

Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education,  
Research, Innovation and Science

Submission on Leaving Certificate reform

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This submission draws on a large body of research conducted at the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) over recent years to highlight a number of key issues to be taken into account in potential Leaving Certificate reform. These include: the nature of current senior cycle provision; the impact of Leaving Certificate assessment on teaching and learning as well as broader wellbeing; inclusion; the lack of continuity between senior cycle and other phases of education; and the extent to which the Leaving Certificate provides students with the appropriate knowledge and skills for the world of work and adult life.

### *Senior cycle provision*

Access to different senior cycle programmes varies across individual schools, with almost all providing the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) programme and the majority providing Transition Year and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme. Fewer schools provide the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme (just over 40% in 2012). Student access to different programmes therefore depends on the school they attend. Subject provision also varies across schools, with schools taking account of their social and gender mix in deciding on the subjects offered. Similarly, the approach to accessing higher level subjects differs across different school settings, with some encouraging all students to take higher level for as long as possible while in other cases access is 'rationed' to students receiving higher grades. Research indicates that smaller schools face greater challenges in offering a broad range of subjects and in providing higher level subjects, with a consequent impact on overall performance levels.

### *Perceptions of senior cycle programmes*

Research indicates that student, parent and teacher perceptions of Transition Year are very positive, with the programme seen as offering access to a broad variety of skills and experiences, and as facilitating more informed subject and career choices. LCA is currently taken by a small proportion of students, typically around five per cent of the cohort. It has been viewed as providing a positive learning experience and re-engaging more disaffected students. However, the strict ring-fencing has separated students from other senior cycle learners and employment outcomes have been poor in comparison with other school leavers.

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### *Assessment and its impact*

Much of the discussion of senior cycle centres on the LCE and in particular on the impact of the mode of assessment on teaching and learning as well as on broader student wellbeing.

Although 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. Exam-based assessment – especially in the context of substantial volumes of work in many subjects – emerges as having a negative backwash effect on teaching and learning, as well as the skills acquired by young people. LCA students report a greater use of active learning methods such as group-work and project work as well as greater interaction with teachers and classmates. In contrast, the LCE and Leaving Certificate Vocational (LCVP) programmes are characterised by greater use of teacher-led instruction, with an emphasis on practising exam papers and doing homework. In research studies and consultations, students contrasted their classroom experiences in senior cycle, where they felt 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 within LCE is seen by students, parents and teachers to facilitate 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. Research indicates that exam marking schemes are a key driver of student engagement in exam preparation.

The nature of the points awarded has been found to influence student decision-making about which subject levels to take. Research indicates that students feel the gap between the points awarded for higher and ordinary papers is too wide and that ordinary-level points do not fairly reflect the workload and effort involved, resulting in disaffection and disengagement among those taking a number of ordinary level subjects.

Longitudinal research in Ireland (as elsewhere) has found students tend to value hands-on, interactive classes in which they have active involvement. However, by sixth year, many students, particularly those who have more ambitious higher education plans, express impatience with, and are critical of, teachers who do not focus on ‘what will come up in the exam’. For them, good teaching constitutes practising exam papers and focusing precisely on the kinds of knowledge and skills needed to do well in the exam. In this context, 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 (‘grinds’).

Although students report more challenging schoolwork and an increasingly demanding workload during the transition to fifth year (see below), levels of stress appear to further 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’. Students see stress as reflecting the constant reminders from teachers about the impending exams, their parents’ expectations and, most importantly, their own desire to do well in the exams. The volume of, and level of detail in, the content of many Leaving Certificate subjects and the concern that

they have not 'finished' the course in all subjects fuels this feeling that there is 'too little time' in which to prepare. As a result of this pressure, many students report curtailing extracurricular and social activities in sixth year, further exacerbating the 'hot-house' climate of exam preparation. Sixth year involves not only preparation for the Leaving Certificate exam but being faced with making decisions about post-school pathways. The decision-making process itself appears to influence stress levels, with students who consider it too early to decide what to do with the rest of their lives reporting greater strain.

In consultations, all stakeholders (students, parents and teachers) highlight the workload involved, with teachers and students under pressure to 'cover the course', resulting in a focus on rote learning in order to prepare for the examination and a reduced focus on higher order thinking and broader skill development. Teachers and parents highlight the negative impact on student wellbeing, but, not surprisingly, students are more vocal about the effect on their stress levels.

Research findings to date suggest that the current assessment model has a negative impact on teaching and learning, narrowing the focus to covering the course and preparing for what will come 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. In consultations with stakeholders, students, parents and teachers all suggested there is a need to spread out LCE 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. Although teacher assessment has been used for Leaving Certificate purposes during the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers have strongly emphasised that assessments should continue to be marked externally to maintain a fair and transparent system.

#### *Senior cycle education and continuity of learning*

Research has highlighted the gap in standards and workload between junior and senior cycle, even prior to junior cycle reform, leading to an escalation of demands on students over the transition. More recent research suggests that this mismatch may have increased in the wake of junior cycle reform, as students now move from a common level in most subjects to a differentiation between higher and ordinary levels at senior cycle.

Research has also pointed to a mismatch between the kinds of teaching and learning experienced in the final year of senior cycle and that faced in further and, especially, higher education. The movement from a more teacher-directed approach to a greater focus on independent learning and a broader variety of assessment methods in FE/HE have contributed to student difficulties in adapting to post-school education.

#### *Knowledge and skills*

When asked about the benefits of second-level education, students tend to highlight the personal and social development aspects as well as skills in 'learning to learn' most positively. However, a significant proportion do not see their education as helpful in preparing them for the world of work and for adult life. Being able to appreciate art, music and reading for pleasure have also been identified as significant gaps.

Currently, student access to work experience depends on which senior cycle programme they take and the link between work-based and in-school learning is variable across schools. 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. Wellbeing has become an important focus of junior cycle but has not yet received the same attention within the senior cycle curriculum, a lacuna raised in consultations with students, parents and teachers. Similarly, a review of relationships and sexuality education conducted by the NCCA has highlighted the need for a more student-centred, holistic and inclusive approach at both junior and senior cycle.

Schools have varied widely in the use of digital technologies in teaching and learning and the shift to remote learning during the pandemic brought a steep learning curve for many teachers. The evidence suggests that schools which made greater use of live online classes were more successful in maintaining student engagement, but variations in students' home learning environments magnified inequalities within and across schools. Junior cycle reforms have focused on embedding digital technologies across the curriculum and supporting the development of digital skills, for students and teachers alike. However, challenges remain in relation to the provision of online educational resources and in ensuring digital resources, including broadband, for all. Supporting the development of digital skills across the senior cycle curriculum will be important.

### *Inclusion*

ESRI research has consistently highlighted the role of school context and composition in shaping the identification of different types of special educational needs (SEN), the adequacy of supports for those students and the experiences of students in different school contexts. Changes to the system of resource allocation, with a 'frontloading' system based on an individual school's profiled need, have meant that schools have the resources to support inclusive practice as assessed by staff without the need for formal diagnostic assessment of a category of disability. The ongoing School Inclusion Model (SIM) pilot further aims to build schools' capacity to include students within additional and complex needs, and is currently being evaluated by the ESRI. The outcome of the evaluation will be important in shaping provision for students with additional needs, particularly in mainstream schools.

Rates of school completion are now very high, with the vast majority of young people in Ireland completing senior cycle. As a result, the composition of the student population is more diverse than previously. A consultation with stakeholders, especially 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 SEN. The introduction of Level 1 and 2 programmes at junior cycle has provided new routes to recognition for young people with special educational needs (SEN). However, teachers and parents consulted in special schools have highlighted the lack of a suitable programme at senior cycle, suggesting the need to develop new programmes that build upon the skills developed at Levels 1 and 2. Research on special classes also points to a reliance on LCA provision for students with SEN, with few special classes provided at senior cycle,

raising concerns over the adequacy of provision for SEN students in schools not providing the LCA programme.

### *Conclusion*

Research findings point to a number of elements which should be considered in reviewing the Leaving Certificate: adopting the kinds of active teaching methods which students find most engaging; the need to embed 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; the need to move 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. Ongoing changes in provision for students with additional needs will be important in providing more comprehensive educational and health supports to allow inclusion for all. These will be particularly important given the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on students with additional needs. More widely, unequal home learning environments have magnified pre-existing social inequalities, highlighting the importance of channelling additional resources to the schools serving students with greater needs.

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