

HEA Opening Statement

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

Committee roundtable discussion on Leaving Certificate Reform, 2021

2nd November 2021

Chairperson and Members of the Committee

My colleagues and I are pleased to assist this Committee in its consideration of Leaving Certificate Reform.

The Leaving Certificate is the primary assessment element of our national curriculum and facilitates the examination of the potential of students in terms of their knowledge of the national curriculum in their final senior cycle year and ultimately defines their progression route into either further or higher education.

It is critical any assessment method is based on a robust and practical delivery method in assessing the capability of the learner. The Leaving Certificate exam should be fair and equitable, have strong quality assurance arrangements and have stakeholder buy in, as it is these stakeholders, primarily the learner but also teachers, schools, higher and further education providers, and employers who will benefit directly from any reform agenda.

In the context of today's discussion, and in relation to the areas to be examined, any reforms which may be considered should focus on improving the learner experience with a view to providing them with the best possible opportunity to realise, develop and display their talents.

Currently, the majority, of higher education entrants come directly from the Leaving Certificate in any given year. Hence, the connection between the second level sector and further and higher education sectors should be strengthened through any reform process and should focus on improving access and retention as learners transition from secondary to tertiary education with a view to providing an even more seamless transition process.

The HEA has participated in the Transitions Group which has implemented several policy changes in recent years to address some of the issues associated with transition to higher education including the revision of the leaving certificate grading system and the streamlining of entry points to higher education programmes to simplify student choices.

Any reform of the leaving certificate assessment model should provide for better connectivity and understanding of future career and associated education pathways for the learner.

Outside of leaving cert assessment it is also important to create and embed links between higher education providers and post-primary learners at other stages in their junior and senior cycle. In this regard the HEA funds ICT and Entrepreneurship summer camps which engage

post primary school pupils with higher education institutions in short taster courses in these critical skills areas.

In addition, the HEA funds an Access to Apprenticeship programme which takes those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who may not have completed the senior cycle, or who may not have achieved their desired leaving certificate outcome, and offers them a pathway to apprenticeship.

The recent expansion of apprenticeships into new sectors such as hospitality, financial services and information and communication technology, presents opportunities for pre-apprenticeship programmes and traineeship programmes to be developed alongside traditional leaving certificate programmes. Any such developments should be supported by guidance services and ensure that graduates have opportunities to progress to work and high quality further and higher vocational and academic qualifications.

In relation to changes regarding available information relevant to student choice and specifically changes to the CAO system the HEA has been involved in and welcomes the inclusion of apprenticeship and further education programme links and information on the CAO platform.

As equity of access to higher education is one of the key priorities for the HEA, it is important that any reform of the Leaving Certificate takes account of the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged students in accessing higher education. The HEAR and DARE schemes, which offer entry to courses on a reduced points basis for socio-economically disadvantaged students and students with a disability, are an important mechanism in that regard.

Overall, the Leaving Certificate, and any future reform of it, should ensure that all students from disadvantaged backgrounds or who face barriers in terms of progression to higher education, have a fair chance of accessing higher education and achieving comparable outcomes as those from more affluent backgrounds. These outcomes cover both access to and progression through higher education as well as completion and future career development.

The HEA works closely with the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education to examine and improve teaching and learning interventions in support of student success, aiming to provide a high quality and supportive higher education environment for all students arriving to our universities, institutes, and colleges.

The recent experience of the higher education system, as with other sections of society and the economy, has demonstrated the need for flexibility and responsiveness in challenging circumstances. Higher education institutions are now examining the outcomes from their recent experience of remote provision, both in terms of teaching and learning and in student supports. Discussions to date suggest that institutions are leveraging new ways of engaging with students, such as through digital learning, outreach from counselling and learning support services, all alongside and complimentary to more traditional higher education provision.

The National Forum, for example, is currently leading a national partnership project, Next Steps for Teaching and Learning: Moving Forward Together, to consider what we have learned since March 2020 and, crucially, what this learning means for the future of teaching and learning in Irish higher education.

Finally, each student is different, and this is a useful opportunity us to consider how their educational needs can be met as they transition from the senior cycle into apprenticeship, further education, and higher education. This will require ongoing engagement and dialogue, not just at institutional or system level, but also between educators at all levels the education system as well as with students and their representatives.

Thank you for the opportunity to join this conversation today, I am happy to answer whatever questions the Committee may have.