

Exemptions from the study of Irish, 2022

ASTI Submission

To

Comhchoiste na Gaeilge, na Gaeltachta agus Phobal Labhartha na Gaeilge

4th October, 2022

Introduction

The ASTI appreciates this opportunity to engage with An Comhchoiste na Gaeilge, na Gaeltachta agus Phobal Labhartha na Gaeilge and commends it for organising this meeting. Strengthening the position of the language within our education system is a key focus of the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language, 2010 -2030 and it is important that An Chomhchoiste continues to monitor changes to the procedures for exemptions for the study of Irish in schools.

The ASTI submitted a full statement of its views on exemptions to the study of Irish in response to the Department of Education's consultation paper in January 2019.¹ It endorsed the paper's articulation of the linguistic, social and cultural importance of the Irish language and its potential to contribute to the goal of an inclusive society characterised by growing cultural diversity. The decision to exempt a student from the study of Irish has significant implications for students, schools and the wider community. The ASTI position is that students should be given every reasonable opportunity to participate in the learning of Irish for as long as possible. Exemptions from the study of Irish should only be granted in circumstances which meet clearly understood thresholds of need.

Context

The decision on whether or not to grant an exemption from the study of Irish is devolved to the school on the basis that the school is best placed to understand the needs of individual students and how those needs can best be addressed in accordance with wider policy on responding to special educational needs in an inclusive school environment.

¹ <https://www.asti.ie/document-library/asti-submission-on-exemptions-from-irish-january-2019/>

Revised Department of Education circulars on exemptions from the study of Irish were issued in August 2022 to primary and second-level schools. The revisions were informed by a review of the implementation of the 2019 circulars which, in turn, replaced circulars in place since the mid-1990s.² The initial review of the 2019 circulars highlighted the need for further changes to ensure equity in the granting of recommendations. In particular, an important feature of the 2019 circulars was a move away from a diagnostic categorical assessment model to a needs-based model in line with other changes to special educational needs policy and practice in schools. This changed approach was important as there was strong anecdotal evidence that access to private assessments were used to gain exemptions for students who were not adjudged by the school to have needed same. This was a particular concern at second level as evidenced in the fact that students who had been granted exemptions from the study of Irish continued to study additional languages to Leaving Certificate level. This raises concerns about equity, transparency and the integrity of the school's curriculum. Teachers of Irish have expressed concern that the unchecked growth in the number of exemptions is undermining the status of their subject among students, creating further negative attitudes towards the language and its relevance to students' lives.

This submission will set out some specific observations on Circular 55/2022 (second-level) followed by a statement of ASTI's wider concerns relating to the process of granting exemptions.

Circular 55/2022

This Circular sets out specific grounds for exemptions for the study of Irish at second-level. It includes grounds set out in previous circulars, namely:

- A student of at least 12-years of age whose education was received outside the state for at least three consecutive years) where they did study Irish.
- Children who experience persistent and significant literacy difficulties which are an obstacle to their learning across the curriculum
- Children who are or who have been enrolled in a special class/ special school

It adds two new grounds, namely:

- Children who experience a high level of multiple and persistent needs that are a significant barrier to the student's participation and engagement in their learning and school life
- Children who have a recommendation and have been deemed eligible for a place in a recognised (sanctioned and resourced by NCSE) special school and/or in a special class in a mainstream school

Circular 55/2022 also amends the appeals process to a refusal to grant an exemption. Previously, an appeal was based purely on the process the school undertook in order to reach

² <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/233821/087a8697-b452-45c0-a2d4-e39ba32fdf7f.pdf#page=null>

its decision. Under new Circular, the Irish Exemptions Appeals Committee (IEAC) will review the case in its entirety (as presented to the school) and make a decision as to whether or not the child meets the criteria. If the Committee decides the student fulfils the criteria of the circumstances under which the application is made and an exemption should be granted, it will instruct the school to give effect to their decision.

Finally, Circular 55/2022 requires schools to update the Post-Primary Online Database on a monthly basis with information on exemptions granted to allow for ongoing statistical analysis and accountability in decision-making.

ASTI observations on Circular 55/2022

The ASTI supports the two new grounds introduced for exemptions. In Ireland, less than 1% of students with Special Educational Needs are educated in special schools. Consequently, schools have very diverse student populations, for whom a complex infrastructure of supports, planning, monitoring are maintained by the school. The prevalence rate of special educational needs in the system is typically 21% of the overall population. Clearly, a 'one-size' curriculum cannot meet the needs of all students as is evidenced in the introduction of Level 1 and 2 Learning Programmes in the Framework for Junior Cycle and the work that is currently ongoing for a progression programme at senior cycle.

A strong feature of the Circular is the requirement that decision-making by the school is based on documentary evidence (Student Support Plan) which substantiates the persistent difficulties of a student with learning the Irish language despite having had access to a differentiated approach to language and literacy learning in all subjects/across the curriculum and over time and having had specific interventions put into place.

The ASTI also supports the revised Appeals Process as it provides for a full examination of the school's rationale for the decisions to refuse to grant an exemption based on the documentary evidence used by the school – as distinct from the process itself. As such, the revised process should provide an objective external oversight to a process that can be challenging for schools.

The requirement that schools update the Post-Primary Online Database on a monthly basis with information on exemptions granted to allow for ongoing statistical analysis and accountability in decision-making is highly important. Currently, there isn't a centralised database where such evidence is gathered and lack of access to information on a newly enrolled second-level student can impair the overall process of responding to special educational needs.

ASTI's wider concerns in relation to process of exemptions from Irish

In its submission to the 2019 Departmental consultation process, the ASTI highlighted several outstanding challenges in terms of school's processing of applications for exemptions from the study of Irish. These concerns derive from wider school issues in relation to supports for

special educational needs. While the Department introduced a new model for the allocation of additional teachers to schools in 2017, it did not provide an accompanying training programme for either subject teachers or teachers allocated to Special Education Teacher roles. Teachers were expected to engage in diagnostic practices and prepare individual Student Support Plans without training. This decision by the Department elicited a strong negative reaction from teachers and the ASTI is on record in terms of demanding a national CPD programme and the allocation of an ex-quota coordinator to each school to lead the SEN team. Planning for special educational needs comprises two key dimensions, namely, planning at whole-school level and planning for individual students. Both processes require high levels of professional expertise, dedicated time (including time to engage with external agencies and professionals as well as parents) and, crucially, access to ongoing professional development.

Red C research commissioned by ASTI in 2019 found that, overall, only 20% of teachers have a qualification in special educational need while just 5% of SET teachers had a relevant qualification.³ Heavy workload and lack of access to relevant are the main reasons for low engagement in CPD. Teachers in the survey strongly identified class size as a key barrier to the delivery of inclusive education.

The ASTI is again calling on the Department of Education to address these ongoing issues which have huge potential impact on the school's processing of applications for exemptions from the study of Irish.

Conclusion

The ASTI believes that the Irish language is central to the purposes of education as set out in the Education Act 1998 and in the curriculum. Languages are for everyone and the principle of inclusivity must underpin policy for the Irish language. Exemptions should be exceptional and only granted in specific circumstances. The curriculum must reflect this principle and seek to provide access for all to Irish language learning.

³ <https://www.asti.ie/document-library/achieving-inclusive-schools-the-teachers-perspective-april-2019/>

