



Opening Statement to:

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

on

Leaving Certificate Reform

19 October 2021

Chairman, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to address you today on this important issue. We have provided a detailed Submission to you so I will confine my remarks to key points from that Submission.

1. We see this review of the Leaving Certificate process as both necessary and timely. We have acknowledged the many positive attributes of the Leaving Cert in our Submission but we believe that reform is necessary. That reform must support the maintenance of internationally-recognised standards of assessment.
2. It is critically important that the reform is student-centric. The Leaving Cert should be fair and equitable, recognising the difference in learning style and capacity of students. It must also address the accepted challenges for students in terms of stress and mental well-being and optimise the pathways to career or further study for students of all abilities.
3. The current over-bearing prominence of the final examination militates against students with learning disabilities or with a learning intelligence not best suited by a written exam. The heavy weighting of the final exam in the Leaving Certificate is still far too great. The universities advocate strongly for more authentic assessment across all subjects that genuinely reflects the learning and thinking of the student. We propose that this change be done on a phased basis, ideally over the coming three-year period.
4. The benefits 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 under the same conditions with results quality-assured by the state. It also ensures continuity and comparability year-on-year so that higher education applicants presenting results from different years are treated equitably.

5. The CAO points system provides an objective and transparent allocation of places, by order of merit, based on Leaving Cert achievement. The points system has been designed on the basis of stable grades but the Covid-induced changes over the last two years has de-stabilised the results trend. In 2019, 207 students achieved a maximum score of six H1 grades. In 2021, this had grown to 1,342 students, an increase of over 600%. This has distorted the entry threshold to third level with a particular inequity to applicants presenting results from earlier years.
6. The IUA proposes that the system reverts immediately to an agreed and stable grade distribution model, which would ensure that the Leaving Certificate results can continue to serve as the mainstream selection mechanism for entry into Irish higher education.
7. The timing of Leaving Cert results is a particular problem, even in normal years. Results in mid-August means that first college offers can't be made until week 3 of August at the earliest. Second and third round offers come well into September, often after college courses have already started. For students who appeal Leaving Cert results, their college offers can arrive a number of weeks into the college year. This needs to change for two key reasons.
 - a) It gives students and their families an unacceptably short timeframe to find student accommodation and make other practical arrangements.
 - b) It is out of line with most other European countries including the UK where college offers are made in July or even earlier. So, a student who has applied for a course in both an Irish university and, say, a university in Manchester may feel compelled to accept the UK course for fear of not getting a place in Ireland.
8. The IUA universities are firmly of the view that these timelines are no longer fit for purpose. We propose that students should be in possession of their Leaving Cert results no later than the end of June of any given year. This would allow the CAO to process these results and for offers and acceptances to higher education to be completed before the end of July. This would allow students to make rational choices regarding their preferred study options and enable them and their families 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 Cert appeals process to be completed well before the start of the academic year.
9. The delivery of results within this revised timeline is entirely feasible with less emphasis on the final examination, and a greater emphasis on a range of continuous assessment options. The IUA proposes that immediate steps are taken to introduce this revised timeline in 2022.

10. In summary, the IUA proposals are centred on four key issues:

- a. A ***more equitable Leaving Certificate***, allowing all students to reach their full potential.
- b. A ***greater range of more authentic assessment*** in the Leaving Certificate.
- c. More ***stable Leaving Certificate results*** to maintain equivalences across years.
- d. And ***earlier Leaving Certificate results***.