

Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on the topic of Leaving Certificate Reform.

Chairman thank you for the opportunity given to HECA to present to this committee. HECA is the representative body for private QQI validated higher education institutions with the majority of private learners in Ireland.

The Leaving Certificate is not, as it should be, a capstone assessment of students' entire 2nd level learning experience but, rather, a third level resource allocation mechanism. What is at stake, valued in the international market place, is €336,810 (6 years medical education) for one student and possibly €3,000 for another. Indeed, those entitled to the €336,810 get or lose their winning place on the toss of a roulette wheel called random selection.

In response, students' game the system, as acknowledged by a former Minister for Education, and focus on subjects leading to maximum points as opposed to personal development. The assessment itself requires absolute precision in marking for fairness in the hugely diverging resource allocations. This makes the examination more predictable and easier to game.

Equity demands fundamental change, but what alternative approaches are there? Two politically difficult approaches would be (1) unrestricted entry to 3rd level with places granted on the basis of first-year performance as in France and (2) providing additional places to meet demand funding them, from student loans. Two less difficult alternatives would be (1) to create alternative pathways for students who are denied their first choice and (2) Introduce alternative access credits as I will discuss below.

Assessment options

- The assessment of learning should reflect the student voice and their range of abilities and knowledge.
- Staggering exams and assessments throughout the senior-cycle rather than the three-week window at the end will provide fairer results and self-awareness of learning needs.
- Providing different ways to measure educational performance which supports the varied styles of learners.
- Increasing focus on formative learning, with multiple and more creative assessment options, progression paths and with a high value on experiential learning.
- Having an inclusive curriculum including options such as increasing specialisations, apprenticeships, voluntary work, and life skills.
- Reduce the 'predict and memorise' emphasis and reliance on 100% summative exam, with more novel assessment instruments – group work, presentations, multimedia project work (podcasts, video, reflective writing (blogging)). Consider a portfolio component (worth % of total grades) that demonstrates the attainment of practical soft skills across different subjects – communication, teamwork, analytical reasoning and critical thinking.
- Consideration should be given towards credit for achievements outside the classroom, community activities, sporting achievements and personal achievements and credits in the nature of Micro-credentials which could be used by the student for progression in third level education.

Key Subjects and digital Learning

- Focused use of digital technology and digital learning environments (DLE) would increase the teaching and assessment options (both formative and summative) for teachers, prepare students for digital literacy or core e-safety skills, as well as promote more novel ways of interaction, which are already familiar to digital natives. Learning technology professionals could be employed in schools to implement and support these activities.
- To prepare students for the modern world, digital literacy and online safety and ethics, including the avoidance of plagiarism and proper referencing of sources should be considered as the fourth pillar of education alongside reading, writing and maths.
- Closing the digital divide (lack of internet connectivity or a laptop) should be a key target of second level education policy.
- Curriculum expansion to cover emerging technologies and more flexible delivery options.

Access, Equality and Well-being Supports

- Inclusiveness, require improved consideration of the challenges faced by learners with disabilities and learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and in large class sizes.
- A dedicated taskforce should be created to identify initiatives that will increase FE and HE participation rates in Dublin 1, 2, 13 and other under-represented districts nationwide.

Higher and Further Education Requirements, Vocational Options and Career Paths

- CAO and one to one career guidance should present all options (e.g., including apprenticeships, FE and HE) and focus on learning being applied or academic, NFQ level and future potential career roles.
- Transition and lateral movements between programmes to be facilitated by flexibility.
- Alumni support groups to advise on post school experience.
- Career development focusing on individual and lifelong responsibility with information from Regional Skills Fora, SOLAS, Intreo and the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs.
- The current cap of 450 points applying to further education students for access to third level should be replaced by a cap of 625 points to place them on a level playing field with school leavers.

Irish Language and Irish Medium Education

- The Irish language should be promoted as a living language with a focus on oral Irish and learning to use the Irish language in daily life and assessed by continuous assessment.
- Provide a numeric national measurement scale as in English (TOEFL, IELTS) in addition to the CEFR scheme of A1 to C2 and require a certain proficiency

International Evidence and Best Practice

- Prepare students with the skills to be successful global and national citizens and able to adapt to the rapidly changing labour market.
- New curricula and periodic cycles for curriculum review have been developed in many countries which focus on developing not only knowledge, but also skills, values, attitudes, and interpersonal awareness which are required for fully engaging in the 21st century