required. The mark schemes are very necessary for students to see examples and work out how to avoid losing marks.

Here this teacher uses marking schemes directly as the basis for a homework assignment, based on the perceived need to tailor the student's learning to LC demands:

I assign them as homework. Students sometimes think they may be accused of cheating but I am of the view that it is clever studying to check your work especially if you're stuck. With business in particular I would assign exam paper questions and correct them in line with the marking schemes.

There were few examples of teachers justifying not using marking schemes, although some were given:

I never use them as a teaching/learning tool or to plan classes as I feel they are too restrictive and narrow.

These teachers did not refer to using marking schemes for either planning class work or for assessment but nonetheless referred to using schemes at points in the teaching and learning

process:

I refer the students to the latest marking scheme if I want to clarify a point about a section. I don't use the schemes in my teaching, I use them when I'm marking work.

5.4.4. Use of marking schemes to build exam skills

Marking schemes were seen as an excellent resource to help students learn how to develop the skills involved in answering exams as effectively as possible:

It is great for students to understand how marks are given as it helps to improve their exam technique.

Working with marking schemes was felt to bring students approach more in line with the expectations of the SEC examiners:

For students to understand how marks are allocated by SEC examiners, in order to structure their time and focus in responding, and to gain a sense of confidence and mastery:

Marking schemes enabled transparent, specific feedback on what components of their answers gained marks or lost marks:

Of course! It is important for students to see how marks are lost and gained. They are going through the process so it needs to be transparent.

This teacher describes it as necessary for students to learn exam technique as a skill in itself, separate from the student's underlying ability:

Part - and only part - of what we do as teachers involves preparing students for an exam. For students, they see this as the culmination of their learning throughout school. For teachers, this is not an absolute measure of any student's worth. The exam can sometimes reflect a student's true ability and effort made and sometimes does not. Exam techniques are necessary if you want your students to understand the purpose of the exam and how it is marked.

Some threats were identified in the use of marking schemes, that it raised the risk of teaching solely to the test and therefore needed to be managed by the teacher:

Marking schemes can prove valuable when not utilised to teach solely to the test.

The marking schemes were especially associated with the lead up to the Leaving Certificate itself:

I use these in the months leading up to the exam with Leaving Cert students, to help them with exam technique.

5.4.5. Student involvement

Several teachers referred to having students become involved actively in using the marking scheme to evaluate their own and others' work:

I sometimes ask students to grade work e.g. a melodic composition or an answer in a listening test. We run this in a similar way to how the marking conferences work. The students are given their own copy of the descriptors and asked to assess a piece of work. Student write down comments and we discuss the final mark in a similar way to how the marking conferences work.

5.4.6. Subject-specific responses

Some references were noted earlier to teachers critiquing the marking schemes available for particular subjects, such as Project Maths. Other references to subject-specific use of marking schemes described how the schemes could facilitate or otherwise contextualise the subject concerned:

In French correction of comprehension écrite with the aid of LC marking schemes enables students to gauge what constitutes excess material and an accurate answer.

I use it coming up to exams to show them how the exams are marked. With Maths they reinforce the fact that if they show their work or make an attempt they can get marks.

5.4.7. The drive for points

Some of the teachers described students and parents as focused on achieving LC points rather than a rounded education, driven by points, and that marking schemes can feed into this:

Students want to use them to reflect the leaving cert exam. I think too much emphasis is placed on past marking schemes but use them because my students request and need them to do well in our national exam system

This teaching to the points system is dictating the teaching and learning in schools and I feel my skills and abilities are no longer relevant. I am swimming against a tide of teachers doing the work for students instead of teaching students to become independent learners. This is not education.

Unfortunately some students use them in the wrong way i.e. Copy out answers instead of doing the questions and using their own brains. Even to the extent of copying down phrases such as - or any other relevant answer- or giving all possible versions of acceptable answers.

5.5 Student expectations for feedback strategies in homework, in-school tests, and pre-Leaving Certificate examinations

The teachers were asked about student expectations as part of the survey, in respect of whether "*students have particular expectations about how their homework and class tests are marked and returned to them*".

Approximately 85% gave a response to this open-ended item. Many of these were single word or short answers (e.g., "yes"). A minority (approximately 10%) of those teachers who answered this question answered to say their students did not have expectations. Therefore most teachers considered that students did hold expectations for feedback.

5.5.1. Teachers who described no student expectations

Those who reported that students did not hold expectations gave short or one word answers, including some qualified responses ("*not particularly*", "*not really*"). There were a few examples of longer responses:

No. They expect it to be graded in some way, but once a grade, percentage or a mark is given they are happy. Sometimes a comment alone will suffice, it depends on the assignment. They expect to get the work back in as little as time as possible, I aim for the next class though this is ambitious, and always within one week.

Several other teachers answered to give non-committal answers, that they did not have a strong opinion on student expectations for feedback:

I haven't asked them. I assume they expect the homework/ test to be corrected and the correct solutions to be given. I also assume that they would like the chance to ask questions about where they went wrong - this I give to them in class.

It was far more common for teachers to report that the general student expectation was for marks and comments:

Yes. they expect a grade or percentage and a comment on how to improve

Teachers referred to beliefs about several specific student expectations, that students:

- want to know how to improve
- appreciate depth of feedback
- appreciate a grade and comment approach
- prefer to know about grades
- want feedback useful to the Leaving Certificate
- want percentage-based feedback.

Each of these sub-themes is explored below, along with two other factors implicated in student expectations:

- the role of teachers in shaping expectations
- expectations as demands.

5.5.2. Students want to know how to improve

Students were seen as expecting to receive feedback to enable them to improve performance:

Yes, they expect to be able to see where and how they scored marks. They also look for advice on how to improve further.

5.5.3. Students appreciate depth of feedback

This expectation concerns the belief commonly expressed by teachers that students prefer a considerable depth of feedback, usually in the form of comments. Although some teachers referred to students not engaging with written comments, the importance attributed here to comments is consistent with positive teacher attitudes to giving comments on Homework, In-School and Pre-Leaving Certificate examinations:

They like to know their grade but they value the comments, particularly when I analyse what they have done well and how they can improve.

Teachers described comments as a time-consuming part of their job but one which was felt to be necessary:

I'd like to think they do. I consider it the most important part of my job and write comments all over my students' scripts that shows them where they went wrong and how to improve.

5.5.4. Students appreciate a grade and comment approach

This teacher demonstrates the belief that students appreciate receiving depth of feedback through comments, while acknowledging the importance that students attribute to grades:

I feel they appreciate the comments as they're clear and give specific targets for improvement whilst also giving praise, increasing their confidence. They do however want a grade for everything, 'what did I get?' is a common refrain! I don't always give them a grade and they don't like it.

Similarly this teacher identified that students held several expectations, with one of these to receive comments:

Yes. They want advice through their answer or piece of writing, a realistic mark and comments that guide and direct towards improvement.

Here this teacher identifies very specific preferences students hold for comments, that they should map on to PCLM¹:

They prefer comments and a detailed grading system e.g. broken down into PCLM. They like to see comments throughout the work and then specific ones on the four elements of PCLM.

As with the beliefs teachers held for comments generally, that commenting on work has a developmental purpose as well as encouragement, students were felt to seek encouragement in the comments they received:

Yes, they'll expect a grade and comment as well as an encouraging comment on the parts where they are on the right track with some encouraging comments on where they could persist until they get something else right.

This teacher wrote that "*the amount of marking, for me, varies with level/ability of a group*", attuning use of comments with student expectations:

Students like a grade, however they need constructive comments to develop & progress- homework benefits more from a comment- ... How much grading/marking/assessing I do depends on the ability of the group. A motivated top set will receive a paper 1 English essay with a grade & comment per week in 6th year. Students know and understand my marking criteria, I share my approach/ method when I meet a group. This intensity isn't necessary for an ordinary level group- on the contrary(in my experience) it would stifle any motivation they already have and is often unnecessary.

5.5.5. Students prefer grades

While teachers valued comments, there was a perception that students may not value comments to the same extent, and would experience dissatisfaction if they do not receive a grade ("*they are concerned about what grade they receive and compete with each other to see what everyone got*"; "*They often feel short changed if they don't get a grade*"):

Students are disappointed if they don't receive a mark and a grade. They have to be encouraged to read the accompanying comments. For this reason, to encourage students to focus on their stress and weaknesses, I only offer comments.

5.5.6. Students want feedback useful to the Leaving Certificate

One strong expectation attributed to students was for feedback tailored to the marking used in SEC:

I would think they would expect them to be in line with how the final exam is graded since that is ultimately what we are preparing for.

Some of the teachers described a student reaction of dissatisfaction if they did not receive

¹ Purpose, coherence, language, mechanics used in language assessment.

feedback consistent with LC marking:

Yes - find it very hard to accept my comment only marking so the compromise is when it is full exam question at the end of a topic or in exams that broad grade will also be included.

The students with high ambitions tend to expect class tests to be corrected similarly to the Marking Schemes. Deviations from this are not well received.

The underlying dissatisfaction concerned a focus more on grades than on comments:

Yes, they like them 'properly' marked using the 'PCLM'.

Yes. Very exam orientated. is this what I would get in the real LC Mus exam, is a question that I am asked on a daily basis. I feel like I am teaching in a grind school at times.

Students consider a teacher who can recall exam questions, the years that these topics came up and teaches to the exam to be a 'good teacher'

5.5.7. Students want percentage-based feedback

One set of responses focused on the student expectation that an exact percentage is provided on assessments ("*Yes they want percentages*"). This interest in precision was based on getting more specific feedback relevant to the Leaving Certificate: "*By the time leaving cert comes, they expect a percentage*". There were also examples cited of students who were dissatisfied with receiving comments only as feedback: "*They mainly just expect comments*", alongside references to having to give up comment only feedback: "*They expect percentages and grades. They don't like comment-only as I've tried it in the past*".

5.5.8. Expectation for timely feedback

The teachers described the student expectation for a quick turnaround in homework and test marking:

Yes, they want the work to be marked immediately and feedback given the next day.

Yes, they like to have their tests marked within one week.

This was in turn part of a more general expectation for a structured process of assessment:

They have come to expect work to be: - planned and meaningful - set regularly - be collected, marked and returned promptly

Yes. They know that all hw and tests are put at the top of my priority and corrected before all other work. They also know that I follow the marking schemes from the department.

Timely feedback was regarded as important for another reason, as quick turnaround was perceived as important in achieving an impact:

My own expectation is that work is returned in a timely fashion - I try not to keep my students waiting too long for the corrected work to be returned to them, if there is a delay you lose the impact of what you are trying to achieve with them.

5.5.9. The role of teachers in shaping expectations

Teachers described their role in shaping student preferences for feedback:

Yes, they expect grades at all times in the beginning. It takes time patience and honesty to "train" a class to trust the system of comment only for formative, % only for summative. I find I have to explain it to them in exactly the same way as we explain it to teachers.

This kind of approach was couched in terms of work completed by teachers to orient students to the mode of feedback provided:

They are happy enough with the method I use. At the beginning of 5th year I explain why I do that

In this example the teachers work with the students to develop an assessment for learning approach:

Well I consulted with them when first assigned the class. I told them about the assessment for learning approach and they were a little resistant at first. Now they are so positive about it and have even requested it as a shared practice in the school.

5.5.10. Expectations as demands

Student expectations for feedback entailed a significant workload for teachers. Giving feedback was one among a number of duties:

They expect their test to be the teacher's number one priority at all times. However, the teacher has to make time to do other prep and correcting work for other classes as well as for their post of responsibility and subject planning priorities.

Here the demand is described as significant and hard to manage:

Yes. They want everything yesterday. They want sample answers for everything which they want to learn off word for word which they replicate in exams. They want the work marked according to LC marking schemes and they want to know how to get every last mark. Where students do not learn through lack of effort or interest, or do not have the ability, parents are called in to find fault with the teaching and demand extra classes or grind school teaching.

This teacher relates the expectation for feedback to a norm endorsed by the school:

This is the expectation of the school---can be difficult admittedly when a broader grading/comment only would be easier all round

Parents were also referred to as a source of expectations for teachers to conform with a particular mode of feedback:

I work in a very academic school where parental and student expectations are very high. Parents are very demanding of specific, targeted feedback in line with examination marking schemes. When work is not graded and returned with a comment, there can often be complaints from parents - even where the criteria for and method of assessment is outlined to students in class.

6 General comments

The final section of the survey was an invitation to give open-ended comments. Teachers reported that they welcomed the opportunity to respond to the survey. A number reported a positive sense of having been consulted on issues concerning grading and marking. The open response at the end of the questionnaire was availed of by most teachers as an opportunity to make general comments, identify issues associated with assessment and, in some cases, to air their concerns and vent their frustrations. Diverse views were voiced on several different issues and one notable point of consensus could be discerned.

6.1 Marking practice

There was clear and consistent evidence of using homework and in-school tests as important opportunities to give feedback, to motivate students and to give them a clear sense of where they were. Making the '**criteria for success**' clear featured prominently in responses across all subjects.

I disagree with reports that we rely too much on marking schemes to teach towards the LC exam, as if it is the only reason students are at school. On the contrary, one needs to know what the criteria for success are in order to be able to succeed.(French)

Leaving Certificate marking schemes provided an important framework which many teachers valued when marking and their students' work, while others eschewed the LC grade approach in favour of more qualitative approaches. The defining characteristics of **formative assessment** – or AfL – were evident as teachers talked about how they used grading and feedback as an integral part of their classroom practice. Giving students the skills to critically and constructively assess their own work was also regarded as an important part of this process. Some teachers explicitly lauded the value of AfL, not just in terms of benefits to students but of the benefits to teachers also.

It (AfL) works, it gives clear signposts and it gives the students acknowledgement for everything they are trying to do. It reminds me of the reasons why I became a teacher. It improves student/class/teacher relationships (English and Religion).

In the use of grading schemes, specifically Leaving Cert grades, there was a sense of **obligation to students**, in the interest of fairness, equity and of giving them the best chance of success. Some teachers felt they would be doing their students a disservice if they did not fully utilise the opportunity to learn from LC marking schemes, while some avoided using grades.

It would be remiss of me not to mark work by students in the Leaving Cert. style ... It's what they expect - that's what their parents expect (English , History).

It would be a poor teacher who did not give their students any advice or experience in handling past papers - it is how students will be ultimately assessed. I personally believe percentages/comments are more informative to students than a simple grade (Business, Maths).

Teachers commonly applied LC criteria to the way in which they assessed homework and in-house tests. The potential **consequence** of availability of marking schemes for class room practice was identified.

I feel that I am forced to spend a considerable amount of time explaining how the marking schemes work and pointing out where students will lose and gain marks and what phrases are acceptable/unacceptable in an answer rather than just letting the students rely on their own knowledge and way of wording an answer (Agricultural Science).

The extent to which the LC examination, and preparation for it, exerts **stress** on students was inevitably reported by teachers. Some, however, believe that the availability of marking schemes and criteria can help alleviate that stress.

If they know what to expect when they enter an exam and if they know what's expected of them, they will be less likely to feel stress in the exam and will be more likely to succeed in the exam (English, History).

The concept of **reliability** of assessment featured explicitly or implicitly in many of the responses. Teachers talked of being able to give students an 'unbiased' opinion and stated that marking schemes are essential for consistency of marking. Whilst the language of **validity** may not have been used explicitly, the concept of validity – or the lack thereof – featured regularly in the perceived lack of alignment between the modes of summative assessment – and, by association, formative assessment – and the kind of outcomes they wish to foster, especially in their own subject area.

6.2 Use of comments

Comments are always better to help understanding. I usually get students to review their work to identify areas of progress, areas in need of improvement, and areas in which they did well. I then get them to outline how they intend to improve their work. I find this is quite meaningful and effective. It encourages students to take responsibility for their learning (Geography, English).

There was recognition that “**feedback is more useful than marking**” (English and SEN). While time consuming, it was deemed worthwhile “because I know the majority of pupils read and use their feedback”. Some teachers use comments because they believe the grading schemes mean nothing to students, as they do not indicate where they have done well and how they can improve. The potential barriers to providing comments were also reported.

I aim to introduce comment-only marking for my 5th years as I did it with a 3rd year class and feedback was positive. Students liked it and told me they really learned from their mistakes; it forced them to really go over where they are went wrong and they were not obsessed with the percentage mark..... my only concern about the syllabus is that it is unfortunately only examined by the terminal exam and this could result in (teachers) reverting back to the old ways of ‘teaching to the exam’ (Maths).

While comments represent the ideal, they are not always possible in reality.

In an ideal situation it would be great to do comments with every test but this is simply not possible. The difficulties in doing this are compounded by the extra time needed to prepare materials for the new Project Maths course (Maths).

Moreover, it is reported that ‘students and parents insist on knowing where they stand specifically in relation to the Leaving Cert standards and are only interested in comments/discussion in so far as it has obvious potential to improve their grade’ (Music, Maths).

6.3 Experience examining for the State Examinations Commission

The experience of **marking state examination** papers enhances teachers’ confidence in preparing students for LC examinations. Some suggested that the opportunity to mark should be available to all teachers, with ‘fewer retired teachers employed by the SEC and more younger and inexperienced teachers taken on’ (Home economics). Specific preparation and training in the use of marking schemes was recommended as a mandatory element of pre-service teacher education courses. Some of those without such experience reported a lack of clarity in marking schemes, especially in the newer subjects.

I have no idea how the new Project Maths will be marked. The marking schemes are all over the place... It is not clear and it is difficult to advise students on where to spend their time (Maths, French).

I would find a new marking scheme difficult to follow except I corrected Project Maths last year (Maths).

6.4 Risks, dilemmas and sources of dissent

The dilemma of ‘**teaching to the test**’ featured in a considerable number of responses. There was a sense of being damned if you did and damned if you didn’t. This was evident in the frustration teachers experience arising from critique in the media alongside the pressure they experience from parents and their schools to do exactly that – teach to the test.

I propose that the NCCA, DES and others refrain from condemning teachers for 'teaching to the test'. If we did not teach to the test our system would be seen to fail and our students deemed as failures (Maths).

This concern is closely associated with the commonly occurring reference to the risk of “reverting to traditional methods”.

My only concern about the (Project Maths) syllabus is that it is unfortunately only assessed by the “terminal” exam and this could result in me reverting back to old ways of “teaching to the exam” (Maths).

The alleged persistence of what was referred to as a ‘jug and mug’ approach to education featured, with references to how the current assessment system fails to promote independent learning and instead, promotes a knowledge transfer approach.

The Leaving Cert syllabi and the exam format do not lend themselves towards the use of active learning methodologies and furthermore students do not want to use these approaches as they are not examinable (Science).

While there was broad welcome for the availability of marking schemes, there were mixed views as to the extent to which their availability and the greater transparency actually impact on classroom practice.

I have been a classroom teacher for 30 years. Students have always demanded a grade or percentage in homework work and tests. The availability of marking schemes has made teachers more aware of how state exams are marked. But it has not had a significant impact on how teaching and learning happens in the classroom. This is a red herring (Geography, English).

A belief in the merit of providing students with access to marking scheme was not universally shared.

I believe that access to marking schemes, especially in languages (access to typescript and audio files) can be very useful when used with care. However I'm not convinced that student access is as useful (French, Maths).

Some teachers found themselves following certain practices that were at odds with their own **beliefs about education** and what they believed represented good practice. Some of this was attributed to the publication of marking schemes

The publication of marking schemes has led to a far more exam-orientated preparation and teaching which, for me, is anathema to what I envision my role today is in education. Particularly in the subjects that I teach, where I seek to open my students' minds to the possibilities of language and literature beyond the confines of the school syllabus (English, French).

6.5 Pressures and expectations – internal and external

I am under pressure to prepare them for the exam and their biggest concern is how to work the system (Irish).

Teachers report feeling under **pressure** to devote a considerable amount of time explaining marking schemes to students, coaching them in how to frame responses to optimise their performance, rather than “just letting the students rely on their own knowledge and a way of wording an answer”. The pervasive pressure to emulate summative assessment in the classroom could be discerned.

Parents in particular are simply not interested in different methodologies in assessment. They want their child to sit (in-house) exams that have the same style, format and conditions as the SEC exams (Maths, Music).

A (poetry) award winning student’s parent asked me at a teacher meeting; ‘Yes I know it was a tremendous honour and achievement - but what about her Leaving Cert grade?’ (English).

The influence of **school management** was reported by a few teachers.

In a lot of schools, students and parents are dictating terms along with management who seem only interested in CAO points and the school’s reputation (Irish, Geography CSPE).

One teacher even claimed to have been bullied by management to use a particular approach to grading in order to increase the number of A-grades.

The **CAO system or points** was dubbed the ‘elephant in the classroom’ and widely regarded as a malevolent influence on teaching practice and student learning.

The elephant in the room is the points system itself. Teachers, ultimately, will continue to be held hostage by it until it is changed (Maths).

The points system dominates the classroom- whether educators, researchers, psychologists will accept this - and as such, it’s the elephant in every classroom of most schools (English, French).

6.6 Workload

A significant point was made on the workload associated with feedback on student work. Teachers of certain subjects, such as English, reported a particular burden; “*Lord bless the poor teachers who have a number of exam classes, particularly English, as they have 2 papers per student to mark*” (English and SEN). These responses provide further evidence of the pressure to emulate the LC summative assessment. This issue is compounded, for many, by a sense of frustration at the general lack of awareness and appreciation.

And if you in the NCCA think that more comments on tests/homework should be the norm, I suggest you teach for a considerable period of time on a full timetable and try it out to see how your views change after being at the coalface (Subject n/s).

7 Integration and Synthesis of the Survey Findings

7.1 Feedback strategies for homework, in-school tests, and pre-Leaving Certificate examinations: overview of quantitative survey findings

The quantitative analysis (Sections 2 and 3) reported on an analysis of responses from 240 teachers from different perspectives, taking account of:

- Teacher characteristics (SEC examiner, subjects taught, pre-LC marker).
- Type of feedback strategy (Percentages, LC Grade, or Letter Grade), broken down by use of the % or grade alone, with comments, or both.
- Type of work being marked (homework, in-school tests, pre-LC examinations).

Percentage-based strategies were the common single feedback type, reported by about 50% of teachers to feedback on homework and pre-LC examinations, and by 70% of teachers to feedback on in-school tests. In each case, the most prevalent way to use percentages was using the *Percentage and Comment* strategy (Section 2.1, Table 1).

Compared with *Percentages*, *LC Grade* feedback was reported less often in giving feedback on homework or in-school tests. Less than half the teachers reported using *LC Grade* to feedback on these. Similar to the use of *Percentage and Comment*, *LC Grade and Comment* was the most common application of *LC Grade* in homework and in-school tests. *LC Grade* was reported by over half the teachers as a type of feedback strategy used on pre-LC exams, with *LC Grade and Comment* again the most common *LC Grade* strategy (Section 2.2, Table 2). *Letter Grade* was the least popular form of feedback. The only exception was use of *Letter Grade and Comment* as feedback on homework (Section 2.3, Table 3).

Teachers differed according to whether they used one or more types of feedback strategy for particular types of work (homework, in-school tests, pre-LC examinations). Depending on the work being marked between 21%-24% of teachers used a combination of feedback strategies. The combination of *Percentage* and *LC Grade* was the most popular combined feedback strategy (between 11.7% and 17.5% of teachers reported using both of these strategies).

The quantitative findings on feedback strategies demonstrate the popularity of *Percentage* feedback, followed by *LC Grades*, a trend confirmed by the third most popular strategy - the combined use of *Percentages* and *LC Grades*. *Percentage*-based strategies only were used by between 29.1%-47.9% of teachers, depending on the work being marked. *LC Grade* was the most popular strategy for the pre-LC exam (42.9%), and ranged from 17.5% to 24.2% on the two other modalities (Section 2.4, Table 4).

The analysis of use of feedback strategy by subject taught revealed some differences in practice according to subject area. These differences tended not to be overwhelming, and trends in feedback were obscured by the large proportion of teachers who taught multiple subjects. Nevertheless, Maths, Business, and Language teachers reported greater use of *Percentage*-based strategies, compared with Humanities teachers who relied more on *LC Grade*.

7.2 Quantitative findings on marking schemes

The survey findings concerning use of examinations, ie marking schemes highlight the widespread use of marking schemes for classroom purposes (73.5%) and for assessment purposes (82.9%). In relation to use in planning class, over half of the teachers (56.4%) used marking schemes as a classroom tool, with a further 15.8% reporting use for planning class as well. Very few teachers reported only using marking schemes to plan class (Section 4.1, Table 5). In relation to assessment, 22.5% reported using marking schemes for Leaving Cert preparation, and 7.5% used marking schemes for planning tests, but the most popular approach was to use them for both reasons (52.9%) (Section 4.1, Table 6).

Although half of the Maths teachers in the survey did report using marking schemes for classroom purposes, this was still less than the equivalent proportion of teachers of other subjects. Sciences teachers also reported relatively low use of marking schemes for classroom purposes. Languages and Business teachers reported the lowest percentage of use of marking schemes for assessment purposes (30%).

7.3 Differences between SEC examiners and other teachers

Of the 240 participants, 141 did not engage in any form of SEC examining and 99 did (Section 4.3). Mostly, those teachers who were SEC examiners were involved in one of the three examinations (Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Applied). The numbers of JC examiners (n=48) and LC examiners (n=55) were sufficient to conduct meaningful comparisons with non-SEC examiners (n=141). We did not report separately on the small numbers who were examiners for more than one State examination or who were examiners for the LC Applied.

There were distinct trends noted in feedback strategies by examiner status. LC examiners were less likely to report using *Percentage*-based feedback, compared with JC examiners and non-examiners (Section 4.3.1, Table 7). JC and LC examiners used *LC Grade* to a greater extent than non-SEC examiners. Teachers who were not SEC examiners made limited use of *LC Grades* in feedback on homework and in-school tests (Section 4.3.2, Table 8). Although there was a trend toward more use of *LC Grades* as a feedback strategy by SEC examiners, it was not a rule. About half of JC and LC examiners did not report using *LC Grades* at all as feedback on homework or in-school tests.

The only exception to the lack of popularity of *Letter Grades* as feedback was among non-SEC examiners. In relation to feedback on homework, 29.1% of this group of teachers reported using *Letter Grade and Comment* (Section 4.3.3, Table 9).

Looking at combinations of feedback strategies, taking into account SEC examiner status, JC examiners were distinctive in favouring combined use of *Percentage* and *LC Grade* feedback strategies across all three types of student work. In the case of LC examiners, *LC Grade* was the single most popular type of feedback strategy. These findings, set out in Table 10 (Section 4.3.4), illustrate a tendency for non-SEC examiners to make more use of *Percentage* feedback, especially on in-school tests, and even for pre-LC exam feedback.

Another distinction by SEC examiner status was evident in the use of marking schemes available from examinations. Over 87% of JC examiners used marking schemes for one or both classroom strategies (planning classes, classroom tool), compared with 72.7% of LC examiners and 69.5% of non-SEC examiners (Section 4.3.5, Table 11). JC examiners also demonstrated the most frequent use of marking schemes for planning tests and LC preparation, followed again by LC examiners and then non-SEC examiners (Section 4.3.6, Table 12).

Overall, therefore, SEC examiners reported making more use of LC Grade for feedback than other teachers. This tendency was not restricted to feedback on pre-LC examinations. It generalised to feedback provided on homework and in-school tests, and was reflected also in greater take up of marking schemes.

7.4 Overview of the qualitative findings

A large majority (80%) of teachers made qualitative comments (Sections 4, 5, 6). The qualitative data obtained presented an opportunity to contextualise and make sense of the patterns in quantitative items. The main body of the qualitative analysis described teacher responses in relation to each combination of feedback and type of student work: homework, in-school tests and pre-Leaving Certificate examinations. Common themes were identified across these responses. Overwhelmingly, the teachers gave a clear rationale for their choice of feedback strategies. Despite differences in the strategies adopted, the goals and purposes for providing feedback were consistent.

In this section we integrate the qualitative data, to provide an overview of the main patterns in the qualitative data, in respect of attitudes and practices, rationale for and pressures on the choice of feedback strategies. The picture that emerged from the qualitative responses on homework, in-school tests, and pre-LC examinations was consistent with that arising from other qualitative items in the survey, on marking schemes, student expectations, and open-ended comments. We bring these sources together below in a synthesis of the qualitative findings.

7.5 Qualitative evaluation of percentage, LC grade, and letter grade feedback strategies

One advantage associated with *Percentage*-based strategies, and with Grades to a lesser extent, was the availability of a precise, accurate indicator of the quality of the student's work. Thus, one teacher commented on the ability of these methods to provide a "realistic impression of [students'] objective ability and progress". There were negative associations with precision as well, which included consequences such as marks becoming a distraction to the learning process or a source of competition between students.

A critical benefit cited by teachers who used *LC Grades* was the value attached to these grades as a means to ground students in the reality of the impending State exam. The use of *LC Grade* in feedback was supported by formal strategies such as PCLM. It should be noted that *LC Grade* was not always cited as being in agreement with teacher preferences. This type of feedback strategy was linked to concerns about teaching toward the Leaving Certificate rather than the

underlying educational goals. Nevertheless, the relevance of *LC Grade* to the SEC assessments meant that, in the words of one teacher, it would be "remiss of me not to mark work by students in the Leaving Cert style".

The use of feedback strategies was not static and unvarying. Instead, it was dynamic, illustrated by feedback strategies being used selectively, depending on the point in the LC cycle. The nature of the homework, subject demands, proximity of exams, and student group were all referred to as influencing the choice of strategy. Several teachers made reference to the complementary functions arising from different types of feedback, which played out over the Leaving Certificate cycle.

7.6 The value of comments

The qualitative responses revealed that teachers had a clear rationale for their choice of feedback strategies, despite endorsing different strategies. Thus, the value placed on written comments was consistently expressed, regardless of the type of feedback given.

For a small proportion of teachers, *Comments* were used instead of a *Percentage* or *Grade* at all. These teachers justified the approach on the basis that it was important not to have the learning process overly oriented to LC performance. Several of these teachers also acknowledged that their students wanted some form of classification. The frustration these teachers experienced resonates with others who used a *Percentage* or *Grade* feedback strategy only because it was demanded by students and schools.

Several purposes were believed to be achieved by giving *Comments*. These included the encouragement given to weaker students and acknowledgement of the progress made by stronger students, as a confidence building measure. The pedagogical rationale was to give personalised, meaningful feedback that contextualised the grade awarded. This was felt to balance the need for clarity, given by a grade (or percentage), and the relevance of comments for ensuring students are not overly focused on marks.

Teachers frequently gave specific reasons and benefits for the use of *Comments* as a critical feedback strategy to students, which conveys the value they attached to it. Most references were to written feedback, with particular reference to structured strategies such as 'two stars and a wish' and AFL. Some variations on written *Comments* were reported, including group rather than individual feedback, and verbal rather than written feedback.

Despite the time-consuming, resource-intensive nature of giving *Comments*, it was regarded as an important professional contribution. Not alone did it individualise the meaning of the objective measure (*Grade* or *Percentage*), but it allowed a student-specific mixture of encouragement, correction, and goal-setting to be conveyed.

The discussion of *Comments* was not wholly positive by any means. A number of teachers reported that they did not give *Comments* as much as they would like, due to workload demands. Furthermore, it was commonly reported that many students do not refer to comments and overlook their value. Teachers were split on this point, as others described students being appreciative and more engaged as a result of feedback.

7.7 Multiple perspectives on Leaving Certificate grades

For the most part, the appraisals made of feedback based on *LC Grades* and of marking schemes was positive. However, there was also critical commentary given on negative associations made with *LC Grades* and marking schemes. Furthermore, as noted in the quantitative analysis, a large proportion of teachers did not use *LC Grades* in feedback on homework and in-school tests, reflecting an active choice not to use this approach. Therefore there was some ambiguity concerning *LC Grades* and marking schemes as influences on feedback, classroom practice, and assessments.

In particular, a negative association was made between *LC Grades* and pressure from students, parents, and schools. When teachers described their own beliefs and choices, they generally used fairly complex reasoning. In contrast, references about pressure from others were pitched in categorical terms (e.g., "the school insists on it"). This suggests some sense of disempowerment on the part of those teachers. This contention is supported by the negative tone in much of the teachers' discussion of feedback expectations held by other people.

A large majority (85%) of teachers reported that students did have expectations for feedback. A number of the student expectations made positive contributions to the developmental purpose of feedback. These included wanting to know how to improve, appreciating depth of feedback, and preferring a grade and comment approach.

The other expectations that teachers cited demonstrate the pressure to teach to the test (wanting to know about grades, wanting feedback relevant to the LC, wanting percentage-based feedback). These issues raised some conflict. Teachers believed they knew what students would benefit most from, in terms of an engaging academic experience, but in many cases students presented expectations prioritising Leaving Cert performance. Parents and schools contributed further to the pressure of expectations. From this perspective, expectations were more equivalent to demands, which could be unrealistic.

It was in this context that teachers described the impact of their workload on the feedback strategies that they adopted. Decision-making was influenced by factors such as having large amounts of marking and the need to have a quick turnaround of assessment in order to have an impact.

Marking schemes were subject to the same dual evaluation as *LC Grades*. While deemed relevant and of pragmatic value due to their relationship to the State exams, their use was associated with the risk of becoming overly focused on preparing for assessments over learning.

7.8 Qualitative evaluation of marking schemes

Commonly, teachers referred to using marking schemes to structure their engagement with students. One reason cited for this was to help students structure their use of marking schemes as a resource. Used in the right way, marking schemes could encourage a sense of mastery on the part of students, to tease apart issues like exam technique, writing, structuring answers, and so on. Assessment using marking schemes was also referred to as a means for students to

achieve important skills, such as avoiding common sources of lost marks. By working with the marking schemes, students could understand better how SEC examiners allocate marks, and were thus a source of transparency in the assessment process. Teachers wanted students to gain better exam techniques, which was acknowledged as important as well as ability and preparation. In terms of negative associations, marking schemes were linked to a focus on the Leaving Certificate as an end in itself.

7.9 Conclusion

Reading the survey findings in terms of differences between teachers, there was considerable diversity in teacher preferences for giving *Percentage* and *LC Grade*-based feedback. Moreover, the differences in feedback practices by Subject area and SEC examiner status point to divergence between teachers. However, it is equally valid to evaluate the findings in terms of similarity, as numerous points of convergence were identified. Despite choosing from different feedback strategies, teachers described similar underlying goals - to encourage, personalise, and provide clear, objective feedback to students. This is illustrated by the importance attributed to *Comments* as a feature of the feedback process, across *Percentage*, *LC Grade* and *Letter Grade*. Although time-consuming, teachers saw *Comments* as an important professional contribution. Another common factor was that teachers gave a clearly articulated rationale for their choice of feedback strategy, regardless of which one was chosen. A common goal underpinning the choice was the motivation to provide students with the best support possible. Finally, teachers had a shared reference point in their exposure to expectations for style of feedback, from students, parents, and schools. These expectations influenced practice, and contributed to an ambiguous attitude to LC Grades - as a realistic, pragmatic and informative source of feedback, but one that was negatively associated with an overly performance-based educational experience.

Appendix 1

Subject categories used for the purpose of data analysis

CODE	Category	Subjects
HUM	Humanities	English History
SCI	Sciences	Physics Chemistry Biology Agricultural Science Science
MTH	Maths	Maths Applied Maths
LAN	Languages	Irish French Italian Spanish German
SOC	Social Sciences	Geography Religion CSPE Classical Studies Social Studies
PRA	Practical subjects	Metalwork Information Technology Home Economics Physical Education Woodwork Technical Graphics Construction Studies
BUS	Business	Accounting, Economics LCVP Link modules
ART	Arts	Music Art Art Craft and Design

Appendix 2 - Questionnaire

Questionnaire

Here at the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, we are interested in hearing about how you mark and grade the work of your Leaving Certificate students in the classroom and in-school tests and in pre-Leaving Certificate examinations, where these are organised. The results of the survey will contribute to ongoing discussions about the impact of the current Leaving Certificate grading system on teaching and learning in senior cycle.

The survey will be available until Friday 18th January. Thank you for taking the time to complete the survey.

1. Please tick the appropriate box or boxes.

I am a subject teacher.

I mark/assess Junior Certificate examinations for the State Examinations Commission.

I mark/assess Leaving Certificate examinations for the State Examinations Commission.

I mark/assess Leaving Certificate Applied examinations for the State Examinations Commission.

My subjects are

2. When assessing your Leaving Certificate students' homework do you use

Percentage marks?

Percentage marks and a comment?

The Leaving Certificate grading system (A1, A2, B1, B2, B3 etc)?

The Leaving Certificate grading system and a comment?

Broad letter grades (A, B, C etc)?

Broad letter grades and a comment?

Why is this your preferred approach?

5. Do you use past Leaving Certificate marking schemes available on www.examinations.ie?

- I never use them
- I use them to plan classes
- I use them as a teaching and learning tool in the classroom
- I use them to plan tests and marking schemes
- I use them for LC examination preparation

Further comments



6. Do your Leaving Certificate students have particular expectations about how their homework and class tests are marked and returned to them?



7. Are there any other comments you would like to make?



