



Written Submission to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science regarding the Committee's examination of Leaving Certificate Reform: October 2021

1. Introduction

AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, is a long-established (1969), non-governmental membership organisation that promotes the value of adult learning and advocates for the rights of all adults to quality learning across the tertiary education system. We have an unwavering commitment to educational equality for adults; we offer solutions-focused advocacy that is evidence-based, drawing on research and our extensive, meaningful learner engagement activities. We continually engage with learners and educators from further education and training, community education and higher education, affording us insights into practice that widens participation. Ultimately, all our work aims to advocate for the rights of all adults to engage in learning and to fulfil their aspirations. Our membership comprises organisations and individuals committed to educational equality for adults: 500 members encompassing all 16 ETBs, over 120 community education organisations, adult learning and access departments of Higher Education Institutions, social justice NGOs, educators and learners across the Island of Ireland.

2. Summary

The experience of school and the Leaving Certificate has lifelong implications. Those who do not achieve the Leaving Certificate¹ face many obstacles from poorer health ([LWI](#), 2017), impeded social mobility, fewer employment opportunities, lower pay (CSO, 2016), barriers to higher education, lower levels of lifelong learning to unrealised potential. It is vital that a reformed Leaving Certificate ensures that all students are set up to succeed regardless of socio-economic background, gender, disability, religion, race ethnicity or disability. This submission draws on the experience of adult learners who left school early and the lessons gained from successful pedagogical approaches to educational equality within the adult and community learning sector so to shed light on the Leaving Certificate reform.

One aspect of adult learning is that it offers the opportunity to complete Leaving Certificate subjects or gain qualifications to an equivalent standard on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Every year, adults return to complete their Leaving Certificate or equivalent (NFQ level 5), in order to gain a qualification, to access a new job, to progress to further and higher education, and to support and inspire their children's education. In this submission, we will focus on the Leaving Certificate with regard to two areas: as a means to certify the end of secondary school and secondly as a means to allocate places for third-level education. Within these two separate functions; however, higher education access has the preeminent purpose of the Leaving Certificate displacing the main function. We argue these functions maintain social stratification to privilege middle class students and uphold inherent inequalities.

¹ Or Leaving Certificate standard education/the highest level of education is less than upper second level



We will offer comments regarding the potential learning that the Leaving Certificate can gain from the pedagogic and supports process in adult education, and specifically community education that is learner-centred. This relates to the theme 'Access, Equality and Well Being Supports'. We also consider equitable access to higher education based on the Leaving Certificate. This relates to the theme 'Higher and Further Education Requirements, Vocational Options and Career Paths'.

3. The Leaving Certificate and Educational Inequality

The Leaving Certificate privileges wealthier students who have the cultural and economic capital to benefit from the education system, including grinds, parental knowledge of the system and recognition of their cultural values in the pedagogic process. Financial means is a key distinguishing feature for success in the Leaving Certificate ([Lynch, 2018](#)). The benefits of success in the education system include access to higher education and elite courses ([HEA, 2020](#)), better-paid jobs ([OECD, 2021](#)), [longer life expectancy](#) and better health ([OECD, 2010](#)). Across all OECD countries, the higher the educational attainment, the higher the percentage of adults reporting being in good or very good health ([OECD, 2021, p 114](#)).

3.1 Statistics on LC or Equivalent Attainment for the Adult Population

Educational inequality in Ireland is persistent and must be addressed through efforts across primary, secondary, further and higher education.

- In Ireland, 83% of adults have completed upper secondary education (80% among men and 86% among women) (OECD, 2019). However, there are many disparities in attainment across age, gender, especially young males ([CSO, 2016](#)), geographic region, and for minority groups such as Travellers.
- Regarding people in employment, 13% of all employees have Level 3 NFQ or less as their highest level of qualification ([SOLAS, 2019, p. 47](#)), which equates to approximately 277,000 having NFQ Level 3 or less as their highest level of qualification, including 64,700 with NFQ Level 2 qualifications or less.
- An early school leaver is three times as likely to be unemployed than another person aged 18-24 who completed their secondary education. In Q2 2019, 25% of early school leavers were unemployed compared to 8% of other persons aged 18-24.
- The CSO Census (2016) found that only 13% of Travellers complete secondary education in comparison with 92% of the general population and 55% of Travellers have completed their formal education by the age of 15.
- In April 2016, there were 386,498 persons in Ireland who had finished their education having completed no higher than primary school level. There are significant discrepancies regarding socio-economic status and geographical location. For example, over one in five persons (21.9%) in Donegal, aged 15+, had not been educated beyond primary level, the highest for any county, followed by Monaghan (18.0%) and Cavan (17.8%) (CSO 2016).

3.2 Adults returning to Education

Yearly, many adults return to complete a number of Leaving Certificate subjects or to gain an equivalent FET qualification (NFQ level 5), a preferable option for many. This involves significant efforts from learners to overcome a range of barriers to learning including past negative experiences

of school. Through the National FET Learner Forum² learners attribute their return to education as a means to gain a qualification for employment “*there are a lot of jobs that wouldn’t take you on without your Leaving Certificate.*” (Tipperary ETB, 2019), to gain a new career “*My job finished up, I was in it for 12 years. I found it [FET] because I left school at 14 and I wanted a break away from what I had been doing so any place I went; the Leaving Cert was holding me back.*” (Limerick / Clare, 2019), to progress to further and higher education “*I suppose I came in with a vision of getting the Leaving Cert with a view of third level. I definitely feel, on the ETB’s end anyway, they’ve provided just that.*” (Donegal, 2019), and to support and inspire their children’s education “*My eldest goes around saying, ‘at least mam passed her Leaving Cert.’ So that is a bonus in itself, even though I stunned them that I was going back to school it helped push me and hopefully they’ll decide to do it when they’re a bit older*” (Louth Meath ETB, 2019).

However, many learners describe regret in not attaining the Leaving Certificate initially. This includes the lack of confidence, inability to achieve their educational aspirations earlier, and challenges arising from low-paid and precarious employment. Additionally, many students experienced challenges that hinder their educational opportunities, such as living in unsafe home environments, domestic violence, health issues including mental health and poverty.

4. The Leaving Certificate as a means to certify the end of Secondary School: Lessons on Educational Inclusion from Adult and Community Education.

The formal school system can take lessons from good practice across the tertiary education system, especially adult and community education which has a proven ability to be the most inclusive part of the education system. This section outlines how community education, effectively engages marginalised learners³, who are the dominant cohort (AONTAS, 2021).

4.1 Setting Students up for Success

Community education offers a package of services to people participating in learning. Community education is particularly successful at engaging people within socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. Integrated support services help learners overcome barriers to access which enables participation and progression. Services in many cases include: childcare facilities, one-to-one counselling, family support services, domestic violence supports, mentoring, one-to-one and small group educational supports, technology-enhanced learning, and access to career guidance. Such tailored supports for students undertaking the Leaving Certificate should be considered (either onsite or through effective engagement with local services).

4.2 Pedagogic Process

At national level pedagogic practice has gained greater prominence in higher education policy as a tool to overcome barriers to participation (NFTL 2019; HEA 2015). A focus on process, not product

² The National FET Learner Forum is a large-scale project designed to ensure FET is actively engaging learner voice and creating policy that is responsive to learner needs. In collaboration with ETBs, over 1000 FET learners share their FET Learning experiences annually.

³ The unemployed; socio-economically disadvantaged learners; people with a disability; lone parents; migrants; Travellers and Roma communities; people experiencing homelessness; women; substance misusers; people living in Direct Provision; and ex-prisoners.

that fosters a sense of belonging, is becoming a central theme to good teaching and learning practice. This approach is embedded in adult education practice and is especially common in community education which is underpinned by an educational philosophy based on dialogue and empowerment (Freire, 1970). The approach builds on a learner's lived experience through a pedagogic process that recognises their knowledge and fosters individual capacity and confidence. The impact of which is the high rate of participation and retention in community education by early school leavers and target groups.

5. Leaving Certificate as a means to allocate places for Third Level Education: Equitable Access to Higher Education based on the Leaving Certificate

The Leaving Certificate acts as a mechanism to determine who gains entry to higher education, especially universities, perpetuating the dominant social class as the majority group resulting in under participation by cohorts of society including lower socio-economic groups who are the focus of access policy (e.g. [HEA, 2018](#))

Diversity in pathways after secondary school are welcome, and the range of FET options should be promoted effectively as a valued option to school leavers. However, there is a fundamental issue that working class students must navigate a range of options post-Leaving Cert, such as additional courses, PLCs⁴, and extended study time in order to attain access to higher education, in part due to a highly competitive points system which favours students with access to private education, educational grinds, and access to additional learning resources.

Adult learners describe the challenges of progressing to higher education, but there are also issues regarding access to Post Leaving Certificate courses for those without an upper second level education.

There is a reserved place system used for both mature students and those with NFQ Level 5 and 6 qualifications gained in the Further Education (FE) sector, however the number is small, limits meaningful access ([Fleming et al., 2017](#)), and this cohort only makes up 6.6 per cent (or 2,985) of the 42,464 new entrants (p.75)

The modes of progression for non-traditional students into HE are:

- In-house access or foundation programmes operated and accredited by individual HEIs;
- Stand-alone access or foundation programmes outside of HEIs in the form of PLC courses run mainly by ETBs at Level 5 on the NFQ;
- Direct access via HEAR and DARE through Leaving Certificate points for those under 23 years of age;
- Mature student entry routes;
- Progression via NFQ Level 5 or 6 qualifications, also referred to as the FET route.

([Fleming et al., 2017](#), p.90)

⁴ Working class students and women were found to be more likely to engage in PLC programme provision ([ESRI, 2018](#))



6. Recommendations for Review of the Leaving Certificate based on Learner Feedback and AONTAS Member Consultations.

Access, Equality and Well Being Supports (including assessment)

1. Meeting Basic Needs

Student supports including, travel costs, food costs, financial costs of all materials covered.

2. Support to Navigate the Education System

Guidance must be a core foundation/support for all learners. It should be a core stand-alone structure that supports learners from a much younger age and include all pathway options including FET

3. Fostering Social Capital, Connection and Belonging

Inclusive curricula and pedagogy that draws on good practice in adult education and recognises the lived experiences of all learners and fosters critical thinking This must move away from the 'banking-model' of rote learning

4. Supporting Wellness to Learn

Mental health and wellbeing supports

5. Encouraging New Learners to Engage

Re-engage students who left school early through outreach, guidance and a range of options to achieve the Leaving Certificate

6. Curricula, Terminal Exam and Continuous Assessment

- Continuous assessment should be considered as an option for students following a clear review of the most equitable practices to achieve consistent, unbiased, inclusive assessment processes
- Review the optimal number of Leaving Certificate subjects, and the availability and weighting of subjects to ensure fairness
- Focus on contextual learning, representative of the lived experience of all learners, that fosters a love of learning throughout life
- Include broader learning e.g. service-learning and volunteering as contributing merit to the Leaving Certificate results
- Consider the value of the Leaving Certificate Applied and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme to the student in terms of accreditation that offers meaningful progression options and does not stigmatise learners.

Higher and Further Education Requirements, Vocational Options and Career Paths

7. **Recognition for Prior Learning** as a tool for access to HE (including a national policy to ensure fairness across all HEIs)

8. **Higher Education Links Scheme (HELS)** scoring of FET awards for accessing higher education. The NFQ Level 5/6 qualifications do not have the same weighting as the Leaving Certificate. The maximum of 120 credits for these awards results in a total of 390 points. This needs to be rectified for fairness

9. **Connected and formalise pathways** to HE in all ETBs

10. **Strengthen formalised relationships** between HE sector and school

11. **Leaving Certificate** is no longer the sole entry route option in HE.

Further Information

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