

Leaving Certificate Reform



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

Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI)

October 2021

Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) has engaged extensively in the Senior Cycle review process, both bilaterally and multilaterally with the NCCA. The TUI has also met with the Department of Education (DE), State Examinations Commission (SEC), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the other education partners to ensure that the voice of the practitioner is heard and that the reform will be meaningful for students.
- 1.2 We have consulted our members (over 20,000) through our branch structures and a series of surveys. Resolutions of TUI Annual Congress have guided us throughout the process.
- 1.3 The TUI has, at all times, emphasised the need for positive improvement in Senior Cycle whilst also ensuring that the widely recognised strengths of the current Senior Cycle - such as high public trust based on state certification of attainment - are retained. It is important also to maintain standards as currently exhibited in the Leaving Certificate examination.
- 1.4 It is essential to emphasise that assessment for the Leaving Certificate does not commence with and is not limited to the June examinations. Some subjects have their first assessment towards Leaving Certificate in December in 6th year. The TUI is calling for some assessment of additional components to commence in 5th year.
- 1.5 The TUI has worked with the NCCA and has proposed structural reforms that have directly fed into the NCCA advisory report that has now issued to the Minister. Core principles of the TUI proposals include the:
 - 1.5.1 involvement of teachers and school leaders at all stages
 - 1.5.2 essential role of the State Examinations Commission in certification
 - 1.5.3 requirement for CPD and professional time
 - 1.5.4 need to end ringfencing of the LCA and LCVP programmes and
 - 1.5.5 better recognition of vocational pathways for students both in schools and in non-mainstream settings.
- 1.6 The TUI has consistently called for additional components of assessment, (where appropriate) in more subjects, thereby reducing the reliance on the June examinations. However, those additional components must be carried out by the SEC and must not lead to additional work for already overburdened school staff.
- 1.7 The TUI aim is to ensure that the needs of a diverse student body that includes students with SEN/AEN and/or those from disadvantaged backgrounds or marginalised communities are addressed in any reform of Senior Cycle and that equity and equality are a core part of the review. For example, there must be meaningful curricular provision made for students with SEN who complete Level 1 or Level 2 learning programmes for Junior Cycle and who now wish to pursue Senior Cycle education.
- 1.8 The TUI has repeatedly insisted that the Senior Cycle must do more than prepare students for higher education and/or the labour force. As well as teaching subjects, teachers prepare students for an ever changing society where global challenges (in relation to the environment, technology, economy, wellbeing and citizenship) abound.

- 1.9 The TUI is hopeful that this NCCA review of Senior Cycle will meet all of our objectives. We will engage extensively with the Department of Education to ensure that all necessary resources are provided so that reforms that are agreed can be successfully implemented, according to a realistic, incremental timeframe.
- 1.10 The review of Senior Cycle must also meet the ambitious targets, as set out in the recently published Action Plan for Apprenticeships.

Introduction

- 2.1 The Teachers' Union of Ireland represents some 20,000 members across a wide range of settings including Second Level Schools and Colleges, Centres for Education, Institutes of Technology and Technological Universities.
- 2.2 The TUI is actively involved in the current review of Senior Cycle and requires the Minister and Government to play its part to ensure its successful implementation.

Assessment Options

- 3.1 Changes to assessment models must be based on concrete educational research rather than on the weathervane of public opinion at a particular point in time. The extensive and vitally important role of the SEC cannot be underestimated. Over the last two years, teachers have demonstrated flexibility and commitment by engaging - in spite of significant misgivings - with emergency assessment processes on a strictly 'without precedent' basis so that two cohorts of final year students could progress to the next stage of their lives. We state once again that our co-operation with these processes was only based on necessity due to the national health emergency.
- 3.2 It is important to address the frequently cited term 'Continuous Assessment (CA)'. In our schools, assessment tends to take three forms:
- Formative, which takes place in schools every day, e.g. marking homework, copies etc
 - Summative, which is used to measure the breadth and depth of knowledge acquired e.g. end of term examinations or State Examinations Commission examinations.
 - Diagnostic testing which measures the capacity of a student to carry out tasks e.g. aptitude, psychological or special needs testing.
- 3.2.1 Each of these forms of assessment takes place frequently in schools. Formative assessment, by its nature, is continuous.
- 3.3 Any move to a CA model for State certification purposes would significantly increase pressure and stress on students and teachers. It would do absolutely nothing to alleviate the anxiety caused by the current assessment models while fuelling a longer-burning anxiety all of its own.
- 3.4 CA is often vaguely promoted as an alternative to the status quo. However, there is rarely any detail provided on how this would actually work in schools, much less how it could be implemented in a way that would be fair and equitable for all communities and students. The TUI has never seen any such detail being provided by those advocating for this vague CA model.

- 3.5 A move to CA would permanently skew the concept of education in Ireland, with an endless and inevitable focus on assessments, ultimately de-prioritising and devaluing both teaching and learning. Furthermore, it would fundamentally and negatively change the pupil-teacher relationship, possibly removing the emphasis on the supportive aspect of the relationship.
- 3.6 While the Senior Cycle and the Leaving Certificate can always do with improvement, the excessive focus on CAO points is not a flaw of the Senior Cycle or the Leaving Certificate itself. It is a separate process that allots places in Higher Education that is superimposed on the Leaving Certificate. The points race that it generates is a by-product of the national obsession with progression to third level that distorts the true meaning of education and often leads to invalid and unfair comparisons between students and between schools. To make rushed, radical changes to assessment modes while doing nothing to tackle the CAO 'points race' is to base change on a misdiagnosis of the real problem. Achieving a particular number of CAO points does not necessarily indicate suitability to a chosen college course or career.
- 3.7 Contrary to some common but wildly inaccurate commentary, Senior Cycle subjects are continually evolving, with most already having an additional component of assessment - separate to the final written examination - involving project, oral or practical work. Approximately two-thirds of Leaving Certificate subjects already have an additional component of assessment - set, administered and examined by the SEC.
- 3.8 All recently launched new subjects have additional components of assessment and it is expected that nearly every subject will have an additional component in future years. Provided that the additional assessment is appropriate and useful in that particular subject and effective CPD is provided, it will have the support of the TUI members.
- 3.9 The TUI has called for some second component assessments, where appropriate, to take place at the end of fifth year (first year of senior cycle), thereby reducing the pressure in sixth year (final year of senior cycle).
- 3.10 Our overall position is clear and unambiguous – State certification is key to all developments and must be retained. TUI members are fundamentally opposed to assessing their own students for State certification purposes and therefore external assessment and State certification – which retain significant public trust – are essential.

Key Subject Areas and Digital Learning

- 4.1 The TUI believes that all subject areas and curricular programmes are intrinsically important. Senior Cycle should prepare young learners for life. Preparation for the labour market is an important factor but merely a factor. Senior Cycle must do more than just prepare students for higher education and the labour force. It must prepare students for living in a complex and changing society where global challenges (such as the environment, technology, economy, wellbeing and citizenship) and personal challenges abound.
- 4.2 Having said that, the TUI is aware that certain discipline/subject ranges or groupings are considered especially important – by governments, employers, international organisations etc. However, such perceived priorities and hierarchies are transient at best. Furthermore,

there is the significant question of equity of access both to such subjects ranges and to higher level.

- 4.3 Reform of Senior Cycle must cater for all students and their varied talents/skills/abilities. At present, the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) caters to students who may not otherwise have remained in school. The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), with its practical elements and second components, fosters key skills. These options must be revamped and enhanced.
- 4.4 The TUI firmly believes that the 'ringfencing' of LCA must be removed so that students could, if they wish, undertake some subjects at a level which would allow them to go directly into an apprenticeship.
- 4.5 Equally, it is vital that the vocational subject groupings that are the gatekeepers into LCVP be amended or abolished.
- 4.6 Reform must not marginalise or exclude any cohort of learners; it must be inclusive in nature. A review of Senior Cycle is an excellent opportunity for all political parties to support TUI's campaign for an adequately funded, high quality public education system that caters for the needs of a diverse student body. Schools reflect society and the difficulties that society encounters. Schools are not the cause of society's problems, neither is curriculum. However, society often looks to the education system, and the school curriculum in particular, to solve all of society's problems. This is neither fair nor practical.
- 4.7 An essential first step in supporting a genuinely integrated Senior Cycle curriculum would be to ensure closer ties between the post primary system, the higher education system and, the frequently overlooked but very important, further education and training sector which includes, for example, the very successful Youthreach programme (ESRI, 2019).
- 4.8 The TUI is currently represented on a DE established committee looking at priorities for an updated Digital Strategy. The TUI is on record as welcoming the previous iteration of the Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020. However, the TUI made clear then, as it does now, that substantial ICT investment is necessary in schools. The €210m over five years in the last strategy was inadequate even by 2015 standards. Given the extent and pace of developments in technology, constant revision and renewal of the government's strategy, priorities and investment are critical to enabling teaching and learning for 21st century skills and competences. The digital divide for students and teachers, especially in DEIS schools, and the poor standard of broadband in many rural areas were clearly exposed by COVID-19-related disruption to in-class teaching in schools. A quantum jump in investment is now needed.
- 4.9 All Irish society is acutely conscious of the impact of COVID-19 and its attendant losses in life, health, and employment. We must guard against losses in the social and cultural fabric that binds our nation together (in which connection, the work of TUI members, both in education and as trade unionists, is vital). Indeed, the crisis highlights the centrality of public service and collective effort to any well-ordered society.

- 4.10 TUI members have risen magnificently to the challenge of providing education of the highest standard. Education is our greatest equalising and unifying endeavour and, in the face of enormous difficulties, our members have continued to inspire curiosity and imagination, to release potential and to unfold opportunities and possibilities. The TUI will resist any complacent or disingenuous assumption by management or Government that the extraordinary efforts made by school staff in response to the COVID-19 emergency form a template for future work. We will ensure that our “no-precedent” stipulations, and the written assurances from Government, Departments and Management to the same effect, are honoured. Emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) was indeed only a COVID-19 emergency measure. This has been acknowledged by the Minister for Education in her address to TUI Congress in April 2021.

Access, Equality and Well Being Supports

- 5.1 Schools require appropriate support from relevant agencies with expertise in areas of health and wellbeing. Those supports are frequently lacking. Cuts to pastoral supports in schools, and especially the degradation of middle management structures, have also made it more challenging for schools to support students. The loss of pastoral supports, such as Year Heads, is a situation that the Department of Education (2014) itself has described as “unsustainable”. Matters have deteriorated rapidly since.
- 5.2 The depletion of middle management posts in our schools (since 2009) has been very corrosive. It has resulted in a reduction of supports to students, at a time when these supports are needed more than ever.
- 5.3 Additional staffing is essential for schools to successfully implement any review of Senior Cycle. At a minimum, schools need to retain the extra teachers provided to schools to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. These teachers are vital to provide a wide range of subject and programme choice for students as well as enabling provision of subject levels.
- 5.4 Schools rely heavily on support agencies, especially when working with students experiencing crisis. School staff, and principal teachers in particular, often find it very difficult to access outside support when needed as the agencies themselves are under significant pressure.
- 5.5 Support services are vital if a student who is experiencing trauma or ill-health is to be appropriately supported. However, through no fault of the staff in those agencies, there are often significant waiting lists. Caseloads for staff in CAMHS/NEPS/OT/SLT etc are often unmanageable. As a result, schools are often left trying valiantly to ‘fill the gaps’ for vulnerable students although lacking the expertise, time or resources to do so. This becomes a particularly acute issue for transitions and in regard to early school leaving. The same applies to cuts to SCP.
- 5.6 School staff and leadership make valiant efforts, every day, to create an inclusive environment. It is important that students from all ethnic/racial/gender/Traveller/disability etc backgrounds feel part of the school system. Additional investment in the education system, especially more teachers to reduce class size, would further contribute to this effort.

Higher and Further Education Requirements, Vocational Options and Career Paths

- 6.1 The issue of the 'points system' is a matter for the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The system is, in essence is a model of supply and demand.
- 6.2 It is important to draw a distinction between the Leaving Certificate and the 'points race', The inordinate premium set on acquiring high points distorts the true meaning of education, inviting invalid and grossly unfair comparisons between students and schools.
- 6.3 There was much media commentary 2020 and 2021 regarding alleged 'grade inflation' and the impact that this has, especially on entry to 'high points courses'. Whilst the TUI is not in a position to be able to ascribe definitively any one cause to this effect, the fact is that it did not happen in 2019 when the SEC Leaving Certificate process, which is both norm and criterion referenced, was the only system in use. Teachers participated in the Calculated Grades system in 2020 and Accredited Grades dual system in 2021 on the basis of it being an emergency COVID-19 response. We have received assurances from the Department that any such system (or variations thereof) will not be used, in any form, in future years.
- 6.4 With regard to 'bonus points', the TUI has long held the position that every subject in the Leaving Certificate should attract equal points. There should not be an arbitrary hierarchy of reward in points terms. The centrality of certain subjects is reflected by the fact that they are compulsory. If a particular level of LC attainment in a given subject is regarded by a HEI as necessary for enrolment in a particular third level Course/programme that can better be addressed by the HEI designating that level of LC attainment as a course entry requirement. The LC examination should not carry the burden in this regard. In addition, take-up of LC subjects, in some cases, is heavily biased on gender grounds. Furthermore, it is important that there be parity of esteem across Senior Cycle. LCA in particular does not currently benefit from a fair assessment recognition system. The TUI has called for such a recognition system to become part of Senior Cycle.

Irish Language and Irish Medium Education

- 7.1 Earlier this year the TUI gave evidence, both orally and in writing, to the Oireachtas Committee on the Irish Language on the topic of Leaving Certificate Irish. The issue is a complex one as there are issues that reside within the education system and other issues which cross many departmental and societal boundaries.
- 7.2 In relation to specific curricular issues, the TUI has significant reservations about a T1/T2 approach to Leaving Certificate Irish. In particular, the TUI believes that:
 - 7.2.1 foundation Level must be retained
 - 7.2.2 the oral and aural components should continue to retain the existing level of marks attached to them
 - 7.2.3 the current draft learning outcomes require significant exposition and
 - 7.2.4 if a T1/T2 approach is to be introduced and especially if bonus points are contemplated (see 6 above) every school must be assisted to provide T1 as, otherwise, the already marginalised will become even more marginalised and a new layer of disadvantage will be created.

International Evidence and Best Practice

- 8.1 Citizen satisfaction with the education system in Ireland is the highest of any of 22 European countries (Boyle 2018) whilst parent satisfaction with the Irish education system was the second-highest out of fifty-six countries in Clerkin et al. (2020).
- 8.2 Ireland has an internationally acknowledged, high-performing education system and a respected teaching profession¹ despite spending relatively little on education² and experiencing historic under-investment (DES, 2018b).
- 8.3 It is also worthwhile noting that 2019 and 2021 data (OECD, 2019b; OECD, 2021) show that the economic return to the taxpayer of investment in education is extraordinarily high in Ireland compared to international norms.

Recommendations

- 9.1 The TUI would like to make the following recommendations to the Committee:
 - 9.1.1 The NCCA Senior Cycle review report must be published as soon as possible by the Minister. The TUI made a number of structural change suggestions and hopes that those suggestions will be implemented, with timely and sufficient resourcing.
 - 9.1.2 It is essential that vital support structures within schools be restored, especially but not limited to, middle management posts.
 - 9.1.3 Significant investment is needed i.e. a reduction in the PTR and additional teachers to enable successful implementation of Senior Cycle.
 - 9.1.4 The Irish education system is significantly underfunded compared to international norms and this needs to be addressed.
 - 9.1.5 Parity of esteem for educational pathways such as LCA, LCV and Further Education and Training.
 - 9.1.6 An updated Leaving Certificate Irish specification should retain Foundation Level and the current proportion of marks attached to the oral and aural components and there should be greater explication of draft learning outcomes.
 - 9.1.7 There must be meaningful curricular provision made for students with SEN/AEN who took Level 1 or Level 2 learning programmes for Junior Cycle and who now wish to pursue Senior Cycle education.

¹ Teaching Council, 2010; OECD, 2013; DES, 2018a; OECD, 2015a; NAPD, 2016; Comhairle na nOg, 2017; Growing Up in Ireland, 2017; IPSOS MRBI Trust in the Professions Survey, 2017; Boyle, 2017; Boyle, 2019; Scanlon & McKenna, 2018; EU Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018; Kantar Millward Brown, 2018; EU Commission, 2018; EU Commission, 2019a; EU Commission, 2019b; Social Progress Initiative, 2018; United Nations Development Programme, 2018, Irish Survey of Student Engagement 2018; HEA, 2019; Coolahan, 2017; Eivers, 2019; CSO, 2019; McKeown et al., 2019; CSO, 2020; OECD, 2020; Eurofound, 2020; McNamara et al., 2020; Clark & Kavanagh, 2021; OECD, 2021; DE, 2020b)

² OECD, 2015b; SJI, 2018, NERI, 2018, OECD, 2019a; UNDP, 2019; OECD, 2021)

Glossary

CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
CAO	Central Applications Office
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DE	Department of Education
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills (Now DE)
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Board
EU	European Union
HEA	Higher Education Authority
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
LCVP	Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
NAPD	National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NERI	Nevin Economic Research Institute
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OT	Occupational Therapy
SCP	School Completion Programme
SEC	State Examinations Commission
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SJI	Social Justice Ireland
SLT	Speech and Language Therapy
TUI	Teachers' Union of Ireland
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

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