

ASTI Submission
Consultation on Exemptions from the Study of Irish
January 2019

Introduction

The ASTI welcomes the consultation on the future direction of exemptions from the study of Irish. This consultation is timely not only in the context of ongoing curriculum change at both primary and second-level but also in the context of achieving progress on the government's 20-year strategy for the Irish language. The consultation paper and research report comprehensively provide the context for a review of the current exemption policy and attendant practices. The ASTI fully endorses the consultation 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. As noted in the consultation paper, languages are for everybody and bilingualism has acknowledged benefits for individuals and the wider society. Indeed, it is of note that the proportion of exemptions granted to migrant and returned emigrant pupils/students is miniscule: many such children already come from communities and states which are bi- or plurilingual.

The Irish language and schools

The Irish language has been a foundational pillar in the curricula in Irish schools since the foundation of the State. This stems from the position of Irish as the first official language in the Constitution and the explicit aim of successive governments to develop a bilingual society, most recently set out in the national 20-year strategy for the Irish language. Along with English, the inclusion of both languages as core subjects in national curricula gives language learning and the advantages of bilingualism a particular status in the learning experience of students. This status is integral to the Primary Languages Curriculum and the Framework for Junior Cycle, both introduced in 2015. In addition, developments in understanding of language acquisition, of special educational needs and in neuroscience in education generally have overtaken the current Departmental policy on exemptions from the study of Irish.

The ASTI believes that Irish must remain a core part of the curriculum at second-level. Education at its core is about fostering human development. This fostering or nurturing of human wellbeing, skills and knowledge takes place in culture and education itself is a deeply cultural process shared and re-shaped between the generations. Language is intrinsic to the process and occupies a central place in every curriculum. The ASTI believes that every student should have access to learning the Irish language so that they can understand themselves and their society, their cultural heritage and the importance of diversity in multi-cultural societies. The ASTI supports the proposed direction of future Departmental policy to provide exemptions in Irish only in very specific circumstances.

Exemptions from Irish

As noted in the consultation paper, exemptions from language is complex and there are no simple solutions. However, the findings of the Inspectorate's report in relation to anomalies and omissions in the criteria for exemptions set out in policy – Circulars M10/94 (post-primary) and M12/96 (primary) in policy - and the divergence of practice at school level are unequivocal. Moreover, this empirical evidence confirms long-standing anecdotal evidence within schools as to inequities and lack of transparency in the exemption process.

Some of the evidence from the Inspectorate's report is of particular concern to the ASTI. The majority of exemptions – almost two-thirds - are granted at second-level and now represent 10% of the second-level cohort. Moreover, this figure under-represents the actual number of students who do not sit the certificate examination in Irish. In the seven-year period between 2004 and 2011, the number of students not sitting Irish in the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations increased by 50% and 40% respectively. In 2016, approximately 15% and 13% of candidates respectively did not take Irish in the Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations.

Similar patterns are reflected in the number of candidates who are exempted from Irish but who sit a modern foreign language examination. Between 2004 and 2010, there was a 71% increase in the number of students sitting the Junior Certificate examination in a modern foreign language who had an exemption in Irish. The equivalent figure for the Leaving Certificate examination in this period peaked at 58% in 2011. In 2016, 67% and 52% of students with an exemption respectively sat a modern foreign language examination in the Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations.

Members of the ASTI have been expressing concerns over these trends for many years. There is a widespread perception among teachers that parental pressure is significant in driving the granting of exemptions by schools. This raises concerns about equity, transparency and the integrity of the school's curriculum. Moreover, as noted in the Inspectorate's report, the fact that exemptions exist is driving demand for more categories of learners to be exempted. 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 phenomenon is acknowledged in the Inspectorate's report when it refers to the motivational factors related to the perceived lack of relevance of Irish and the opportunity to use it. The latter is moreover intrinsically influenced by the legacy of political, cultural and psychological issues associated with the language as an entity in itself and indeed with the learning of the language.

Proposed revised circular for exemptions

The ASTI's representative structures have carefully studied the Inspectorates report and supports its core recommendation that the policy of inclusion should underpin language policy and practice. Students with additional and special educational needs need opportunities to experience and benefit from learning a second language at a level appropriate to their needs and abilities. The ASTI supports the claims made for the advantages of language learning and bilingualism in the report.

The ASTI broadly supports the proposed changes to policy on exemptions from the study of Irish as set out in the proposed draft circular revising M10/94. The unambiguous specification of criteria for exemptions – as set out in Section 2.2 of the proposed draft circular – will provide clarity and transparency to the entire school community – students, parents and teachers. This is particularly true in the case of Irish given the legacy of political, cultural and psychological issues associated with the

language as an entity in itself and indeed with the learning of the language. Of equal importance is the fact that the proposed policy is congruent with overall policy for students with additional and special educational needs which is no longer based on a point-in-time diagnosis of disability but, rather, seeks to respond to students' emerging – or diminishing - needs as they grow and progress through the curriculum. The removal of the need to secure a psychological assessment to process applications for exemptions is similarly welcomed.

At the same time, there are a number of additional issues in relation to policy on exemptions and the study of Irish in schools which are external to the issues addressed in the proposed revised circular. They include curriculum and pedagogy, teacher education and training, supports for schools, policy coherence across 'transition' points, supporting students' access to out-of-school Irish language and cultural experiences.

Exemptions granted to students with specific learning difficulties that are persistent

The ASTI supports this criteria but must put on record its profound concern about the impact on teachers' workload of the continuum of support model for special educational needs in schools. Since the introduction of the new model for the allocation of teachers for special education, ASTI members have registered their dissatisfaction with the requirement to engage in planning for special educational needs, including the preparation of Student Support Plans, Individual Education Plans, etc., without having had access to training or reductions in their timetables to contribute to the planning process. The ASTI has recently advised its members ASTI recently advised classroom teachers not to prepare and implement Individual Education Plans (IEPs) or their equivalents (e.g. student support files), but rather to focus their efforts and time on teaching and learning for all students including students with special education needs.

Curriculum and pedagogy

The curriculum provides the context for teaching and learning and must therefore be designed to meet the wide variety of needs and abilities of learners. The Framework for Junior Cycle and the Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation emphasise the focus on 'recognising a wide range of learning'. The subject specifications for languages, including Irish, are broadly built on the common focus on communicative competence, language and cultural awareness and learner's self-awareness as a language speaker. At the same time, there is strong evidence from recent ASTI research which demonstrates that teachers' are not confident that the new specification model is improving learning in the classroom or is capable of sustaining standards. Research must be continue to be conducted by the NCCA on the implementation of the new specifications in order to identify those aspects of the specifications which are working well and those which aren't. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the provision of separate specifications for Gaeilge for Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools is a progressive measure. The review of the new Irish specification after its first three-year cycle in 2020 must take particular cognizance of the already emerging concerns of the discouraging impact of the requirement for study of an over-ambitious range of literature.

Teachers' pedagogical practices are the key to realising the potential of subject specifications. Again, recent ASTI research indicates that teachers find the Junior Cycle specifications problematic in terms of lack of guidance between depth of subject content, learning outcomes and key skills. These concerns are of particular relevance in the context of ensuring an inclusive curriculum for Irish in the context of restricted criteria for exemptions.

Teacher education and training

The *Action Plan for the Irish Language 2018-2022* contains specific actions in relation to teacher education and training. Collectively, they aim to improve initial teacher education and ensure ongoing professional development. These actions must be sustained to support the new inclusive curricula for language learning at primary and second-level. A dominant theme from recent ASTI research is the challenge of differentiation in the classroom. This concern has also arisen in relation to the embedding of the new model of support for students with additional and special educational needs. Teachers need more training in this aspect of pedagogy if they are to create the necessary inclusive learning environments in their classrooms.

The abolition in Budget 2012 of the grant (€637) for the mandatory student placement in the Gaeltacht was a retrograde step and is now a major financial burden for the 1,350 or so student teachers. This burden was acknowledged as early as 2014 by the Minister for Education and Skills when he stated that *"that the funding of the Gaeltacht Placement is a significant cost to students and their families"* (Written Answers, 25 September 2014). USI have estimated that the cost of restoring the grant for the extended four-week placement at €1 million. The non-reinstatement of this grant is indefensible: it is a form of 'double-burden' for student teachers who had to verify residential experience of at least two months in a Gaeltacht area in order to be accepted on the PME programme. The ASTI calls for an immediate restoration of this grant which would not only reduce the burden for student teachers of Irish but would also represent a commitment by the State to support the teaching profession.

The non-availability of qualified teachers of Irish is a key driver in the teacher supply crisis at second-level. Allied to this is the shortage of teachers of other subject who are competent to teach through the medium of Irish. The Teacher Supply Action Plan contains specific measures to address these problems. However, there are also interim measures which could be introduced to facilitate teacher upskilling such as the provision of a Gaeltacht placement grant to qualified teachers of Irish; the provision of post-graduate diploma upskilling programme such as that provided for teachers of mathematics.

Supports for schools: The *Action Plan for the Irish Language 2018-2022* contains specific actions in relation to the provision of high quality teaching resources for all schools. These actions must be sustained to support the new inclusive curricula for language learning at primary and second-level. Teachers of Irish and their professional associations have long criticised the quality of teaching and learning resources in the Irish language.

Policy coherence across 'transition' points: The Departmental consultation paper identifies lack of coherence between the NUI matriculation requirements and current policy on exemption from Irish and other languages. The NUI criteria are not entirely consistent with the Department Circulars. Future Departmental policy needs to address this anomaly which is also relevant to the implementation of *Languages Connect*, the national foreign languages strategy.

Supporting students' access to out-of-school Irish language and cultural experiences: Research has consistently demonstrated the importance of positive attitudes and experiences to students' motivation to learn Irish. Students who have attended summer schools in the Gaeltacht have demonstrably more positive attitudes the language at school. However, the costs of these summer schools are prohibitive for many families. There is, moreover, a dearth of alternative learning experiences such as 'Easter schools', weekend camps, etc. The potential cost of attending such alternative events is also a barrier for many families. Thus while acknowledging the many measures in the *Action Plan for the Irish Language 2018-2022* for community and language supports programme, the ASTI believes that additional measures are necessary. In the first instance, there is no reason why similar types of measures could not be introduced in for students in DEIS schools in particular. There is a vibrant Irish language culture in many of our cities and towns, created by young people, artists and musicians which could contribute to supporting students' access to out-of-school Irish language and cultural experiences.

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.