

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

Leaving Certificate Reform

26 April 2022

Opening Statement

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My name is Andrea Feeney and I am the Chief Executive Officer of the State Examinations Commission. I am joined today by my SEC colleagues;

- Elaine Sheridan, Head of Examinations and Assessment
- Richard Dolan, Director of Operations.

I would like to thank you Cathaoirleach and members of the Committee for the invitation to attend before you today to discuss the reform of Senior Cycle including the Leaving Certificate.

The Commission's statutory responsibilities include the development, assessment, accreditation and certification of the second-level school examinations and the Board of Commissioners are the custodians of this key national service

The SEC is committed to working in partnership with all of the education stakeholders to develop and deliver a high-quality examinations and assessment system, centred on the needs of students.

Our appearance before the Committee follows the recent announcement by the Minister for Education on Senior Cycle Reform and the publication by the NCCA of their Report on the Review of Senior Cycle. We commend our NCCA colleagues for their extensive work and recognise the deep and meaningful contribution of stakeholders, many of whom have already appeared before this Committee, in the review and consultation process.

The stated purpose of the Leaving Certificate is to measure the extent to which each student has fulfilled the objectives of the syllabus. This examination is an important event in the lives of young people. In conducting the examinations, the SEC prioritises fairness and equity; quality in all aspects; and upholding examinations integrity and consistency of standards to the greatest degree possible.

It is noted also that the Leaving Certificate results are used for a number of other purposes including by employers and as a tool of progression to higher education. The latter in particular increases the high-stakes nature of the Leaving Certificate.

In advance of this appearance, the SEC made a submission under the four broad thematic headings identified by the Committee. I will now focus on three of those headings.

1. Assessment Options

We have set out in our submission the wide range of components we provide which extend the assessment landscape far beyond the written examinations and which allow students to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and skills, in areas that cannot always be assessed in a written examination.

Of the 41 subjects being examined at Leaving Certificate in 2022, 27 have a component of assessment additional to the written examination worth at least 20% and up to 60% of the marks.

We look forward to building on this experience in the reform of Senior Cycle. We will be working with the NCCA, Department colleagues, and through the implementation structures to give effect the changes announced including reducing the reliance on final written examinations. We will be engaging in a programme of research and development on a number of aspects including the impact of weighting and timing of additional components worth at least 40% in all subjects. We will also Implementing interim measures to spread the load of assessment pending full subject redevelopment. High stakes examinations are by their nature inherently stressful events. Therefore, care will be required in spreading the load of assessment in order to mitigate the potential for stress throughout the school year. We have also been asked to jointly research with the NCCA how

externally moderated school-based assessment will operate in an Irish context noting that such assessment models are widely used in other jurisdictions.

2. Digital Learning

The SEC has invested in a number of key information technology tools (~~the SEC website, the Candidate Self-Service Portal, the Schools Portal and online marking of examinations~~) to streamline communications; enhance transparency; and improve the delivery of examinations.

Coursework components in some Leaving Certificate are completed digitally by students and technology also has a very significant role for students with special educational needs to access the examinations.

However, the deployment of technology in assessment (rather than supporting assessment) is at an early stage at second level in Ireland. It is recognised by the OECD¹ that the development of digitally based examinations is resource intensive and expensive and often beyond the reach of national examinations boards.

We welcome the inclusion in the announcement of exploration of the potential uses of ICT in examinations and assessment and also the recognition that this must be tied into the *Digital Strategy for Schools*.

3. Access and Equality

Accessibility in the examinations starts at design stage and we design our test instruments to be as accessible to the widest range of students as possible. Through the scheme of reasonable accommodations (RACE Scheme), we provide students with special educational needs with support arrangements to enable them to access the examinations. The variety of needs with which students present is complex and wide-ranging and so too is the range of supports available.

Much work has been done by the Board of the SEC to reform the scheme in recent years. The scheme will be subject to further review in the context of Senior Cycle reform and a priority will be increasing the use of Assistive Technology to enhance access and to further support independent learning.

The RACE Scheme also provides support arrangements to candidates who experience trauma and adversity at the time of their examinations. In this context, the SEC is developing the arrangements for the deferred examinations series of the 2022 Leaving Certificate for students **unable** to sit their examinations at the main sitting in June due to bereavement, serious illness or Covid-19. Engagement with public health and with stakeholders, through the Advisory Group on Examinations Planning, and with other stakeholders is underway.

Conclusion

The recent announcement by the Minister for Education sets the trajectory for an ambitious programme of Senior Cycle reform. The review process demonstrated consensus on the need for change. It also recognised the high level of public support and trust attached to the existing Leaving Certificate qualification and modes of assessment. In undertaking further work, there will be particular focus by the SEC in seeking to underpin validity and reliability in the assessment so that

the integrity of the Leaving Certificate qualification, and public trust and confidence in that qualification, is maintained.

The examinations system relies upon the support of teachers, school leaders, and other stakeholders for its success. We welcome and value the contribution of the student and parent voice to what we do and how we do it and we wish to strengthen and deepen our relationships in our ongoing work and as we embark on the process of reform

We look forward to working with colleagues in the NCCA, with the Minister and officials in her Department, and with all of the stakeholders in education, in the time ahead contributing to the necessary reform of the educational landscape at Senior Cycle to the benefit of students and wider society

My colleagues and I are happy to respond to questions that the Committee may have.

ⁱ Stobart, UPPER-SECONDARY EDUCATION STUDENT ASSESSMENT IN SCOTLAND: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE, OECD Education Working Paper No. 253.