



# ESRI Research Bulletin

## *Student Stress and the Leaving Certificate*

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This Bulletin summarises the findings from: Banks, Joanne and Smyth, Emer, 2015. "Your whole life depends on it: Academic stress and high stakes testing in Ireland", *Journal of Youth Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 5, pp. 598-616. DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2014.992317

# Student Stress and the Leaving Certificate<sup>1</sup>

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**\*Joanne Banks and Emer Smyth**

## **INTRODUCTION**

We examined academic stress among Irish sixth year students in the months leading up to the Leaving Certificate exam. The research was based on survey and interview data from the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study, involving 900 students across 12 case-study schools. We found that students themselves placed enormous weight on their performance in the exam and that stress was often linked to fears of not achieving academic goals. The role of Leaving Certificate results in deciding entry to higher education means that students see it as a crucial influence on subsequent life chances, with some believing that ‘their whole life depends on it’.

Levels of stress were high among sixth year students, particularly among girls. Just under 40 per cent of females reported ‘losing sleep with worry’ and over 50 per cent felt ‘constantly under strain or pressure’. Young people reported a number of sources of stress, such as keeping up with schoolwork and feeling the need to spend less time on leisure activities. External pressures also played a part. Teachers were frequently seen as a source of pressure as they constantly emphasised the importance of the exams, with a strong emphasis on practising previous exam papers. Students said they were also concerned about how their results would be perceived by peers. However, possibly the main source of pressure was the young person’s own desire to do well in the exam.

## **FACTORS PREDICTING STRESS LEVELS**

The analysis explored the extent to which stress levels varied by individual and school factors. We found much higher stress levels among girls than boys even after taking account of school experiences and prior achievement. Students’ prior performance was associated with their stress levels in sixth year, with the highest-achieving and more ambitious students feeling under greatest strain.

While a certain amount of stress is common among sixth year students, schools can play a role in reducing it. The quality of interaction with teachers emerged as a key influence. Those students who reported more positive interactions with

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their teachers, that is, who were praised or given positive feedback frequently, reported lower stress levels. Relationships with peers also mattered. Students with more negative peer relations, particularly students who experienced bullying, were at much higher risk of stress. Many students reported cutting back on social activities, including sport, to spend more time on homework and study in sixth year. Interestingly, those who continued to take part in regular school-based sports had lower stress levels than their peers.

The kinds of subjects and academic supports available to students influenced stress levels. Young people taking the Leaving Certificate Applied programme, which combines exams with assessment of coursework, had much lower stress levels than those faced with the high-stakes established Leaving Certificate exam. Those who reported being dissatisfied with their subject choices and who regretted taking some subjects reported higher stress levels, highlighting the importance of students receiving the guidance necessary to make well-informed choices at senior cycle level. Another key factor was a student's academic self-image, that is, the extent to which students felt capable of coping with schoolwork. Feeling unable to cope with the amount of effort involved and feeling that they would like more help with schoolwork appeared to put many students under strain. It is worth noting that students who had positive interaction with their teachers felt more confident and therefore reported lower levels of strain. Young people in sixth year are faced not only with preparing for the exam but also with submitting applications for higher education. Those who felt that it was 'too early to decide on a future career' reported higher stress levels, again highlighting the importance of guidance and preparation for the future.

The research provides useful insights into the way in which the current mode of assessment at Leaving Certificate contributes to high levels of stress among young people, particularly girls. The high-stakes nature of the exam, with results influencing access to higher education and employment, further contributes to it being seen as a case of 'all or nothing'. Coupled with other findings that show how the dominance of the exam narrows student experiences of teaching and learning, the results point to the need for further debate on the nature of assessment at senior cycle. In the interim, the findings show that schools can play a role in reducing stress by promoting positive interactions between teachers and students, reducing bullying, encouraging sports participation and facilitating subject choice.