Towards a Balanced, High Quality Assessment System for the Certification of Achievement at Senior Cycle

A Submission Prepared for the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

by

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Opening Statement

There is broad consensus in the research literature that high quality educational assessments are underpinned by a number of key principles. The first is that all assessments should be designed to support accurate (valid), consistent (reliable) and fair decision making about the progress and achievement of learners. The principle that all assessments contain measurement error means that single assessments are a poor basis for making high stakes decisions about learners. In addition, while assessment systems provide information to many stakeholders (including policy makers), learners are the most important users of assessment information and, for this reason, a balance needs to be struck between assessments that support learning and those that measure it. The positive and/or negative consequences that derive from the use of an individual assessment or the implementation of an assessment system must always be considered when making judgements about assessment quality.

These principles underpin arguments outlined in this submission for why the certification of achievement at the end of Senior Cycle needs to be based on the outcomes of a broad range of assessment approaches. Four proposals are made: (1) exams spread out over fifth and sixth year with reduced content that, in time, move from paper-based to computer-based so that the power of digital technology can be leveraged to broaden the scope of what can be assessed; (2) continuous assessments that involve a combination of tasks externally set and marked and tasks assessed by the student’s own teacher; (3) the collective judgement of in-school teams of teachers about the achievement of students across the Key Skills Framework for Senior Cycle; (4) an element of student self-assessment contributing to decisions around the grading of some assignments and, in particular, competences associated with the Key Skills Framework. Data from all four modes of assessment should be used for certifying achievement at the end of post-primary education.

The potential for over-assessment and increased workloads/stress for both students and teachers are threats that need to be considered when evaluating the proposals outlined in this submission. Moreover, the current relationship between the Leaving Certificate Examination and the CAO points system poses a formidable barrier to assessment reform at Senior Cycle.