



Implementation of Ireland's Leaving Certificate 2020-2021: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, countries around the world faced the challenge of how to certify student learning at the end of schooling when in-person examinations were no longer possible. In 2020 and 2021, Ireland swiftly developed emergency measures to replace the country's historic Senior Cycle examinations or Leaving Certificate. The global health situation, school closures and the challenges to continue teaching and learning in this context made it a particularly difficult time for students, teachers, school leaders, families and policy makers.

Ireland's emergency solutions – the Calculated Grades System in 2020 and the Accredited Grades System in 2021 – gave students the option to draw on teachers' professional judgement to estimate their grades. These temporary emergency solutions provided recognised certification of student achievement and enabled Ireland's young people to progress to the next stage of life, into further education or employment. This policy perspective reflects on the experience for stakeholders of the solutions that were adopted in 2020 and 2021.

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1 Introduction

Overview

This policy perspective presents an assessment of the implementation of temporary alternative arrangements for Ireland's Senior Cycle state examinations, also referred to as the Leaving Certificate, which were put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021. The pandemic caused a global crisis that largely exceeded the public health sphere and has deeply affected the world of education and conditions for student learning. Since the start of the pandemic in early 2020, countries around the world have had to temporarily close schools to slow the spread of the virus and protect children and those surrounding them. As a result, students and teachers had to move almost overnight to learning online from home. External student assessments were cancelled or replaced in many countries, and families were expected to take a larger role in supporting student learning, putting the most vulnerable children at greatest risk of learning loss (Gouédard, Pont and Viennet, 2020^[1]).

Ireland was not spared these challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools were temporarily closed in both 2020 and 2021. School closures brought huge disruption to the lives of children and young people, and the collective well-being of society. The impact fundamentally disrupted the way Irish external examinations were conducted in 2020 and 2021.

The Irish education system adapted and showed resilience in many ways. Schools used technology to facilitate remote learning for students, adopted health and sanitary measures that allowed classrooms to reopen and introduced alternative examination arrangements for the Leaving Certificate at the end of the Senior Cycle. More specifically, in 2020, the oral and practical examinations due to take place around Easter were cancelled and the main summer examinations were postponed. Students were offered the option of receiving Calculated Grades for the subjects they were studying, with the opportunity to sit the 2020 Leaving Certificate examinations when it was deemed safe to do so (which ultimately was in November). In such cases, they were accorded the better result on a subject-by-subject basis.

In 2021, as the COVID-19 pandemic continued, a set of Leaving Certificate examinations took place in June. Leaving Certificate candidates could also opt for a set of Accredited Grades through a system operated by the State Examinations Commission (SEC), known as SEC-Accredited Grades. In this way, students were able to opt for written examinations, SEC-Accredited Grades or a combination of the two. Again, they were accorded the better result on a subject-by-subject basis.

The Department of Education of Ireland asked the OECD to undertake a review of the design and implementation of the alternative examination arrangements that were implemented temporarily during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021. The objective was to assess the implementation of these alternative assessment arrangements and capture what was learnt from that experience.

The review assesses implementation of the Calculated Grades process in 2020 and the Accredited Grades process in 2021 based on stakeholders' perspectives, including consideration of the context, design and processes adopted to deliver the Leaving Certificate during the COVID-19 pandemic. It provides lessons learnt to help ensure that Ireland's student assessment process will be resilient and continue to meet 21st century needs.

Methodology

The OECD’s Implementing Education Policies project offers countries tailored support for implementation and/or assessment of their education policies. To undertake this review, the OECD put together a team of internal and external experts. In February 2022, after conducting initial desk-based research, the team carried out semi-structured interviews with relevant stakeholders in Ireland to collect their views on the Calculated and Accredited Grades Systems employed by Ireland in 2020 and 2021. A list of the consulted organisations is provided in Annex A: List of interviewed organisations. The team also built on its previous work with Ireland for the Assessment of the Senior Cycle Review (OECD, 2020^[2]). The analysis is based on research evidence, stakeholder perspectives and international practices.

The Implementing Education Policies team used its analytical framework on effective education policy implementation applied to the COVID-19 context (Viennet and Pont, 2017^[3]) (OECD, 2014^[4]) to reflect on the Leaving Certificate and its implementation in Ireland during 2020 and 2021. Building on these dimensions, the analysis is structured as follows:

- The Leaving Certificate in context: How the Leaving Certificate in Ireland compares from an international perspective and how COVID-19 impacted its regular functioning.
- Design of the Leaving Certificate during COVID-19: How the Calculated and Accredited Grades Systems functioned as temporary emergency solutions to the immediate challenges caused by COVID-19.
- Implementation in schools and the role of teacher judgement: How teacher judgement played a role in the implementation of the Calculated and Accredited Grades Systems.
- Lessons learnt: Lessons for the future Ireland can consider from the implementation of the Leaving Certificate during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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2 The Leaving Certificate in context: An international perspective and the impact of COVID-19

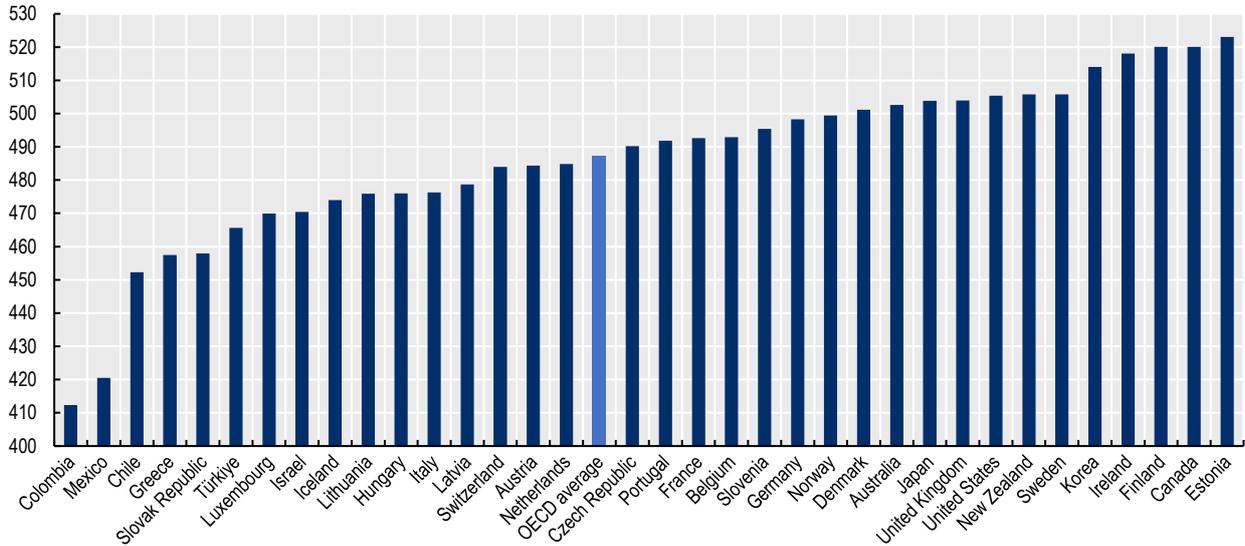
As one of the high-performing education systems across OECD countries, Ireland has a long tradition of high-quality education and is committed to adapting its system to the challenges that the future presents. Upper secondary is a key stage in the education trajectory of any individual and plays a key role in Ireland's strategy to enhance an already robust education system (OECD, 2020^[2]). As in many other parts of the world, policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the education system in Ireland. In particular, two different revised assessment models were put in place: the Calculated Grades System in 2020, which was then further developed and evolved into the Accredited Grades System in 2021. This section sets out the context in which these two revised assessment models were undertaken, introduces the Leaving Certificate in a comparative perspective and reviews the impact of COVID-19 on the regular functioning of the Leaving Certificate.

Upper secondary education in Ireland

Ireland stands out internationally as a high-performing education system

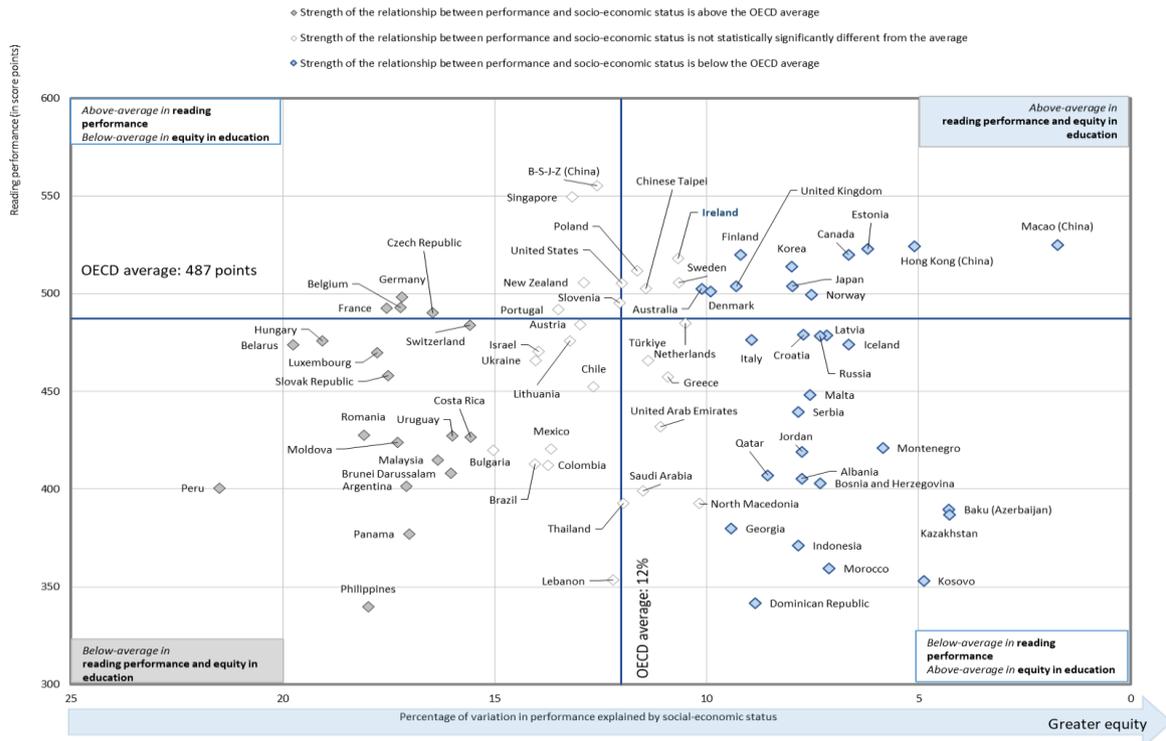
Students in Ireland consistently perform above the average of OECD member countries in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which assesses 15-year-old students as they transition into upper secondary education in each country (in Ireland, this stage is known as the Senior Cycle). In 2018, students in Ireland scored 518 points on average in reading (Figure 1). This was among the highest of all OECD countries, with only three countries (Canada, Estonia and Finland) scoring higher on average. Average scores in mathematics (500) and science (496) were slightly lower, but still above the OECD average (OECD, 2019^[5]). In addition, according to PISA data, Ireland performs well in terms of the relationship between equity and student performance - the percentage of the variation in reading performance (as measured by the PISA test) that is explained by socio-economic status is below the average for the countries participating in PISA in 2018 (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Average scores in reading across OECD countries, PISA 2018



Source: OECD (2019^[6]). PISA 2018 Database, <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/> (accessed on 6 December 2022).

Figure 2. Ireland performs well in equity and student performance

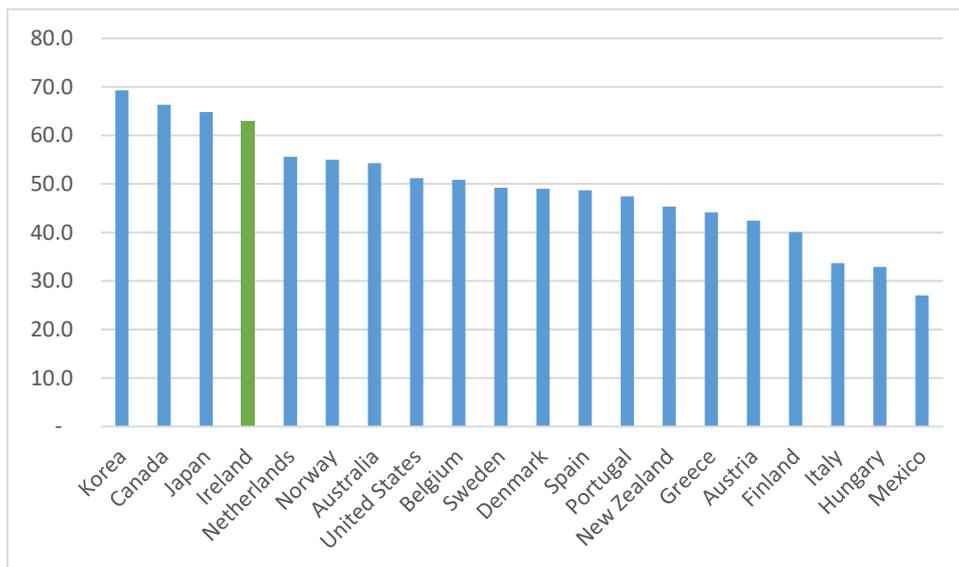


Source: OECD (2019^[5]) PISA 2018 Results (Volume II): Where All Students Can Succeed, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/b5fd1b8f-en>.

Almost all young people in Ireland complete upper secondary education. In 2020, 94% of 25-34 year-olds had completed at least upper secondary education. Only 6% did not have this level of education (compared to the OECD average of 15%), which is among the lowest rates across the OECD (OECD, 2021^[7]).

Many young people attain tertiary education in Ireland. In 2021, about 63% of the population aged 25-34 years old had attained tertiary education (Figure 3), one of the highest rates of tertiary attainment among OECD countries (OECD, 2021^[7]). The high enrolment in bachelor's programmes makes students' transition after upper secondary education a competitive process.

Figure 3. Population with tertiary education 25-34 year-olds, 2021



Source: OECD (2022^[8]), "Population with tertiary education" (indicator), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/0b8f90e9-en>.

Students feel supported by their teachers but are anxious and report lower levels of life satisfaction

Students in Ireland feel well-supported by their teachers, with an index of teacher support higher than the OECD average (OECD, 2019^[9]). Around three-quarters of students report that in every lesson or most lessons, their teacher shows an interest in every student's learning, gives extra help when students need it, helps students with their learning and continues teaching until students understand (OECD, 2019^[10]).

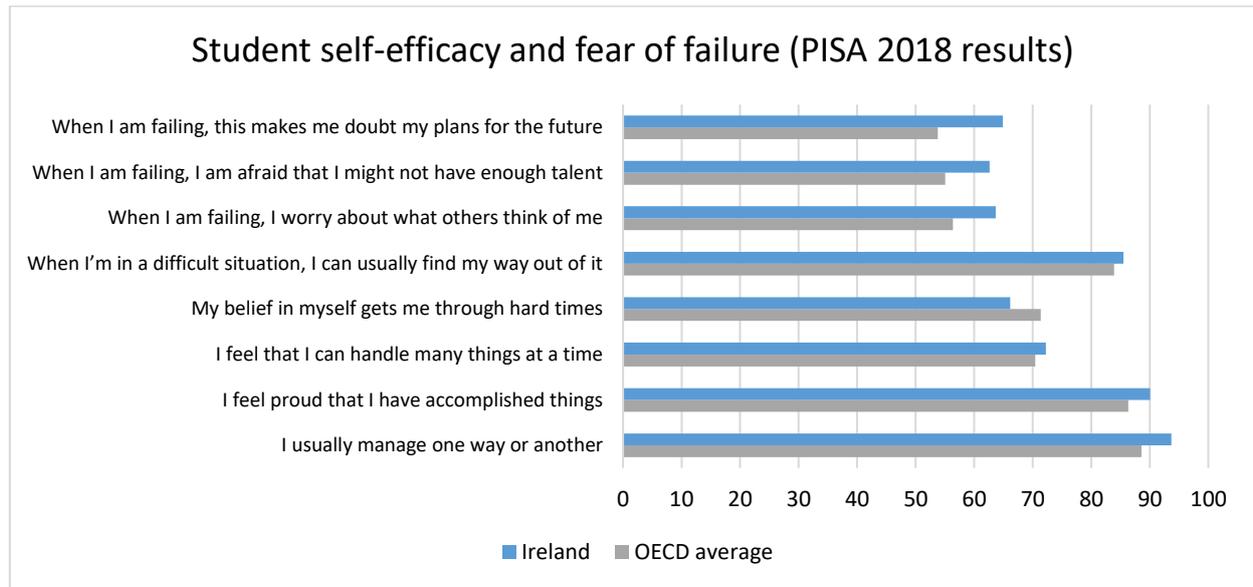
However, while students perform well and feel supported, indicators of student well-being suggest that some students are stressed and anxious at school. Students in Ireland report lower levels of overall life satisfaction than their peers in many other OECD countries. In 2018, 26% of 15-year-olds in Ireland reported that they were very satisfied with life, compared to 33% across the OECD on average (OECD, 2019^[11]). One source of anxiety for students in Ireland seems to be related to fear of failure. In 2018, 15-year-olds in Ireland reported more than the average of their peers in other countries that, when they fail, this makes them doubt their plans for the future and worry about what people will think of them (Figure 4).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many young people internationally reported greater levels of stress and anxiety than other age groups. When schools shut down, young people were cut off from their normal sources of support, including the daily routines and social interactions that support the maintenance of

good mental health. In most countries, the mental health of young people (15-24 year-olds) deteriorated over 2020-21 (OECD, 2021^[12]). In Ireland, a survey of young people in summer 2020 found that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected their health and well-being, especially among some marginalised groups. Young people reported greater worry, anxiety and depression, and almost a third (27%) were anxious about the future (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2020^[13]).

Figure 4. Student self-efficacy and fear of failure, PISA 2018

Based on students’ reports



Source: OECD (2019^[6]) PISA 2018 Database, Tables III.B1.13.1 and III.B1.13.2 <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/> (accessed on 6 December 2022).

Almost all upper secondary students are enrolled in general education programmes

In Ireland, students can complete an optional Transition Year which gives them the space to develop their cognitive and social-emotional skills for the future without the pressure of high-stakes examinations. After the Transition Year, or directly after the completion of the Junior Cycle, students choose from one of three two-year upper secondary programmes:

- **Leaving Certificate Established Programme:** A general education programme that aims to provide learners with a broad, balanced education. Students generally take between five and six to seven subjects for examination purposes (as six is the number of subjects used for Central Applications Office (CAO) points calculation purposes for progression to tertiary education). Successful certification of the Leaving Certificate Established provides students with direct access to tertiary education, subject to requirements of individual courses and institutions.
- **Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme:** Similar to the Established Programme, with students taking six or seven subjects, as well as two additional modules: Preparation for the World of Work and Enterprise Education. Successful completion of the Leaving Certificate Vocational also provides students with direct access to tertiary education, subject to requirements of individual courses and institutions.

- **Leaving Certificate Applied Programme:** Students follow a pre-vocational programme made up of a range of different courses structured around vocational preparation, vocational education and general education. Unlike the Leaving Certificate Established and the Leaving Certificate Vocational, successful completion of the Leaving Certificate Applied does not in general provide students with direct access to tertiary education.

Most students (70.8% in 2020) take the Leaving Certificate Established Programme. The share of students taking the Established and Applied Programmes has increased slightly in recent years, while the share of those taking the Vocational Programme has declined (Department of Education, 2021_[14]) (Table 1).

Table 1. Share of students in Ireland taking upper secondary programmes, 2016-20

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Leaving Certificate Established	67.8%	68.3%	69.2%	70.0%	70.8%
Leaving Certificate Vocational	27.3%	26.8%	25.9%	25.00%	23.9%
Leaving Certificate Applied	4.9%	4.9%	4.9%	5.1%	5.3%

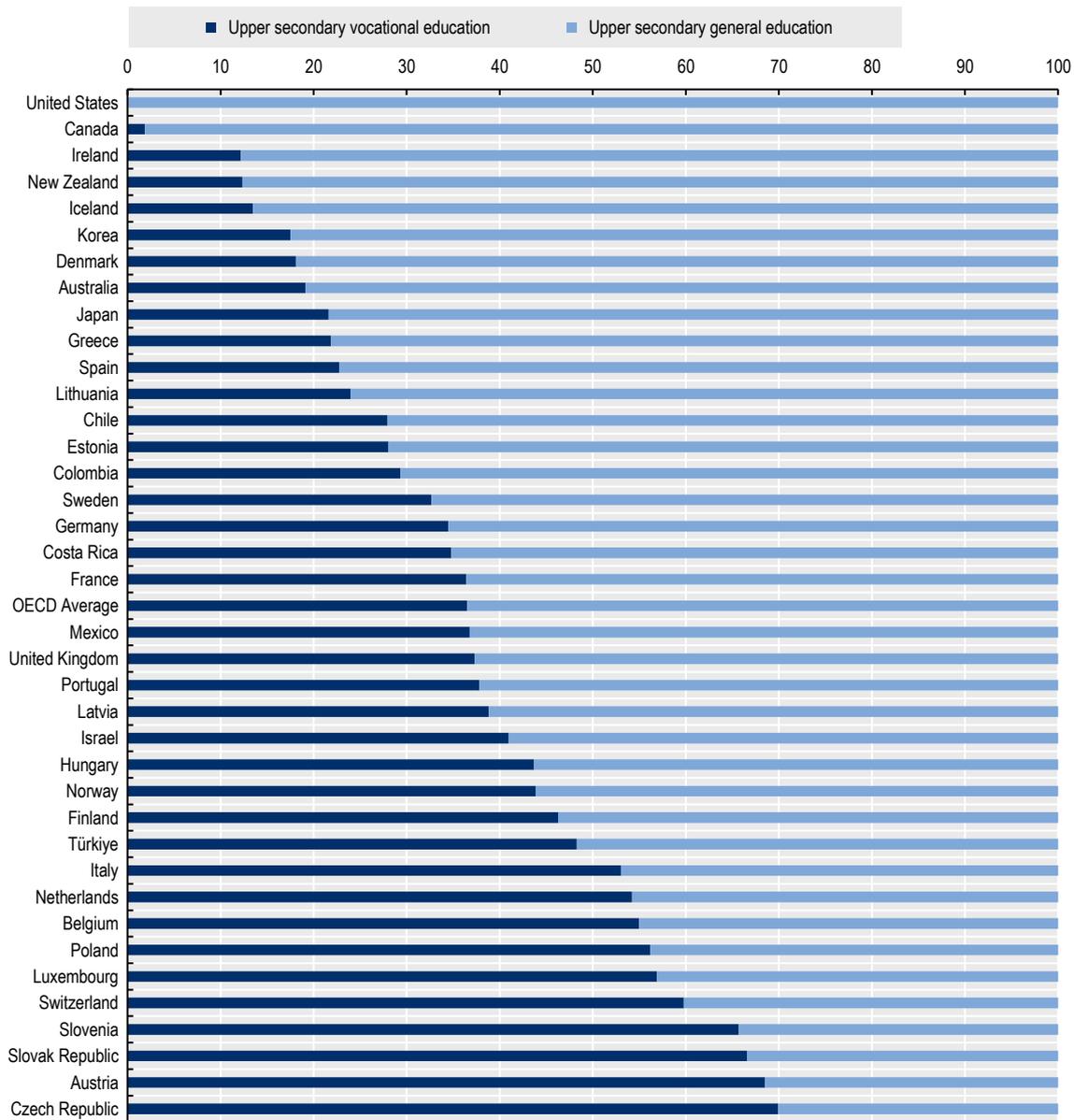
Note: Data is reported on an academic-year basis (i.e. 2020 means September 2020). Enrolments for Leaving Certificate programmes are the sum of both 5th and 6th year pupils, while percentages are calculated as the percent of both 5th and 6th year enrolments.

Source: Department of Education (2021_[14]), *Education Indicators for Ireland*, Department of Education, Dublin, https://www.google.com/search?q=212247_a97b6e7c-92bb-4039-938f-1eda1736fb99.pdf&oq=212247_a97b6e7c-92bb-4039-938f-1eda1736fb99.pdf&aqs=edge..69i57.425564j0j1&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8 (accessed on 25 March 2022).

Unlike most OECD countries, all of Ireland's upper secondary programmes are classified as general education according to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED)¹ (OECD/Eurostat/UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015_[15]). This means that almost all school-age upper-secondary students are enrolled in general upper secondary programmes, as reflected in Ireland's low share of 15-19 year-olds enrolled in vocationally-oriented programmes (Figure 5). In most OECD countries, education systems offer students the option to develop in-depth vocational skills and often to undertake some work-based learning as part of a vocationally-oriented upper secondary programme (Stronati, 2023_[16]). What this meant for Ireland in 2020 and 2021 was that almost the whole cohort of students in their final year of the Senior Cycle was impacted by not being able to take the Leaving Certificate examinations.

¹ ISCED is the standard framework used to categorise and report cross-nationally comparable education statistics.

Figure 5. Share of 15-19 year-old students enrolled in upper secondary by programme orientation



Note: Upper secondary vocational education includes upper secondary school and work-based vocational education (ISCED 2011, level 3 programme 5_SW). Countries are ranked in ascending order of the share of 15-19 year-old students enrolled in upper secondary vocational education.

Source: OECD (2021^[7]), "Education at a glance: Enrolment by gender, programme orientation and mode of study", *OECD Education Statistics* (database), <https://doi.org/10.1787/1e72e8c8-en>.

Ireland's Leaving Certificate in the international context

In Ireland, assessment of student learning in upper secondary education (the Senior Cycle) takes place towards the end of the cycle in the case of the Established Leaving Certificate. In the case of the Leaving Certificate Applied, modules are spread across the two years of the programme. Box 1 discusses the purposes and functions of different types of student assessment. Towards the end of the Senior Cycle, Established Leaving Certificate students in Ireland take the national upper secondary exit examination, called the Leaving Certificate, which has been in place since 1925. In certain subjects, additional assessment components take place prior to the terminal written examination. As noted earlier, there are three different types of Leaving Certificates linked to the different upper secondary programmes that students can follow during the Senior Cycle: Established Leaving Certificate, Vocational Leaving Certificate and Applied Leaving Certificate.

Box 1. The purposes and functions of student assessment

Student assessments, which focus on understanding the level of knowledge and skills acquired by a student, have multiple purposes. These are rarely served by a single assessment instrument or by a single form of assessment, such as external examinations, peer feedback processes or performance reviews. The functions are sometimes contradictory, and there is no one assessment system or tool that can fulfil all of them perfectly. Assessment systems need to combine a range of different types of assessments to capture a broad range of learning outcomes for different purposes (OECD, 2013_[17]).

Three main purposes of assessment are relevant for Ireland in relation to the current Leaving Certificate:

- **Improved learning:** Central to an effective policy framework for student assessment is the expectation that assessment supports student learning (OECD, 2013_[17]). Many teachers' continuous assessment judgements about students' assignments, or even their everyday accomplishments, are designed to provide feedback to students so they can improve their learning over time by becoming more aware of strengths and weakness that they might try to remedy. Diagnostic assessments, formative assessments, peer assessments, performance assessments, portfolio assessments and student self-assessments provide different ways of using assessment to improve learning and achievement over time in a way that is based on personal knowledge of the student, the student's capacities and the student's special circumstances at home and in life.
- **Selection and certification:** National examinations are standardised assessments developed at the national or state level with formal consequences for students. At the end of upper secondary education, national examinations certify and signal student achievement for entry to the labour market or further education. For example, when places in tertiary education are scarce or limited, upper secondary exit examinations may also serve a selection function. Selection and certification processes require assessment methods that are trusted, reliable and not subject to manipulation or corruption.
- **Accountability:** Over the past 40 years, examination and national assessment results have also been used for purposes of public and professional accountability. National and international assessments provide reliable data on learning outcomes that countries use to measure and report on the performance of their national educational systems, and sometimes on the performance of schools. Accountability provisions, including published assessments, can create transparency in a system and point to where interventions might be needed in individual schools, subjects or year levels, for instance.

In general, a comprehensive assessment system should include a range of internal and external approaches and make use of different assessment formats to capture a broad range of learning outcomes for different purposes. It is not appropriate to try and serve multiple purposes with a single assessment. It is important, instead, to develop a comprehensive assessment system that is clear about what the various formats and approaches can achieve and ensure that they are used appropriately for their intended purpose. Providing multiple opportunities and formats for student assessment can increase both the validity and reliability of student assessment (OECD, 2013^[17]).

Source: OECD (2013^[17]), OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education Synergies for Better Learning: An International Perspective on Evaluation and Assessment, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264190658-en>.

The purpose of the Leaving Certificate is to measure attainment and satisfy the achievement of completion of second-level education. The results of the Leaving Certificate are used by candidates following a number of different paths, including as a means of entry to the world of work, to apprenticeships or traineeships, to further education or to tertiary education. The Central Applications Office (CAO) and the tertiary (higher) education institutions (HEIs) use the results of the examination to regulate entry into tertiary education. The entry requirements for tertiary education are matters for the HEIs, which are autonomous bodies, and they deal with these through the central applications process, in line with their own decisions. At a governmental level, policy responsibility for entry into further and tertiary education is a matter for Ireland’s Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Department of Education, 2021^[18]).

Entry into tertiary education is determined by order of merit on the basis of the points obtained from the six best scores on a student’s Leaving Certificate examinations. Some individual HEIs also set basic matriculation requirements for admission to the institution, and minimum course entry requirements for admission into specific courses. The CAO matches students’ results with the HEI’s requirements and places available for each subject (Dublin, n.d.^[19]). The number of CAO points required for entrance into a given course are calculated on the basis of supply (the number of places available in the course), and demand (the number of applicants and the CAO points achieved by them). While some institutions and courses may have certain specific subject requirements, CAO points are calculated on the basis of overall Leaving Certificate performance.

In Ireland, the entrance system based on points is said to contribute to high levels of trust and objectivity in the higher education selection process. As was explained during the project team’s meetings with stakeholders in Ireland, “the points system” carries significant cultural and social weight. It also contributes to the position of the Leaving Certificate as a symbol of identity in Irish education, which creates strong social and intergenerational connection among individuals educated in Ireland. At the same time, most stakeholders commonly consider the points system a stressful experience. However, it should be noted that students indicate their preferred courses before the points are taken into account to determine whether they get the course they chose. As a result, the vast majority of students are offered one of the courses listed in their preferences (OECD, 2020^[21]). In line with the norm of previous years, in 2021 approximately 80% of offers for Level 8 courses were for one of the applicant’s top three preferences.

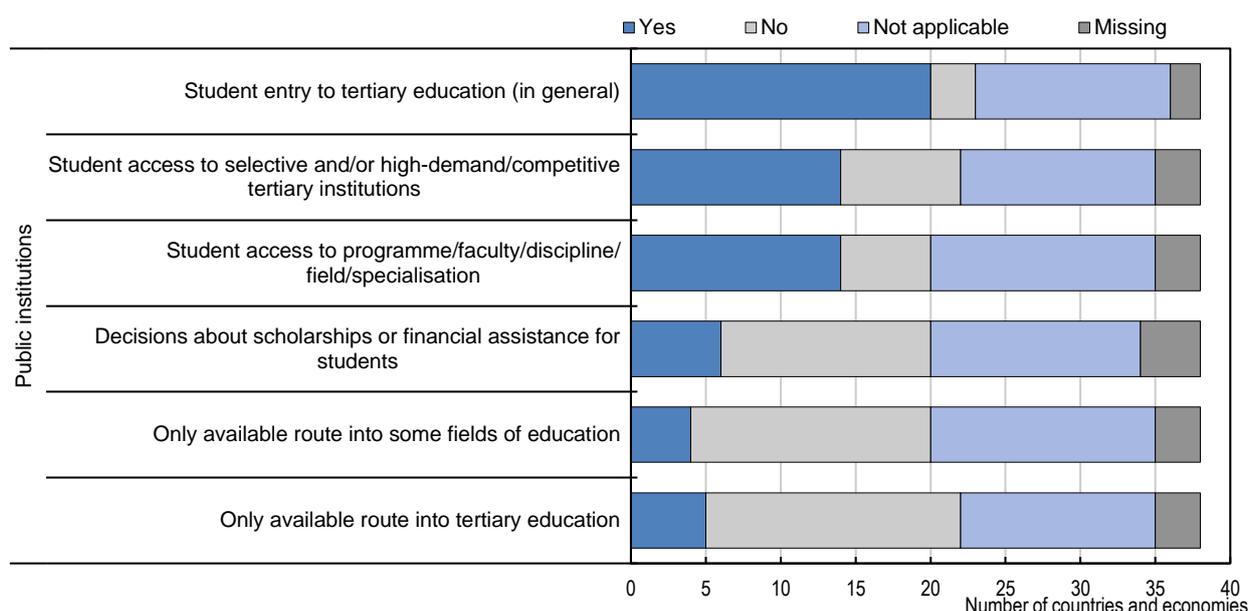
When considered in an international context, the Leaving Certificate has a number of distinctive features. These features shaped the scale of the challenge created by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 when students could not take examinations in line with the norms of earlier years, as well as the solutions that could be developed in response to it.

Every mark in the Leaving Certificate counts for tertiary selection

Internationally, it is common for countries to use exit examinations at the end of upper secondary education for the same two purposes that the Leaving Certificate is used for in Ireland: student certification and entry into tertiary education. In 2017, half of the countries and economies in an OECD survey reported that national/central examinations at the end of upper secondary were used for student entry into tertiary education (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Purposes and uses of national/central examinations as criteria for admission to tertiary institutions, 2017

National/central examinations refer to examinations for students at the end of upper secondary level



Note: Government-dependent private institutions and independent private institutions have been excluded.

Source: OECD (2019_[20]), *Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/f8d7880d-en>.

However, education systems use the results of national upper secondary examinations in different ways, depending on their systems for tertiary entrance:

- In **open or unselective systems of tertiary admission**, all applicants with the required minimum attainment level can enrol in the programme (OECD, 2019_[20]). Many open systems use upper secondary examination results to set a minimum threshold that students must meet to be eligible to enter tertiary education. For example, all students who pass the Baccalaureate in France are guaranteed a place in tertiary education. As marks from upper secondary examinations are not used for selection, each mark in the national upper secondary examination does not necessarily matter, thus reducing the overall stakes and pressure associated with the examination.
- In **selective systems of tertiary admission**, applicants are required to meet specific criteria. In these systems, institutions and courses set their own requirements for selection. In some systems, such as in Finland and Sweden, requirements are based on a number of sources of information, including aptitude tests, schoolwork and interviews (OECD, 2019_[20]).
- In a few countries, such as England (United Kingdom), Ireland and Scotland (United Kingdom), institutions and courses **base their selection on results from upper secondary examinations**.

While some institutions also include other information, such as portfolios for art, additional tests or interviews, examination results remain overwhelmingly the dominant source of information.

The selective, points-based system for tertiary entrance in Ireland means that every mark in the Leaving Certificate counts towards students’ admission to tertiary education. This process is particularly competitive in Ireland for the following reasons:

- Very high completion rates in upper secondary education.
- A high share of students is enrolled in general upper secondary programmes which are traditionally designed as a pathway into tertiary education. In countries where a higher share of students is enrolled in other types of upper secondary programmes, such as vocational education, students are being prepared for a more diverse range of future pathways such as into other post-secondary education pathways or employment.
- High shares of people entering tertiary education based on the Leaving Certificate (about 70% of new entrants).

Students in Ireland are competing for tertiary entrance with a very large share of the student cohort, which makes entrance competitive. Every single mark in the Leaving Certificate can be critical for students and their chances of getting a place in their desired institution and programme. Although the vast majority of students are offered one of their preferred courses and the points system is perceived to contribute to high levels of trust in public education in Ireland, most stakeholders consider it to be a stressful experience (OECD, 2020^[2]).

A large proportion of Leaving Certificate marks are based on externally set, written examinations

Across most OECD countries, it is common to use a combination of different sources of information about student learning at different occasions over the year to assess students for the purpose of upper secondary certification. This reflects evidence that alone, a single type of assessment is rarely able to assess the full breadth of competencies that modern curricula expect young people to acquire by the end of schooling (OECD, 2013^[17]). Certification for completion of upper secondary education in most OECD countries now combines teacher- and externally-assessed content in varying shares (Table 2).

Table 2. Cross-national summary of upper secondary examinations

	Age of national / state examinations	External examination system	Format of external examinations	Contribution of school-based assessments
England	16, 18	National, terminal written exams – fixed dates. Graded on total marks	Mainly written	None in main subjects
France	18	National, terminal written exams – fixed dates. Fixed pass marks (10/20)	Written, oral	40% (includes tests based on item bank)
Ireland	16, 18	National, terminal, written exams – fixed dates	Mainly written	None in main subjects
New Zealand	17-18	External module assessments – fixed dates	Exams, portfolios, reports, performances	50% teacher assessment
Norway	15, 18 (only 1 or 2 exams)	National – only taken by a sample of students	National and local exams (including practicals and orals)	Mainly teacher assessed – including continuous assessment
Ontario (Canada)	Not applicable	No province-wide subject exams Credit based Grade 9 numeracy and Grade 10 literacy test (literacy test serves as graduation requirement)	No external subject exams	Teacher assessed (numeracy test counts for up to 30% of final mathematics grade)
Queensland (Australia)	18 (teacher assessed, locally moderated)	From 2020, state-wide exam worth 25% of total marks	Written exams introduced (25%) in 2020	75% based on coursework – teachers mark, teacher moderated
Scotland	14-16; 15-17; 16-18 (students' progression rates vary)	National, timed, written exams – flexible age of entry, fixed exam dates	Mainly written	Coursework tasks (varying by subject teacher assessed, externally moderated)
Wales	16, 18	National, timed, written exams – fixed dates	Mainly written	Coursework tasks (approximately 20%)

Source: Adapted from Stobart (2021^[21]), "Upper secondary education student assessment in Scotland: A comparative perspective", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 253, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/d8785ddf-en>.

There have been some changes in recent years to introduce greater variety to assessment and certification in the Senior Cycle in Ireland:

- The Leaving Certificate Applied is awarded based on three forms of assessment: 1) credits that students accumulate by completing modules; 2) performance in Student Tasks, such as the development of a product, investigation, performance, provision of a service, staging of an event or a personal reflection; and 3) final examinations (NCCA, 2001^[22]).
- Many newer and social science subjects in the Established Leaving Certificate and the Vocational Leaving Certificate now incorporate some type of coursework that also contributes to students' final marks. The coursework contributes at a minimum around 20-30% of the Leaving Certificate marks and includes student research projects (e.g. in Geography, History and Economics) and practical skills examinations (e.g. in Engineering). In certain subjects, the coursework or other additional components to a written examination carry a proportion of marks appreciably higher than this. The coursework, which is anonymised and marked externally by the State Examinations Commission, enables students to demonstrate proficiency in course content and skills that are not easily assessed by the end-of-course examination (Department of Education, 2021^[23]).
- Leaving Certificate Vocational students study two modules, Preparation for the World of Work and Enterprise Education, where 60% of the marks are assessed via a Portfolio of Coursework (PDST, 2017^[24]).

Assessment of some subjects that are generally considered core subjects for upper secondary students and which many students in Ireland are required to take, such as English and mathematics, continue to be assessed through external written examinations at the end of the two-year Senior Cycle. Where coursework components exist, they are submitted in the spring of students’ final year. This meant that when the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in March 2020 and schools were forced to close, students had not yet submitted their coursework and had not yet completed any assessments for certification purposes

As such, in 2020, and to a lesser extent in 2021, Ireland had to find a solution for a very large share of its student cohort who were not able to take the physical written examinations and had not yet submitted much of their coursework. In contrast, in many OECD countries, certification of upper secondary education already included some degree of teacher-assessed content, and this was expanded when it became impossible to conduct written examinations. In some countries, assessment had also been more continual or periodical throughout the upper secondary cycle, so that teachers and schools had some recorded student achievement for certification purposes when schools closed in spring 2020.

The predominance of terminal, written examinations partly reflect teachers’ perceptions of their role and the historic tradition of the Leaving Certificate

The OECD Review Team was made aware that in Ireland teachers tend to perceive their role as one of advocates for students. This might be reflected in the high levels of teacher support students in Ireland reported in PISA 2018. Conversely, teachers do not traditionally see themselves as having a role in respect to their own students in the high-stakes, external student assessment that characterises the Leaving Certificate. Part of this perception is likely linked to the high stakes that the Leaving Certificate carries in the points system for entrance to tertiary education in Ireland. Teachers may not wish to have a summative role that determines the future life opportunities of the young adults that they have taught and with whom they have developed a relationship over many months and years.

The Leaving Certificate was developed in a broad tradition of student assessment where external, public one-time examinations are used to assess students at key points in secondary schooling (Stobart, 2021^[21]). Other systems developed in this tradition include the A-Levels in England and the Higher and Advanced Highers in Scotland. In these countries, as in Ireland, the characteristics of these examinations as written, one-off examinations are strongly embedded both educationally and culturally.

The Leaving Certificate shapes teaching, learning and student experiences in upper secondary education

Student representatives reported to the OECD Review Team that the Leaving Certificate is a period of intense stress and pressure for them. The extent to which the terminal examinations dominate the Senior Cycle is reflected in the fact that Senior Cycle students in Ireland are commonly referred to as “studying for their Leaving Certificate”. The Senior Cycle programmes are also officially named after the terminal examination that students take at the end of the cycle (i.e. Established Leaving Certificate, Vocational Leaving Certificate or Applied Leaving Certificate). The predominant role of the Leaving Certificate during the Senior Cycle limits space for the development of the broader, transversal competencies and socio-emotional skills that are critical for young people’s lifelong learning (OECD, 2020^[2]).

In Ireland, there is a strong culture of private tuition (known as grinds) to help students prepare for the Leaving Certificate examinations, with nearly half (49%) of young people reporting attending grinds. Students from the most socio-economically advantaged backgrounds (the highest income quintile) reported attending grinds twice as much (63%) as those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds (lowest income quintile) (33%) (Growing Up in Ireland, 2016^[25]).

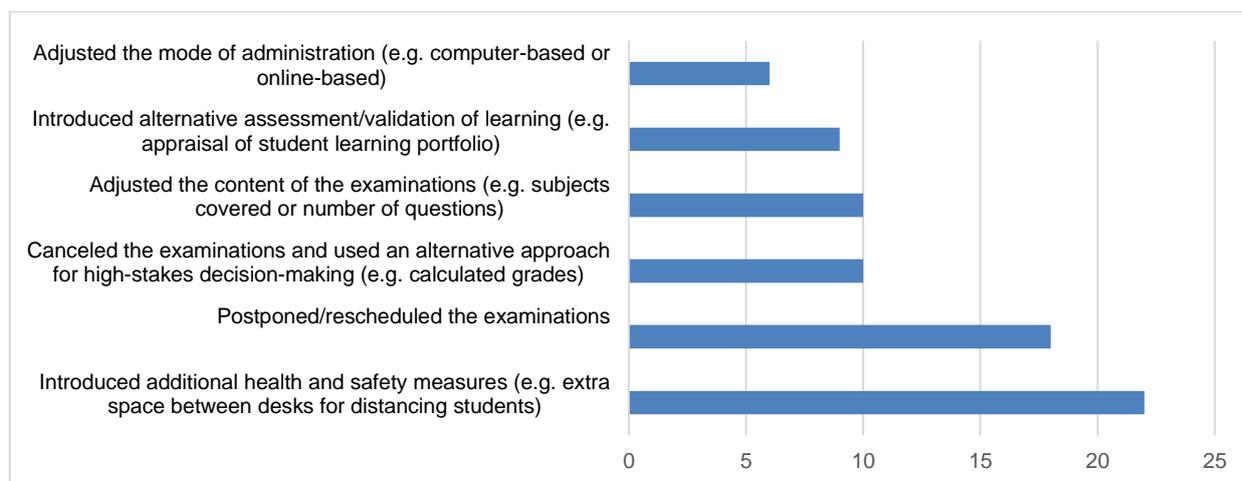
The international and national context during COVID-19

In spring 2020, the Department of Education in Ireland, like many other education systems internationally, was coping with the move to remote work settings and developing the information technology infrastructure to meet the needs of staff. Schools were closed, leaving Irish officials with the task of making critical decisions about how to adapt the Leaving Certificate examinations in the context of COVID-19 during periods in which school buildings were closed, thereby creating challenges for stakeholder consultation. At the same time, Ireland was responding to the formation of a new government and institutional changes, with the establishment of the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, whose responsibilities were previously under the remit of the Department of Education.

Many education systems around the world took measures to respond to the challenges COVID-19 imposed for normal implementation of national examinations for students (Figure 7 and Table 3). As in Ireland, many other countries, including France, Ontario (Canada) and Norway, also increased the role of teacher-assessed content. Compared with Ireland, this was a less significant departure from pre-pandemic practice in these countries because their systems for upper secondary certification were already based to some extent on teacher-assessed content. Several countries also explicitly modified expected performance standards and/or reduced the breadth of content assessed. As in Ireland, many countries also gave students greater choice, often by giving them the option of which grades to include or alternative timelines regarding their participation in written examinations.

Figure 7. Student assessment during COVID-19

Changes reported in national examinations due to the pandemic by 37 countries and constituencies



Note: Thirty-seven countries and economies responded to this question: Austria, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Czech Republic, Denmark, England (United Kingdom), Estonia, Finland, Flemish Community of Belgium, France, French Community of Belgium, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and Republic of Türkiye.

Source: OECD (2021^[26]), *The State of Global Education: 18 Months into the Pandemic*, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/1a23bb23-en>.

Table 3. Student assessment during COVID-19

Examples of adjustments made by countries and economies in the context of COVID-19

Increasing teacher-assessed content	Adjusting standards	Enhancing student choice
France – average score in each subject based on marks in tests and homework throughout year	New Zealand – number of credits for tertiary entry, and to reach specific grades adapted	Finland – students able to retake examinations if not satisfied with initial results
Ontario (Canada) – used grades prior to school closure or pass/fail judgements based on teachers’ classroom assessment	The Netherlands – Dutch language, mathematics and chosen learning objectives (minors) graduation criteria have been adapted	Estonia – organised additional examinations in autumn 2020/21 for students not satisfied with initial marks
Norway – marks based on student achievement throughout year	Slovenia – 15% reduction in content covered, examiners could remove a question if they felt that students were not adequately prepared	Luxembourg – not all subject grades taken into account, students could drop lower grades
Ireland – marks based on predicted grades/test results or best of two		

Source: OECD (2021^[26]), *The State of Global Education: 18 Months into the Pandemic*, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/1a23bb23-en>**Calculated and Accredited Grades in 2020 and 2021**

COVID-19 interrupted and disrupted decades of policy stability in Ireland regarding the Leaving Certificate. It led to a set of unprecedented, innovative and collaboratively developed solutions relying more heavily on teacher judgements that had not previously been exercised in the Senior Cycle:

- **Calculated Grades (2020):** This combined individual schools’ estimation of an overall percentage mark and ranking for a specific student in a specific subject, along with data on past performance of students in each school and nationally. Students could also opt to take the postponed external examination in November if they wished (Table 4 and see Section 3).
- **Accredited Grades (2021):** This offered students the options of availing of estimated school-based assessment and/or a regular external examination, which also had been significantly adjusted to reflect disruption to learning arising from school closures in 2020 and 2021 (Table 5 and see Section 3).

Table 4. Main decisions leading up to Calculated Grades, 2020

Date	Key decisions
12 March	Schools in Ireland close and teaching moves online where possible.
19 March	Cancellation of oral and practical performance tests of the Leaving Certificate and announcement that students who were due to take these tests would be awarded full marks for this portion of the exam. Deadlines put back for the completion of project work and coursework in a number of subjects.
10 April	Postponement of state examinations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaving Certificate exams postponed from planned start date of 3 June to July or August, subject to public health advice • Practical exams due to be held in May deferred to late July • Deadline for submission of project and coursework extended to immediately prior to commencement of the written examinations • Announcement that Junior Cycle final examinations, also due to commence on 3 June, would be replaced by school-based exams and assessments held early in the new school year.
29 April	Announcement that Junior Cycle examinations would not be held in 2020.
8 May	Postponement of the 2020 Leaving Certificate exams. Students offered the option of receiving Calculated Grades and the alternative of sitting the examinations at a later date when safe to do so.
21 May	The Department of Education published guidance and an instructional video for schools on implementing Calculated Grades.
1 September	Decision to remove historical school distribution data (based on historical Leaving Certificate examination performance of past

Date	Key decisions
	cohorts of students at the school level across 2017, 2018 and 2019) from the range of data being used in the standardisation model. Announcement that 1 250 additional places in certain high-demand programmes in HEIs would be made available.
7 September	Calculated Grades provided to candidates.
30 September	Minister announced the discovery of two errors in the Calculated Grades process which meant that incorrect grades were issued to some students when they received their results on 7 September. Students were advised that the rectification process was expected to lead to increased grades for about 6 500 students, but that no students would have their grades decreased. In the end, increased grades were awarded to 6 100 students.
3 October	Minister announced that corrected grades would be made available to affected students at 6:00 pm on 3 October through the online Calculated Grades portal and that the CAO would now establish how many students were eligible to receive a new CAO offer.
16 November	Postponed written examinations for Leaving Certificate 2020 commenced for approximately 2 200 candidates taking one or more subjects, running until 11 December.

Source: Adapted from Department of Education (2021^[18]), *Background Questionnaire*.

Table 5. Main decisions leading up to Accredited Grades, 2021

Date	Key decisions
6 January	Announcement that schools would close until 1 February 2021, with teaching moving online where possible.
17 February	Decision to proceed with a combination of Accredited Grades and written Leaving Certificate state examinations (in the normal June period).
26 February	Publication of a Guide to State Examinations and Accredited Grades for Leaving Certificate 2021.
1 March	Students in the last year of the Senior Cycle (i.e. Leaving Certificate students) returned to school. Schools had remained closed for longer than first announced for public health reasons.
March – May	Publication of various guidance documents for schools, students and parents.
3 September	Accredited Grades results provided to candidates, with an associated Department of Education press release .

Source: Adapted from Department of Education (2021^[18]), *Background Questionnaire*.

The context of the Leaving Certificate: In summary

The Leaving Certificate in Ireland is a high-stakes student assessment for certification purposes that represents an important tradition in a high-performing school system. It is trusted by society and many teachers consider that they should not be playing a role in this examination². It is a key component of the education system that provides a signal of completion of upper secondary education and is used for admission of students into tertiary education. During the 2020 and 2021 pandemic period, as in many other countries, health concerns forced Ireland to temporarily adapt the traditional Leaving Certificate. A large proportion (about 70%) of new entries to tertiary education are based on the Leaving Certificate in Ireland, making the implementation of alternative solutions for the Leaving Certificate particularly challenging, not just in terms of their technical characteristics but also the scale and political pressure this process entails. This context is important to keep in mind as background for the analysis of the temporary emergency solutions adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland given that:

- A large number of students sit the Leaving Certificate examination, meaning that the challenge created by COVID-19 was particularly significant.
- The function that the Leaving Certificate plays in the system for admission to tertiary education created a high-pressure context in 2020 and 2021 with a limited margin for error.

² Although in practice the majority of examiners employed on a temporary basis by the State Examinations Commission to mark examinations are also teachers.

- Ireland’s education system lacked the diversity in modes and timing for student assessment that proved to be a valuable asset for other systems facing the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3 Assessing the design and operation of the Calculated and Accredited Grades Systems

The Irish Leaving Certificate has historically garnered a high level of public trust and is considered by the general public to be a fair, transparent, and reliable assessment measure (Doyle, Lysaght and O’Leary, 2021^[27]). It is against this national context that this section of the report considers the technical issues, opportunities, and challenges associated with the Calculated and Accredited Grades Systems introduced during COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021.

Design of the Calculated and Accredited Grades Systems in 2020 and 2021

On 8 May 2020, following a Government decision, the Minister for Education announced that the Leaving Certificate examinations would be postponed and that the Calculated Grades System would be the emergency solution. The announcement came after weeks of intense internal and external consultations and deliberations that started in March 2020. This solution offered students the option of either receiving Calculated Grades or sitting the Leaving Certificate at a later date when it would be safer, in order to protect their health.

In 2021, building on the experiences of the Calculated Grades System, further changes to the emergency solution were made, with the development of the Accredited Grades System. It offered students the option of either receiving an estimated grade, or both receiving an estimated grade and taking the regular external written examination. If students opted for both the estimated grade and the examination, they received the highest mark as their final grade. While the overall solution was similar in 2020 and 2021, there were a number of key differences (Table 6).

Table 6. Calculated and Accredited Grades in Ireland

Key similarities and differences

Key features	Calculated Grades, 2020	Accredited Grades, 2021
Responsible body	Minister for Education	State Examinations Commission
Provision of student grades	Students could: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • receive an estimated grade and	Students could: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • receive an estimated grade and

Key features		Calculated Grades, 2020	Accredited Grades, 2021
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> take the postponed written examination in November. Students received their estimated grade in September and could decide if they wanted to take the written examination in mid-November.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> take the written examination in June (in line with pre-pandemic scheduling) If students opted for both the estimated grade and the examination, they received the highest mark as their final grade.
Developing estimated grades	Teacher estimation	Teachers estimated the percentage mark a student was most likely to have achieved if they had sat the Leaving Certification examination as normal.	
	In-class estimation	Teachers produced a "rank order" (an estimated rank order for students in the class).	No "rank order" and a requirement that no two students in a class could be given the same mark, with marks calculated up to two decimal points.
	In-school alignment	Teachers of each subject engaged in alignment (moderation) process to ensure alignment of marks across the school. Principals reviewed marks in each subject within their schools to ensure alignment of standards.	
	National standardisation	National statistical standardisation of estimated grades based on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> class-based performance distribution for Leaving Certificate 2020 students in the Junior Certificate, as measured by a composite score in Irish, English and Mathematics, along with the two best subjects distributions reflecting the relationship between the school's performance in the Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate (2017-19) the historical distribution of grades nationally for each subject. 	
Date of written examination		Mid-November 2020	7 June 2021 (as per normal pre-pandemic schedule)
Out-of-school, including home-schooled students		Students without a host school or registered teacher were unable to receive a Calculated Grade.	Host schools formed a teacher panel to assess a body of work evidencing student learning.
Date of provision of student results		7 September 2020	3 September 2021

Source: Data based on discussions with, and information shared by, the Department of Education Ireland.

The Calculated Grades System was a combination of:

- **Teachers' estimated percentage mark for each candidate in each subject:** Estimated percentage marks reflected the mark that the teacher judged that candidates were most likely to have achieved, had they sat a Leaving Certificate examination in 2020 as normal.
- **Teachers' estimated class rank order for each candidate:** A list of all the candidates in a class for their particular class group in the subject, in order of the predicted level of achievement of each candidate.
- **Historical performance data,** such as students' performance in the national examination at the end of lower secondary education (Junior Certificate) and historical grade distributions by subject (Government of Ireland, 2020^[28]).

At the beginning of the second quarter of 2020, a number of dedicated bodies were developed to oversee the process for development of the Calculated Grades System (Box 2). This governance structure operated in close co-ordination and communication with the Advisory Group that was supporting the Minister on this matter. During the design of both the Calculated and Accredited Grades Systems, broad consultations were initiated and considered when making important decisions (see Section 4).

Box 2. Governance arrangements for the Calculated Grades System, 2020

Following the decision to postpone the written examination, Ireland established a dedicated governance structure to oversee the development of the Calculated Grades. It included the following bodies:

- The Programme Board for Calculated Grades, which provided governance and decision making for the Calculated Grades process. Chaired by a head civil servant, it included officials from the Calculated Grades Executive Office (CGEO), the Department of Education and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.
- The Management Group for Calculated Grades (a sub-group of the Programme Board), which met weekly for quick decision making for the CGEO and the Calculated Grades process.
- The National Standardisation Group, which produced, reviewed and refined the standardisation process.
- The Independent Steering Committee for Calculated Grades, comprised of six independent members appointed by the Minister of Education, which oversaw the quality and independence of the process.
- An External Reviewer from the Scottish Qualifications Authority, who provided independent oversight of the system.
- The Educational Research Centre, which provided data quality assurance and validation on data processing and standardisation processes.

The process for in-school estimation

To help teachers use their judgement to determine student percentage marks and rankings, the Department of Education provided schools with written resources on how to use evidence to inform their professional judgements. This material indicated that teachers should:

- space their estimated marks appropriately so that students are not only placed in the correct rank order, but that the gaps between marks are a true reflection of differences between individual students
- avoid inappropriate clustering or the tendency to subconsciously mark in multiples of 5 and 10 and to gravitate towards grade boundaries
- be mindful of tendencies to either bring an estimate down to avoid having it too close to the next grade boundary or to move marks up that were originally close to a boundary
- remain alert to possible sources of unconscious bias based on perceptions of the student’s classroom behaviour or what they know or think they know about students’ backgrounds, such as their socio-economic or family background (Doyle, Lysaght and O’Leary, 2021^[27]).

The last point is particularly important, since reliable and valid assessment of student achievement should not be influenced by what may be construed as difficult or inappropriate classroom behaviours (see Section 4). Cross-national research suggests that teachers tend to reward behaviours that keep instruction running smoothly and, for a sizable proportion of teachers and schools, to reward attitudes, habits and behaviours that may be less beneficial for students’ educational careers (OECD, 2012^[29]).

It is for these reasons that a number of standards-based assessment reforms in other countries are increasingly reporting student achievement separately from characteristics such as students’ work habits (Brookhart et al., 2016^[30]) and/or learning skills (Parekh, Brown and Zheng, 2021^[31]). In Ireland, government resources and guidelines also advised teachers to use a range of evidence to support their judgements,

including both formative and summative phases of assessment. In-class assessment evidence could include tests, presentations, projects and oral assessments, among others (Government of Ireland, 2021^[32]).

In-school alignment processes

Once teachers had undertaken in-school estimation, steps were taken to help align standards of judgement both within and across schools, a process commonly referred to in Ireland as standardisation. Moderation (or standardisation) can occur among teachers within schools or externally in testing agencies. Both internal and external moderation present opportunities and challenges for education systems. However, the core issue is that moderation leads to reliable estimates. Consistency of ratings between teachers and across schools, which is typically referred to as inter-rater reliability, is an important consideration when measuring student competencies and skills for certification purposes (Pantzare, 2015^[33]).

In Ireland in 2020, as noted by the State Examinations Commission (2021), the main purpose of the in-school alignment process was to ensure that all teachers who provided estimated percentage marks in the same subject within a school applied similar standards, so that their judgements were consistent. Additional oversight steps were carried out by school principals to finalise the alignment process. In Ireland, this meant that the final estimated percentage marks for individual students represented the collective professional judgement of the teachers and school leaders involved in the alignment process and were not the judgement of one individual teacher. Relying on collective judgements improves the consistency of individual student ratings, reduces assessment error and contributes to reducing stress that would be associated with a process relying exclusively on the judgement of individual teachers.

National standardisation

Once the alignment process was complete, the national standardisation phase utilised statistical techniques to align standards across schools. Two distinct purposes are achievable via standardisation:

- the ability to align the standards across different schools
- the ability to align those standards with an established national standard based on past student performance.

In 2020, the national standardisation process was initially planned to rely on four sub-sets of data:

- class-based performance distribution for Leaving Certificate 2020 students in the Junior Certificate, as measured by a composite score in Irish, English and Mathematics along with the two best subjects
- historical performance of the school in both the Leaving Certificate and the Junior Certificate (2017 to 2019)
- distributions reflecting the relationship between the school's performance in the Leaving Certificate and the Junior Certificate (2017 to 2019)
- historical distribution of grades nationally for each subject (Doyle, Lysaght and O'Leary, 2021^[27]).

However, in response to equity concerns, an important and time-sensitive decision was made in September 2020 to accord diminished importance to aligning standards to historical national achievement trends, and school historical data was removed from the standardisation process in 2020 and was not a feature in the 2021 model. A particular concern around the use of historical data was that high-achieving students in disadvantaged schools should not be unfairly marked down through statistical standardisation

because of their school's performance. The decision to remove school-by-school historical data from the standardisation process was legally challenged but upheld by the Irish High Court.³

The decision to remove historical trend data on Leaving Certificate performance also reflects the broader acknowledgement that the COVID-19 pandemic had resulted in profound disruptions to in-person teaching both within and outside of Ireland. Collectively, school closures and the shift to online learning were difficult for teachers and students, particularly for at-risk student populations, such as those from disadvantaged student backgrounds and those attending schools under the Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools (DEIS) programme (Government of Ireland, 2022_[34]).⁴ Unsurprisingly, estimates of student learning during the pandemic suggest that learning has stalled in the majority of education systems studied (Blaskó, da Costa and Schnepf, 2021_[35]) (Donnelly and Patrinos, 2021_[36]) (Engzell, Frey and Verhagen, 2021_[37]) (Kaffenberger, 2021_[38]). Even more importantly, these studies underscore growing inequities in achievement outcomes between advantaged and disadvantaged youth.

Also in September 2020, three errors in the Calculated Grades coding were discovered which meant that incorrect grades had been provided to some students on 7 September (Box 3). A correction process led to around 6 100 students having their grades increased, and no grades were decreased.

Box 3. Coding errors in the Calculated Grades, 2020

In September 2020, three coding errors related to the processing of Junior Cycle data in the standardisation model were discovered in the software underlying the Calculated Grades standardisation process:

- The system was meant to draw on the core Junior Cycle subjects of English, Irish and Mathematics and combine them with the students' two best non-core subjects for all of the students in each class in each school. The coding error instead combined the core subjects with the students' two weakest non-core subjects.
- The Junior Cycle subject Civil, Social and Political Education was meant to be disregarded as part of the model, but it had been included.
- There were also errors related to how the code handled cases where students did not sit all three core subjects (Irish, English and Mathematics) at Junior Cycle level and how the algorithm used in the standardisation process treated students' marks at the extreme ends of the marks scale. However, the Educational Testing Service (ETS), an external testing agency that Ireland asked to review the coding errors, stated that this latter point had no material impact on the results and no student received a lower grade as a result of it.

³ Sherry v Minister for Education and Skills and Others, [2021] IEHC 128 available at:

https://www.courts.ie/acc/alfresco/1260dd92-a131-4030-b503-e6b4a87fe186/2021_IEHC_128.pdf/pdf#view=fitH

See also: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/crime-and-law/courts/high-court/high-court-judge-dismisses-lead-challenge-over-leaving-cert-calculated-grades-process-1.4498978>.

⁴ The DEIS programme is the Department of Education's main policy initiative to respond to educational disadvantage in Ireland. It focuses on targeting additional resources to those schools included in the programme to ensure that every child has an equal opportunity to achieve their potential Government of Ireland (2022), Extension of DEIS to further schools, <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a3c9e-extension-of-deis-to-further-schools/#about-the-deis-programme> (accessed on 6 December 2022).

Support and information for stakeholders on Calculated Grades

The success or failure of revised assessment models is intimately intertwined with the resources available to support these changes. This includes both technical resources for the in-school alignment and national standardisation components, along with the availability of professional resources which relate to professional capacity. Accompanying the announced changes to the Leaving Certificate in 2020, the Department of Education published several relevant documents:

- a Guide to Calculated Grades for Leaving Certificate for students
- FAQs for students, teachers and parents
- a publication of the National Educational Psychological Service entitled *The Well-being and Mental Health of Young People in Ireland: Factors for Consideration for the Leaving Certificate Examination in the context of the Covid-19 Pandemic* (<https://www.lmetb.ie/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2020/05/wellbeing-mental-health-young-people-leaving-cert-covid-19.pdf>)
- a factsheet prepared by the Department of Education entitled *Challenges of Organising Examinations with Social Distancing Requirements* (<https://www.lmetb.ie/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2020/05/challenges-of-organising-examinations-with-social-distancing-requirements.pdf>)
- a Leaving Certificate infographic explaining how Calculated Grades work.

The 2021 Accredited Grades System: An alternative solution

In the second emergency solution, adopted at a government meeting on 17 February 2021, it was agreed to proceed with a combination of Accredited Grades and written Leaving Certificate state examinations and to draft amending legislation, the Education (Leaving Certificate 2021) (Accredited Grades) Bill 2021, to confer on the State Examinations Commission the power to run the Accredited Grades System. The Accredited Grades System offered students the option to take the customary Leaving Certificate examinations in addition to receiving an accredited grade based on the judgement of their teachers, informed by school assessment estimate results.

The Accredited Grades System followed similar processes to the Calculated Grades System. For example, a number of key elements of the Calculated Grades model developed for the Leaving Certificate 2020 were incorporated into the model of Accredited Grades:

- the reliance on the professional judgement of teachers, which would not be subject to appeal
- a process of in-school alignment to ensure fairness among candidates at school level
- approval by the school principal of school-based estimated subject scores
- a process of standardisation at the national level to ensure as much fairness as possible among the year's candidates.

While there were many similarities between the 2020 and 2021 temporary solutions, the experience of the previous year, as well as earlier decision making (the decision to provide Accredited Grades in 2021 came far earlier than the equivalent decision to provide Calculated Grades in 2020), provided more time to consider the solution and address some of the challenges that had emerged in 2020. In particular, specific measures were put in place for out-of-school students, including those who were home-schooled, and in 2021 teachers were no longer required to rank students on the basis of their estimated grades in each class (Table 6).

In-school estimation

As in 2020, schools were asked to provide an estimation of the overall percentage mark. School management bodies suggested that the in-school estimation process was easier for the Calculated Grades System in 2020 than for the Accredited Grades System in 2021. This was because Leaving Certificate students of 2021 had been out of school for a longer period than those in 2020 and there was less school-based assessment data to draw upon for this cohort. As a result, the Accredited Grades System was said to be more reliant on teachers’ judgement.

Given teachers’ need for summative assessments to inform their estimation of student grades, stakeholders reported that some teachers started using activities which were previously used for formative purposes, for summative purposes. This meant that the regular evaluations that students normally completed as part of their classwork, such as end-of-unit tests, timed essays, and classroom tests, were now being used to contribute to the decision about the estimated marks to be awarded for their Leaving Certificate. This increased the workload for both teachers and students and the use of summative assessments in classrooms.

National standardisation

The statistical model used for national standardisation in 2021 did not differ fundamentally to that used in 2020. However, following the coding errors in 2020 (see Box 3), in 2021 Educational Testing Service (ETS) recoded and rebuilt the statistical model underpinning the standardisation process, using a different programming language from the code designed by Polymetrika, the company hired for the process in 2020. In addition, in 2021, external quality assurance of the Accredited Grades System for the Leaving Certificate was provided by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). NFER is an independent, not-for-profit organisation based in the United Kingdom with expertise in conducting independent research, assessment and evaluation studies, and developing and providing tests to schools. NFER’s quality assurance included undertaking checks on the coding of the statistical model, as well as verification of the data and integrity of the data processing and standardisation processes.

Student results in 2020 and 2021

There was a significant jump in Leaving Certificate results from 2019 (pre-pandemic) to the 2021 Accredited Grades results, with mean scores increasing from 87.9 in 2019 to 96.9 in 2021 (Table 7). More students were awarded the maximum number of CAO points awardable via the 2021 school estimation model than in previous years. Tertiary education officials noted that, in some cases, greater numbers of tertiary education places were decided via lottery, known as “random selection” due to these ceiling effects than in previous years.

Table 7. Leaving Certificate composite scores 2017-21

Year	Number of candidates	Minimum recorded scores	Maximum recorded scores /140	Mean scores
2017	55 752	0	136	87.2
2018	54 414	0	127	87.6
2019	56 040	0	137	87.9
2020 school estimated mark.	57 610	0	139	95.7
2020 Calculated Grade mark	57 610	0	138	94.5
2021 school estimated mark	57 770	0	140	98.0
2021 Accredited Grade mark	57 770	0	139	96.9

Source: Adapted from State Examinations Commission (2021^[39]), *Accredited Grades for the Leaving Certificate 2021: Report on the National Standardisation Process*.

Within the Irish secondary school context, H1 represents the highest level of achievement and H8 represents the lowest level of achievement in Higher-Level subjects. Compared to pre-pandemic examination periods, there was a significant increase in the relative percentage of students that achieved the highest grades (H1 and H2). Table 8 provides a more detailed breakdown of the relative percentage of students at each grade, aggregated across all Higher-Level subjects. In the case of the 2021 Accredited Grades System, approximately double the percentage of students were assigned H1 compared to 2019 (11.8% versus 5.9%).

Table 8. Distribution of grades across all Higher-Level subjects, 2017-21

Percentage at each grade

		H1 (Highest grade)	H2	H3	H4	H5	H6	H7	H8 (Lowest grade)
2017		5.1	15.3	21.0	22.1	18.5	11.5	4.5	1.9
2018		5.8	15.3	20.2	21.8	18.3	11.5	4.7	2.4
2019		5.9	15.1	20.1	21.6	18.5	11.8	4.9	2.2
2020	School estimated mark	13.4	19.9	22.3	19.9	13.9	8.0	2.0	0.7
	Calculated Grade mark	9.2	17.3	23.9	23.1	15.9	8.0	2.1	0.7
2021	School estimated mark	16.9	20.8	21.8	18.0	12.1	7.1	1.9	1.3
	Accredited Grade mark	11.8	19.0	24.4	21.8	13.9	6.5	1.6	1.0

Source: Adapted from State Examinations Commission (2021^[39]), *Accredited Grades for the Leaving Certificate 2021: Report on the National Standardisation Process*.

The availability of the dual options undoubtedly contributed to grade inflation in the Accredited Grades System. The 2021 Accredited Grades results were on average 2.43 score points higher than the 2020 Calculated Grades results, which in turn were on average 6.6 score points higher than the 2019 Leaving Certificate exams (State Examinations Commission, 2021^[39]). These results signify a total increase of approximately 9 score points on a composite scale ranging from 0 to 140. Despite the overall increase in marks, the standardisation process did help to ensure comparability across schools. As a result of national standardisation, 62.2% of students had their schools' estimated mark reduced (although this did not always result in a reduction in the grade awarded), compared to 24.9% whose marks were increased during the national standardisation process in 2021 (Table 9).

Unabated, this type of grade inflation will intensify ceiling effects using the existing 0-140 Leaving Certificate composite score scale described above and, under the current CAO points system, it will increasingly constrain higher education institutions in their ability to make more fine-grain decisions for admittance to select programmes. Undoubtedly, grade inflation will also put additional pressures on

government officials and undermine stakeholder confidence in the system as a whole. Grade inflation and its consequences for higher education entry has been a concern for many examination and certification systems across OECD countries (SQA, 2022^[40]). The latter further underscores the centrality of utilising rigorous and transparent grading practices in relation to standards, teacher judgement and moderation in the future (Connolly, Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith, 2012^[41]).

Table 9. Changes from school estimated marks to final calculated marks for all subjects, Higher Level, 2021

Degree of change	Number	Percentage
Reduced by more than 10 marks	1 916	0.7
Reduced by 6 to 10 marks	33 284	11.4
Reduced by 1 to 5 marks	146 067	50.1
Unchanged	37 442	12.8
Increased by 1 to 5 marks	66 910	22.9
Increased by 6 to 10 marks	5 040	1.7
Increased by more than 10 marks	895	0.3

Note: The State Examinations Commission (2021^[39]) report offers additional summaries of the degree of change between school estimates and Accredited Grades for the Ordinary Level.

Source: Adapted from the State Examinations Commission (2021^[39]), *Accredited Grades for the Leaving Certificate 2021: Report on the National Standardisation Process*.

A Perspective on the Calculated and Accredited Grades Systems

The section below discusses some of the benefits and challenges of the 2020 and 2021 systems.

Teacher estimation and in-school alignment processes responded to the emergency context

Teacher moderation used for certification purposes is traditionally carried out by educators who are judging student responses on large-scale or school-based assessments in relation to students’ work against a set of nationally defined performance standards. These performance standards are often set in relation to grade- and subject-level curriculum expectations for what students should know and be able to demonstrate by the end of a course of study. In addition, final evaluative decisions are often made with the assistance of common rating scales, rubrics, exemplars, or other assessment tools. The latter allows students to be judged against the same evaluative criteria in relation to completed “answers” – a process designed to ensure reliable, valid, and fair assessment.

In the context of the Calculated and Accredited Grades Systems, teachers in Ireland were making estimations of student performance based on their familiarity with students’ work and demonstrated abilities, and presumably the performance standards captured by the Leaving Certificate – not necessarily in relation to a sample or samples of students’ work that closely aligned with specific assessment criteria.

Understandably, the relative novelty of the approach taken was necessary due to the extraordinary conditions created by COVID-19 and the lack of existing continuous student assessment data to draw upon in this emergency. One of the consequences of the changes to assessment methods in 2020 and 2021 was grade inflation in contrast to historic trends. Considering how to ensure that grade inflation is controlled for future generations taking the Leaving Certificate will be important for the assessment’s integrity and to discriminate between different levels of achievement.

Assessment systems can draw on multiple approaches to standardisation

Although the Calculated and Accredited Grades Systems reflected a statistical moderation approach, it is worth noting that reliability can also be enhanced via non-statistical approaches that rely on external oversight outside of schools or internal oversight within or across schools. Collectively, these moderation options can be combined and vary independently of the performance criteria in curricula frameworks. Both statistical and non-statistical moderation approaches present opportunities and challenges for education systems and should be considered in relation to unique contextual issues, such as resource allocation, professional capacity and general workload issues (as well as alignment to the curriculum and specific subject approaches to assessment).

The 2020 and 2021 temporary emergency systems underscored the importance of supporting and preparing teachers on assessment for summative purposes

The grade estimation processes in 2020 and 2021 were a significant departure from existing practice in Ireland. It is notable that Calculated and Accredited Grades in 2020 and 2021 were undertaken in the absence of a strong tradition of using school-based assessment and in the context of historical reliance on external high-stakes testing, and the unprecedented challenges created by the pandemic (Banks and Smyth, 2015^[42]) (Murchan, 2018^[43]) (Black et al., 2010^[44]) (O'Brien et al., 2019^[45]) (Rimfeld et al., 2019^[46]). While teachers were provided with guidance to develop estimated grades, little is known about how this guidance was applied by teachers and schools (Doyle, Lysaght and O'Leary, 2021^[27]). Education officials may consider identifying a stratified sample of schools that could be used in the future to help monitor the implementation of newly adopted policy tools. This could help to identify implementation concerns and link such issues to the availability of technical and professional resources within different types of Irish schools.

Some stakeholders also noted that reviewing the current certification could create the space to ensure that the breadth of the curriculum is more fully assessed in the Senior Cycle. Interviews with the review team indicated that there is some interest for a Leaving Certificate based on a variety of assessment methods, such as tests, presentations, projects and oral assessments.

A strong collective vision to ensure fairness and equity underpinned the Calculated and Accredited Grades Systems

The Calculated and Accredited Grades Systems were both guided by a strong collective vision to utilise as fair a process as possible, given the public health and logistical constraints imposed by COVID-19. Specific decisions were made to ensure that no group of students was disadvantaged by either the Calculated or Accredited Grades Systems. Particular demographic characteristics, such as a student's gender or their socio-economic background in cross-national contexts, are known to correlate with test scores (Volante et al., 2019^[47]). However, these were not factored into the estimation model. This meant that an individual student's Calculated Grade would not be directly influenced by factors such as the student's gender, the status of their school under the DEIS programme, or any other individual demographic or school-category indicator in the statistical model, at either an individual or group level. In practical terms, this meant that:

... if two students in the same class were placed in a particular order of expected achievement on the basis of the professional judgement of the teacher and the school, it is unlikely to be considered credible or acceptable to stakeholders if, in the absence of any specific evidence of the relevant form of bias on the part of that teacher or alignment group, these two students were to have their positions reversed purely because of their gender or because of their household income (even if the information to reliably do this were available) (State Examinations Commission, 2021^[39]) p. 150)

As in many countries, school closures and the move to distance learning presented an additional set of challenges for socio-economically disadvantaged youth and those within DEIS schools (Mohan et al.,

2020^[48]) which would have had an adverse impact on their ability to fully engage in online learning and on their preparation to sit traditional examinations. These equity concerns influenced the decision not to include pre-pandemic national achievement trends, which were derived under vastly different teaching and learning conditions, in the national standardisation process in 2020 and 2021.

A number of checks were also carried out that considered student gender, including interaction between gender and gender mix of school, school DEIS status and school language-of-instruction categories. These aspects were examined at a subject-specific and aggregate level and are detailed in Appendix O of the (State Examinations Commission, 2021^[39]) report (pp. 160-183). Some stakeholder groups in Ireland indicated that the more broadly-based assessment model may have helped to create an assessment that enabled different types of learners to demonstrate their competencies. Internationally, it is acknowledged that while high-stakes, written examinations may motivate learners, that when standards are perceived to be set too high, they may lead to a loss of motivation, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and for low performers (OECD, 2013^[17]).

There was broad-based consultation on the 2020 and 2021 systems

Given the significance of the changes to Ireland’s assessment arrangements in 2020 and 2021, it was important for Irish officials to engage with key stakeholders in the design of the policy, a consideration that was even more important in emergency conditions (OECD, 2021^[49]). It was widely acknowledged by members of different stakeholder groups that the Department of Education utilised a broad consultative process, despite the need to make very quick decisions in the face of the evolving pandemic. Indeed, this report underscores the openness of Irish officials in the education system to learn from this experience and seek ways to improve their available policy tools (see Section 4).

In particular, Irish officials were careful to provide multiple opportunities for students to engage in key decisions. Policy makers sought students’ perspectives on multiple occasions and communicated back to students how their perspectives were taken into account. Other groups were also consulted and involved, including parents, teacher representatives and school management representatives. Dedicated guidance for students about the changes in 2020 and 2021 was also developed.

Ultimately, the decisions made were largely welcomed by Irish students, as evidenced by several large-scale surveys conducted by the Irish Second-Level Students’ Union (ISSU). For example, survey results suggested that the cancellation of exams in 2020 and the choice afforded by the Accredited Grades System were welcomed by the majority of students - see (Irish Second-Level Students Union, 2021^[50]). Similarly, the most recent ISSU survey strongly favours the continuation of the Accredited Grades System, and calls for changes to the traditional examination model are supported by a strong majority of students (Irish Second-Level Students’ Union, 2022^[51]). Students’ general desire to further develop the Leaving Certificate as it is currently designed is also echoed by the (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021^[52]) which recently argued for “reform of the Leaving Certificate examination with a view to reducing the stress caused to children” (p. 8).

Calculated and Accredited Grades seem to have contributed positively to student well-being

In 2021, offering students the choice between an accredited grade or an examination grade was welcomed by students and likely contributed to a lessening of examination stress (Elwood, Hopfenbeck and Baird, 2017^[53]). The reduced stress is particularly important, given the heightened mental health concerns reported around the world, including in Ireland, associated with the pandemic (Quinn, McGilloway and Burke, 2021^[54]). Based on existing research, it may also be the case that the pedagogical approaches of

teachers in Ireland were likely less constrained as a result of the emergency measures in 2020 and 2021. For example, the terminal and external nature of the traditional Leaving Certificate, coupled with its high-stakes and widespread media coverage, have made washback effect a particular concern within the Irish context (Looney, 2016^[55]).

Design of the Accredited and Calculated Grades: In summary

Once it was clear that it would be impossible to hold in-person examinations in 2020, Ireland developed complementary assessment approaches in both 2020 and 2021 with the aim to serve both certification purposes and entry into tertiary education. In its simplest form, the Calculated Grades System employed in 2020 represented a combination of an individual school's estimation of the overall percentage mark and ranking for a specific student in a specific subject, along with data on past performance of students in each school as well as nationally. Three errors in the code were found, but quickly addressed and no student received lower marks because of the errors. The second emergency solution, the Accredited Grades System in 2021, was seen as an integrated assessment system that incorporated school-based teacher judgements with previous external assessment results to provide students with a fair and comparable representation of their level of achievement. The implementation of the in-school alignment process was complemented with national standardisation mechanisms. In the absence of a strong tradition of using school-based assessment, the development of the Calculated and Accredited Grades Systems was a rather remarkable feat for the Irish education system, given the traditional reliance on external high-stakes testing.

A balanced assessment of the Calculated and Accredited Grades Systems, given the time constraints faced by government officials within the Irish educational context, suggests a number of lessons learnt:

- The emergency solution produced estimates of student achievement using school-based classroom assessment data that were comparable with pre-pandemic achievement.
- National standardisation mechanisms helped to moderate teachers' judgements and alleviate grade inflation to some extent and were appropriate and feasible in the emergency context.
- The development of teachers' moderation capacities, grounded in best-practice research, could contribute to an agile system capable of reacting to future emergencies.
- The capacity of teachers and school principals to engage in assessment processes that rely on teacher judgements and continuous assessment approaches needs to be carefully considered in light of available resources and support structures.
- The identification of a stratified, purposeful sample of representative schools could help monitor implementation of policy solutions in the future.

4 School-level implementation: Looking at teacher judgement

This section draws on stakeholders’ views to explore the factors that affected the movement towards greater reliance on school-level teacher judgements of student achievement in the Senior Cycle in 2020 and 2021. The section concludes by listing key lessons learnt from examining documented and interview-based evidence from stakeholders in the Irish educational system.

The relevance of teacher judgement

Many kinds of assessment, including much of the assessment process used during the implementation of Calculated and Accredited Grades, rely on teacher judgement. Teachers make an average of 0.5 to 0.7 decisions per minute throughout the working day (Borko and Shavelson, 1990^[56]) (Clark and Peterson, 1984^[57]). Making high-stakes judgements is the essence of being a professional in social care (Schlicker et al., 2021^[58]) (Taylor, 2006^[59]) (BASW, 2018^[60]) healthcare, (Giro, 1993^[61]) (Hepworth, 1989^[62]) (Liu and Aunguroch, 2018^[63]) and teaching. Guiding students towards or away from different career paths and providing assessment-based feedback on students’ work are all instances of high-stakes judgement in teaching.

Significant uncertainties in professional judgement arise when practitioners are confronted with situations that are not merely novel, but unprecedented and profound. The high-stress circumstances of COVID-19 confronted teachers with countless examples of unique challenges, such as how to motivate students and provide feedback to them personally in an online and remote environment (Hagerman and Kellam, 2020^[64]) (Chief Inspector, 2022^[65]) how to teach literacy or communicate effectively with students while having to wear masks (Pourret and Sallet, 2020^[66]) and how to grade students’ work for their Leaving Certificate when there were no prior records of predicted grades to refer to.

Inconsistencies might appear when teachers assess their own students

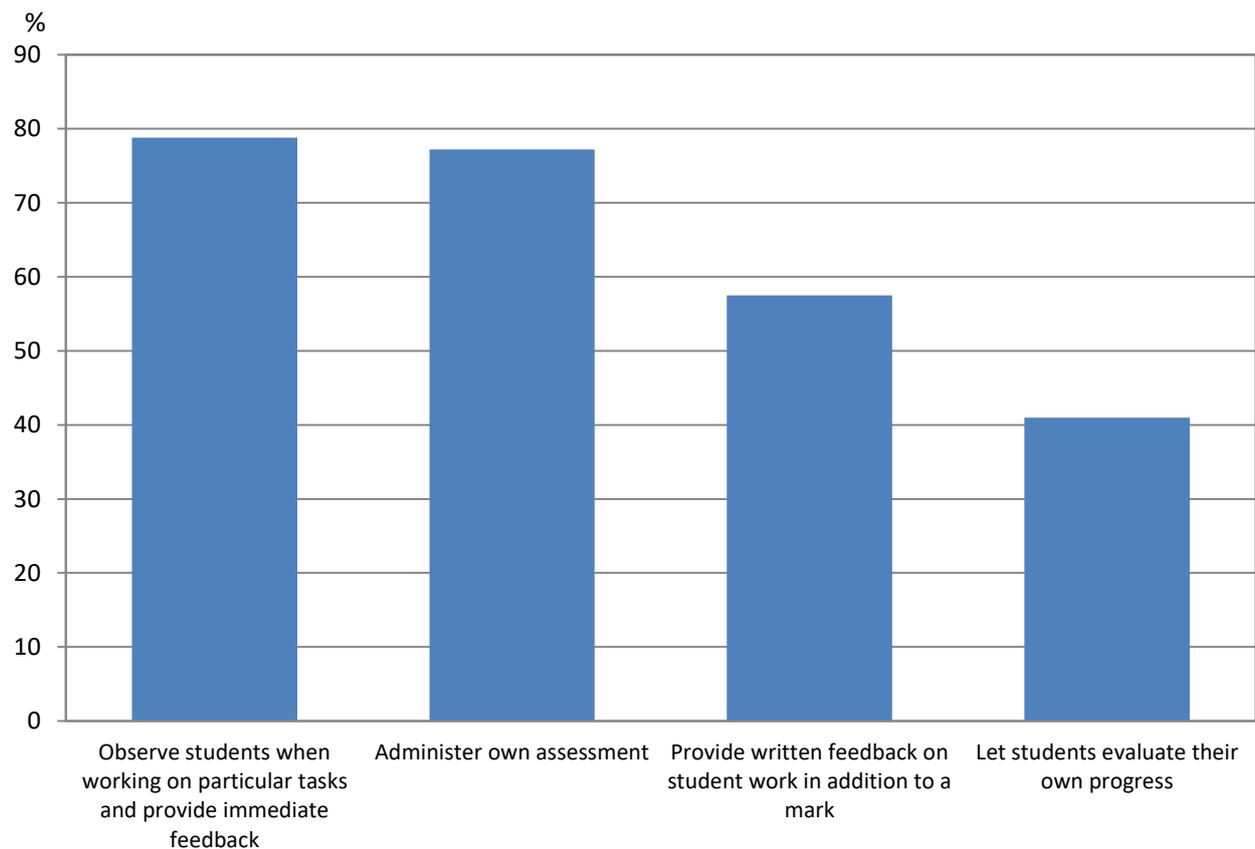
When teachers use their professional judgement to assess their own students, inconsistencies often arise. These inconsistencies often stem from variability of teaching experience (Geven, Batruch and Van De Werfhorst, 2018^[67]) (Hoge and Coladarci, 2016^[68]). In general, the more experienced teachers become, the greater are their levels of expertise compared to early-career teachers (Borko and Shavelson, 1990^[56]) (Kaufmann, 2020^[69]). Increased expertise can reduce degrees of variability in teachers’ judgements of their students’ work (Timmermans, Kuyper and van der Werf, 2015^[70]) (Volante et al., 2019^[47]). This explains why it is important to improve teachers’ expertise in assessing their students not just through repeated practice or through supplying technical training, but also through continuous professional learning, coaching and mentoring. Unconscious bias can also arise from teachers’ beliefs about a range of social,

psychological and behavioural characteristics that are manifested in their students, related to social class, poverty, race, disability and other factors.

At the same time, biases of a positive nature in favour of students whose performance can be adversely influenced by conditions of inequality and disadvantage, or whose performance can be interpreted more favourably in relation to those conditions, can also result from teacher-based assessment judgements compared to externally determined assessments. Professional judgements in teaching and other people-related professions have both cognitive and emotional elements (Hargreaves, 1998^[71]) (Hargreaves, 2000^[72]). Professional judgements in teaching depend on cognitive understanding of knowledge, on skills and also on emotional understanding of young people, their motivations, and their life circumstances. At its best, emotional understanding builds empathy and inclusion that enables teachers to put student performance in context and to identify strategies for helping very different kinds of students succeed and thrive. In any event, what is clear is that teachers are constantly engaged in some kind of assessment activity. Figure 8 offers some examples of the assessment practices teachers frequently use (OECD, 2018^[73]).

Figure 8. Teachers' assessment practices

Percentage of lower secondary teachers who “frequently” or “always” use the following assessment methods in their class (OECD average-31)



Source: OECD (2018^[73]), TALIS 2018 Database, <https://www.oecd.org/education/talis/talis-2018-data.htm> (accessed on 6 December 2022).

The understanding that underpins effective professional judgement does not only evolve with experience; it also depends on working conditions that enable teachers to have the time to develop the knowledge of all their students that will support their ability to make effective judgements about those students.

Assessment for certification needs to balance reliability and validity

National examinations are standardised assessments developed at the national or state level with formal consequences for students. The standardised, external nature of national examinations provides reliability and objectivity which are important when results are used to inform high-stakes decisions about students’ futures (OECD, 2013^[17]). National examinations avoid linking assessment decisions to teaching practices and outsource them to processes and agencies that seem uncontaminated by emotional elements and all the negative biases that may accompany them. As national examinations signal student achievement and carry high stakes for students’ futures, they can also help to motivate students. Research suggests that, without external benchmarks like national examinations, the pace of learning can slow down (Bishop, 1999^[74]). This, historically, is the solution that the Irish Leaving Certificate provides. Reflecting the need for objectivity and reliability in student assessment at the end of upper secondary education, the vast majority of OECD countries (31) also have exit examinations at this stage (OECD, 2015^[75]).

However, eliminating or minimising negative bias also removes opportunities for teachers to draw on the positive benefits of emotional understanding that would reflect what all students know and can do in contexts of increasing diversity and uncertainty. Strengthening the culture and conditions of teaching and ongoing student assessment enables positive understandings to be maximised, while reducing negative biases and considering multiple sources of evidence about student performance. One way to do this is to develop and support teacher judgements that have a collective quality, not just an individual quality.

Drawing on teacher judgement for summative assessment purposes alongside data from external assessments also helps to provide balanced assessments. Depending on their design, examinations may provide a limited snapshot of student learning based on performance in one-off, time-pressured exercises. There are also concerns that when examinations are used for high-stakes purposes, they can distort teaching and learning, with teachers and students dedicating excessive classroom time to examination preparation, which can narrow learning (OECD, 2013^[17]). Most OECD countries complement examination data with teacher-assessed content for the purposes of student certification at the end of upper secondary.

Collaborative teacher judgement and social capital

The power of collaborative thinking and agency rests on what is known as social capital. Social capital is the capital of skills, knowledge, relationships and trust that people possess together. Social capital adds value to individual human capital (Leana, 2011^[76]) (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012^[77]). On average, in teaching, collaboration is more professionally effective than individualism (Goddard, Goddard and Tschannen-Moran, 2007^[78]). Social capital might offer multiple benefits for teacher judgement in assessment.

Social capital seems to yield the greatest benefits in education when specific collaborative practices, including practices of assessment moderation, are embedded in surrounding cultures of collaborative professionalism. Collaborative professionalism is about making judgements together or, at least, coming to shared understandings of criteria, standards and procedures that guide professional practice when it is carried out alone. It is also about making decisions professionally, with respect for mutual expertise, rigorous dialogue about practice and its improvement, and reference to data, research and other evidence that can inform and enrich collective professional judgement (Hargreaves and O’Connor, 2018^[79]).

Collaborative professionalism is integral to Irish professional learning and development (Professional Development Service for Teachers, 2020^[80]) (The Teaching Council, 2016^[81]). It is built on two interrelated principles: *solidarity* of relationships and *solidity* or firmness of practices and protocols (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018^[79]). *Solidarity* of relationships is evident in the development of trust, in building strong communities, in care for one another as people and in mutual support, especially in difficult circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Sahlberg and Walker, 2021^[82]). *Solidity* of practice is manifested in clear and rigorous approaches to the structures, roles, responsibilities and protocols that guide collective professional work. Specific collaborative practices, such as mentoring or assessment moderation, will not be effective or sustainable unless they are part of and actively contribute to wider cultures of collaborative professionalism.

Moderated assessment is a specific kind of collaborative practice

Moderated assessment provides a way to align judgement standards across teachers and schools. It relies on collaborative discussions among educators about standards and the quality of student work in relation to and assisted by specific tools such as rating scales or rubrics. However, technical tools alone are not sufficient to guarantee the quality and consistency of professional judgements in moderated assessment. For example, an evaluation of teacher judgement in relation to the Australian Queensland Comparable Assessment Tasks found that even with the presence of a reference guide and of annotated student work with samples of graded standards, there was still variability in judgement (Klenowski and Adie, 2009^[83]) (Smaill, 2020^[84]).

Moderated assessment addresses not only how to use tools effectively and accurately when making assessments; it also addresses the ways in which teachers make sense of those tools and how to apply them together, by collecting and then scrutinising individual expertise and knowledge (Donohoo, 2017^[85]) (Klenowski and Adie, 2009^[83]) (Podolsky, Kini and Darling-Hammond, 2019^[86]) (Wyatt-Smith, Klenowski and Gunn, 2010^[87]). The effectiveness of collective moderated assessment hinges a lot on the attention that is paid to collaborative relationships of high trust and on the time that is provided and resourced to build those relationships, not just on the tools and criteria that inform the conversations and judgements within those relationships.

Effective practices of collaborative teacher-based assessment are therefore contingent on more than providing training. They also rely on committing to developing wider cultures of collaborative professionalism and to providing the time, support, leadership and personnel that make them possible and sustainable. There is evidence from school inspections that collaborative decision making and distributed leadership already showed signs of considerable strength in Ireland before COVID-19. In his March 2022 report, for example, Ireland's Chief Inspector presented data showing that teamwork and distributed leadership were good or very good in over 80% of Irish schools ((Chief Inspector, 2022^[65])p. 225).

Drawing on the previous understanding of different forms and purposes of assessment and the nature of teacher judgement within different contexts of policy change, the remaining part of this section examines the perceptions of educational leaders in Ireland of how these three sets of factors intersected before and during COVID-19 and how they might develop after COVID-19.

Stakeholder views of Calculated and Accredited Grades in 2020 and 2021

The 2020 and 2021 temporary measures were implemented in the context of a system to which significant historical and cultural significance is attached. The Irish Leaving Certificate is an examination primarily based on externally developed and assessed content at the end of the Senior Cycle, with the majority of the assessment through written examinations. It has a long history that has garnered immense trust and respect with the Irish public and throughout many parts of the education profession. The Leaving Certificate

is almost 100 years old and is built upon a tradition of public examinations that had been introduced in the nineteenth century when, in the context of denominational conflicts, the British administration in Ireland determined that the state would not run secondary schools but would provide standard subject-based external examinations that would be fair to everyone. The expansion of secondary education in the 1970s opened access to the Leaving Certificate and to the curriculum associated with it.

The typical feedback in Ireland about the Leaving Certificate is that it is tough but fair and has integrity and that people have confidence that all students will get a fair mark, no matter what school they attend or what their background is. In this sense, some stakeholders indicated that, as an external, national examination, the Leaving Certificate ensures that everyone is treated equally, that results can be checked and verified as fair, and that the process is anonymous in both directions between assessors and students. When students could no longer physically take examinations in spring 2020, this system had to be radically changed.

In-school alignments of standards or processes of moderation of judgements, supported by school principals, were used to secure fairness and consistency and were guaranteed through national standardisation (State Examinations Commission, 2021^[39]). Compared to other countries and systems, Ireland’s creation of an alternative system based on collective professional judgement was hindered by having no prior summative assessment data arising from teacher judgements and little or no prior expertise among Senior Cycle teachers in making such judgements about student achievement for summative purposes at that level. Systems of ranking and ordering students within schools were atypical, compared to other systems where professional judgement is used as a basis for final assessments at the end of upper secondary education. Teachers were, however, provided with technical assistance regarding best uses of evidence, such as how to treat students just above or below borderlines, and professional guidance on how to be alert to sources of subjective bias about student behaviour, ability and identity (see Section 3).

In the OECD Review Team’s discussions with stakeholders, there was a consensus that they had lived, worked, endured, and prevailed through arguably the greatest period of turmoil in modern educational history. They felt that the system had been more collaborative in scope and intensity than many of its international counterparts, especially with regard to inclusion of students.

A collaborative approach was taken

The collaborative approach taken towards emergency decision making by the Irish Government enabled swift implementation of the revised assessment models. Moves towards use of teacher judgements were less chaotic and inconsistent than might have been expected in such unprecedented circumstances, where there had been little or no prior experience of teacher-based summative assessments, an online teaching and learning environment that did not provide solid bases for understanding students and their learning, and no traditional tools to support alignment and moderation (such as rubrics and samples of student work to support estimations of or judgements about student performance).

There were a variety of stakeholder perceptions on the process

The OECD Review Team’s interviews included discussions with teacher union leaders, school leaders, student leaders, government officials, representatives of higher education, academics and other stakeholders (see Annex A: List of interviewed organisations). There was broad recognition that stakeholders worked together effectively and that teachers adjusted to the challenges of the context to provide estimated marks.

Some teacher unions criticised certain aspects of the process, notably that in 2020 teachers were required to rank students as part of the assessments, that differences in combined assessments left them open to

challenges and that the reliance on multiple sources of evidence for teachers' judgements subjected them to overwork in a system with insufficient support. A specific concern was the publication of student rankings in 2020, although teacher unions were clear that they had been assured that they would not be published. Despite the state indemnity for teaching staff, protocols against canvassing, and legislative provisions which largely protected teachers from canvassing, corruption and litigation, some unions expressed the view that legal protections for teachers facing challenges were inadequate.

Leaders of school administrations and managers of groups of schools appreciated the effectiveness of stakeholder collaboration and acknowledged the immense psychological toll that the emergency reform took on all educators. Teachers rapidly developed the skills of high-stakes teacher judgement, but school administrators noted a need for initial teacher training and professional learning and development in assessment and moderation. They also empathised with teacher unions' concerns about the risks of canvassing and corruption, although in practice neither materialised.

The perceived vulnerability of teacher judgement in relation to high-stakes decisions

One factor to which interviewees in this review returned repeatedly was the actual and perceived vulnerability of individual teacher judgements involving high-stakes decisions about students. In an educational system that comprises many small, rural communities, where teachers live side by side with the families of the students they teach, there were some concerns among teachers that their judgements could be subject to unfair and undue influence or objection. These concerns were reflected in a survey of over 700 teachers in Ireland during COVID-19 (Doyle, Lysaght and O'Leary, 2021^[27]).

Stakeholders related that Ireland had been prone to canvassing and patronage politically in many areas of society, and that this led to a strong rejection of favouritism and undue influence. This context helps explain the strong attachment to the externality and perceived fairness of the Leaving Certificate. Objectivity and reliability are particularly important in Ireland given the particularly high stakes that the Leaving Certificate carries for tertiary selection (see Section 2). Countries that have been able to integrate broader forms of assessment at the end of upper secondary education, notably teacher-assessed content, tend to have systems for tertiary selection that are based on a wider range of evidence. In Ireland, specific legal protections were enacted to respond to concerns that teachers should not be subject to canvassing, corruption pressures or even possibilities of litigation for making life-determining assessment judgements about students they knew and taught personally in their own communities. These included comprehensive indemnity provided by the state for all staff involved in the Calculated and then Accredited Grades, as well as a protocol (a significant statement of public policy) against canvassing or inappropriate contact by students, their parents or others in relation to Calculated Grades. Both of these elements were provided for in legislation enacted in 2021 which provided for the Accredited Grades process.

Teachers feared canvassing by parents, but in practice it did not materialise. There were only three formal complaints that the 2020 and 2021 processes had not been contracted properly at school-level. In the Inspectorate administrative reviews, on one complaint it was determined that while the process was not conducted perfectly, the process had not undermined the result. Two further complaints were not upheld.

The emergency temporary measures changed teachers' roles in 2020 and 2021

During COVID-19, Ireland moved from almost wholly external assessment to teachers assessing their own students. Most stakeholders perceived this change as hugely significant. However, this sudden switch to teacher-based assessments, with little or no relevant prior data available, was immensely challenging. In 2020, there was legitimate concern that disadvantaged students would be negatively affected by the use of historical data in schools as part of national standardisation. This led to the removal of historical school distribution data on 1 September 2020.

There were reports that students became anxious about how their relationships with their teachers would affect their grades. The move towards moderation and collaboration helped to allay these anxieties. Records of past performance were used for Calculated Grades in 2020. Teacher judgements were used for Accredited Grades in 2021, in recognition of the significant disruption to learning caused by the pandemic and, as a consequence, the unfairness in requiring students to sit an examination-only form of assessment.

Interview participants recognised the elements of moderation and oversight put in place, but some felt that they were weak because there had been little discussion on assessment or moderation in the past. Although there had been attempts to develop more collaboration within Senior Cycle subject departments prior to COVID-19, these were generally subject-based, focusing on timetables and similar issues, with little evidence of collaboration on assessment. Schools thus had to introduce moderation measures with no professional development, and school leaders acknowledged that there had been some difficult professional conversations between principals and teachers. Some stakeholders suggested that, in addition to the heavy workload, these moderation measures were highly stressful for both teachers and administrators, with principals and deputies becoming returning officers of sorts, with pressures continuing through the summer with no break.

Some school leaders were supportive of changes to the Leaving Certificate in the post-COVID-19 world. They felt that teachers had upgraded their skills and now had solid experience of assessment and moderation to build on and that fears about canvassing had been allayed by taking a collective approach. At the same time, they felt that there was a great need for professional development and that teacher training and ongoing professional learning and development would need a heightened focus on moderation and standardisation. Furthermore, they felt that working conditions would need to be structured to allow time for in-career professionals to consider moderation.

Student voice was prominent in the process to introduce the measures in 2020 and 2021

At the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, some students felt that the decision on deferring the Leaving Examination took too long, but students soon became effective contributors to decision making over 2020 and 2021. Many stakeholders described the inclusion of students in the decision making process as a step change. Student representatives were able to contribute to decision making by drawing on evidence of student experiences and views from three surveys they administered to 5 000, 20 000 and then 40 000 members.

For Accredited Grades in 2021, when teachers had to locate and create their own assessments, students noted that this resulted in over-assessment in some schools, which was burdensome for teachers and provoked anxiety among students. Some students were stressed by being tested every week when it was unclear how much those test scores would count towards their Leaving Certificate result. The Minister for Education released a video with students asserting that they could not be assessed more than three times, and this was also reflected in formal guidance issued by the Department, but student leaders felt there had been no real oversight of that protection.

Student surveys conducted by the Irish Second-Level Students’ Union reported that the majority of students welcomed the shift to Accredited Grades and that a large majority of students wanted to see changes to the traditional examination in the future in order to relieve the related stress.

National level education leaders viewed the emergency educational and examination changes as extraordinary

Under the Calculated Grades System in 2020 and the Accredited Grades System in 2021, teachers had to make life-shaping judgements about students' work with limited evidence available and almost no prior experience of teacher-based assessment of a high-stakes nature. It was deemed essential to establish a collaborative approach to changing circumstances that were immense, volatile and constantly shifting. As noted earlier, an important element of this collaborative approach was the creation in spring 2020 of an Advisory Group to advise the Minister on changes to the Leaving Certificate during the pandemic. Membership was broad, including officials from the Department of Education and the State Examinations Commission and representatives of students, teachers, parents, school principals and higher education institutions.

Despite the fears and anxiety, the outcomes led to fewer errors and less public distrust than in many other nations, especially in the United Kingdom, which the media, government and educators in Ireland watched with a very close eye. In Ireland, the already extraordinary situation of the pandemic was further exacerbated by its occurrence during an intersession between two governments, following inconclusive elections and the formation of a new higher education department (see Section 3).

Stakeholders in the OECD Review Team's interviews noted that trust was vital. Teachers were a critical part of the process from the outset, even though one of the teacher unions temporarily withdrew during discussions on the 2021 examination arrangements. Multiple meetings of the Advisory Group were supplemented with intense one-to-one engagements with individual partner bodies. At critical periods, there were regular phone or Zoom meetings with every principal in all organisations, sometimes multiple conversations in a single day. The leaders of the two teacher unions were consulted at least twice weekly over sustained periods. The principals' and deputies' association was also a key player. Documents were discussed line-by-line, feedback was constant, publicly available minutes were shared and agreed, and an agreed press statement was then issued. Leaders sought to ensure consistency and correctness of messaging throughout, including with student leaders, who produced student-friendly messages on WhatsApp.

The Department of Education realised that teachers were approaching moderation meetings with little or no prior knowledge or experience, so training was provided through webinars. The Inspectorate, a division of the Department of Education responsible for the evaluation of primary and post-primary schools and centres for education, provided webinar information sessions and also ran a helpline to assist with moderation meetings and answered thousands of queries across a number of categories, including moderation/in-school alignment. This also provided the system with feedback on how things were proceeding at school level. In hindsight, however, school principals and teacher representatives felt that more professional learning and development in moderation could have been provided.

In his March 2022 report, the Chief Inspector looked to the past and to the future with a sense of possibility. Among his findings: 1) the response to the emergency situation demonstrated the value of how significant change can be advanced through collaboration, with open sharing of ideas and difficulties and co-construction of solutions; 2) there was and should be increasing attention paid to the voices of students; and 3) there had been clear demonstration of a strong professional culture among teachers combined with excellent in-school leadership among educators who had participated fully in the emergency response, despite serious reservations in previous years concerning teacher involvement in student assessment related to the Leaving Certificate (Chief Inspector, 2022^[65]p. 300).

School-level implementation and teacher judgement: In summary

Overall, there was a consensus among most stakeholders in the Irish system that the implementation of alternative assessment and grading solutions at school level was successful. Unquestionably, the process experienced some difficulties and there were some mistakes, but the education system eventually overcame them with exemplary collaboration from all the stakeholders involved. In particular, the developments in moderation and collective responsibility contributed to offsetting the risks of excessive influence and pushback from parents that teacher unions were concerned about.

In summary, the main lessons learnt at school-level implementation follow and will be further developed in the concluding section of this review:

- The emergency situation brought forth and highlighted the quality, capabilities and commitment of teachers in Ireland.
- The collaborative approach to school-based judgement helped to mitigate teachers’ historic concerns about the need to be protected from canvassing, corruption and litigation.
- The emergency situation drew attention to previous evidence and experience about the negative side effects of the Leaving Certificate on students’ learning and well-being.
- A system of effective moderation cannot exist outside a robust culture of collaborative professionalism.

5 Temporary emergency solutions to the Irish Leaving Certificate during the pandemic: Lessons learnt

The years of the COVID-19 pandemic have sharpened our awareness of how we live in a world that is experiencing multiple threats and transformations. Education systems around the world have adapted in different ways to continue to deliver education and support for their students. The Irish education system has taken measures to continue to provide quality education within its own health, safety and educational boundaries. Among the key policies adopted were the emergency solutions to continue to deliver Ireland’s Leaving Certificate in 2020 and 2021. The Calculated and Accredited Grades Systems were implemented by the Irish Department of Education and the State Examinations Commission following analysis, consultations and decisions made in short periods of time.

This final section of the assessment sets out the lessons learnt through the implementation of Ireland’s Leaving Certificate in 2020 and 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. It starts with the lessons learnt, as presented in Sections 2, 3 and 4, and concludes with an overall view of how the emergency solutions adopted for the Leaving Certificate during the pandemic accomplished their purpose. These lessons offer

insights on design and implementation of the Calculated and Accredited Grades Systems that could inform and guide future development of the Leaving Certificate.

The prominent role of the Leaving Certificate in Ireland's education system exerted significant pressure on emergency responses to deal with COVID-19

Given that a very large group of students sit the Leaving Certificate examination, the challenge created by COVID-19 was particularly significant

In Ireland, the structure of upper secondary education is dominated by a single pathway from upper secondary general programmes into tertiary education. This meant that, in 2020 and 2021, there was a huge impact on the whole education system and almost the whole Senior Cycle student cohort was affected by not being able to sit the Leaving Certificate written examinations. The Leaving Certificate has been in place since 1925 and enjoys a large degree of trust and respect in Irish society. It is a sign of quality, one of the most influential elements in the education system in Ireland, and therefore extremely important for society as a whole.

In countries and jurisdictions with greater diversity in student pathways, such as a greater share of students in vocationally-oriented programmes or a cohort that progresses into a more diverse range of post-secondary education programmes, there was less pressure on written examinations at the end of upper secondary education to determine student progression to further education or training.

The function that the Leaving Certificate plays in the system for admission to tertiary education created a high-pressure context with a limited margin for error

The Leaving Certificate is the primary means for institutions and courses to select students for a tertiary place in a very competitive context. This created a lot of pressure on any alternative solution to the written examination in terms of perceptions of fairness and robustness by students, tertiary institutions and society.

In systems where the upper secondary exit examination is just one factor alongside others for tertiary selection, and/or where upper secondary exit examinations only establish eligibility rather than providing the means for selection into tertiary education, decisions in response to the COVID-19 challenge were taken and accepted in a less high-pressure environment.

Ireland's education system lacked the diversity in modes and timing for student assessment that proved to be a valuable asset for other systems facing the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic

Systems with greater diversity in the modes and timing of student assessment for upper secondary certification were able to adapt relatively swiftly to the absence of written examinations. Notably, when students could no longer sit physical written examinations in 2020 and 2021, education systems in other countries that already included some teacher-assessed content and periodically assessed students throughout the upper secondary cycle were able to draw on existing marks for students and extend the teacher-assessed components of their upper secondary certification.

The emergency solutions in 2020 and 2021 certified achievement and enabled young people to continue into the next phase of their lives

The emergency solutions produced estimates of student achievement that utilised school-based classroom assessment data that were comparable with pre-pandemic achievement

The emergency solutions utilised a combination of an individual school’s estimation of an overall percentage mark and ranking for a specific student in a specific subject, along with data on past performance of students in each school, as well as nationally. The resulting Calculated and Accredited Grades, while inflated in relation to previous traditional Leaving Certificate results, were nevertheless comparable across schools and were able to function within the existing CAO points system.

Overall, the incorporation of school-based assessment into the Irish context was both a novel and a monumental achievement given the logistical constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This element of the assessment reform was based on teachers’ assessments of student performance based on ongoing classroom work and elaborated at each school (as explained in more detail in Section 3).

National standardisation mechanisms helped to moderate teachers’ judgements and alleviated grade inflation to some extent and were appropriate and feasible in the emergency context

Although the Government decided to accord diminished importance to the alignment of standards to historical national achievement trends in the Leaving Certificate, primarily to address public confidence concerns, the national standardisation phase adopted did moderate grade inflation. Unabated, continual grade inflation will increasingly constrain the ability of tertiary education institutions to make appropriate admission decisions, particularly for highly selective programmes, unless other measures are adopted to complement the Leaving Certificate.

Collectively, the national standardisation mechanisms underscore a central issue that assessment systems face in other international contexts. That is, should the moderation mechanisms reflect a statistical approach or a non-statistical approach that relies on either external oversight outside of the school or internal oversight within schools? These options can be combined and vary independently of the performance criteria reflected in Irish curriculum frameworks. Moreover, each of these approaches has discernible advantages and disadvantages that should be considered in relation to unique contextual considerations, such as resource allocations, professional development and workload issues, to name but a few.

The development of teachers’ moderation capacities, grounded in best-practice research, could contribute to an agile system capable of reacting to future emergencies

The current structure of the Leaving Certificate created challenges during a global pandemic and the ensuing disruptions to schooling. Teacher judgement and continuous assessment approaches can provide important benefits for learning and assessment. These approaches provide the space to draw on a wide range of information about students to provide a fuller picture of achievement and can be integrated into classroom practices or other tasks as part of learning. However, using teacher-assessed content for summative purposes creates a number of challenges for ensuring reliability and objectivity, which are critical when results are used to determine high-stakes decisions about students’ futures (OECD, 2013^[17]). Up until 2020, the need in Ireland for such objectivity and reliability meant that external and primarily written

assessments predominated in its design, especially given the prominent role that the Leaving Certificate plays for tertiary entry.

The ability of teachers and school principals to engage in assessment processes that rely on teacher judgement and continuous assessment approaches needs to be considered in light of available resources and support structures. The experience of Calculated and Accredited Grades underscored the need for system-level support structures to address the challenges of using teacher-based assessment for certification purposes. Teacher education and development, school leadership preparation programmes and, most importantly, adequate resources and workload issues are critical. Ultimately, a system is only as strong as its teachers, and the educational-change literature is ripe with evidence underscoring the importance of support for teachers.

The identification of a stratified purposeful sample of representative schools could help to monitor the implementation of emergency policy solutions in the future

Policy monitoring and evaluation are essential steps after policy tools are adopted within education systems, but they are often overlooked. In the current context, Irish officials had little opportunity or relevant data to draw upon to assess the extent to which schools were following official guidelines in the development of Calculated and Accredited Grades. A small representative sample of schools across Ireland that reflects its unique national characteristics could be developed so that in the event of a future emergency, the sample could be consulted and data collected to understand how the emergency policy tools were being implemented across schools. This might help policy makers to better understand and quickly respond to challenges experienced by schools.

The implementation of the Leaving Certificate emergency responses in schools built on teacher professionalism and student engagement

The emergency situation brought forth and highlighted the quality, capabilities and commitment of teachers in Ireland

Even with very limited evidence on which to base teacher judgements compared to most other systems internationally, decisions were made about young people's accomplishments that would affect their futures, with limited challenges regarding concerns about unfairness, corruption or undue pressure being exerted on teachers.

The collaborative approach to school-based judgement helped to mitigate teachers' historic concerns about the need to be protected from canvassing, corruption and litigation

The emergency situation revealed that an externally set and assessed examination, in a largely one-time, sit-down format, is not the only protection that exists against undue influence. A compelling moral purpose to pull together and help everyone during a crisis, along with reliance on collaborative rather than individual teacher judgements as the basis for student assessments, reduces the risks and exposure that individual teachers and their unions have feared in the past. In the emergency context of 2020 and 2021 moderated teacher judgement assessed students' achievement in ways that were reported to benefit well-being, while protecting teachers' professional autonomy and integrity.

The emergency measures used in 2020 and 2021 were perceived by students to have positively affected their well-being

The conditions of the pandemic and at-home education exposed great inequities in students’ living and learning conditions that meant that a standard, external examination and the conditions to prepare for and perform on it would have been unequal. During the emergency situation, students in particular welcomed a more accommodating and responsive assessment environment that they reported to increase their engagement with learning and reduce their anxiety and stress.

Broad and balanced assessments that incorporate educators’ judgements are in place at other levels of the Irish education system

Different levels of the Irish education system before and beyond the Senior Cycle, in primary schools, the Junior Cycle, applied courses and universities, make widespread use of broad and balanced assessments that incorporate educators’ judgements. Most teachers in the Senior Cycle also teach in areas such as the Junior Cycle. This implies that professional judgement and teacher assessment experiences already exist among most teachers. But the emergency situation revealed that assessment skills are underdeveloped and that proficiency in student assessment needs to be embedded in teacher training and continuous professional development.

A system of effective moderation cannot exist outside a robust culture of collaborative professionalism

Ireland can build on the lessons learnt from the experiences of the Leaving Certificate and the Accredited and Calculated Grades Systems during 2020 and 2021. External moderation requires a collegial school environment of high trust, along with working conditions offering sufficient time and resources to provide effective support. An important future commitment, therefore, might be to provide the leadership, conditions and support for an effective culture of collaborative professionalism throughout the Irish education system.

The temporary emergency solutions adopted for the Leaving Certificate during the COVID-19 pandemic accomplished their purpose

Overall, the Calculated Grades System (2020) and the Accredited Grades System (2021), implemented as emergency solutions to the traditional Leaving Certificate, were suitable alternatives given the context, health situation, limited time, lack of evidence and educational constraints. This perspective was shared by most of the stakeholders interviewed by the OECD Review Team.

At the time when these decisions were made, evidence for international best practices was extremely scarce and Ireland, like many other countries, had to take decisions in an emergency with limited information and time. Even now, more than two years after these systems were implemented, evidence on how to adapt terminal examinations to the context of a public health emergency is limited and highly context-based. But this is changing rapidly, thanks to the efforts of authorities, stakeholders and international organisations, which are gathering evidence and systematising it very rapidly see (OECD, 2021_[26]). In retrospect, the OECD Review Team has found limited evidence to contrast with the Irish experience. It is important to take into consideration the high level of pressure under which these decisions were made.

The implementation of the Calculated and Accredited Grades Systems reached its main goal of allowing Senior Cycle students to conclude their education and transition to either further and tertiary education or work. It helped to emphasise the strengths and challenges associated with the traditional Leaving Certificate and demonstrated the importance placed on the Leaving Certificate by Irish society in general as a signpost of the quality of the education system and its reliability to signal students' accomplishments and general readiness to move into tertiary education. It also demonstrated the system's fragility in times of emergency and uncertainty and showed how important an alternative approach or emergency solution can be. Ireland could take this into consideration in the future, by planning pathways that do not limit students' opportunities to finish the Senior Cycle to only a single approach (the Leaving Certificate examinations) and by designing and putting in place a range of options to consider for times of emergency.

Fairness was an essential principle for the design of the emergency solutions adopted. As discussed in this assessment (particularly in Section 3), the Calculated Grades System (2020) and the Accredited Grades System (2021) provided a workable solution in an emergency context that pursued fairness as an essential principle in design and implementation. In both cases, processes for in-school alignment and cross-school alignment (i.e. national standardisation) were in place to support teacher judgement and ensure fairness. The implementation of the Calculated Grades System was particularly challenging, as it had to respond to the traditional expectations of trust and fairness of the Leaving Certificate examination. Teachers successfully adapted their roles and displayed assessment skills to contribute to the implementation of the emergency solution. In addition, in-school teacher assessments were balanced through moderation with cross-school standardisation mechanisms in order to support fairness in the whole process. In turn, the Accredited Grades System solution was a sensitive reaction to what were perceived as the main shortcomings of the Calculated Grades System. While the statistical model did not fundamentally change, the Accredited Grades System adopted a number of important modifications from the Calculated Grades System. At the same time, the approach adopted in 2021 gave students the choice between estimated school-based assessment and regular external examinations. These two major adjustments in the Accredited Grades System in relation to the Calculated Grades System were largely responsive to the need to offer the education system in Ireland an alternative to the regular Leaving Certificate that would be as fair and robust as possible.

For students, it reportedly reduced anxiety and stress and allowed the use of other assessment approaches

Students were able to complete their year on similar terms and progress to the next stage of their life. High levels of stress and anxiety are one of the most recurrent challenges reported for Senior Cycle students in Ireland, and the changes in 2020 and 2021 may have reduced this (OECD, 2018^[88]) (Banks, Mccoy and Smyth, 2018^[89]) (NCCA, 2018^[90]). In fact, the relationship between high levels of stress and anxiety and the Leaving Certificate has attracted considerable attention from student unions and many education stakeholders (OECD, 2020^[2]). Ireland is not unique, as the association between high levels of stress and anxiety and terminal assessment for students has been demonstrated in countries such as Greece and Korea (OECD, 2019^[11]).

The Calculated and Accredited Grades Systems were able to help reduce the traditionally high levels of stress and anxiety among students, which were already elevated due to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to stakeholders interviewed by the OECD Review Team, this could be related to two main factors:

- Authorities and stakeholders involved in the decisions were successful in projecting these solutions as a means to help students continue with their studies and lives during a very difficult situation, and this was perceived by students as solid support.

- Giving relevance to classroom-based assessment added an extra level of confidence to students. It helped them to feel control over how their individual performance in the classroom would shape their final grades, rather than depending on a single examination.

This perspective was prevalent throughout the discussions with stakeholders and the documentation reviewed by the OECD Review Team.

For teachers and schools, their empowerment was critical to deal with the emergency solutions

The experiences with the Leaving Certificate in 2020 and 2021 gave teachers a key role in the system by empowering them with assessment responsibilities. Teachers displayed a high level of self-efficacy during the pandemic. According to the OECD Review Team’s interviews with stakeholders, despite the efforts of the Department of Education to provide precise and clear guidance for schools and teachers on the implementation of the Calculated and Accredited Grades Systems, it was not always possible to provide ideal support, given the limitations imposed by public health restrictions to deal with COVID-19. Despite these limitations, teachers and schools in Ireland assumed their roles with high levels of autonomy in order to support their students. This is perhaps one of the most valuable lessons of the experiences in 2020 and 2021 and solid testimony that teachers in Ireland may be ready to play a more prominent role in assessment of their students in the future.

For the education system, the emergency solutions demonstrated strong collaboration and consensus in decision making on alternatives to the Leaving Certificate examinations

The Irish education system, like all others around the world, was confronted with an unprecedented challenge for which there was little relevant policy evidence to inform decisions. Even as the OECD Team Review was drafting this report, one of the main challenges was to identify relevant literature that could help to assess the Irish experience. Furthermore, decisions were made under considerable pressure, not just in terms of finding a solution that would be satisfactory for public health concerns, but also in terms of minimising the impact on Senior Cycle students’ aspirations and transition to tertiary education or employment.

In these circumstances, the OECD Review Team considers that the capacity and willingness of the education community in Ireland, led by the Department of Education, to design and implement suitable emergency solutions in a very short period of time was remarkable. According to interviews with stakeholders and the documentation available, this was possible thanks to a concerted effort organised by the Department of Education and a clear vision that ensured students were centrally involved. With the evidence available, it is clear that the Irish education community was guided by a vision that always tried to prioritise the safety of students without jeopardising their immediate future, a balance that is of critical importance when dealing with a young segment of the population in transition to either tertiary education or employment. The OECD Team was impressed by the high level of collaboration and commitment displayed by all stakeholders in the system during this period, especially among teachers. This is a valuable lesson that can be of help to support future reforms in the Senior Cycle.

Table 10. Summary of lessons learnt

Lessons learnt
The prominent role of the Leaving Certificate in Ireland's education system exerted significant pressure on emergency responses to deal with COVID-19:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Given that a very large group of students sit the Leaving Certificate examination, the challenge created by COVID-19 was particularly significant.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The function that the Leaving Certificate plays in the system admission to tertiary education created a high-pressure context with limited margin for error.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ireland's education system lacked the diversity in modes and timing for student assessment that proved to be a valuable asset for other systems facing the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.
The emergency solutions provide interesting insights for the future of the Leaving Certificate:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The emergency solutions produced estimates of student achievement that utilised school-based classroom assessment data that were comparable with pre-pandemic achievement.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National standardisation mechanisms helped to moderate teachers' judgements and alleviate grade inflation to some extent and were appropriate and feasible in the emergency context.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The development of teacher moderation capacities, grounded in best-practice research, could contribute to an agile system capable of reacting to future emergencies.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability of teachers and school principals to engage in assessment processes that rely on teacher judgement and continuous assessment approaches needs to be considered in light of available resources and support structures.
The implementation of the Leaving Certificate emergency responses in schools built on teacher professionalism and student engagement:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The emergency situation brought forth and highlighted the quality, capabilities and commitments of teachers in Ireland.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The collaborative approach to school-based judgement helped to mitigate teachers' historic concerns about the need to be protected from canvassing, corruption and litigation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The emergency measures used in 2020 and 2021 were perceived by students to have positively affected their well-being.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broad and balanced assessments that incorporate educators' judgements are in place at other levels of the Irish education system.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A system of effective moderation cannot exist outside a robust culture of collaborative professionalism.
The temporary emergency solutions adopted for the Leaving Certificate during the COVID-19 pandemic accomplished their purpose:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For students, it reduced anxiety and stress and allowed use of other assessment approaches.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For teachers and schools, their empowerment was critical to deal with the emergency solutions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For the education system, it demonstrated strong collaboration and consensus in decision making on alternatives to the Leaving Certificate examinations.

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Annex A: List of interviewed organisations

The OECD Review Team conducted semi-structured interviews with individuals from the following organisations for the purposes of this review:

- Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS)
- Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI)
- Central Applications Office (CAO)
- Children’s Rights Alliance (CRA)
- Cork Education and Training Board (Cork ETB)
- Department of Education, Ireland
- Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)
- Institute of Education, Dublin City University (DCU)
- Irish Second-level Students Union (ISSU)
- Irish Universities Association (IUA)
- IT Carlow (Subsequently, in May 2022, merged with Waterford IT to become South East Technological University)
- Joint Managerial Body (JMB)
- National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD)
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)
- National Parents Council Post-Primary
- Office of the Ombudsman for Children
- Scottish Qualifications Authority
- SOLAS (*Seirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna*)
- State Examinations Commission (SEC)
- Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI)
- Technological Higher Education Association (THEA)
- University College Cork (UCC)

Implementing Policies: supporting change in education

This document was prepared by the Implementing Education Policies team.

The OECD project Implementing Policies: Supporting Effective Change in Education offers peer learning opportunities and tailored support to countries and jurisdictions to help them achieve success in the implementation of their policies and reform initiatives.



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