

## Opening statement on Leaving Certificate reform to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

I am delighted to be addressing the Joint Committee today. My ESRI colleague, Dr Selina McCoy, and I made a submission to the Committee on Leaving Certificate reform, drawing on a large body of research conducted at the ESRI over recent years. Here I highlight a number of key issues from that submission.

Much of the discussion of senior cycle has centred on the Leaving Certificate Established programme so I will focus my remarks on this programme. While some LCE subjects have non-exam assessment components (such as orals or project work), exam-based assessment retains a dominant role, and exam results are very high stakes in determining entry to higher education and influencing employment access. Our research shows that this exam-based assessment has a significant negative effect on the nature of teaching and learning, on the skills acquired by young people and on their overall wellbeing.

Preparation for the Leaving Certificate exams means that classes in fifth and sixth year are often characterised by teacher-led instruction, with a strong emphasis on regular homework and practising exam papers. In in-depth interviews, students have contrasted their classroom experiences in senior cycle, where they feel under pressure to cover the course, with that in junior cycle, where they enjoyed more time and space to engage in a variety of approaches to learning and to have more interactive classes. The exam-focused approach is seen by students, parents and teachers as leading to rote learning, with a focus on memorising material at the expense of authentic understanding and a neglect of the development and assessment of broader skills. Exam marking schemes have become a key driver of student engagement in exam preparation.

In Ireland (as elsewhere) students tend to value hands-on, interactive classes in which they have active involvement. However, by sixth year, many students, particularly those with more ambitious career plans, are critical of teachers who do not focus on 'what will come up in the exam'. For them, good teaching becomes focusing precisely on the kinds of knowledge and skills needed to do well in the exam. Thus, an emphasis on broader educational development or on life skills comes to be seen as irrelevant. Indeed, some students negatively contrast approaches to teaching at school with the more narrowly focused approach to exam preparation characteristic of private tuition (part-time 'grinds').

All of this has a significant effect on student wellbeing. Levels of stress tend to escalate in sixth year with students finding their schoolwork even more difficult. Many students, especially female students, report feelings of strain and loss of confidence in sixth year; for example, over half (55%) of female sixth year students reported feeling constantly under strain 'more' or 'much more than usual'. As a result of this pressure, many students curtail extracurricular and social activities in sixth year, further exacerbating the 'hot-house' climate of exam preparation.

Rates of school completion are now very high, with the vast majority of young people in Ireland completing senior cycle, which is indeed a success story. As a result, the composition of the student population is more diverse than previously. In a consultation with stakeholders, students and their parents pointed to the neglect of vocational and practical subjects within the current curriculum. Senior cycle was seen as better suited to those with an academic orientation and with the ability to memorise material, with a neglect of those with more vocational interests and those with special educational needs (SEN). The introduction of Level 1 and 2 programmes at junior cycle has provided new routes to recognition for young people with SEN. However, there is no comparable programme at senior cycle, suggesting the need to develop new programmes that build upon the skills developed at Levels 1 and 2.

Young people report that the current Leaving Certificate model does not prepare them well for life after school. The movement from a more teacher-directed approach to a greater focus on independent learning and a broader variety of assessment methods in further and higher education contribute to student difficulties in adapting to post-school education. In addition, a significant proportion of young people do not see their education as helpful in preparing them for the world of work and for adult life. At present, student access to work experience depends on which senior cycle programme they take. In a consultation, there was a strong consensus among students, parents and teachers that all young people should be provided with an opportunity to take part in a work experience placement. There was also a strong consensus that senior cycle should embed life skills in the curriculum to better prepare young people for further/higher education, employment and adult life.

Research findings suggest that the current Leaving Certificate assessment model has a negative impact on teaching and learning, narrowing the focus to covering the course and preparing for what will come up in the exam, rather than engaging in promoting critical thinking and broader skill development. The evident consensus on some of the challenges has not resulted in clear agreement on the alternative. However, consultations with stakeholders indicate that students, parents and teachers all suggest a need to spread out assessment during senior cycle and to adopt a broader variety of approaches to assessment, such as project work, portfolios and presentations, to better reflect student skills.

In conclusion, existing evidence points to a negative effect of the Leaving Certificate assessment model on the educational and socio-emotional development of young people and points to the potential to adopt a broader approach to assessment that is not focused on a short window of time at the end of their second-level education. Research findings point to a number of elements which should be considered in reforming the Leaving Certificate: adopting the kinds of active teaching methods which students find most engaging; developing key skills, such as critical thinking and digital skills, in the curriculum in order to equip young people for the future; making work experience available to all students, regardless of the programme they take; moving to a broader range of assessment modes (such as project work, portfolios and presentations), which better reflect the full range of skills and knowledge developed within senior cycle; and ensuring continuity between junior and senior cycle in the standards expected of students.

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