

QUALITY AND QUALIFICATIONS IRELAND (QQI) RESPONSE
TO THE INVITATION OF THE JOINT OIREACHTAS
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, FURTHER AND HIGHER
EDUCATION, RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SCIENCE TO
MAKE A WRITTEN SUBMISSION ON THE COMMITTEE'S
EXAMINATION OF LEAVING CERTIFICATE REFORM.

4 OCTOBER 2021



QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

Adding Value to Qualifications

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Introduction

QQI would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to make this written submission on the topic of Leaving Certificate Reform.

QQI oversees quality in post-secondary education and training and delivers public benefits through the availability of accessible and highly valued qualifications. QQI has a statutory remit to promote the implementation of Ireland's National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) which includes school, further and higher education and training qualifications. We promote lifelong learning through the implementation of national policy on access, transfer and progression. QQI is a member organisation on the NCCA [Board for Senior Cycle](#); on the [Transitions Reform Steering Group](#), chaired by the Department of Education; and on the [Apprenticeship Council](#).

Executive Summary

1. The Leaving Certificate as an examination, is an integral part of what is known as senior cycle in Ireland and as upper secondary level education, internationally. The ongoing [Senior Cycle Review](#) led by the NCCA, has **built on the many strengths** of our secondary school system including: systematic use of **consultation** processes for large-scale reform initiatives; well-developed **autonomy for schools**, conducive to fostering professionals and institutions which are **responsive to the needs** of their students and communities; a strong supply of **highly-qualified and engaged teachers**; a high level of **school completion rates**¹. Given the broad reform activity suggested in the Senior Cycle Review process, **taking time to embed new structures, ensuring alignment of processes, structures and actors will be crucial**. Any reform of the Leaving Certificate should build on what works and be informed by engagement with stakeholders and findings from the best available evidence.
2. Senior cycle, and the Leaving Certificate examination, are important stages within the wider education and training system. Following on from Junior Cycle and leading directly to employment or to further and higher education and training opportunities. **System connectedness across general, further and higher education and training** in Ireland, will help to ensure cohesion and clear responsibilities underpinning any reform.
3. Senior cycle curriculum should be shaped by **social and economic considerations**, striking the right balance between these interests is important. Policymakers need to be aware of alternative structures that support responsive and flexible upper secondary education system that simultaneously serves **employment, social inclusion and lifelong learning**. Curriculum should foster and promote other valuable dimensions including **artistic, cultural identity and cosmopolitanism**. As Ireland emerges from a **pandemic, emerging lessons learned from the interruption to education**², should inform decisions about the Leaving Certificate.
4. Access to better quality secondary education for all students is a priority under the current **Programme for Government**³ which states that 'Education is a cornerstone of society and a driver of social equality' and that 'creating new and viable opportunities for young people and those wishing to reskill is a civic, social, economic, and environmental imperative now more than ever'. Government have committed to **ongoing review and reform the post-primary curriculum**,

¹ OECD (2019) <https://www.oecd.org/education/policy-outlook/country-profile-Ireland-2020.pdf>

² OECD (2020) Lessons for Education from Covid <https://www.oecd.org/education/lessons-for-education-from-covid-19-0a530888-en.htm>

³ Department of the Taoiseach (2020) <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7e05d-programme-for-government-our-shared-future/>



- ‘prioritising elements such as critical thinking, problem-solving and continuous assessment, so that they feature more centrally’.
5. Ireland's economy and dynamic labour markets need people with sophisticated knowledge, skills and competences that cannot be developed only in school. The capacity for **lifelong learning** is based on high quality primary and secondary education. The secondary school age cohort of young people is larger than ever before⁴ and these students will require skills to prepare them for a lifetime of learning.
 6. The Programme for Government includes an action to ‘establish a **Citizens’ Assembly** on the Future of Education ensuring that the voices of young people and those being educated are central’. The 1995 White Paper on Education⁵ has guided education reform over the past 25 years. **A new or renewed blueprint, informed by citizen engagement, is needed to guide educational policy to 2050.**
 7. The enduring **challenges** facing policy makers responsible for upper secondary level education have been well documented⁶ they include the need to:
 - guarantee **real opportunities** for all young people to continue learning in upper secondary education of their **choice** after completing compulsory education;
 - avoid making **upper secondary vocational education** programmes a choice for **lower achievers linked to poor-quality jobs and no access to tertiary education**;
 - create **credible pathways** from secondary vocational education to tertiary education and encourage a significant proportion of students to follow that path; and
 - establish **systematic student counselling and career guidance** services in all basic schools to prevent a lack of awareness of future options, and in all upper secondary schools to help students to overcome their troubles and prevent dropout
 8. This submission concentrates on four issues identified by the Committee as of interest – (1) **Key Subject Areas and Digital Learning**; (2) **Access, Equality and Well-Being Supports**; (3) **Assessment Options**; and (4) **Higher and Further Education Requirements, Vocational Options and Career Paths**.

Key Subject Areas and Digital Learning

9. QQI have no strong view on the key subject areas in Senior Cycle. There are national and international authoritative sources on curriculum⁷. It is clear however that senior cycle curriculum will need to support a **just and fair transition** in response to climate change, and to the opportunities and challenges presented by **digitalisation**.
10. The latest European Skills Agenda⁸, recognises that education and training systems should cater for the **diverse individual needs, abilities and capacities of all learners and offer learning opportunities to all**. European policy also emphasises the rapid shift towards a climate neutral Europe and how digital transformation is changing the way we work, learn, take part in society and lead our everyday lives.

⁴ Department of Education (2020) Projections on full-time enrolments. Primary and Secondary School 2020-2038. Enrolments in post-primary have risen by 27,558 (8%) over the past five years and are projected to continue rising over the short term. They are projected to peak in 2024 with 410,415 pupils, some 39,000 higher than in 2019. <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/projections/>

⁵ Department of Education and Science (1995) White Paper on Education <https://assets.gov.ie/24448/0f3bff53633440d99c32541f7f45cfeb.pdf>

⁶ Sahlberg, P. (2007) Secondary Education in OECD Countries. https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/m/C12578310056925BC12573850034415B_NOTE78H_D6G.pdf

⁷ The NCCA have a long tradition of providing expertise and advice on subject development and choice. The [OECD \(2021\) Towards a 21st Century Curriculum](#) offers an international reference point for policymakers on curriculum.

⁸ EU European Skills Agenda <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223>



11. The use of **digital technologies** to support learning should be led by pedagogy as much as by technology. Built on sound and well-established principles for instructional design, digital technologies can support in-person teaching, learning and assessment. **Blended Learning solutions** in secondary education 'requires a coherent approach by the education and training system as a whole as part of a culture of continuous improvement'⁹. At the same time, policymakers need to be alert to **the prospect for digital technologies in school to exacerbate rather than ameliorate disadvantage**, this prospect has been noted in the EU opinion on Irelands national reform programme¹⁰ with Irish authorities advised to '**address the risk of digital divide**, including in the education sector'.
12. Digitalisation in education is not limited to using technologies to support teaching, learning and assessment. **Digital skills also need to be identified acquired and maintained. Certification systems are increasingly digitalised**, students should have access to **a digital leaving certificate** that is secure, portable and shareable¹¹.
13. Subject specifications should be clearly specified in terms of **learning outcomes**¹². Aside from making **educational standards more transparent**, subject specifications and assessment criteria set out in terms of learning outcomes, helps to **align teaching, learning and assessment**. Such constructive alignment has an additional benefit of **fairness**, since well-designed and articulated learning outcomes can help less advantaged students, who may struggle to cope with a lack of specificity¹³.

Access, Equality and Well Being Supports

14. Any reform of the leaving certificate examination must support **inclusion and accessibility** to education to a wider range of learners, including vulnerable groups (such as persons with disabilities, low-qualified/skilled persons, minorities, people with migrant background, refugees and people with fewer opportunities because of their geographical location and/or their social-economically disadvantaged situation¹⁴. **AHEAD** define **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** as a set of principles for curriculum development that give all individuals equal opportunities to learn, including Students with Disabilities. UDL aims to improve the educational experience of all students by introducing more flexible methods of teaching, assessment and service provision to cater for the diversity of learners in our classrooms¹⁵. **UDL principles should underpin senior-cycle curriculum.**

⁹ EU (2021) Council Recommendation on Blended Learning for high quality and inclusive primary and secondary education. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0455&from=EN>

¹⁰ EU (2020) Council Recommendation on the 2020 National Reform Programme of Ireland and delivering a Council opinion on the 2020 Stability Programme of Ireland. [2020-european-semester-csr-comm-recommendation-ireland_en.pdf \(europa.eu\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0455&from=EN)

¹¹ QQI (2017) Background Paper on Digitalisation in Education [Background paper_FINAL.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](https://www.qqi.ie/Background%20paper%20FINAL.pdf)

¹² Learning Outcomes -defined as statements of knowledge, skill or competence, learning outcomes should make explicit what students should know, understand and be able to do.

¹³ Didau (2021) Is Curriculum all that? <https://learningspy.co.uk/curriculum/is-curriculum-all-that/>

¹⁴ See McGuinness et al (2018) <https://www.pobal.ie/app/uploads/2018/06/Profiling-Barriers-to-Social-Inclusion-in-Ireland-The-Relative-Roles-of-Individual-Characteristics-and-Location.pdf> and ESRI (2020) <https://www.esri.ie/news/migrant-groups-have-higher-levels-of-education-but-some-experience-higher-unemployment-than>

¹⁵ AHEAD – Principles for UDL <https://www.ahead.ie/udl>



15. The relationship between the **Leaving Certificate and its' constituent programmes as qualifications¹⁶ and the NFQ should be strengthened and made more transparent¹⁷**. This would enhance national arrangements for access transfer and progression and international recognition of the Leaving Certificate¹⁸.
16. The European Pillar of Social Rights states in its first principle that everyone has the **right to quality and inclusive education**, training and life-long learning to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market. **A reformed Leaving Certificate examination should provide opportunities for young people in Ireland to exercise this fundamental right.**

Assessment

17. The **pandemic has brought increased attention and scrutiny to assessment in education¹⁹**. International observers have noted 'an acceleration of ongoing efforts to **balance continuous and summative assessment**' and argued that 'Ireland should continue to engage stakeholders on the topic, drawing out lessons from this experience to inform the future implementation of assessment reforms'²⁰ Initial analysis of pandemic related alternative assessment practices, including accredited grades for leaving certificate²¹, provide **insights into teacher estimated marks**. It is worth noting that the professional judgement of teachers and lecturers, with appropriate external moderation and oversight, is a mainstay of formative and summative assessment practice in further and higher education.
18. A **more holistic approach to student assessment** has been introduced as part of wider reforms to the **Junior Cycle** curriculum. A systematic evaluation of **assessment reform at lower secondary education** could usefully inform assessment policy and practice at senior cycle including assessment for the leaving certificate.
19. Assessment as integral to the curriculum, to teaching and to learning. As a qualifications and quality assurance agency, QQI is interested in both the summative and the formative purposes of assessment²². Assessment of learning to mean inference (e.g., judgement or estimation or evaluation) of a learner's knowledge, skill or competence by comparison with a standard based on appropriate evidence. The **award standard underpinning the Leaving Certificate should be made explicit**. It can involve, knowledge, skill, competence or attitudes.
20. The growing role of digital technology and the internet in assessment in further and higher education, has heightened interest among the academic community in the

¹⁶ A **qualification** is the formal outcome of an assessment and validation process by a competent body and typically take the form of documents such as certificates or diplomas. They determine that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards

¹⁷ Amendments to the QQI ACT in 2019 provide for a statutory procedure for the inclusion of school qualifications within the NFQ.

¹⁸ This issue highlighted in the QQI (2020) Referencing Report of the NFQ to the European Qualifications Framework <https://europa.eu/europass/system/files/2021-03/Irish%20reference%20report-updated.pdf>

¹⁹ Oireachtas Report (2021) on Impact of Covid-19 on Primary and Secondary Education [2021-01-14_report-on-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-primary-and-secondary-education_en.pdf](https://www.oireachtas.ie/publications/2021-01-14-report-on-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-primary-and-secondary-education_en.pdf) (oireachtas.ie)

²⁰ OECD (2020) Initial education policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic in IRELAND <https://www.oecd.org/education/policy-outlook/covid-snapshot-Ireland.pdf>

²¹ SEC (2021) [Report on the National Standardisation Process - AG 2021](https://www.examinations.ie) (examinations.ie)

²² QQI (2018) Green Paper on Assessment of Learners and Learning [Green Paper Assessment of Learners and Learning March 2018.pdf](https://www.qqi.ie/green-paper) (qqi.ie)



integrity of assessment. Guidelines and advice generated by the [National Academic Integrity Network](#) are applicable to assessment in senior cycle.

21. **Standardised assessments** such as PISA global metrics for academic outcomes have been very influential on teaching, learning and assessment in secondary school education in Ireland. A new international comparative survey of social and emotional skills (SSES) compliments the picture by connecting cognitive social and emotional skills²³. Initial results suggest that **social and emotional skills, including creativity and curiosity, decline in secondary school. Ireland should participate in any future rounds of the SSES standardised assessment.**

Higher and Further Education Requirements, Vocational Options and Career Paths

22. Most students (about 70%) complete an optional **transition year programme (TY)** between lower and upper secondary education, in order to sample different subjects and undertake work experience to inform future education and career choices. Currently, many valuable learning achievements during TY are not certified, compromising their portability and subsequent recognition. **Recognised certification, including micro-credentials, should be explored as tools for enhancing the transparency, portability and recognition of TY learning achievements.**
23. **Vocational Education and Training (VET)**²⁴ is currently under-developed within senior cycle²⁵. **The role of senior cycle in Initial VET (IVET) in Ireland should be strengthened and expanded.** IVET programmes combine school and work-based learning. 'Developing and strengthening both general and vocational in upper secondary education can make education more inclusive and strengthen the transition from school to work²⁶'. The LCVP and LCA have a work orientation but are more appropriately classed as pre-vocational or pre-technical with little work-based learning required. These programmes attract a minority of students, 25% and 5% of the leaving certificate cohort respectively. Furthermore, the LCA, which does not provide direct access to tertiary education, disproportionately attracts students from disadvantaged backgrounds and lower ability students²⁷. **The restriction on LCA progression to higher education should be revisited.**
24. The recent expansion of **apprenticeships** into new sectors such as hospitality, financial services and Information and Communication Technology, presents **opportunities for pre-apprenticeship programmes and traineeship programmes to be developed alongside traditional leaving certificate programmes**²⁸. Any such developments should be supported by **guidance services** and ensure that graduates have **opportunities to progress** to work and high quality further and higher vocational and academic qualifications.

²³ OECD (2021), *Beyond Academic Learning: First Results from the Survey of Social and Emotional Skills* [OECD iLibrary | Beyond Academic Learning: First Results from the Survey of Social and Emotional Skills \(oecd-ilibrary.org\)](#)

²⁴ Eurostat define VET as, is the training in skills and teaching of knowledge related to a specific trade, occupation or vocation in which the student or employee wishes to participate. VET programmes prepare participants for direct entry into specific occupations without further training.

²⁵ CEDEFOP (2019) VET in Ireland [Vocational education and training system in Ireland \(europa.eu\)](#)

²⁶ See OECD (2019), "What characterises upper secondary vocational education and training?", *Education Indicators in Focus* [OECD iLibrary | What characterises upper secondary vocational education and training? \(oecd-ilibrary.org\)](#) also NCCA (2018) review of upper secondary education in nine jurisdictions [scoping-report-online-2.pdf \(ncca.ie\)](#)

²⁷ ESRI (2017) Leaving Certificate Applied Discussion Paper [scr-lca-discussion-paper.pdf \(ncca.ie\)](#)

²⁸ SOLAS (2020) The National Strategy for FET suggests how pathways from school to FET can be enhanced https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf