

Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) **opening statement** to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on “Leaving Certificate Reform”, including recommendations involving Youthreach provision

19 October 2021

1. Introduction

Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) welcomes the invitation by the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to contribute to the Committee’s examination of the Leaving Certificate Reform, including recommendations involving Youthreach provision.

ETBI is the national representative body for our member Education & Training Boards (ETB) and negotiates on behalf of the ETB sector at various forums both within the education sector, the wider public service and at EU level. Our mission is to harness the collective strength of Education and Training Boards to advance the development of education, training and youth work in Ireland. Our vision is for a lifelong learning society, where people have access to the education and training required to fulfil their potential and to meet their personal, social, cultural, economic, and civic needs. ETBI is guided by the principles of people, partnership and potential in all its activities. This submission draws on the knowledge of the ETBs where 3,700 Youthreach places are provided annually in over 100 Youthreach centres across the national network of ETBs. Approximately 1/3 of all Youthreach learners successfully pursue the Leaving Certificate Applied model annually. This model meets the needs of a cohort of learners for whom the traditional format of school did not meet their needs. The Leaving Certificate Applied model supports our Youthreach learners achieve to continue with their education and further their life opportunities. We advocate a Senior Cycle model comparable to the Leaving Certificate Applied model that embraces vocational subject specifications that lead to competence in vocational skills for learners.

2. Context

Managers and practitioners within Youthreach settings agree that the Leaving Certificate Applied model provides the opportunity to support the non-linear nature of progression experienced by many Youthreach learners. Flexible models of learning such as this, that ensure the inclusivity of educational pathways for the learner are advocated and promoted by the ETB sector. We believe that it is incumbent on us to prepare our Youthreach learners with transversal and technology skills to support their future career choices.

Having regard to Youthreach provision, the proposed reform of the Leaving Certificate must ensure that:

- The learners’ capabilities are realised through the different strands and choices in senior cycle education with holistic learner supports integrated into the programme.
- Subject specifications should prepare learners for lifelong learning in addition to academic attainment, training and employment; promoting the development of critical thinking, reflection, and problem-solving skills to support learners become participative and enterprising citizens.
- Delivery approaches should embrace interactive, experiential, and practical modes of teaching and learning; augmented by curricular modularisation that ensures the development of transferable and transversal skills.

3. Recommendations

a) Assessment Options

Assessment methods in Youthreach should be framed within supportive, responsive structures that are inclusive and supportive of difference and diversity and thereby empower individuals, communities, and by extension, society. Alternative means of assessment such as skills demonstration and assessment performance that provide for incremental and continuous assessment over the 2 years of the programme are advocated.

b) Key Subject Areas and Digital Learning

Innovative models of delivery and learning are essential in responding to global changes and to removing the barriers that affect the Youthreach learner. Key societal and strategic values including sustainability and community engagement, should be integrated in learning activities to prepare learners for civic and professional lives. Measures of reform should include the integration of:

- Higher order skills and reflective thinking, reasoning, innovation, and interpersonal skills to equip learners with confidence and knowledge to navigate their world and be active participants in society.
- Technological and digital literacy supports consistent and responsive to global changes affecting young people and communities.
- Literacy and numeracy supports concurrent with the Leaving Certificate programme, to widen participation and overcome learning barriers.
- Integrating models such as UDL (Universal Design for Learning) in the curriculum to increase levels of inclusion, enhancing equal opportunities and supporting learners with disabilities.

c) Access, Equality and Well Being Supports

Leaving Certificate reform should aim to challenge social inequality by actively enabling the progression options best suited to the learners' aspirations and interests, including paths to apprenticeships, FET, HE and traineeships. Literacy and numeracy deficits remain major concerns. Improved post-primary level supports in these areas are an essential part of reform. Consistent and integrated learner supports including inclusive teaching and learning methodologies and appropriate and supportive guidance and information provision are essential in addressing motivational/dispositional barriers including confidence, self-esteem and familial disengagement with education and in supporting transition pathways. Learner support must also meet the needs of groups experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, LGBTQI+ communities, ethnic minorities and learners with a disability. Eliminating economic inequality, including costs associated with transport and materials, is a matter that needs urgent attention for disadvantaged groups. Learners develop social capital through cultures of collaboration, community engagement across schools, colleges, institutions, and networks

coupled with awareness raising activities and events at post primary level that share positive learner experiences, demonstrating achievement and progression with a focus on marginalised cohorts.

d) Higher and Further Education Requirements, Vocational Options and Career Paths

Broader awareness of the wide range of options available to learners becomes even more important with the current ongoing restructuring of the CAO portal. Learners will now have a range of FET and Apprenticeship options available to them and it is vital that all learners are aware of all of the options available to them. The evolution of the Leaving Certificate must equip all learners with:

- Interpersonal and lifelong skills to prepare for academic and professional life.
- Attributes reflecting self-awareness, confidence and the motivation required for future careers.
- Transition options that include vocational, HE and alternative progression routes to suit individual needs and career prospects.

4. Conclusion

ETBI welcomes the opportunity to present to the Joint Oireachtas Committee meeting today. Our recommendations are rooted in our core principles, which strive to position the ETB sector for innovation, as a key contributor to developing appropriate learning and teaching policies. ETBs are a leading provider of lifelong learning and place learners at the heart of educational development. It is within these principles that ETBI proposes a Leaving Certificate reform conducive to flexibility and adaptability, to equip learners with skills that withstand global challenges in a supporting, inclusive education system. A modular senior cycle that is underpinned with vocational subject specifications that meet the needs of all learners is advocated. ETBI welcomes its active involvement in the Leaving Certificate reform through these recommendations and remains open to input and collaboration from stakeholders in what is soon to be a defining point in FET educational reform.