



Submission to:

**Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education, Further & Higher Education,
Research, Innovation & Science**

on

Leaving Certificate Reform

Introduction

1. The Leaving Certificate is a state-certified statement of achievement by an individual student, across a range of Senior Cycle subjects. As such, the Leaving Certificate should have an intrinsic value to the student and be seen as an achievement in its own right, as well as being a stepping-stone to a range of educational and labour market opportunities.
2. All students who sit an examination in at least one subject receive a Leaving Certificate, irrespective of their final grade in that subject or their average grade across a range of subjects. This is different to many European countries, where certain levels of achievement are required before a student is awarded a certificate showing satisfactory completion of post-primary education.
3. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment has been undertaking a review of the Senior Cycle since 2016. While the IUA has not yet seen the final advisory report of this review, which we believe has issued to the Minister for Education, the universities have been very supportive of the goals of this review, which we hope will lead to significant innovation across the Senior Cycle. This would include the mainstreaming of more diverse pedagogies and forms of learning, and the mainstreaming of more diverse forms of student assessment, leading to significant reform of the Leaving Certificate examination itself.
4. It is crucial that any reform of the Senior Cycle and Leaving Certificate supports standards of student attainment in line with or exceeding international benchmarks, demonstrated using best practice methodologies of assessment. Maintaining these standards is key for individual students as well as for the nation. It also supports the ability of Irish universities to deliver internationally competitive graduates.

Leaving Certificate and Equity

5. Post-primary schools in Ireland vary enormously in their profiles, resources and range of subjects offered. This creates an inherent inequity in Leaving Certificate outcomes across the post-primary system, as can be seen through third level progression figures. The reform of Senior Cycle and the Leaving Certificate should, therefore, also place significant emphasis on access and supports to enable equality of opportunity for students across the system.

6. The stress and mental health of students arising from the Leaving Certificate examination are well chronicled. From an equity perspective, the current over-bearing prominence of the final examination militates further against students with learning disabilities, and likewise confers advantages on students who have access to grind schools.
7. There have been some positive incremental developments in curricular reform of the Leaving Certificate in recent years. The introduction of a greater degree of practical and project work in certain subjects has worked very well and supports a greater variety of learning.
8. However, ***the heavy weighting of the final examination in the Leaving Certificate is still far too great. The universities advocate strongly for more authentic assessment across all subjects, including English and Mathematics, that genuinely reflects the learning and thinking of the student.*** This would help moderate the critical stress point of the final examination and reduce the potential of rote learning.
9. The significant experience developed by teachers and schools over the last two years, in providing alternative in-school evidence of student achievement and standards, should be built on to consider what alternative assessment methodologies might best be used. The introduction of these should be done on a phased basis, ideally over the coming three-year period.

Leaving Certificate and University Entry Mechanisms

10. The universities have traditionally used Leaving Certificate grades in order to rank applicants in order of merit, when selecting new entrants to university courses. The universities likewise use the official state-certified results of other national post-primary examination systems, such as the UK A-Levels and the French Baccalauréat, for applicants from other EU countries.
11. Up until the 1980s, when the numbers of applicants grew rapidly and the Central Applications Office (CAO) became the main application route, the universities also regularly organised their own separate Matriculation examinations which applicants could take, in addition to or instead of the Leaving Certificate. These Matriculation examinations are no longer used, although Trinity College Dublin maintains an optional matriculation examination in a very small range of subjects which is not sufficient for the fulfilment of all admissions requirements.
12. ***The advantages of using a national, state-certified school leaving examination as the basis for selection to higher education are obvious.*** It is ***available to all students nation-wide*** and is taken by almost all school leavers, under the same conditions. The exams are set, administered, marked and ***quality assured by the state***, thereby ensuring standards are maintained across the state for all students. It also ensures ***continuity and comparability year-on-year*** so that higher education applicants presenting Leaving Certificate results from previous years are not disadvantaged compared to those presenting results from the current year. In addition, significantly, a large majority of applicants do not have to prepare for or undertake any additional admissions requirements and therefore have ***no additional costs***, apart from some exceptions such as Art, Music or Medicine. From an organisational perspective, only one set of assessments are run, removing the additional time, effort and costs involved in alternative examinations.
13. The disadvantages, however, include the dependency of higher education admissions processes on Leaving Certificate outcomes and timelines. The Covid-19-induced situation of the last two years has highlighted the difficulties which this dependency can create.

Stability of Leaving Certificate Results

14. The CAO points system was designed to allow for an objective and transparent allocation of places, by order of merit, based on Leaving Certificate achievement. When the Leaving Certificate grading system was changed in 2017, significant efforts were made by the universities and other higher education institutions to ensure that the ensuing revision of the points system would result in a significantly decreased use of random selection between applicants with the same points scores.
15. The points system has been designed on the basis of a stable Leaving Certificate grade distribution model, as provided over the years by the State Examinations Commission. While minor variations in grade distributions across subjects and across years are inevitable, the accelerated and unprecedented grade variations seen in 2020 and 2021 have been without precedent, with very significant increases in the numbers of students achieving very high grades across all subjects. In 2019, 207 students achieved a maximum score of six H1 grades (including Higher Level Mathematics). In 2021, this had grown to 1,342 students, an increase of over 600%.
16. It has now become impossible to allocate scarce places in high demand courses equitably on the basis of this grade inflation¹. This has had a significant detrimental effect, not just on the very high demand courses, but across the full range of higher education courses, distorting the process and resulting in an inherently difficult situation for many applicants. It has also introduced significant inequity to applicants presenting Leaving Certificate results from earlier years.
17. Given that our long-standing allocation model was not designed to operate in this new context, and that student demand continues to far outstrip the available supply of places, the universities are faced with a number of stark choices:
 - a. Remove the Leaving Certificate from the CAO process and replace it with a separate assessment process run by the universities, with the sole purpose of determining entry to higher education. This would be resource intensive for both students and higher education institutions, and would also detract from the Senior Cycle and Leaving Certificate itself.
 - b. Supplement the Leaving Certificate results (revised timelines as per below) with additional screening mechanisms to allow a more refined allocation process. Mechanisms used in other countries include aptitude tests, psychometric testing, interviews, school references, portfolios, etc. These have been considered by the universities at various stages in the past, but in general have not been favoured in an Irish context, given the difficulty in ensuring the overall equity of such mechanisms and the additional costs involved. In the small number of courses where such supplementary mechanisms are used, there is limited consensus as to their added value.
 - c. ***Rely on the Department of Education reverting immediately to an agreed and stable grade distribution model for the Leaving Certificate, which would ensure that the Leaving Certificate can continue to serve as the mainstream selection mechanism for entry into Irish higher education.***
18. The IUA proposes that option c) above is the only viable basis on which to provide for a system of State-accredited grades for entry into higher education. Other options, which may

¹ In 2019, 1.4% of Leaving Certificate students achieved 600 points or higher, 13.3% achieved 500 points or more, and 37.4% achieved 400 points or more. In 2021, these had grown to 5.7% achieving 600 points or higher, 26.7% achieving 500 points or more, and 54.6% achieving 400 points or more (source: CAO).

have worked in the past when higher education enrolments were just a fraction of those nowadays, are neither practical, student-friendly nor cost-effective.

Earlier Leaving Certificate Results

19. In 2020 and 2021, as a result of delays to the availability of Leaving Certificate results, the start of the higher education academic year was delayed by up to three weeks, with significant knock-on effects for all students and staff, and the consequent reorganisation of university teaching programmes and assessment timelines.
20. The effects of these delays have been particularly felt by the many thousands of Leaving Certificate students who applied to study in countries other than Ireland², since they were unable to present their results and gain admission to those universities until after most places there had already been allocated and the academic year had already begun. As a result, many were unable to follow their preferred course of study in another European university.
21. The inverse has applied to the many thousands of students in other EU countries and the UK (Irish citizens abroad and others wishing to study in Ireland) who had to wait until CAO offers became available, after the closing date for accepting offers that these students may have received from universities in their countries of residence³. As a result, Ireland has lost the opportunity to attract a large number of high-potential young people who would contribute positively to our universities and more broadly to our society.
22. The knock-on effects of these delays have been most severe in terms of student accommodation, in particular for 1st year students who were unable to make arrangements until after they had received a CAO offer, long after most other students. This situation has aggravated an already serious student accommodation crisis.
23. Even in a “normal” pre-Covid situation, students did not receive their Leaving Certificate results and CAO offers until towards the middle of August, leaving them a maximum of two or three weeks to organise accommodation and make arrangements to enter higher education. While there is an underlying demand-supply imbalance for student accommodation, the situation is greatly exacerbated each year by the impossibly short timeline between the release of Leaving Cert results and the start of the college year.
24. The scenario for students who appeal their results is even more problematic. In most cases, the appeals process and the subsequent revision of college offers to eligible students, is not concluded until several weeks after the commencement of the academic year⁴. This issue was brought centre-stage in 2019 arising from a judicial ruling.
25. This has further knock-on effects on other elements of the tertiary education landscape, notably the Further Education and Training sector, which may not fill many of its courses until the CAO process has completed.

² For example, over 4,400 students from Ireland applied to study in the UK in 2020 (source: UCAS). In 2019, it was estimated that over 1,000 students from Ireland applied to study in the Netherlands (source: EUNICAS).

³ Over 3,300 applicants from outside Ireland received a CAO offer in 2021, with only 35% of these accepting. Only 25% of the 770 CAO offers made to applicants from Northern Ireland in 2021 were accepted (source: CAO).

⁴ For example, in 2021 over 10,700 Leaving Certificate appeals were received by the State Examinations Commission. The results of these appeals will be made available on 8 October, and improved CAO offers for successful appellants will issue on 13 October. This will allow these students, where places are still available, to begin their course on 18 October, having missed 3 full weeks of teaching as well as the preceding orientation week.

26. The universities are firmly of the opinion that these timelines are no longer fit for purpose. They do not serve the students or their families well, and they do not serve the higher education or further education sectors well.
27. In order to move away from this inherently unsatisfactory process, and to facilitate a range of better options for students at this crucial decision-making time, ***the universities advocate strongly for a radical change to Leaving Certificate timelines. We propose that students should be in possession of their Leaving Certificate results no later than the end of June of any given year***, allowing the CAO to process these results and for offers and acceptances to higher education to be completed before the end of July.
28. This would afford the following advantages:
- Students would be in a position to make rational choices regarding their preferred study options, regarding higher or further education, in Ireland or abroad.
 - Students and their families would likewise have a reasonable time period to make the necessary practical arrangements, most especially those regarding accommodation, fees and grants.
 - This process would also allow for the Leaving Certificate appeals process to have completed well before the start of the academic year, meaning that successful appellants who have received an improved CAO offer would be in a position to take this up without missing part of the academic year.
29. It should be noted that, while ambitious, the delivery of results within this revised timeline is entirely possible. Indeed, while every country and exam system is different, the proposed timeline is the norm across a broad range of EU countries⁵. With less emphasis on the final examination, and a greater emphasis on a range of continuous assessment options across the two-year Senior Cycle, including project work, practical's and language assessments (such as already exist in a number of Leaving Certificate subjects), Ireland could rapidly move to this model. The IUA proposes that immediate steps are taken to introduce this model in 2022.

Summary

30. IUA is therefore asking for four main outcomes from the current Leaving Certificate reform process:
- A ***more equitable Leaving Certificate***, allowing all students to reach their full potential.
 - A ***greater range of more authentic assessment*** in the Leaving Certificate.
 - More ***stable Leaving Certificate results*** – helping to maintain equivalences across years.
 - Earlier Leaving Certificate results*** – helping students and their families consider a wider range of options, allowing for earlier higher education admission process and resolving the problem of the Leaving Certificate appeals process.
31. We believe that implementation of these four requests would result in a radically improved Leaving Certificate experience for students, with significant additional benefits for all other stakeholders also.

⁵ For example, Swedish (c. 100,000 students/year) and Dutch (c. 130,000 students/year) school-leaving certificates are issued around 10 June each year. Finnish (c. 30,000 students/year) school-leaving certificates are issued by the end of May each year. Danish school-leaving certificates (c. 50,000 students/year) are issued by 5 July each year. The results of the French Baccalauréat (over 700,000 students/year) are published in the 2nd week of July each year, and of the German Abitur exam (over 500,000 students/year) by 15 July.