

REPORT ON
PUBLIC
CONSULTATION
ON EXEMPTIONS
FROM THE STUDY
OF IRISH IN
SCHOOLS

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List of Acronyms used in the Report

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	ADHD
Autism Spectrum Disorder	ASD
Common European Framework Reference for Languages	CEFR
Continuous Professional Development	CPD
Department of Education and Skills	DES
Early Childhood Care and Education	ECCE
Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act.....	EPSEN
English as an Additional Language	EAL
General Learning Disability	GLD
IBM Statistics Package for the Social Sciences	IBM SPSS
Initial Teacher Education	ITE
National University of Ireland.....	NUI
Special Educational Needs.....	SEN
Specific Learning Disability.....	SLD

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SECTION 1: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Introduction to the Public Consultation

Public consultation on the future direction of policy on exemptions from the study of Irish in schools was undertaken in the context of recent changes in the arrangements for granting additional supports to children with special educational needs (SEN), in addition to Irish language curricular developments and related Department of Education and Skills (DES) policy. The consultation was initiated on the 7th of December 2018 through an invitation to members of the public to participate in an online survey and to send submissions via email or in writing if they wished to supplement their online responses. Due to “record” numbers of survey responses from the public (DES, 2019), the deadline for responses to the consultation was extended from the 11th of January to the 18th of January, 2019. The public consultation sought views on the draft revised circulars for primary and post-primary schools which presented key changes to the processes, circumstances and criteria for granting exemptions from the study of Irish (see Appendices 1 and 2 for the draft revised circulars). These key proposed changes are (DES, 2018, pp.17-18):

- *The draft revised circulars are for implementation in English-medium schools only.*
- *The draft revised circulars recognise the authority devolved to special schools in decision making concerning the Irish language learning needs of students in special educational contexts. Similarly, the draft revised circulars provide mainstream schools where there are special classes or to which students may be returning having spent a period in a special education setting, with the flexibility to make decisions that are in the best interest of the student’s learning in the area of Irish.*
- *The draft revised circulars set 12 years of age or the final year in primary education as the most appropriate time to consider an application for an exemption from the study of Irish where pupils may have received their primary education outside the state or are re-enrolling following a period abroad. Typically, applications for exemption are made by parents/guardians on behalf of students. The draft revised circulars provide that students who have reached the age of 18 years may apply for an exemption from the study of Irish.*

- *In line with other Department policies in the area of SEN, the draft revised circulars support the identification of need rather than using a diagnostic, categorical model.*
- *Average/Above Average Intelligence Quotient (IQ) is no longer used as a diagnostic specifier. Based on the draft revised circulars, psychological assessments will no longer be necessary to process applications for exemption from the study of Irish.*
- *In the case of pupils with significant learning difficulties, the criteria for exemption include only one literacy attainment score (Word Reading or Reading Comprehension score) at/below the 10th percentile.*
- *The draft revised circulars make provision for an appeals mechanism at local level.*

The survey was made available in Irish and English, and was housed on a commercial survey website, the links to which were embedded within the DES website. The first section of the survey requested brief demographic information, and subsequently asked participants to respond to five closed-ended Likert-type items based on criteria from the draft revised circulars. The second section of the survey was comprised of open-ended questions that requested observations and/or comments on the broad areas of: the circumstances in which a pupil/student may be granted an exemption from the study of Irish; the most appropriate age/stage in a pupil's/student's education at which to consider granting an exemption; circumstances for exemption in the case of pupils/students with significant and persistent learning difficulties; exemptions in special schools or special classes in mainstream schools; and general comments on the draft revised circulars. It is important to note that the questions in Section 2 of the survey did not directly map on to the questions of Section 1.

1.2 Participants

A total sample of 11,109 individuals participated in the online survey, with the vast majority (95.3%) choosing to respond in English. The average response rate for the closed-ended questions of the survey was 62% but only 12% for the open-ended questions. The majority of respondents self-identified as teachers and/or parents of students in English-medium post-primary schools. 149 written submissions were

received by the DES in response to the public consultation. Of these, 24 were submitted by organisations and 125 by individuals. Of the submissions received from organisations, 5 broad stakeholder groups were represented including parents, the teaching profession and school management (primary and post-primary level), the university sector, the Irish language sector, and disability/special needs representatives. Among the 125 individuals who submitted written responses, 15 self-identified as parents and 35 as teachers. The remaining 75 individuals did not state whether they were parents or teachers. 25% of the submissions were in Irish, while the remaining 75% were in English.

1.3 Overview of Analytic Methods

The responses to the closed-ended questions of the survey (i.e., the quantitative data) were examined by one analyst through descriptive statistics using *IBM Statistics Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 25*. The open-ended survey responses (i.e., the qualitative data) were analysed both independently and collectively by four raters using a systematic inductive categorical approach (supported by *NVivo 12* software) whereby relevant categories were inductively derived from the dataset based on prominence. The written submissions were analysed according to the same analytic framework, with each submission being treated as a discrete unit of analysis. The inductive approach to the analysis, involving line-by-line coding, aimed to capture as much of the nuance and heterogeneity of the responses as possible, whilst also identifying areas of significant agreement or consensus. Illustrative excerpts were selected for each category that was identified in the analysis of the qualitative survey data and the written submissions data. Throughout this report, excerpts are quoted in the original language used by respondents so as to avoid misrepresentation.

1.4 Key Findings from the Survey

1.4.1 Findings from analysis of the quantitative survey data.

Analysis of the quantitative survey data indicated that the majority of respondents either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the proposed criteria from the draft revised circulars. The highest level of stated agreement was found for the proposed criteria related to: pupils/students who have received their education outside the State (75.1% agreement); pupils/students in special schools or special classes in mainstream

schools (67.5% agreement); students who have reached the age of 18 years (66.5% agreement); the appeals mechanism (63.3% agreement); and pupils/students who are re-enrolling in school following a period of at least three consecutive years abroad (63.4% agreement). Lower levels of agreement were found for the criteria concerning Irish-medium schools (58%), and pupils/students with significant and persistent learning difficulties (56.1%).

1.4.2 Findings from analysis of the qualitative survey data.

The open-ended survey questions were analysed separately to identify consensus views (if any) as indexed by the most prominent categories in responses, each of which is described in detail in Section 4 of this report. It is important to note that there was very substantial heterogeneity within the qualitative survey data, with a broad spectrum of views and positions within most themes.

Themes in opinions on the general circumstances in which a pupil/student may be granted an exemption from the study of Irish (Section 1, Question 1) included: status of Irish (i.e., views relating to whether Irish should be an optional or “compulsory” subject); SEN including Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Dyslexia and other diagnosed or undiagnosed learning difficulties; students educated abroad; well-being and mental-health (i.e., views that mental health outcomes should or should not be considered as grounds for granting an exemption from the study of Irish); and views on the proposed criteria in the draft revised circulars (i.e., concerns in relation to the requirement of a standardised score at or below the 10th percentile on a discrete test in Word Reading or Reading Comprehension). In responses to the question asking for comments/observations on the most appropriate age at which to consider granting an exemption from Irish (Section 1, Question 2), the marginally most prominent answer was early primary school (i.e., any time between Junior Infants and up to, and including, second class). However, many other alternatives were suggested by respondents including the beginning of post-primary school (second most prominent response) or at any age or stage (case-by-case basis). In considering the criteria for the granting of exemptions to students with significant and persistent learning difficulties (Section 1, Question 3), respondents spoke about: exemptions on the basis of diagnoses of Dyslexia/Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD); needs-based exemptions (i.e., exemptions granted on the basis of observed persistent difficulties rather than diagnoses); the adjudicating authority for eligibility for exemptions (i.e.,

opinions on the decision-making authority of parents, teachers and external professionals such as psychologists); and alternatives to exemptions based on differentiation of teaching and learning, and revisions to the Irish curriculum.

The greatest degree of consensus across Section 1 of the survey was seen in responses related to the granting of exemptions to pupils/students in special schools or special classes in mainstream schools (Question 4), with the dominant view being that exemptions should be automatically granted to this cohort. Where respondents made reference to the specifics of the proposed criteria within the draft revised circulars, they tended to focus on and express concerns in relation to: the 10th percentile threshold and the 3rd class decision-point for pupils/students with significant and persistent learning difficulties; the degree of guidance within the circulars in relation to the use of standardised tests; the number and type of literacy attainment indicators specified within the criteria; the age criterion for students educated abroad; and to a lesser extent, the tracking and documenting element of the criteria (i.e., using the Student Support File).

The final open-ended question of the survey asking for other comments on the draft revised circulars elicited extremely diverse opinions and positions not only on the proposed criteria for exemptions but also on the broader context of Irish language education. The most prominent identified themes in these responses included: changes to Irish curriculum, teaching and learning (i.e., views in relation to the current and potential future versions of the Irish curriculum); Irish exemption and modern foreign languages (i.e., opinions that Irish exemptions should preclude the study of modern foreign languages); Irish and identity, culture and heritage (i.e., insights on the relevance and importance of Irish for our national identity, culture and heritage); Irish optional (i.e., beliefs that Irish should be an optional rather than a core subject); well-being and mental health (i.e., thoughts about links between mental health and “struggling” with Irish); and the appeals process (i.e., judgements that the Board of Management should not be the arbiter of appeals). Finally, respondents expressed criticism of the Irish exemption consultation process based on concerns relating to the chosen methodology, the timing of the online survey, the wording of the survey, and the use of research findings to inform the creation of the draft circulars.

1.5 Key Findings from the Written Submissions

1.5.1 Themes in opinions/perspectives regarding the proposed criteria for exemptions in the draft revised circulars.

Given the open nature of the analysis of the written submissions, the themes that emerged were not necessarily focused only on the proposed circulars but encompassed the broader context of Irish language education. However, the process of analysis also included drawing out the positions of the respondents *vis-à-vis* the proposed criteria for exemptions.

Within the 4 submissions that referenced the language of instruction in the school, there was broad agreement that exemption from the study of Irish should only be available to pupils/students in English-medium schools. However, some organisations highlighted that there should be scope for exceptional cases, such as in the case of newcomer students to Gaeltacht schools. There was more disagreement than agreement across submissions [number (*N*) = 14] that referenced the proposal that students who have received their education abroad and who have completed the final year of their primary education or have reached 12 years of age may be granted an exemption from the study of Irish. The most prominent theme in discussions of this criterion was the difficulty in providing a balance between the needs of students of English as an additional language and the compulsory study of Irish. Another common point raised was that intensive Irish language courses should be provided for newcomer students to allow them the option of studying Irish, regardless of their age upon arrival in the State. Among the 5 submissions making reference to the criterion of pupils/students who are re-enrolling following a period abroad, one agreed with the proposal, one suggested an amended time-frame, and three recommended providing extra Irish language support to returning students. The proposal that pupils/students in special schools or special classes in mainstream schools should receive automatic exemptions from the study of Irish was addressed in five of the written submissions, and there was broad consensus around the proposed change. The submitting bodies agreed that students in such cases should not have to apply for an official exemption, and they welcomed the prioritising of students' individual needs. However, there were some concerns raised around the continuity of provision for exemptions in cases where a pupil/student moves from a special school or special class setting into mainstream education, and in relation to the need for monitoring of the implementation of the criteria in special schools.

Twenty-three of the written submissions referred to the proposed criteria for the granting of exemptions to pupils/students with significant and persistent learning difficulties. While there was broad agreement that the proposal represented a positive move towards focusing on children's individual learning needs rather than psychological assessment and diagnosis, three categories of concerns were raised. The first category was the perceived arbitrary nature of the cut-off points for exemption, and the exclusion of certain categories of SEN from the grounds for exemption, in particular ASD. The second category centred on the issue of workload and the implications of the additional documentation practices required at school-level. The third category challenged the perceived assumptions made around the connection between language-learning and SEN. The proposal that students who have reached the age of 18 years may make their own application for an exemption from the study of Irish was addressed in 2 of the written submissions. Both submissions reported favourable views, but there was an expressed caveat that guidelines should be provided in the form of a discussion framework for supporting students and school leaders in such a decision.

A very substantial number of written submissions ($N = 107$) made reference to the decision making authority of school principals. The large majority of submissions disagreed with the proposed role of the school principal in the application process for exemptions, with articulated reasons ranging from the concern that this change would lead to a long-term increase in the number of exemptions granted, to the concern that the proposed change would place school principals under undue pressure from parents to grant exemptions. Among the 11 written submissions that referenced the mechanism for appeals, there was significant disagreement with the proposal to make the Board of Management the arbiter of appeals, with articulated rationales including subjectivity, workload issues, and a perceived lack of clinical expertise at Board of Management level. An alternative proposal was that there should be another body or organisation to which appeals can be addressed. Indeed, a common theme across the written submissions was the articulation of specific recommendations regarding amendments to, or refinement of, the revised draft circulars. The most prevalent recommendation made was that the criteria for exemption from the study of Irish should be amended to include the proviso that, if pupils/students are exempt from Irish, they should not be eligible to study modern foreign languages. Secondly, it was recommended that the revised circulars should provide clarity on whether stress and

anxiety could be considered as grounds for an exemption. A third recommendation was that the DES should provide clarity in the circulars around the question of indemnification for schools and Boards of Management; that is, that parents should be responsible for any implications arising from a decision to avail of an exemption.

1.5.2 Themes in the written submissions on the broader context of Irish language education.

Across all of the written submissions, there was significant agreement on the inadequacy of the current system of exemptions. Points raised in this regard included: a lack of focus on learner needs; a failure to cater for inclusivity; the perceived misuse of the exemptions system and misinterpretation of the current criteria for exemption; and a call for the introduction of on-going monitoring and evaluation of decisions on granting of exemptions. Arising from the perceived inadequacy of the current system, there was broad agreement around the need for reform of the exemptions system. The public consultation process was welcomed as an opportunity to raise concerns and queries around the exemptions process. However, there was very significant diversity in positions towards the concept of exemption itself, ranging from calls for abolishing exemptions entirely to calls for making exemptions automatically available upon request. These positions, while seemingly at odds, were anchored in a common call for reform of the approach to Irish language education. The core message arising from the diverse positions reflected in the written submissions is that reform of the system of exemptions from Irish cannot be considered in isolation from its educational and social context.

Five key themes emerged from the analysis of the written submissions; namely, Inclusive Education, Curriculum, SEN, Identity and Culture, and School Context. Within the theme of Inclusive Education, a number of respondents argued that in an inclusive education system, the opportunity to study the Irish language should be available to all learners, regardless of circumstance, and that additional learning supports and a differentiated curriculum should be put in place to allow this. However, some submissions made the point that a commitment to inclusivity within the education system should recognise the increasing ethnic and cultural diversity of Ireland's population by removing compulsory Irish from the curriculum.

Curriculum was the second most prominent theme in the written submissions and within this theme, respondents from across the spectrum of positions on the study of

the Irish language argued that the policy on exemptions should not be reviewed without also addressing the question of curriculum reform. While there were significant differences of opinion regarding the compulsory nature of Irish and the availability of exemptions, there was overwhelming consensus that the curriculum for Irish at all levels should be reformed, and that teaching methodologies should be reviewed and brought into alignment with the pedagogical approaches used in modern foreign languages.

Under the theme of SEN, respondents highlighted that differentiation should be a core principle of education and that, if there was scope for teachers to adapt the curriculum to individual learners' needs, there would be an associated reduction in the necessity for exemptions. However, respondents also highlighted that, in situations where the study of Irish is having adverse effects on a learner's ability to engage with the rest of the curriculum, it is essential that the option of exemption remain available to them. A further key point made within this theme was that the assumed association between SEN/SLD and language learning is misconceived. More specifically, respondents highlighted a range of research that challenges this assumption and suggested that parents, teachers, and clinical professionals should be made aware of research on the potential cognitive benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism for learners of all abilities.

The fourth theme emerging from the written submissions centred on the question of Identity and Culture. Submissions articulated the cultural and historical significance of the Irish language; highlighted that the widespread provision of exemptions is at odds with the State's statutory commitment to the language; and argued that the system of exemption positions the language as being of lesser status or importance than the other core subjects on the curriculum. However, while the majority of the written submissions highlighted the cultural importance of the language, a number of respondents pointed out that the compulsory study of Irish privileged a model of 'Irishness' that was at odds with the increasingly diverse student population.

School Context was the final theme within the responses to the call for written submissions. Here, the respondents pointed to three key issues relating to the day-to-day operation of schools that they suggest should be considered as part of a review of the provision of exemptions. The first of those issues are resources and training, both to support school personnel in considering and preparing cases for exemption, and to support teachers in developing differentiation skills. The second issue is the

current policy context, in particular the questions of reform fatigue and the contentious implementation of reform at Junior Cycle. Finally, the socio-economic and cultural variation between schools was flagged as problematic in terms of designing a 'one-size-fits-all' policy on the provision of exemptions.

SECTION 2: INTRODUCTION TO THE PUBLIC CONSULTATION ON EXEMPTIONS FROM THE STUDY OF IRISH IN SCHOOLS.

2.1 Background to the Consultation

Public consultation on the future direction of policy on exemptions from the study of Irish in schools took place between the 7th of December 2018 and the 18th of January 2019. The impetus for the public consultation was findings from a review of the current arrangements for the granting of exemptions from the study of Irish in primary and post-primary schools that was conducted by the Inspectorate of the DES between 2014 and 2016. This research concluded that the existing rules for exemption from Irish, which date back to the 1990s, were not working, and furthermore, were not aligned with the current arrangements for granting additional supports to children with SEN in schools (DES Inspectorate, 2018). Another stimulus for the consultation was the recent significant change that has taken place in Irish language curricular provision in schools. The publication of the *National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Young People 2011-2020* was the main catalyst for a comprehensive review of both the purpose of languages in primary and post-primary curricula, and of how language learning happens in schools. As a result, the implementation of a new *Primary Language Curriculum* was commenced in primary schools in 2015. The *Strategy* was also the impetus for the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015), which informed the development of the two specifications for Irish that are now being introduced in Junior Cycle in post-primary schools. A review of the current arrangements for exemptions from the study of Irish was deemed necessary to ensure better alignment with the principles underpinning recent and potential future curricular developments and related Department policy (DES, 2018).

Draft revised circulars for primary and post-primary schools which presented key changes to the processes, circumstances and criteria for granting exemptions from the study of Irish were developed and launched by Minister Joe McHugh in December 2018 (see Appendices 1 and 2), and it was these proposed changes that were the subject of the public consultation. The key proposed changes are (DES, 2018, pp.17-18):

- *The draft revised circulars are for implementation in English-medium schools only.*

- *The draft revised circulars recognise the authority devolved to special schools in decision making concerning the Irish language learning needs of students in special educational contexts. Similarly, the draft revised circulars provide mainstream schools where there are special classes or to which students may be returning having spent a period in a special education setting, with the flexibility to make decisions that are in the best interest of the student's learning in the area of Irish.*
- *The draft revised circulars set 12 years of age or the final year in primary education as the most appropriate time to consider an application for an exemption from the study of Irish where pupils may have received their primary education outside the state or are re-enrolling following a period abroad. Typically, applications for exemption are made by parents/guardians on behalf of students. The draft revised circulars provide that students who have reached the age of 18 years may apply for an exemption from the study of Irish.*
- *In line with other Department policies in the area of SEN, the draft revised circulars support the identification of need rather than using a diagnostic, categorical model.*
- *Average/Above Average Intelligence Quotient (IQ) is no longer used as a diagnostic specifier. Based on the draft revised circulars, psychological assessments will no longer be necessary to process applications for exemption from the study of Irish.*
- *In the case of pupils with significant learning difficulties, the criteria for exemption include only one literacy attainment score (Word Reading or Reading Comprehension score) at/below the 10th percentile.*
- *The draft revised circulars make provision for an appeals mechanism at local level.*

The stated aim of the public consultation was to gather views from all stakeholders so as to inform the amendment of the draft revised circulars, with the hope of achieving a fairer and more equitable application of the criteria for exemptions from the study of Irish (DES, 2018).

2.2 Public Invitation

The consultation was initiated on the 7th of December 2018 through an invitation to members of the public to participate in an online survey, the links to which were embedded on the DES website. In addition, individuals and organisations were invited to send submissions to a dedicated email address (advertised on the DES website) if they wished to supplement their online responses. The public consultation process gained very substantial media traction in Ireland, with the survey being publicised in multiple print, radio and internet news reports over the duration of the consultation period. This likely contributed to the “record” numbers of survey responses that were received from the public (DES, 2019). In response to the high level of interest in the consultation, the Minister for Education and Skills, Joe McHugh, extended the deadline for responses to the 18th of January 2019, and facilitated the submission of written responses from individuals or organisations.

2.3 The Online Survey

The survey, which was devised by the DES, was made available in Irish and English on a commercial survey website. A forced-choice response strategy (i.e., requiring participants to respond to a question before they could proceed) was not utilised in the online survey (with the exception of in the demographics question) due to concerns that this could potentially reduce participation levels. However, a consequence of this was that there was very considerable variability in response rates across the questions of the survey. The first section of the survey requested brief demographic information about participants (i.e., whether “parent”, “student”, “teacher” or “other” best represented them; what “other” represented, if selected; and whether the language medium of their educational setting was English or Irish, if relevant). Subsequently, the survey asked participants to report their views on the proposed changes contained in the draft revised circulars by responding to five closed-ended Likert-type items. Response options included, “Strongly Disagree”, “Disagree”, “Neutral”, “Agree” and “Strongly Agree” or, “Easaontaím go mór”, “Easaontaím”, “Níl aon tuairim agam”, “Aontaím leis sin”, and “Aontaím go mór leis sin”. The second section of the survey requested observations and/or comments on the draft revised circulars. More specifically, respondents were asked to complete five open-ended questions relating to the broad areas of:

- The circumstances in which a pupil/student may be granted an exemption from the study of Irish.
- The most appropriate age/stage in a pupil's/student's education at which to consider granting an exemption from the study of Irish.
- Criteria for granting an exemption from the study of Irish in the case of pupils/students with significant and persistent learning difficulties.
- Exemptions from the study of Irish in special schools or special classes in mainstream schools.
- Other comments on the draft revised circulars.

It is important to note that the open-ended items did not directly map on to the closed-ended items of the survey.

2.4 Participants

(This sub-section reports on the findings from analysis of responses to Question 1 of Section 1 of the online survey). A total sample of 11,109 individuals participated in the online survey, with the vast majority (95.3%) choosing to respond in English. The response rates for the closed-ended questions of the survey (Questions 2 to 6 of Section 1) ranged from 66.5% to 73.8% of the total sample, whereas the response rates for the open-ended questions of the survey (Questions 1 to 5 of Section 2) were much lower, ranging from 10.71% to 14.23%. In response to Question 1 of the online survey, 56.8% of the total sample reported that they are parents, 40.9% reported that they are teachers, 16.5% reported that they are students, and 11.2% reported that are in the "other" category.¹ The number of respondents in each sub-category of the major categories of "parent", "student", "teacher" and "other" are displayed in Figures 1-4 below. Of the 4528 respondents who reported that they are teachers, the majority self-identified as either post-primary teachers (50%) or primary teachers (40%). Of the 6281 respondents who reported that they are parents, the majority self-identified as parents of children in post-primary school (39.55%), followed closely by parents of children in primary school (36.16%). Of the 1835 respondents who reported that they are students, the majority self-identified as post-primary students (77.82%), followed by third level students (21.68%). The majority of respondents (84.5%) reported that their educational setting was an English-medium setting. Of the 1242 individuals who

¹ The frequencies reported for the categories of "student", "teacher", "parent" and "other" do not total to 100% because respondents could select multiple categories to represent themselves.

described themselves as “other”, the majority worked in “other” settings (46.86%), followed by post-primary schools (21.1%). Twenty-four organisations and 125 individuals [15 parents, 35 teachers, and 75 “other”(s)] provided submissions directly to the DES either via email or in writing.

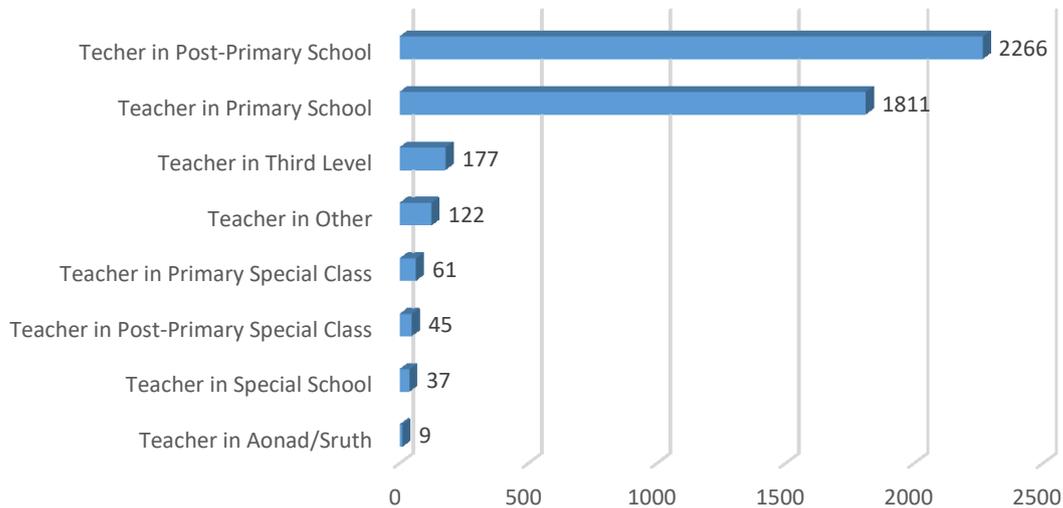


Figure 1. Teacher sub-category frequencies ($N = 4528$).

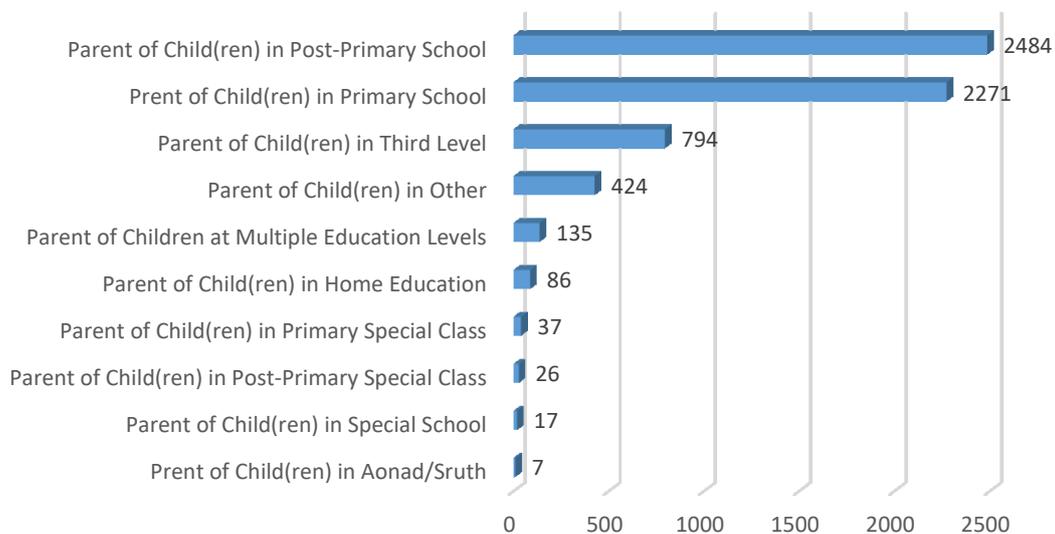


Figure 2. Parent sub-category frequencies ($N = 6281$).

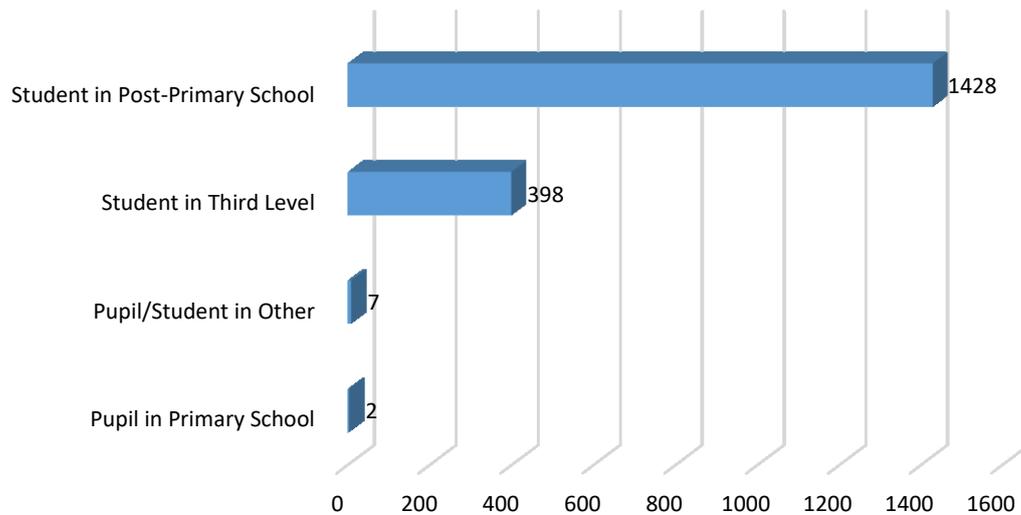


Figure 3: Student sub-category frequencies ($N = 1835$).

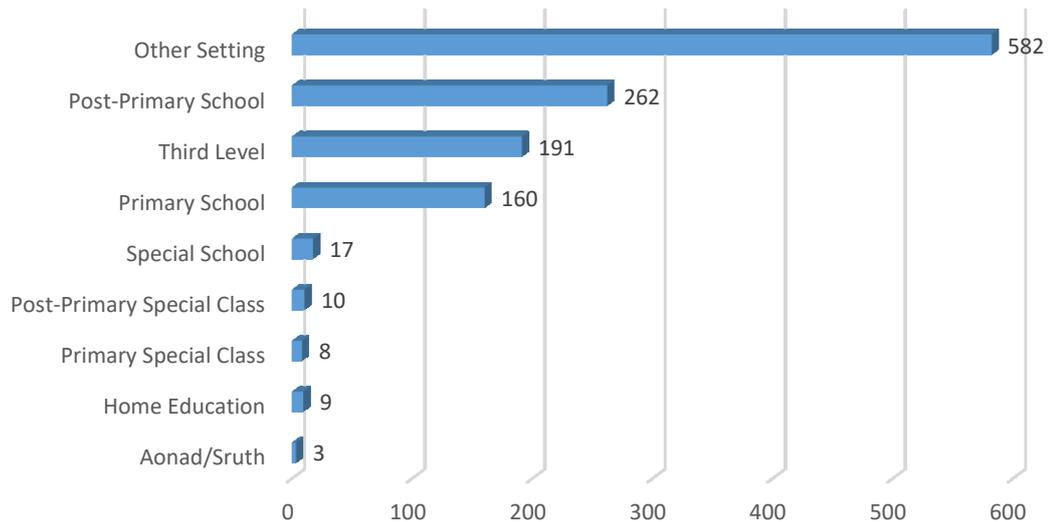


Figure 4: "Other" sub-category frequencies ($N = 1242$).

2.5 Data Analysis Procedures

2.5.1 Quantitative analysis.

Statistical analysis of the quantitative data from the online surveys (i.e., responses to the closed-ended questions) was conducted using *IBM SPSS Version 25*. Descriptive statistics and graphs were used to examine trends in the quantitative dataset which was comprised of the merged responses from both the Irish and English surveys.

2.5.2 Qualitative analysis.

2.5.2.1 Qualitative analysis of survey data.

A randomly selected sub-sample of 50% of the participants who provided responses to the open-ended questions of the online survey was analysed ($N = 792$). It was hypothesised that analysis of a 50% sub-sample would lead to theoretical saturation, that is, identification of categories that would capture the diversity and patterning of responses within the total dataset. The qualitative data in this sub-sample were analysed using *NVivo 12* software, and a systematic inductive categorical approach was applied to the data whereby relevant “categories” were inductively derived from the dataset based on prominence. The following systematic approach was used in the analysis:

- Complete coding (i.e., line-by-line coding) of the data.
- Synthesis of related codes to generate categories.
- Identification and labelling of candidate categories.
- Identification of illustrative extracts for candidate categories.
- Re-labelling of candidate categories to form final categories.

Firstly, each member of the project team (a 50% bilingual multi-disciplinary team with expertise in both quantitative and qualitative data analysis) independently coded the sub-sample dataset according to the above steps. Following this, a team consultation took place, wherein the ranked candidate categories of each analyst were compared with those identified by the other members of the team, until consensus regarding the most prominent emerging categories was reached. In selecting final categories for reporting, special care was taken to ensure *heterogeneity* was achieved between the categories (i.e., each of the selected categories were sufficiently distinct and different from the others), and that there was *homogeneity* within constituent codes (i.e., that the relevant properties within each code were clearly related).

2.5.2.2 Qualitative analysis of written submissions data.

The written submissions were analysed according to the same analytic framework as described above, with each submission being treated as a discrete unit of analysis. The inductive approach to the analysis, involving line-by-line coding, aimed to capture as much of the nuance and heterogeneity of responses as possible, while also identifying areas of significant agreement or consensus.

SECTION 3: FINDINGS FROM THE CLOSED-ENDED QUESTIONS OF THE ONLINE SURVEY

3.1 Part B: Learning Irish in School²

3.1.1 Question 2: The language of instruction in the school.

Exemption from the study of Irish should only be available to pupils/students in schools where all subjects except Irish are taught through the medium of English.

As shown in Figure 5 below, of the 8181 respondents to this item (73.64% of the total sample), the majority (58%) indicated that they “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with this proposal. 29.8% of respondents indicated that they either “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed”, whereas 12.2% of respondents chose the “neutral” option. Frequencies of responses were also examined across the sub-samples of “parent”, “student”, “teacher” and “other”. As shown in Figure 6 below, the majority of parents (56%), students (56.4%), teachers (61.4%) and “others” (55%) reported that they “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with this proposed change.

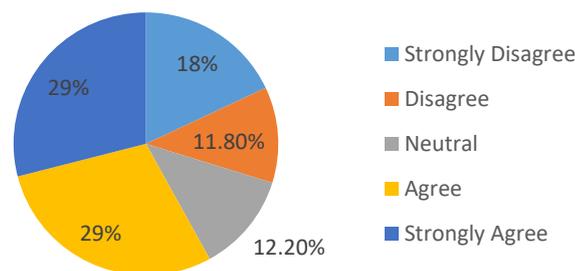


Figure 5. Frequency of responses across total sample for Question 2: The language of instruction in the school.

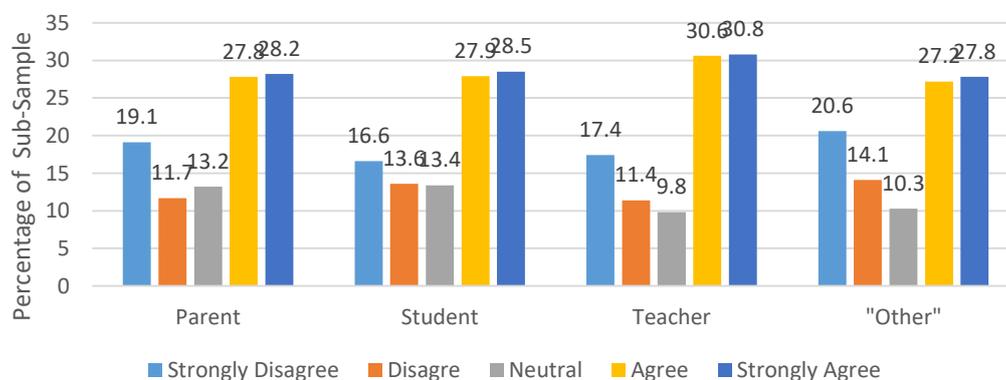


Figure 6. Frequencies of responses for Question 2 across “parent”, “student”, “teacher” and “other” sub-samples.

² The findings from Part A, Section 1 of the online survey are reported on in section 2.4 of the report (i.e., the Participants section).

3.1.2 Question 3a: Pupils/students who received their education outside the state.

Pupils/students who have received their education outside the State (where they did not have opportunity to study Irish) and who have completed the final year of their primary education or have reached age 12 years may be granted an exemption from the study of Irish.

As shown in Figure 7 below, of the 8203 respondents to this item (73.84% of the total sample), a large majority (75.1%) reported that they “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with this proposed change. 19.1% indicated that they “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed”, whereas 5.8% of respondents chose the “neutral” option. Sub-sample analyses indicated that the majority of parents (76.8%), students (73.6%), teachers (73.5%) and “others” (68%) “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with this proposed change (see Figure 8).

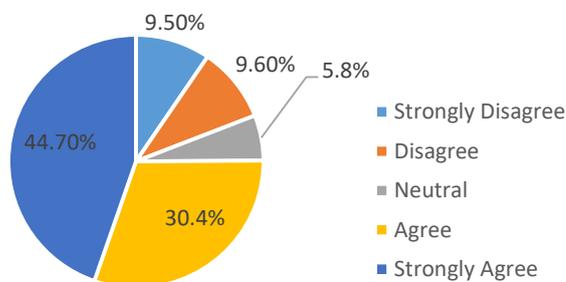


Figure 7. Frequency of responses across total sample for Question 3a: Pupils/students who received their education outside the state.

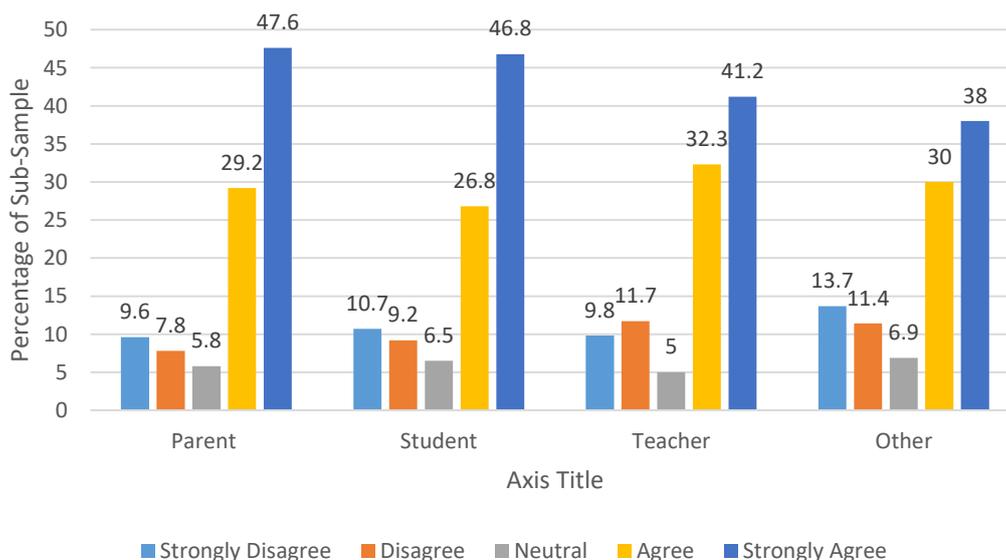


Figure 8. Frequencies of responses for Question 3a across “parent”, “student”, “teacher” and “other” sub-samples.

3.1.3 Question 3b: Pupils/students who are re-enrolling in school following a period abroad.

Pupils/students who are re-enrolling following a period of at least three consecutive years abroad (and where they did not have opportunity to study Irish) and who are at least 12 years of age on re-enrolment may be granted an exemption from the study of Irish.

As shown in Figure 9 below, of the 8179 respondents (73.62% of total sample), the majority (63.4%) indicated that they “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with this proposed change. 27.3% reported that they “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed”, whereas 9.3% chose the “neutral” option. Sub-sample analyses indicated that the majority of parents (68.6%), students (63.7%), teachers (56.8%) and “others” (57.2%) “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with this proposed change (see Figure 10 below).

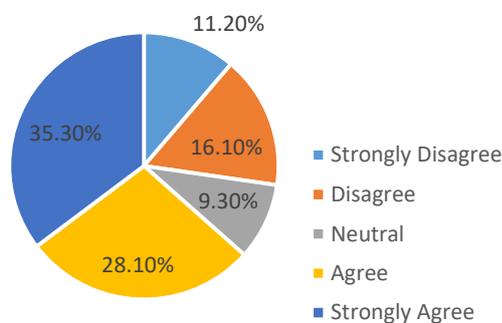


Figure 9. Frequency of responses across total sample for Question 3b: Pupils/students who are re-enrolling in school following a period abroad.

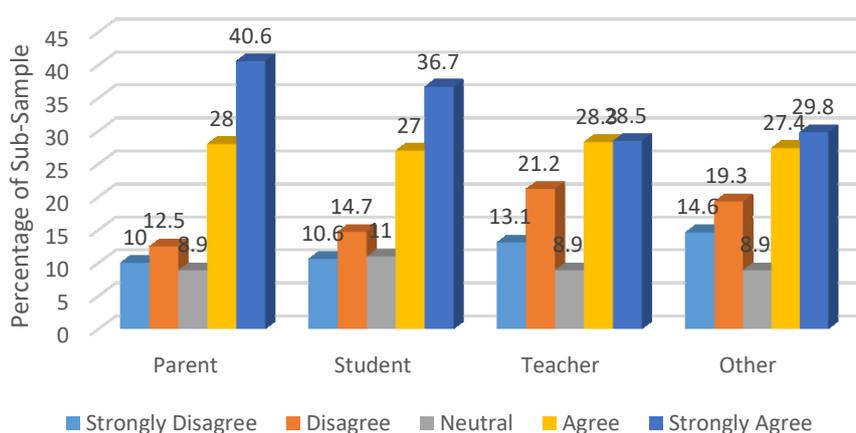


Figure 10. Frequencies of responses for Question 3b across "parent", "student", "teacher" and "other" sub-samples.

3.1.4 Question 3c: Irish in special schools and in special classes in mainstream schools.

The draft revised circulars recognise the authority devolved to the authorities of special schools and mainstream schools where there are special classes in decision making concerning pupils'/students' Irish language learning needs.

3c(i) Pupils/students in special schools or classes should not have to apply for an official exemption from the study of Irish.

As shown in Figure 11 below, of the 8201 respondents to this item (73.82% of total sample), the majority (67.5%) indicated that they “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with this proposed change. In contrast, 22.8% reported that they “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed”, whereas 9.7% chose the “neutral” option. The majority of parents (72%), students (62%), teachers (64.9%) and “others” (63.4%) indicated that they “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with this proposal (see Figure 12 below).

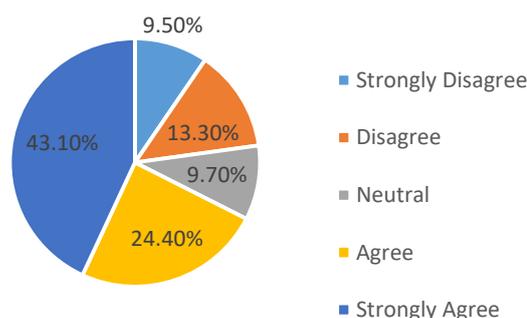


Figure 11. Frequency of responses across total sample for Question 3c(i): Pupils/Students in special schools and special classes.

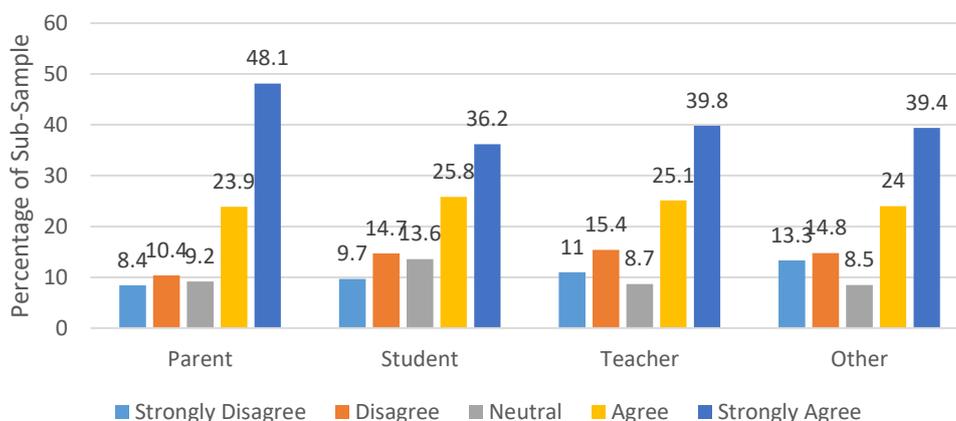


Figure 12. Frequencies of responses for Question 3c(i) across “parent”, “student”, “teacher” and “other” sub-samples.

3cii) Decision making concerning the Irish language learning needs of pupils/students in special schools and special classes in mainstream schools is a matter for school authorities.

Only respondents who had selected the “neutral”, “disagree” or “strongly disagree” options for question 3c(i) were directed to question 3c(ii). As shown in Figure 13 below, of those who were directed to and who responded to this question ($N = 2596$; 23.36% of total sample), 47.6% reported that they “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed”, 35.1% reported that they “agreed” or “strongly agreed”, and 17.3% of respondents chose the “neutral” option. Sub-sample analyses indicated that there was more disagreement than agreement with this statement among parents (48.9% versus 33.1%), students (42.2% versus 30.5%), teachers (50.1% versus 37.9%) and others (56.3% versus 17.4%) [see Figure 14 below].

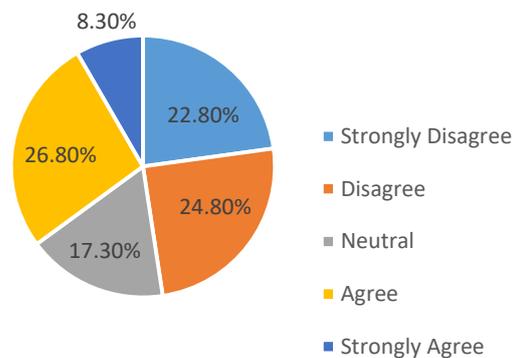


Figure 13. Frequency of responses across total sample for Question 3cii): Decision making in special schools and special classes.

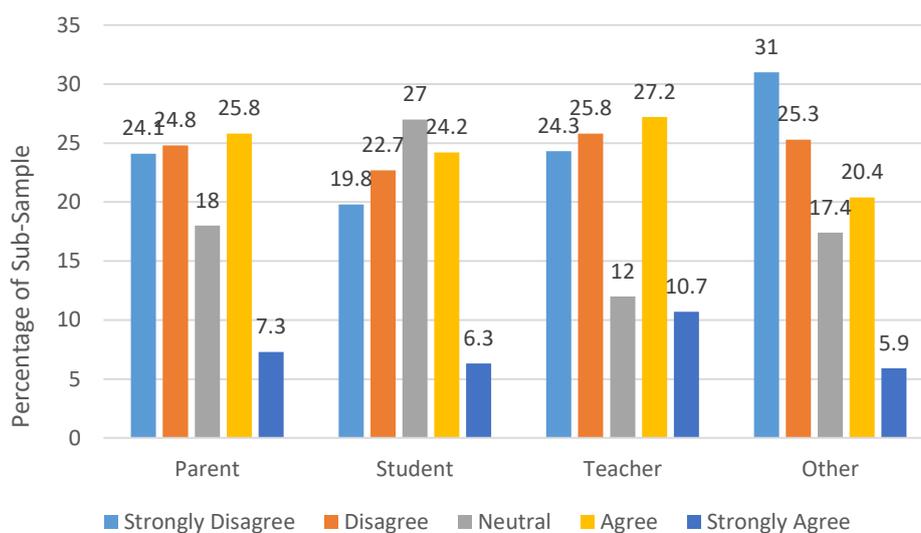


Figure 14. Frequencies of responses for Question 3c(ii) across "parent", "student", "teacher" and "other" sub-samples.

3.2 Part C: Criteria for Pupils/Students with Significant and Persistent Learning Difficulties.

Question 4.

The draft revised circulars propose that where a pupil/student presents with significant and persistent learning difficulties, decisions to grant an exemption should only be considered in the case of:

i. *Pupils who have at least reached third class*

and

ii. *present with significant learning difficulties that are persistent despite having had access to a differentiated approach to language and literacy learning in both Irish and English over time. Documentary evidence to this effect, held by the school, should include Student Support Plans detailing:*

-regular reviews of learning needs as part of an ongoing cycle of assessment.

-target setting.

-evidence-informed intervention and review, including test scores (word reading, reading comprehension, spelling, other scores of language/literacy) at key points of review.

and

iii. *at the time of the application for exemption present with a Standardised Score on a discrete test in Word Reading or Reading Comprehension at/below the 10th percentile.*

As shown in Figure 15 below, of the 7627 respondents to this item (68.66% of total sample), the majority (56.1%) indicated that they “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with this proposed change. In contrast, 31.9% reported that they “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” with this proposed change, whereas 12% chose the “neutral” option. Sub-sample analyses showed that the majority of parents (52.4%), students (53.3%), teachers (62.7%) and “others” (53.4%) “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with this proposed change (see Figure 16 below).

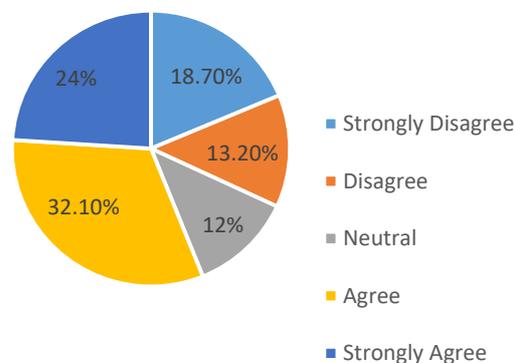


Figure 15. Frequency of responses across total sample for Question 4: Criteria for pupils/students with significant and persistent learning difficulties.

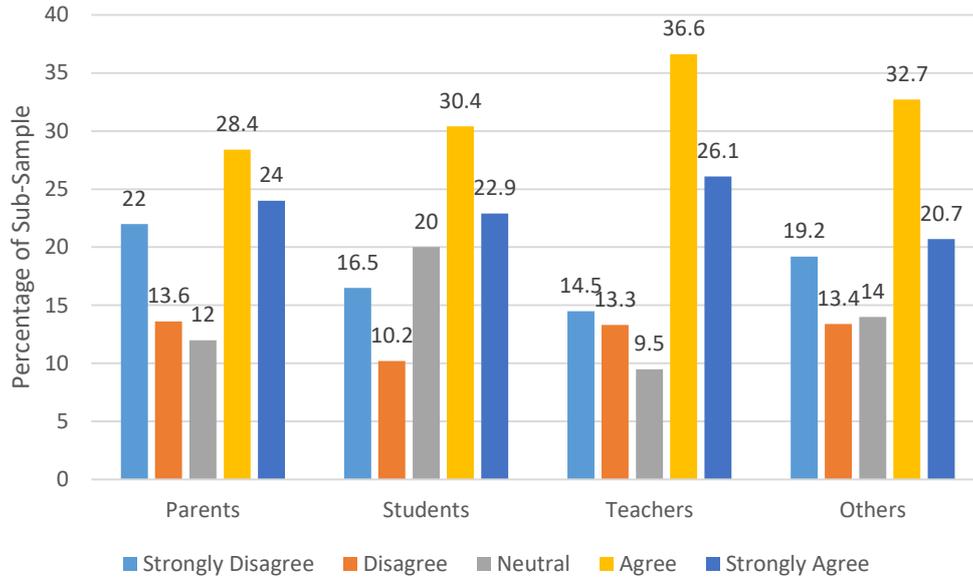


Figure 16. Frequencies of responses for Question 4 across "parent", "student", "teacher" and "other" sub-samples.

3.3 Part D: Appeals Process

Question 5: Students who have reached age 18 years.

Students who have reached age 18 years may make their own application for an exemption from the study of Irish.

Of the 7418 respondents to this item (66.77% of the total sample), the majority (66.5%) reported that they "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with this proposed change. In contrast, 25.5% reported that they "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed", whereas 8% of respondents chose the "neutral" option. As shown in Figure 18 below, the majority of parents (73.1%), students (70.8%), teachers (57.4%) and "others" (66.9%) indicated that they "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with this proposed change.

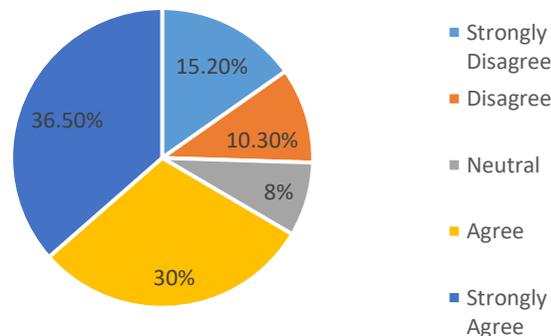


Figure 17. Frequency of responses across total sample for Question 5: Students who have reached age 18 years.

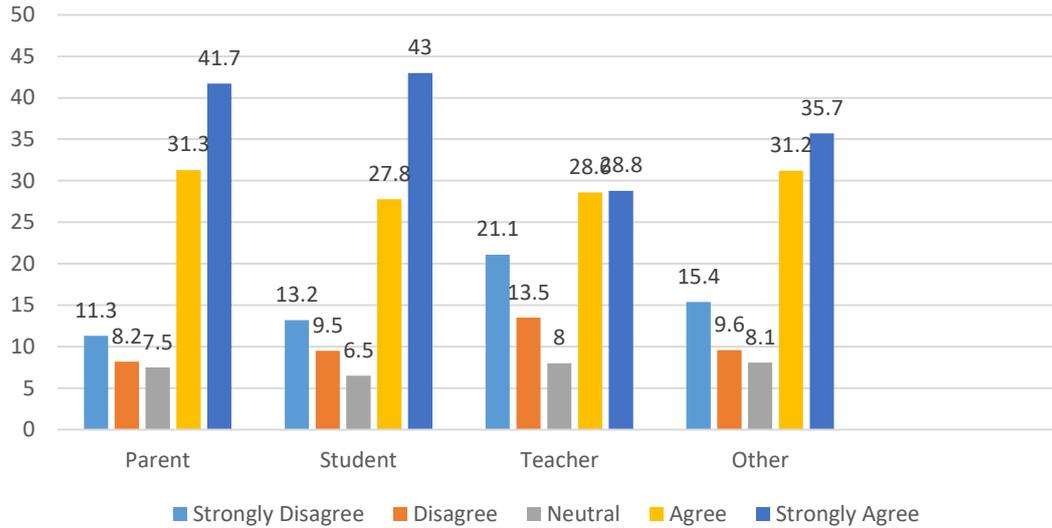


Figure 16. Frequencies of responses for Question 5 across "parent", "student", "teacher" and "other" sub-samples.

Question 6. Appeals mechanism

The draft revised circulars set out that applications for exemption from the study of Irish are in the first instance made to the school principal. Where an application is declined, and where parents/guardians/students wish to challenge that decision, an appeal should be addressed to the board of management using the school's appeals mechanism.

As shown in Figure 19 below, of the 7383 respondents to this item (66.46% of the total sample), the majority (63.3%) indicated that they "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with this proposed change. In contrast, 25.6% reported that they "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" with this proposed change. 11.1% chose the "neutral" option for this item. Sub-sample analyses revealed that the majority of parents (67.5%), students (67.1%), teachers (56.7%) and "others" (60.3%) "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with this proposal (see Figure 20 below).

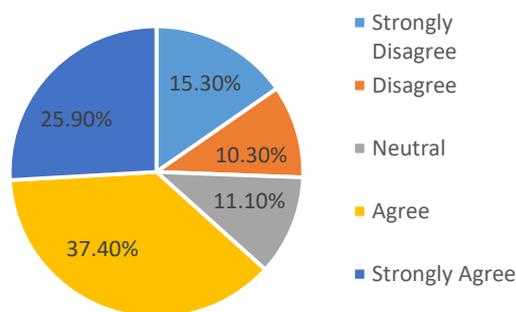


Figure 19. Frequency of responses across total sample for Question 6: Appeals mechanism.

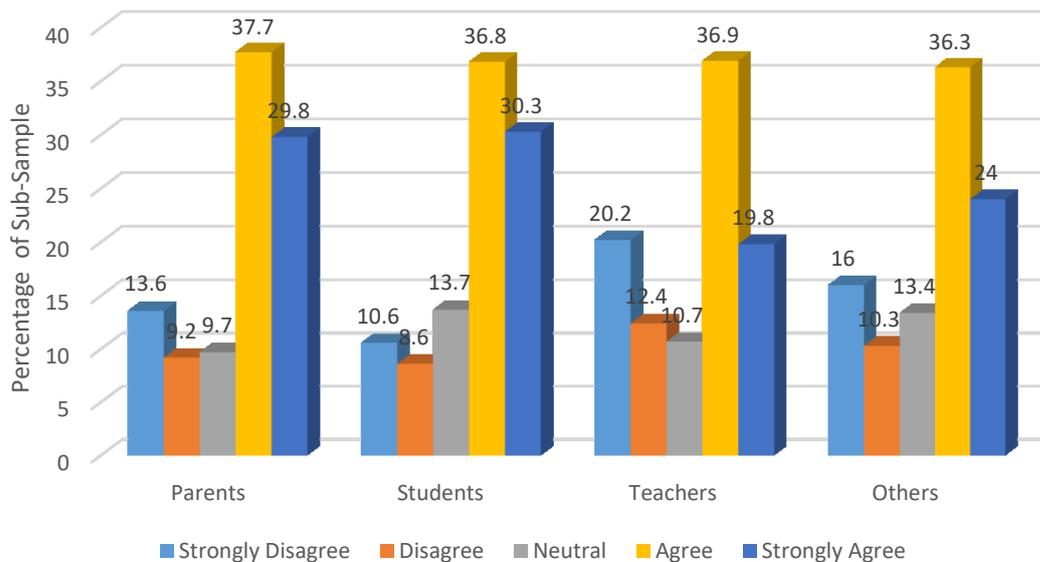


Figure 20. Frequencies of responses for Question 6 across sub-samples of "parent", "student", "teacher" and "other".

3.4 Summary of Findings from the Quantitative Survey Data

The final sample for the online survey was 11,109 individuals, the vast majority of whom (95.3%) completed the English version of the survey. The response rates for the closed-ended questions of the survey (Questions 2 to 6 of Section 1) ranged from 66.5% to 73.8% of the total sample. The majority of respondents were parents or teachers of students in post-primary English-medium settings. Descriptive analyses indicated the following results:

- Exemption from the study of Irish should only be available to pupils/students in schools where all subjects except Irish are taught through the medium of English:* Of the 8181 respondents to this question (73.64% of the total sample), the majority (58%) were in agreement (56% of parents, 56.4% of students, 61.4% of teachers, and 55% of "others").
- Pupils/students who have received their education outside the State (where they did not have opportunity to study Irish) and who have completed the final year of their primary education or have reached age 12 years may be granted an exemption from the study of Irish:* Of the 8203 respondents to this question (73.84% of the total sample), the large majority (75.1%) were in agreement (76.8% of parents, 73.6% of students, 73.5% of teachers, and 68% of "others").

- *Pupils/students who are re-enrolling following a period of at least three consecutive years abroad (and where they did not have opportunity to study Irish) and who are at least 12 years of age on re-enrolment may be granted an exemption from the study of Irish:* Of the 8179 respondents to this question (73.62% of total sample), the majority (63.4%) were in agreement (68.6% of parents, 63.7% of students, 56.8% of teachers, and 57.2% of “others”).

- *Pupils/students in special schools or classes should not have to apply for an official exemption from the study of Irish:* Of the 8201 respondents to this question (73.82% of the total sample), the majority (67.5%) were in agreement (72% of parents, 62% of students, 64.9% of teachers, and 63.4% of “others”).
 - Those who selected the “neutral”, “disagree” or “strongly disagree” option for this question were directed to a follow-up question which stated that:
 - *“Decision making concerning the Irish language learning needs of pupils/students in special schools and special classes in mainstream schools is a matter for school authorities”.* Of the 2596 respondents to this question (23.26% of the total sample), 47.6% reported that they disagreed or strongly disagreed, whereas 35.1% reported that they agreed or strongly agreed, and 17.3% selected the neutral option. There was more disagreement than agreement with this statement among parents (48.9% versus 33.1%), students (42.2% versus 30.5%), teachers (50.1% versus 37.9%) and others (56.3% versus 17.4%).

- *Where a pupil/student presents with significant and persistent learning difficulties, decisions to grant an exemption should only be considered in the case of:*
 - *i) Pupils who have at least reached third class **and***
 - *ii) Present with significant learning difficulties that are persistent despite having had access to a differentiated approach to language and literacy learning in both Irish and English over time. Documentary evidence to this effect, held by the school, should include Student Support Plans*

detailing: regular reviews of learning needs as part of an ongoing cycle of assessment; target setting; evidence-informed intervention and review, including test scores (word reading, reading comprehension, spelling, other scores of language/literacy) at key points of review and

- *iii) At the time of the application for exemption present with a Standardised Score on a discrete test in Word Reading or Reading Comprehension at/below the 10th percentile: Of the 7627 respondents to this question (68.66% of the total sample), the majority (56.1%) were in agreement (52.4% of parents, 53.3% of students, 62.7% of teachers and 53.4% of “others”).*

- *Students who have reached age 18 years may make their own application for an exemption from the study of Irish: Of the 7418 respondents to this question (66.77% of the total sample), the majority (66.5%) were in agreement (73.1% of parents, 70.8% of students, 57.4% of teachers, and 66.9% of “others”).*

- *The draft revised circulars set out that applications for exemption from the study of Irish are in the first instance made to the school principal. Where an application is declined, and where parents/guardians/students wish to challenge that decision, an appeal should be addressed to the board of management using the school’s appeals mechanism: Of the 7383 respondents to this question (66.46% of the total sample), the majority (63.3%) were in agreement (67.5% of parents, 67.1% of students, 56.7% of teachers and 60.3% of “others”).*

SECTION 4: FINDINGS FROM THE OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS OF THE ONLINE SURVEY.

4.1 Introduction

Of the 11,109 individuals who participated in the online survey, only an average of 11.91% provided responses to the open-ended questions of the survey (Section 2). The response rates for the open-ended questions of Section 2 ranged from 9.96% to 13.48% of the total sample (13.27% of sample for Question 1; 13.48% for Question 2; 12.31% for Question 3; 10.53% for Question 4; and 9.96% for Question 5). As was discussed in Section 2.5.2.1 (qualitative analysis of survey data section), a randomly selected sub-sample of 50% of the qualitative survey dataset ($N = 792$) was analysed using a systematic inductive categorical approach starting with complete coding (line-by-line coding) by independent analysts, and ending with team-based consensus regarding the most prominent emerging categories. Special care was taken to ensure *heterogeneity* was achieved between the categories for each question (i.e., each of the selected categories were sufficiently distinct and different from the others), and that there was *homogeneity* within constituent category codes (i.e., that the relevant properties within each code were clearly related).

The open-ended questions were analysed separately to identify consensus views (if any), as indexed by the most prevalent themes in responses within each broad topic area. However, there was very substantial variance in the degree to which participants specifically referenced the topic of the question in their responses, thus explaining the repeated themes that were observed across questions. For means of explication of each identified category, illustrative excerpts from participant responses are presented in de-identified form. It should be noted that throughout the entire report, excerpts from qualitative responses are quoted in the original language in order to avoid misrepresentation. For excerpts taken from the Irish online survey, the original quote in Irish is presented.

4.2 Question 1: The circumstances in which a pupil/student may be granted an exemption from the study of Irish.

The categories that emerged from reported views on the circumstances in which a pupil/student may be granted an exemption from the study of Irish were very disparate, representing a significant diversity of perspectives among respondents. The identified categories are listed below in order of prominence in the dataset:

- *Status of Irish as a Subject;*
- *SEN;*
- *Students Educated Abroad;*
- *Well-Being and Mental Health;*
- *Views on the Proposed Criteria of the Draft Revised Circulars.*

4.2.1 Status of Irish as a subject.

The *Status of Irish as a Subject* category was notably the most prominent category in the qualitative responses to Question 1. It was comprised of two codes, namely, *Irish optional* and *Irish mandatory*, each of which will be discussed below.

The *Irish optional* code, which was the dominant code within this category, represents respondents' view that there should be no exemptions because Irish should be an optional subject in schools. However, only a small number of the respondents who articulated the view that Irish should be an optional subject provided rationales for this stance. These rationales included: the importance of protecting and maintaining individual choice; the counter-productiveness of compulsory subject study; the importance of matching subjects to individual interests, needs and strengths; and the relevance, practicality and usefulness of Irish in modern society. For example:

...I strongly believe that Irish should be made an optional language. It is my opinion that it would better for the students to have any other more widely spoken language as part of a compulsory curriculum rather than so much time dedicated to learning a language that nobody speaks. (Respondent 787).

In the context of criteria outlined in the revised circular, it should be noted that policies that seek to force people to learn and use a language against their will, rarely work. By refusing an exemption to a learner, the school ie teachers will be at the frontline of the consequences of such a refusal when the learner has decided not to engage with the language. Schools should be cognisant of this. (Respondent 2129).

There were varying views regarding the stage at which Irish should become optional, but some agreement was evident in relation to student choice during post-primary school, particularly after Junior Cycle.

The *Irish mandatory* code captures respondent views that there should be no exemptions because the study of Irish should be compulsory for all pupils/students:

No exemptions should be granted. Irish is our national language and should be a compulsory subject for anyone who wishes to study within the Irish curriculum (Respondent, 5840).

Ós rud é gur chuid an-luachmhar den rud is náisiún Éireannach ann ba chóir do gach duine atá ag fáil oideachais anseo staidéar a dhéanamh ar an nGaeilge. Níor chóir go mbeadh córas díolúintí ann (Respondent 10874).

The primary articulated justification for this stance was the importance of Irish for respecting and preserving our heritage, culture and identity. As one respondent described:

Never, it is our heritage, culture and native language. For those who wish to reside in the state the law should make clear that it is a statutory requirement to learn our native language. (Respondent 5413).

Another theme in the responses of participants who argued against exemptions was questioning why Irish should be treated differently to other curricular subjects:

Many students find maths difficult. It is never suggested that students be granted an exemption from maths on this basis....Fostering the idea that learning Irish is somehow more difficult than learning other subjects is not beneficial to any Irish citizen but rather contributes to an already problematic inferiority complex. (Respondent 3994).

These proposals perpetuate the myth of Irish being the most difficult of all subjects. They ignore the fact that when the exemption was formalized in the early 90s-“the pre-IT age” - the educational/information revolution had yet to arrive. The situation has completely changed within the last 30 years. This consultation paper fails to take that change into account. Without any discussion as to the raison d’être of the Irish-language exemption in the 21st century, outside of Special Needs Schools, and as to why the Irish language as a subject continues to be singled out for discriminatory treatment... (Respondent 472).

A number of respondents proposed alternatives to full exemptions from the study of Irish such as: different scoring criteria for students with SEN or newcomer students in exams; or exemptions from Irish exams only, with continued exposure to oral Irish for the development of functional Irish language skills:

I truly believe that every child should be offered the opportunity to engage with the Irish curriculum. I think that exemptions in school should not be a matter of the student withdrawing from Irish lessons but rather an option to choose whether or not to sit the state exam. This option allows for all students to learn spoken Irish at the very least (Respondent 6925).

Rather than offering an exemption or alternatively the full study of the language on a formal, exam based basis there should be alternatives. For example, there could be two strands. One as it stands, which is quite an academic approach, studying texts, grammar etc. for students exempted from studying the language at this level, they should be required to participate in Irish language classes that focus on conversational Irish and exploring ways of introducing Irish into the day to day activities within the school and the wider community. Activities, leisure pursuits, hobbies etc could be conducted through the medium of Irish. Make the language relevant and fun. (Respondent 7076).

Many respondents had well-formulated ideas in regard to a modified Irish curriculum, with differentiation at its core, such as one that would be aligned to CEFR, or one that would cater to all levels of learning:

Is féidir foghlaim na Gaeilge a cheangal leis an Chreat Eorpach d'Fhoghlaim Teangacha agus ar an dóigh seo is féidir le daltaí laga nó leo siúd a thosaíonn ag foghlaim na Gaeilge níos moille tosú ar leibhéal a oireann dóibh. (Respondent 11090).

Other respondents referred specifically to the case of Project Maths, suggesting that instead of granting exemptions, students could be encouraged to study the language through the provision of extra points in the Leaving Cert:

Ní aontaíonn muid go bhfuil gá leis na ciorcláin seo nuair is féidir córas nua a chur i bhfeidhm a laghdódh an gá le díolúine. Nuair a bhí fadhb ann le foghlaim an mhata sna scoileanna níor cuireadh córas díolúintí ar bun leis an bhfadhb a réiteach – cuireadh 'Project Maths' ar bun agus bronntar 25 pointe CAO breise ar aon duine a bhaineann pas amach i scrúdú Ardleibhéal na hArdteiste mar spreagadh do na daltaí (Respondent 10728).

4.2.2 SEN.

The second most prominent category in the Question 1 qualitative data was *SEN*, which summarises respondent views that ASD, Dyslexia, and other diagnosed difficulties, as well as learning difficulties not associated with formal clinical diagnoses should be considered as conditions/circumstances for the granting of Irish exemptions. A large number of respondents proposed that students with diagnoses of ASD should be granted exemptions, citing potential stress and anxiety resulting from difficulties with learning Irish as a rationale:

My main concern relates to a type of student that I have come across frequently in my practice as an Educational Psychologist. This is the student with an Autism Spectrum Disorder, usually high functioning and in a mainstream setting, who is experiencing significant anxiety over studying Irish. There is no provision for this type of student in the circular at present but having witnessed the significant distress that studying Irish causes these students at times, I feel provision should be made for them. (Respondent 7752).

Another very frequently cited circumstance/condition for exemption from the study of Irish was a diagnosis of Dyslexia:

In the case of students that are dyslexic. If a child is struggling with one language why would we bombard them with the pressure of a second language. What about their mental health??? (Respondent 5661).

It was evident that most respondents understood a diagnosis of Dyslexia to be a clinical label assigned to an individual by a psychologist following a formal assessment process. Respondents also referenced a wide range of other diagnosed difficulties as potential grounds for exemption from Irish including Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dyspraxia, Epilepsy, General Learning Disability (GLD), and Specific Speech and Language Impairments:

Children with Additional Needs such as ASD, ADD, ADHD, SSLI, GDD and Specific Learning Difficulties who experience stress, anxiety or frustration at the learning of Irish (Respondent 7768).

Nuair atá deacrachtaí foghlama an-dáiríre ag dalta a chuireann isteach ar a gcumas teanga eile a fhoghlam aontaím sa chás sin gur féidir leis an dalta sin díolúine a fháil ó staidéar ar an nGaeilge (Respondent 10899).

Many respondents spoke about the lived experience of their own children when asserting that exemptions should be granted in the case of other diagnosed disabilities:

The current criteria is too narrow, my child has dyspraxia. He scores highly in his Stens but school is still more of a struggle for him than others. Irish is just another struggle he does not need. (Respondent 8239).

My son scores too high for exemption yet is struggling to pass foundation English and Irish. He has a speech disorder and it's affecting him severely. Not fair how current exemptions are handed out. (Respondent 6695).

Finally, many respondents highlighted non-diagnosed difficulties, evidenced by poor learning outcomes, as conditions/circumstances for exemption from Irish. Poor learning outcomes that were cited by respondents included situations where:

- Students are persistently failing at Irish, with concomitant deleterious effects on their learning in other subjects;
- Students are presenting with low literacy scores;
- Students have failed to achieve proficiency in Irish despite a differentiated approach to teaching and learning;
- The study of Irish poses too great a challenge relative to the student's general academic ability, and a disproportionate amount of time must be dedicated to studying Irish, leading to a negative impact on the development of English literacy skills.

For example:

If a pupil experiences serious and enduring challenges in learning Irish and it is judged that time would be better spent ensuring an adequate standard in English and in Maths, then an exemption should be considered. (Respondent 5538).

Where due to learning and/or behavioural issues studying a language takes extreme effort and is detrimental to his general ability to learn and keep up in school. (Respondent 6361).

However, dissenting views were voiced by a smaller number of respondents who argued that SEN should not be considered as a condition for granting exemptions since inclusive practice and differentiation allows (or should allow) all students to participate in, and benefit from, Irish:

Ní i gcónaí, áfach, a bheadh míchumas foghlama ina bhac ar an scoláire an Ghaeilge a fhoghlaim. Tá Sonraíocht Ghaeilge na Sraithe Sóisearaí bunaithe ar Thorthaí Foghlama uilíocha, rud a chiallaíonn go bhfuil deis ag an múinteoir freastal ar scoláirí ag leibhéal cumais éagsúla. (Respondent 11015).

Is tuismitheoir mé le páiste le riachtanaisí foghlama breise, freastalaíonn sí ar bhunscoil lán-Ghaelach. Ceapaim féin gur fíor anamh gur cheart díolúine a dhéanamh ar pháiste atá in ann don ghnáth córas. Is leithscéal leanúnach é an Ghaeilge a fhágáil. (Respondent 10,594).

4.2.3 Students educated abroad.

The third most prominent category within the Question 1 qualitative data was *Students Educated Abroad*. Some respondents reported the belief that these students should not be granted exemptions because it is reasonable to expect them to speak the language of their new country, as would be the case in other countries, and to “catch up” with their peers through intensive language support that would capitalise on their

transferable skills in languages. For example:

...By age 12, students have very basic language skills in Irish that could be learned in a few months study, how to introduce yourself, describe the day, simple past, present and future etc. If a child comes in from abroad it is reasonable to expect them to learn up to junior cert level Irish within the 2-3 years it takes to cover the course. (Respondent 6527).

...Imthoisc eile faoi láthair ná go gcuirtear scoláire a fhilleann ar Éirinn tar éis dó trí bliana a chaitheamh thar lear, agus aois 11 bhliain bainte amach aige, san áireamh do dhíolúine. Tá scileanna teanga inaistrithe agus, mar chuid den ionchuimsiú, tá sé inmhianaithe go mbeadh rochtain chothrom ag gach scoláire ar an nGaeilge. (Respondent 11105).

Conversely, a larger number of respondents posited that students educated abroad should be granted an exemption from Irish because they are at a disadvantage relative to other students, and because an emphasis on Irish language learning undermines their rights to preserving their own cultural identity:

Pupils who move to Ireland from other English speaking countries are at a huge disadvantage having to start the study of Irish after 2nd class. Very few can actually catch up to the extent that they are on a level par with other students. (Respondent 6797).

...Resentment is growing amongst the international community for forcing Irish on non-Irish children who are often already bilingual living in a foreign country. These children are already at risk of losing their identity and attachment to their native culture and experience mental imbalances. The State should respect the convictions of the parents, as stated in the EU Constitution of Human Rights. A modern inclusive society should be respectful of other cultures. (Respondent 350).

4.2.4 Well-being and mental health.

The fourth most prominent category was *Well-Being and Mental Health* which reflects the views that poor mental health and well-being outcomes, most notably stress and anxiety, should be grounds for granting an exemption from the study of Irish. It appeared that in these responses, participants were conceptualising stress and anxiety as consequences of, rather than antecedents to (i.e., pre-existing mental health conditions), attempts to learn Irish. For example:

Consideration must be made for the negative effect on mental health of students, where an exemption would likely see a beneficial mental health or behaviour outcome either in individual subject's studies or overall general behaviour. (Respondent 5018).

However, it was unclear whether respondents were alluding to clinically diagnosed difficulties or to non-diagnosed yet behaviourally expressed difficulties. Irrespective, the concept of “struggle” frequently emerged in responses referencing these difficulties:

It's sad that children's mental health, distress and anxiety have not been considered. Any student struggling with Irish should be able to get an exemption. (Respondent 6425).

4.2.5 Views on the proposed criteria of the draft revised circulars.

The final and least prominent category that emerged from the Question 1 data was *Views on the Proposed Criteria of the Draft Revised Circulars*.

4.2.5.1 Standardised test scores.

The draft revised circulars propose the use of “a standardised score on a discrete test in word reading or reading comprehension at/below the 10th percentile” for students with significant and persistent learning difficulties. Most of the respondents who commented on this proposal expressed dissatisfaction with the 10th percentile threshold, suggesting that it is too low:

...there should be a little flexibility for the child who may be consistently outside that cut off as happened recently with a child I teach. Often pupils who are just above the 10th is due to intense intervention in literacy in school and by parents. In effect they are penalised for doing well. Then they have the added burden of the study of Irish. (Respondent 8331).

By insisting that all children in mainstream schools who are above the 10th percentile are not eligible for an exemption in Irish you are setting these children up to fail. (Respondent 5015).

Alternatives that were cited by respondents included scores below the 15th percentile or below the 20th percentile. In addition, concerns were expressed in relation to the proposal to consider word reading and reading comprehension alone as indices of literacy attainment:

Given the complex nature of Dyslexia it is very difficult to diagnose and understand the impacts of the associated issues on learning. The Draft Circular does not explain the rationale or provide the evidence as to why only two measures of Dyslexia, namely Word Reading and/or Comprehension will be used as the Criteria to determine if an exemption is merited together with a score of being in the 10th percentile or lower in those categories. (Respondent 5641).

However, there was some expressed agreement with the draft revised circulars in relation to the removal of Average/Above Average IQ as a diagnostic specifier:

A report of specific learning difficulties alone such as dyslexia or dyspraxia should be enough to secure an exemption without a convoluted IQ testing system which I am glad to see is going... (Respondent 6762).

4.2.5.2 Decision-making authority.

The draft revised circulars propose that “*the decision to grant an exemption from the study of Irish is made by the principal teacher but it must be made following detailed discussion with the pupil’s parent(s)/guardian(s), the class teacher, special education teachers, and the pupil*”. While discussing this proposal, the majority of respondents maintained that the ultimate decision-making authority in relation to exemptions should be parents: *The parents should be granted right to make decision, not the school, not the state (Respondent 6674)*. However, other respondents agreed with the proposal specified in the draft revised circulars, suggesting that the decision to grant an exemption should be derived from a collaborative process involving the key agents in a child’s life, such as parents and teachers who have close and extensive personal knowledge of the pupil/student:

The pupil should be granted an exemption from the study of Irish where parents, teacher, Resource teacher and Principal agree that it is in the child’s best interest. (Respondent 6914).

In contrast, many of the respondents to the Irish online survey referred to the need for a psychologist to be included in the exemption decision making process. Articulated justifications for this position centred on the prediction that significant pressure will be placed on principals should the ultimate decision making authority reside with them:

Daltaí le deacrachtaí foghlama agus a rinneadh tastáil chuí orthu ag siceolaí oideachasúil. (Respondent 10718).

Ní chóir go mbeadh an cumhacht sin ag príomhoidí chun díolúintí a thabhairt amach. Táim cinnte cad a dhéarfadh an chuid is mó dóibh chun saol níos éasca a fháil agus chun éalú ó bhrú na dtuistí. (Respondent 11097).

A very small minority of respondents posited that decisions to grant exemptions should be the sole responsibility of the DES:

Also I believe that it should be the department of education that decides whether a student is exempt or not and not the school principal/ board of management. (Respondent 7882).

Ní aontaím leis an achomhairc ar leibhéal áitiúil. Tá an iomarca brú ar príohoidí agus ar leas príomh-oidí faoi láthair. Aon duine atá ag iarraidh diolúintí, i mo thuairim, ba cheart dóibh an iarratas a dhéanamh ar dtús ina scoil féin. Má glacann an príomh oide leis, is féidir é a chur go dtí an Roinn chun cinneadh a dhéanamh. Muna bhfuil an iarrthóir sásta ba cheart dóibh achomharc a dhéanamh don t-Aire Oideachais. An fadhb leis an dréacht imthosca ná caithfeá aithint go bhfuil aithne ag duine ar a chéile taobh amuigh den scoil agus go mbeidh brú diongbháile ar an scoil agus ar an príomh-oide. (Respondent, 11092).

4.2.5.3 Students educated abroad.

The draft revised circulars propose that exemptions shall be granted to “*pupils whose education up to 12 years of age or the final year of their primary education was received outside the State and where they did not have opportunity to engage in the study of Irish*”. However, most of the respondents who specifically referenced this proposal asserted that the age criterion of 12 years is too old:

I feel the age of 12 years for those new to the country is too old. Some of these children may be entering secondary school with no Irish learned. Also, for many of these students, English is their second language so they are already struggling in the classroom in terms of everyday comprehension. If English is their first language, then maybe there could be different rules for them. (Respondent, 4890).

The use of the age of 12 is too restrictive. There have been many EAL students who have come to this country at the age of 10 and could not gain an exemption as they were not aged 11 or over under the old circular. Therefore it is to blunt an instrument to put an age barrier in place. Recognition has to be put in place in relation to EAL children younger than 12 but who may meet a set number of other criteria. (Respondent 5105).

Alternatives that were proposed by respondents included an age criterion of 8, 9 or 10:

...entry to country at age 9 or older... (Respondent 8331).

The current rule around 12 years of age for children integrating from outside the state, should be reduced to 8 years of age. (Respondent 5996).

4.3 Question 2: The appropriate age/stage in a pupil's/student's education at which to consider granting an exemption from the study of Irish.

The categories that emerged in analysis of Question 2 data were as follows (listed in order of prominence in the dataset):

- *Early Primary School;*
- *Beginning of Post-Primary School;*

- *Any Age/Stage (Case-by-Case Basis);*
- *Senior primary;*
- *Third Class;*
- *No Exemptions;*
- *Senior Cycle;*
- *Junior Cycle.*

4.3.1 Early primary school.

The marginally most prevalent category in the data was *Early Primary School*, which was defined as any time between Junior Infants up to, and including, second class (age 8 and under):

Any child which has a diagnosis that may make learning a challenge should be allowed to be exempt from Irish before 3rd class as they do not need to waste their formative years trying to learn Irish when this time could be better spent working on their maths and language skills etc. (Respondent 8066).

If, by the end of one year in primary school despite varied methods and different teachers, the student has not made any progress. (Respondent 8183).

It was noticed that not all respondents were envisaging full exemptions from Irish whilst considering the most appropriate age/stage of education for exemptions:

Children in 2nd class with scores in English reading, comprehension and spelling at the 10th percentile or below....should be allowed to participate in the oral aspects of Irish lessons until they leave primary school. This way they may have some knowledge of our native language and not feel further alienated from their peers. (Respondent 48).

4.3.2 Beginning of post-primary school,

The next most prominent category in the data was *Beginning of Post-Primary School*, defined as the period covering 1st and 2nd year in post-primary (ages 12-15). It was evident that many respondents valued the opportunity for pupils to learn Irish for the duration of primary school:

When it really matters - after 1st year. A pupil, parent and teacher should be able to decide then if an exemption is required. Primary school Irish builds a foundation. (Respondent 7671).

4.3.3 Any age/stage.

The third most prominent category was *Any Age/Stage* which reflected views that pupil/students should be considered for exemption on a case-by-case basis at the

appropriate time. More specifically, this category reflected respondent views that exemptions should be considered in a number of different situations irrespective of age or stage of education such as:

- As soon as a pupil's/student's needs become evident in school;
- When diagnoses are made;
- When parents request an exemption on the basis of the observed difficulties of their child.

For example:

A child with SEN should not have to wait until 3rd class to apply for an exemption. If an SEN has been identified at an earlier stage (eg infants) then the child (parents) should have the option of applying for an exemption. The Irish lesson time could be used to provide learning support to the child. (Respondent 2104).

The earlier the better. 3rd class does not make sense. It is known as soon as possible that a child gets help the better. If we wait for third class we are at risk of children's anxiety rising and their self esteem and belief being destroyed. (Respondent 3831).

4.3.4 Senior primary.

The fourth most prominent category to emerge from the Question 2 data was *Senior Primary* which refers to 4th, 5th and 6th classes (age 10+) of primary school:

At the end of primary school where there is documented evidence that the student has a genuine difficulty learning the language from 4th to 6th class. (Respondent 8123).

From age 10 they have had enough opportunities n educational exposure to english and irish acquisition and if still experiencing difficulties then an exemption from the study of Irish should be considered. (Respondent 5724).

4.3.5 Third class.

The fifth most prominent category in the Question 2 data was "third class", which is the educational stage that is proposed in the draft circulars:

Regarding students with learning difficulties, I agree that 3rd class is a good stage to pick as children must be given the chance to acquire basic literacy before an exemption is considered. If an exemption is given too early, the child is not really being given the chance to achieve his/her potential. An exemption granted earlier than 3rd class could be perceived as 'giving up on the child' before he/she has had the chance to learn. (Respondent 7752).

I believe 3rd class is an appropriate stage to grant an exemption for written

Irish. Oral Irish should be contributed for as long as possible at Primary level. (Respondent 7768).

4.3.6 No exemptions.

A recurrent theme in the qualitative dataset that was also evident in the responses to Question 2 data (6th most prominent category) was views that exemptions should not be granted at any time to any pupil/student:

Exemptions shouldn't be granted, if we are to talk of learning difficulties why is it that Irish should be the 'slack' subject that should be let down. (Respondent 8273).

...Ach arís, ba chóir scoir a dhéanamh ar córas na díolúntaí agus tús a chuir le forbairt an Gaeilge sa chóras oideachas in ionaí iarracht a dhéanamh í a lagú. Níl díolúntaí don mata nó béarla mar shampla. (Respondent 10858).

4.3.7 Junior Cycle or Senior Cycle.

Only a small minority of respondents proposed that third year or Senior Cycle (i.e., 4th year and above) are the most appropriate stages at which to consider granting exemptions from Irish. For example:

I lár thréimhse na meánscolaíochta. Tá go leor leibhéal ann i gcomhair na Gaeilge cheana féin le gur féidir le daltaí staidéar a dhéanamh uirthi chun a gcumais féin... (Respondent 11068).

Beyond Junior Cert Level so as to promote inclusivity and survival of our national heritage, as before this stage any disadvantage to learning Irish is irrelevant - as JC grades have no bearing on future endeavours. (Respondent 6991).

4.4 Question 3: Criteria for granting an exemption from the study of Irish in the case of pupils/students with significant and persistent learning difficulties.

The most prominent categories that emerged from reported views on the criteria for granting an exemption from the study of Irish to students with significant and persistent learning difficulties were as follows (listed in order of prominence in the dataset):

- *Exemptions for pupils/students with diagnoses of Dyslexia/SLD;*
- *Needs-based exemptions;*
- *Adjudicating authority for eligibility for exemption;*
- *No exemptions for students with significant and persistent learning difficulties;*
- *Views on the proposed criteria of the draft revised circulars.*

4.4.1 Exemptions for pupils/students with diagnoses of Dyslexia/SLD.

In responding to open-ended Question 3, the majority of respondents reported the view that students with diagnoses of Dyslexia or SLD should be granted automatic or optional exemptions from the study of Irish:

Students with SLDs such as Dyslexia should be given an option of applying for an exemption as they are further disadvantaged by being forced to study Irish if it is causing them extra stress...The current system is unfair and disadvantages students already dealing with SLDs. (Respondent 272).

An apparent latent meaning of these responses was that diagnoses are, or should be, based on formal assessments conducted by clinical professionals such as psychologists or language specialists:

Má tá díolúintí le deonú, ba cheart go mbeadh tacaíocht ag iarratais ó shíceolaithe teanga nó ó theirpeoirí teanga a bhfuil aitheantas idirnáisiúnta acu mar speisialtóirí sa dátheangachas agus i bhfoghlaim teangacha i measc daltaí a bhfuil deacrachtaí foghlama suntasacha agus leanúnacha acu. (Respondent 10640).

4.4.2 Needs-based exemptions.

The second most prevalent category in the Question 3 data was “needs-based exemptions” which reflects respondents’ views that exemptions should be granted on the basis of observed (persistent) difficulties rather than diagnoses. Indeed, the conceptual change in the draft circulars from a diagnostic-based system to a needs-based system was explicitly recognised and welcomed by some respondents:

I think it is a very positive change to shift from a focus on diagnosis to need. The new circular accommodates children who are struggling with attaining basic literacy in English regardless of reason (e.g., dyslexia, general learning difficulty, speech & language disorder, etc.). I think that this step, coupled with the removal of the need for a psychological assessment, is a very positive one. (Respondent 7752).

Firstly, respondents highlighted cognitive, language and literacy difficulties as possible grounds for exemptions:

...children with specific language needs recommended by SLT following clear levelled guideline”. (Respondent 6694).

...children with literacy difficulties should be entitled to irish exemption. There should be no 10th percentile cut off. (Respondent 1489).

Níor chóir díolúine a dheonú ach amháin go bhfuil fadhbanna ollmhóra le sárú ag daltaí lena gcéad teanga". (Respondent 10861).

Má chuireann na deacrachtaí foghlama suntasacha agus leanúnacha sin isteach go mór ar a gcumas teanga eile a fhoghlaim. Má tá deacrachtaí suntasacha léamh, léamh thúiscint nó scríobh acu. (Respondent 10899).

Secondly, respondents made reference to well-being and mental health difficulties as grounds for exemption for students with significant and persistent learning difficulties:

Children should not be tortured. Mental abuse has been equalized to physical abuse. It should be solely the decision of the parents. A child with learning difficulties will be estranged by peers, ridiculed and emotionally (if not even physically) bullied. Moreover, the subject child will have one more reason to lose self-confidence and feel a loser for the rest of his/her life in comparison to his peers. These children are set to fail. ([Respondent 350).

...The mental well-being of our pupils and their parents should be taken into account. We should not make their life with a special needs pupil more difficult and stressful...(Respondent 4185).

4.4.3 Adjudicating authority for eligibility for exemption.

The third most prominent category in Question 3 responses was views on the adjudicating authority for eligibility for exemption. Most of these respondents posited that parents alone, teachers alone, or parents in collaboration with teachers should decide on eligibility for exemption based on repeated observations of the pupil's/student's progress and achievement of learning goals. For example:

To be decided by the parents and teachers as they see fit. They are the ones that know the child best. (Respondent 5140).

Parents/guardians insights and deep knowledge of the child's ability to learn that subject, to complete the homework and to cope with learning in general. This is so undervalued and should be the key as the parents know their child and have a vested interest in the child's psychological wellbeing. (Respondent 6481).

The next most frequent view was that that external professionals (e.g., educational psychologists) should be responsible for decision-making following a holistic assessment of the pupil's/student's needs:

Should require Educational Assessment by NEPS to check that child is eligible. (Respondent 5753).

These difficulties must be determined by a NEPS psychologist and be specific in why Irish (and any language other than English) should be exempt for the pupil. (Respondent 100).

Only a very small minority of respondents proposed that decisions in relation to exemptions for students with significant and persistent learning difficulties should be made by principals or Boards of Management.

4.4.4 No exemptions for pupils/students with significant and persistent learning difficulties.

The fourth most prominent category in the Question 3 data was views that exemptions should not be granted to pupils/students with significant and persistent learning difficulties. As was seen across other survey items, reasons presented for this stance included alternative approaches based on differentiation of teaching and learning, and revisions to the Irish curriculum:

I am not an expert on learning difficulties so I would not presume to comment in detail on that. However, I would like to mention that in the case of dyslexia, for example, many exemptions are being granted and perhaps they should not be. I know of one such case where later in life, the person in question managed to learn a foreign language fluently. Therefore, it strikes me that rather than granting exemptions, we need to look at more effective teaching methods that cater to and are inclusive of these students rather than simply removing them from the language learning process. (Respondent 154).

..Beidh páistí ann nach mbeidh ábalta don scríbhneoireacht nó don léitheoireacht ach, leis an tacaíocht cheart, ba cheart go mbeidís ábalta an teanga a thuiscint agus a labhairt. (Respondent 10650).

Tá mac agamsa le dyslexia géar aige. Bhí moill air ag léamh dá bharr. Nuair a bhí sé i rang 3 bhí a chuid léamh faoin 10ú peirsintíl. Ach fuair sé marc an ard sa Ghaeilge san ardeist mar gheall go raibh cuid de bainteach le héisteacht agus caint. Ní chóir páistí a fhágáil ar leath-taobh ag aois óg nuair is féidir moill a bheith ann in ionad easpa chumais. (Respondent 10920).

If these students can speak a certain level of English they have already proven that it is possible for them to learn a language. Students with special needs should not be denied the opportunity to learn Irish. Rather more emphasis should be placed on the spoken language and on normal conversation. There is no need for these students to spend too much time reading or writing the language. (Respondent 3994).

Other respondents expressed the equivalent view that there should be no exemptions for pupils/students with significant and persistent learning difficulties, but this was predicated on the belief that Irish should be an optional subject:

Study of Irish should be optional for all students, thus negating the need for special circumstances for exemptions. (Respondent 8249).

4.4.5 Views on the proposed criteria of the draft revised circulars.

The least prominent category in the Question 3 qualitative data was views on specific aspects of the proposed criteria for the granting of exemptions to students with significant and persistent learning difficulties. Echoing themes in responses to Question 1, many respondents reported concern about the appropriateness of, and clarity surrounding, the proposal that students must present with “*a standardised score on a discrete test in word reading or reading comprehension at/below the 10th percentile*”. As illustrated in the extracts below, respondents questioned the perceived arbitrary nature of the cut-off point (i.e., 10th percentile) for exemption, and highlighted the potential for inconsistency in the use of standardised tests due to a lack of explicit guidance. Many respondents expressed the view that standardised test scores should not be included in the proposed criteria for exemption, whereas others recommended that scores on a wider range of standardised tests should be permissible as they may more effectively capture the strength and needs of diverse pupils/students. For example:

There is clarity needed around "word reading". At the moment psychologists writing recommendations for exemptions cite subsections of the assessments which fall below the 10th percentile as meeting the requirements. However the score in word reading is often above the 10th percentile. In these cases I do not grant exemptions. However, it causes tension between myself and teaching staff and often angers parents. We all need to be absolutely clear and reports should not be recommending exemptions if "word reading, comprehension, spelling" are the criteria. (Respondent 8179).

...There is no justified reason for using the 10th percentile, what about the student's true score? and what about confidence intervals? The 10th percentile needs to be looked at, and additionally the literacy scores used need to be expanded to the use of other scores such as reading speed, non-word reading and spelling, as these are areas of literacy difficulty that affect students on a daily basis and puts them at a disadvantage against their peers. (Respondent 167).

I believe the tests to be used must be the same in every school. Therefore as a psychological report is no longer required the DES must specify what tests are to be used to assess Word Reading for example. (Respondent 5015).

As the mother of a son with dyspraxia, I began noticing the struggle with Irish from 4th class especially...My son is capable but takes longer to complete tasks than most, this is why a reading test is not a fair test. Dyspraxics are challenged in the organizing of their thoughts & planning what they need to say, they can be easily distracted and because of muscle tiring, writing for long periods eg exams is challenging. In the interest of fairness please include these additional needs of children with dyspraxia when outlining your revised bill. (Respondent 706).

The next most prominent concern among this sub-sample of respondents was the third-class requirement of the proposed criteria which was perceived as being too late a stage for consideration of exemptions:

It is useful to allow an earlier decision to be made for these children, as the time would be well used in additional remedial education. (Respondent 6599).

A small minority of respondents made explicit reference to the tracking and documenting element (i.e., using the Student Support File) of the proposed criteria of the draft revised circulars. However, those that did were broadly supportive of the proposal, with some slight reservations in relation to teacher workload, and queries regarding the time-frame for monitoring needs:

I agree with this criteria, as it gives the school more autonomy. It also emphasises the importance of gathering evidence and regularly reviewing progress. This is very much in line with the new special education model. (Respondent 66).

Secondary classroom teachers need to be trained in their role in the school support file. 2.2.c.ii needs to be a short process at secondary. Otherwise it will be too much of an administrative burden to achieve it that people who need exemptions may not get them. Doesn't take account of the fact that the students with the greatest need receive the greatest amount of support under the new model, so it is possible that the student could not receive the time needed to generate such a file. (Respondent 7490).

4.5 Question 4: Exemptions from the study of Irish in special schools or special classes in mainstream schools.

The responses to this question showed the highest degree of consensus across the entire survey as evidenced by the small number of discrete categories that emerged from the qualitative analysis. These included: *Automatic exemption; Changes to curriculum, teaching and learning; and decision making authority.*

4.5.1 Automatic exemption.

The most prominent category in the Question 4 data was views that there should be automatic exemptions (i.e., applications not needed) for pupils/students in special schools and special classes in mainstream schools:

This should be standard and no paperwork required. (Respondent 5223).

It seems to be common sense that a child who already needs special help should not have to keep jumping through hoops to justify an exemption by prove their difficulties. I anyway support devolving judgment on this to those who work with and understand the difficulties of the child best. (Respondent 184).

A very small minority of respondents drew distinctions between automatic exemptions for pupils/students in special schools versus those in special classes:

...children in special schools should have an automatic right to opt out however I would be wary of giving the same automatic right to children in special classes in mainstream school outside of the rules which would apply to other students in the same school. (Respondent 7112).

4.5.2 Changes to curriculum, teaching and learning.

Despite there being a broad consensus view in relation to automatic exemptions, some respondents proposed a revised curriculum and changes to Irish teaching and learning in special schools/classes as an alternative to exemptions:

A revised curriculum, with a focus on oral language only, would be more appropriate. The experience of children with SEN in Gaelscoileanna make a strong case for Irish language education in special settings. (Respondent 6964).

Given that most pupils in these schools are accessing a modified curriculum, it is worth considering inclusion of Irish as a modified subject also. Conversation skills, songs, poems and Irish cultural elements can be enjoyed and benefit a wide range of pupils with special needs. If the exemption applied separately to study and exams, pupils and parents must rest assured that Irish can be enjoyed as a subject without additional pressure from exams. (Respondent 581).

Nach féidir curaclam níos fóirsteanaí a fhorbairt? Tá dalta sa Ghaelscoil áitiúil le Down Syndrome air agus ag éirí go hanmhaith leis. Má dhéantar An múineadh mar is ceart agus an tábhar in oiriúint don ghrúpa áirithe seo is féidir [X] Gaeilge a fhoghlaim. (Respondent 10803).

With all the efforts to integrate Special Needs students, it makes no sense to now "exclude" them from the study of Irish. (Respondent 1239).

4.5.3 Decision making authority.

The third most prominent category, which was repeated from Question 3 to Question 4, was *Decision Making Authority*. Most respondents articulated the belief that decisions regarding exemptions for students in special schools and special classes should ultimately be made by parents and/or the students themselves:

In my opinion I believe it's up to the individual student and their family to decide this, not a stranger.(Respondent 4505).

...At the parents decision, nothing else. (Respondent 6645).

The next most popular option in relation to decision making authority was school personnel, either alone or in collaboration with parents:

They should be at the discretion of the school on the basis of the students needs whether academic or due to mental health linked to social and sensory difficulties. (Respondent 9047).

I would think that exemptions in these cases are a matter for the school and would form part of an educational plan for each student. Again I do not think that an exemption should be automatic. (Respondent 6925).

However, a small number of respondents stated the view that external professionals should have decision-making authority for granting exemptions for students in special schools or special classes:

...É seo bunaithe ar chomhairle profisiúnaithe atá suas chun dáta le caighdeán ard oideachas orthu le tuiscint acu ar an nGaeilge". (Respondent 11098).

4.6 Question 5: Other comments on the draft revised circulars.

This open-ended question elicited extremely diverse opinions and positions not only on the proposed criteria for exemptions in the draft revised circulars but also on the broader context of Irish language education. Some of these categories approximated to themes observed in the responses to preceding questions, whereas others were novel categories. The most prominent identified categories were as follows (listed in order of prominence in the dataset):

- *Changes to curriculum, teaching and learning;*
- *Irish exemption and modern foreign languages;*
- *Irish and identity, culture and heritage;*
- *Irish optional;*

- *Well-being and mental health;*
- *Appeals process;*
- *Criticism of the Irish exemption consultation process.*

4.6.1 Changes to curriculum, teaching and learning.

The most dominant category in the Question 5 data was *Changes to curriculum, teaching and learning* which reflects both respondent views of the current Irish curriculum, and proposals regarding a potential future Irish curriculum. In the main, respondent perceptions tended to be somewhat negative in relation to the current Irish curriculum. For example, some respondents suggested that the current curriculum for Irish at post-primary level is at least partially contributing to increased demand for exemptions from the subject:

...If there is a concern about rising numbers seeking exemption from Irish, surely it would be prudent to examine what is so off putting about the course? (Respondent 6124).

Respondent proposals for revision of the Irish curriculum ranged from aspirational yet undeveloped suggestions to more deeply-formulated schemes focusing on oral language as a curricular priority:

Education should enhance our children's world not upend them. Learning should be symbiotic and organic, it should challenge and enhance them as human beings not humiliate and stress them. We are responsible for creating safe inclusive learning environments not for demoralizing and isolating our youth. They are our future! (Respondent 1217).

I firmly believe, through my work in English and Irish-medium education, that a curriculum that focuses primarily on oral language throughout primary education would allow learners with SEN, returning migrants and new Irish to develop skills in and grá for the language, and thus reduce the number needing exemptions. (Respondent 6964).

...The main difficulty from a formal educational perspective is the complexity of the current curriculum as taught in second-level schools. This complexity has contributed to the establishment of significant negative connotations in the mindset of the majority of young people at second-level. If the curriculum was modelled on the European languages template I feel it would be more enjoyable and fulfilling for pupils and teachers and provide a greater sense of ownership and achievement. (Respondent 4741).

For many respondents, it was clear that proposed curricular changes were predicated on the assumption that all learners have the right to access Irish in an inclusive education setting:

...Freagracht á sheachaint ag an Roinn le daoine óga a chumasú. Tá de cheart ag gach saoránach sa tír gnó a dhéanamh leis an Stáit trí mheán na Gaeilge. Tá freagracht ar na scoileanna/An Roinn Oideachais daltaí a chumasú le rogha a bheith acu cé acu Gaeilge nó Béarla a roghnóidh siad. Tá an ceart seo á shéanadh orthu siúd nach bhfoghlaímíonn an Ghaeilge. (Respondent 10739).

Tá níos mó i gceist le teanga ná méan cumarsáide agus stórfocal. Is eispéireas saol atá ann a thugann luachanna daonna, spiorad agus anam do dhuine. Ní "táirge" scolaíochta ná oideachas atá ann. Is bealach saoil é, ní miste i ré agus costas na pleanála teanga go mbeadh deis ag gach saoránach agus na Gaeil nua as tíortha eile chuile dheis a bheith acu an Ghaeilge a fhoghlaim agus a chleachtadh. (Respondent 10744).

In addition, the *Changes to curriculum, teaching and learning category* encompasses respondents' perceptions of current approaches to the teaching of Irish, and suggestions for pedagogical changes anchored in immersion, differentiation and inclusive teaching:

Need to look at what is going wrong with the teaching of Irish....seems to go into decline from 3rd class in primary school. (Respondent 6185).

Nuair a mhúintear an Ghaeilge mar theanga bheo chumarsáideach baineann na daltaí an-taitneamh aisti. Nuair nach ndéantar sin agus nuair a leantar leabhar léitheoireachta nó leabhar saothair amháin is beag grá nó meas a spreagtar I ndaltaí, múinteoirí nó I dtuismitheoirí I bhfoghlaím na Gaeilge. (Respondent 10778).

...As a teacher of Irish and MFL I have seen all levels of students at all points on the continuum succeed. For me it is about accessibility and restructuring of the evaluation systems. I feel that exemptions from the language is a narrow and unimaginative answer to the issue in question. (Respondent 8329).

Is gá modhanna múinte Gaeilge a bhreathnú agus cumas /tiomantas na múinteoirí a chinntiú. Tig le daoine I dtíortha eile ar Mhór-Roinn na hEorpa cúpla teanga a fhoghlaim. Tig TEG agus spriocanna insroicthe cinntithe a úsáid leis an fhoghlaim a éascú agus a dhéanamh níos tarraingtí. (Respondent 10782).

As a student of Irish medium primary and secondary schools I believe the best way to reduce Irish exemptions is to teach Irish in an immersive fashion in national and English medium schools like in Gaelscoileanna. This will make learning Irish easier and more interesting to going people especially those under 8. (Respondent 6527).

Indeed, some respondents expressed the opinion that the public consultation on Irish exemptions should be halted and substituted with a review of the teaching of the Irish language in schools:

Ba chóir an comhairliúchán seo a chur ar ceal agus próiseas a thosú le pholasaí oideachas do mhúineadh na Gaeilge ina iomlán a chur le chéile. Moltar a leithéid de pholasaí mar gheall ar na cúiseanna seo a leanas: Chuimseodh a leithéid de pholasaí comhtháite gach leibhéal den chóras, an ghaelscolaíocht, páirt-tumoideachas, curaclam, oiliúint múinteoirí, srl. Bheadh ciall agus ceangal le foghlaim na Gaeilge sa chóras ón gcéad lá scoile don dalta go dtí an scrúdú ardteiste agus ar aghaidh go dtí an tríú leibhéal Ní raibh a leithéid de pholasaí ann riamh ó a bunaíodh an Stáit ó dheas Tá eiseamláir dá leithéid de pholasaí comhtháite cuimsitheach le feiceáil sa Pholasaí Oideachas Gaeltachta agus tacaíocht/sealbh ag an bpobal sa pholasaí Cheanglódh polasaí mar seo na geallsealbhóirí ar fad le chéile le díriú ar sprioc faoi leith le chéile Athródh seo múineadh na Gaeilge ón mbonn agus spreagfadh sé úsáid na Gaeilge sa tír ar fad. (Respondent 11093).

4.6.2 Irish exemption and modern foreign languages.

The second most prominent category in the Question 5 data was *Exemption and modern foreign languages*. This captures the views of respondents that the draft revised circulars should incorporate the proviso that if pupils/students are to be exempted from Irish, they should not be eligible to study modern foreign languages. The rationale provided for this stance was that language and learning difficulties will necessarily pertain to all languages, not solely to Irish. For example:

...Ina theannta sin, má bhíonn fadhb foghlaim teanga ag dalta cén dóigh gur féidir leis nó léi teangacha eile ar nós Fraincis nó Gearmáinis a fhoghlaim. Ní bhaineann fadhb foghlama le teanga amháin thar theanga eile. (Respondent 11090).

Important to avoid this being an opt out for those who can fabricate a learning difficulty but still manage to learn other languages. (Respondent 7190).

Any case where a student is exempt from Gaeilge and does not patake in class yet continues an additional language should result in the exemption being reviewed and retracted. The human brain does not discriminate between languages in terms of learning ability. (Respondent 7867).

If a student has been properly taught and supported in the acquisition of Gaeilge as a 2nd language and has failed to the point of being eligible for an exemption from study, serious consideration must be given to that student's ability and consequently eligibility to study further languages other than his/her mother language. (Respondent 6400).

Indeed it was recognised that being exempt from Irish yet being able to choose to study and sit an exam in a modern foreign language is an anomaly of the current arrangements for exemptions:

Students do not sit Irish exams but I have found that quite a number of these students can still sit French/German exams. (Respondent 6050).

If students are being given exemptions for Irish why then are these same students sitting state exams in other languages and achieving good levels of fluency? (Respondent 6925).

The *Irish exemption and modern foreign languages* category also reflects the views of some respondents (particularly respondents to the Irish online survey) that learning Irish aids the development of cognitive, social and personal skills, with concomitant positive effects on other language learning. This is linked, it was noted, to the European Union's policy on developing a multilingual society within the EU:

Má tá scoláire in ann tabhairt faoi staidéar ar theanga iascachta eile ba choir dóibh tabhairt faoin nGaeilge chomh maith. Bíonn deis ag an scoláire 'a fhoras pearsanta, cognaíoch agus sóisialta a fhorbairt' (Sonraíocht na Gaeilge). Tacaíonn foghlaim na Gaeilge le foghlaim na dteangacha iasachta agus a mhalairt. Luann an tSonraíocht na deiseanna ata ann cosúlachtaí agus difríochtaí idir teangacha a thabhairt faoi deara agus leagtar béim inti ar thábhacht an dhátheangachais/an ilteangachais. Réitíonn sé seo le beartas an Aontais Eorpaigh saoránaigh an Aontais a spreagadh chun a bheith tritheangach ar a laghad. (Respondent 11015).

4.6.3 Irish and identity, culture and heritage.

The third most prominent category in responses to Question 5 was views that Irish is extremely important for our national identity, culture and heritage:

Irish is part of our culture and our history. The government have a duty to save Irish for future generations. The only way, is in schools. (Respondent 6579).

Our language is an integral component and mode of expression of our national and cultural identity. (Respondent 4741).

Irish is the 1st language of our country. It is the living history of those who came before us. The education department should be exploring how to revamp the teaching methods and make it the primary language of education on equal footing with English, not trying to find new ways for people to avoid learning it. (Respondent 7594).

Ba chóir go mbeadh muid bródúil as an nGaeilge. Is fiú leanacht ar aghaidh le poileasaidh na h-Athbheochana. Nach bhfuil caighdean an dá theanga ag dul suas. Féach taithí na nGaelsgoil. Ní am no airgead amú a tá ann. Lean ar aghaidh. (Respondent 10822).

This view was most notable among respondents who explicitly supported the maintenance of Irish as a core subject in schools, and who perceived the exemption system as a threat to the status of Irish both within and outside of schools:

Exempting students from Irish as opposed to other languages is fostering the idea that Irish is harder than other subjects, is not important and is disposable. (Respondent 3994).

Ba cheart do chuile scoláire eolas ceart a chur ar chultúr agus oidhreacht na tíre. Is cuid lárnach í an Ghaeilge den oidhreacht sin. Cabhróidh foghlaim na Gaeilge scileanna teanga a fhorbairt sna scoláirí, cabhróidh sí le forbairt inchinne. Tá deis an teanga a úsáid le cabhrú leo meas a fhorbairt ar mhionlaigh, ar chultúir eile chomh maith len í a úsáid le féiniúlacht chomónta a spreagadh. (10879).

However, dissenting views were reported by some respondents who overtly rejected the notion that Irish is important for national identity:

Irish was dead before 1840 and all attempts to revive it have failed because we already speak the one global language and our only neighbour speaks it too. Claims of an impending loss of national identity are nonsense, Ireland has convincingly demonstrated that its loss has not resulted in the loss of our globally recognised distinctiveness as a nation. People who jump to defend Irish rarely speak a word of it, it's an irrational & emotional delusion. A language is like a currency, insisting on using Irish is like insisting on carrying around punts in your wallet on the off chance you might find a shop where you can spend them. It died, please let it rest in peace. (Respondent, 2672).

4.6.4 Irish optional.

As was evident in previous questions, the view that Irish should be an optional subject was a prominent theme in the Question 5 data. Explicitly articulated rationales for this stance included: the importance of individual choice; the relevance of Irish to a globalised, 21st century world; the impact of stress and anxiety resulting from “struggling with Irish”; and the inequity of the points system. The last of these articulated rationales was unique to the Question 5 data. For example:

This contravenes freedom of choice and intellectual autonomy of each individual in this state, each person should have the choice to study any language they choose or none. (Respondent 6262).

You are endangering the wellbeing of our children when you don't believe the real anxiety and stress studying Irish can cause our children. (Respondent 5870).

It's not fair to make it obligatory in a points-based system. Students should have

the right to opt for a different language instead of Irish. Many already do. I see nothing wrong with giving students the autonomy to choose the language they wish to study. (Respondent 6425).

Mandating Irish in schools (especially up to leaving cert) is handicapping our children in the global job market. It is an outdated idea that does not serve our Children and does not instil a love of the Irish language in the majority of people who study it. (Respondent 6221).

The fear of not getting enough points to go to college can hang on the result of an Irish paper. If students could drop the subject and replace it with another subject then they should be able to do so without being labelled as having learning difficulties! (Respondent 7671).

4.6.5 Well-being and mental health.

As was observed for Question 1, mental health and well-being was a dominant theme in the open responses provided by participants to Question 5. Here, many respondents discussed the significant levels of stress that result from persistently “struggling” with Irish:

There should be allowances for mental health conditions impacting the school life of a student no matter what his academic abilities in order to avoid school refusal and undue stress. (Respondent 8047).

Page 11 of consultation document states that you get a lot of applications for exemptions due to stress and that initiatives including the Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines (2017) have been implemented. This is not a fix. I am gravely concerned that you do not understand what "stress" means for ASD/ADHD students. It is extremely serious and can lead to self harm/ suicidal thoughts. Instead you have to give credibility to the parent's views and decisions. You need to stop your thinking that children of a certain IQ are able and competent to study Irish because they are not. (Respondent 5870).

The study of Irish in post primary school where a student struggles causes significant stress to both student and parents. (Respondent 7671).

In addition, many respondents referenced the lived experience of their own children to explain their stance of support for exemptions from Irish for students with SEN who experience stress and anxiety:

“My son fails his irish test every week, The dept of education don't see his tears and his humiliation. The system deems my son too clever for an exemption yet he can't learn or pass the curriculum. They haven't seen us at the drs, having Ct scans, Seeing neurologists, administered pain medication all because of the headaches and nausea of trying and trying and trying to

pass and failing. The system is flawed it's failing my son, it's hurting his health ...Children are suffering...real children. (Respondent 1840).

In contrast, a more positive view of associations between Irish and mental health was presented by small number of respondents who suggested that language learning can improve well-being and mental health, and highlighted how the new Junior Cycle Specification for Irish is linked with the well-being specification:

Tacaíonn staidéar ar an nGaeilge le táscairí na Folláine a chothú sa scoláire trí cheangail leis an bpobal teanga agus trí rannpháirtíocht sa chultúr. (Respondent 11105).

4.6.6 Appeals Process.

The mechanism for appeals was also addressed by respondents in Question 5. Among those who directly referenced appeals, there was general disagreement with the proposal that the Board of Management should be the arbiter of appeals; rather, they suggested that appeals should be addressed to an outside agency such as the DES. Cited concerns about the appropriateness of local management of appeals centred on: increases to workload; a perceived lack of clinical expertise at Board of Management level; and an anticipated lack of objectivity due to personal relationships within the school community:

Equally the appeals procedure to the BOM's should not be used. This another piece of workload that Board's should not do. An appeals mechanism to an outside agency should only be used as Board members may know personally the people appealing. Board members also will be made up of people who would not have the necessary skills or knowledge to examine scores/School Support Files etc in order to reach a decision. It should be an independent educator/educators who can impartially examine all available data. (Respondent 5015).

I think the appeals mechanism should not be confined to the principal/Board of Management and that the Department of Education should hold some responsibility in this regard. If an exemption from Irish is refused by the school, then appealing it - in my experience - can become personal and an external body should in these cases be asked to determine whether the schools decision is right or wrong. Either a child meets the criteria for an exemption or they don't. So once the school reaches a decision based on the criteria, I can't see why the school would change its mind unless under pressure. Therefore an independent appeals mechanism is needed. (Respondent 5665).

The suggestion of placing the burden of making the decisions about exemptions on already overworked Principals is inadvisable. It would have the effect of

exposing them to undue pressures from parents, who while anxious to give their children every opportunity often have very little idea of the educational benefits their child derives from a particular area of study. (Respondent 3994).

4.6.7 Criticism of the public consultation process.

The final substantive category that emerged from the analysis of the Question 5 data was respondents' criticism of the Irish exemption consultation process in general. A very small number of respondents indicated that they welcomed the revision of the circulars governing exemptions from Irish, and appreciated the opportunity to be involved in the public consultation process:

I think it is wonderful that these circulars are being revised and it is impressive how you have sought the relevant stakeholders' opinions. I hope these will be reflected in a transparent way and recommendations be implemented accordingly. (Respondent 4816).

...Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this survey. The planned reforms are welcome and very overdue. (Respondent 5789).

However, many more respondents articulated criticisms and concerns related to a number of the elements of the consultation process including: the chosen methodology; the timing of the online survey; the wording of the survey; and the use of research findings to inform the creation of the draft circulars:

Tá an comhairliúchán fhéin agus an modh le hionchur ón bpobal a bhailiú tríd suirbhé ar-líne an-an-teoranta; agus níl ach an suirbhé ar líne amháin ar fáil le páirt a ghlacadh ann. Tá gach cuma ar an scéal go bhfuil an suirbhé ar líne ann le daoine a theorannú do na dréacht ciorcláin amháin atá curtha le chéile ag an Roinn. Níl aon áit ann chun moltaí nua a chur chun cinn, mar shampla, a laghdódh an gá le díolúintí sa thodhchaí. (Respondent 10735).

The survey is too restricted in its schedule of questions and assumes that all respondents are simply suggesting improving the exemption rules. (Respondent 6432).

Níl an dréacht-chiorclán léite agam - níor chuala mé faoi go dtí inné! Níl mórán ama fágtha agaibh len e a iniúcadh - am Nollag 7rl. I ndairíre Ba chóir an comhairliúchán seo a chur ar ceal agus próiseas a thosú le polasaí oideachas do mhúineadh na Gaeilge ina iomlán a chur le chéile seachas leathscéalta a lorg le díolúine ón dTeanga Náisiúnta a ceadú! (Respondent 10743).

The draft circular is written in education jargon and is extremely difficult to understand for lay people like me. (Respondent 7779).

Níor cuireadh an taighde ón gCigireacht a eisíodh leis an bpáipéar comhairliúcháin san áireamh go sásúil sa cháipéis comhairliúcháin agus sna

moltaí luaite ann do na ciorcláin nua. Mar shampla, dúradh ar leathanach 78 den taighde: 'Leagann síceolaithe SNSO ar na tairbhí a bhaineann le foghlaim an dara teanga... I dtaighde reatha atá luaite ag SNSO táthar in amhras leis ... faoi cé acu an cleachtas críonna nó éigríonna é díolúintí a thabhairt do scoláirí ag a bhfuil saindeacrachtaí foghlama' acu. Níl aon rian den mholadh seo le feiceáil sna dréacht ciorcláin nua. Tá an comhairliúchán féin agus an suirbhé ar líne an-teoranta. Níl aon áit ann chun moltaí nua a chur chun cinn, mar shampla, a laghdódh an gá le díolúintí sa todhchaí. (Respondent 10872).

SECTION 5: FINDINGS FROM THE WRITTEN SUBMISSIONS DATA.

5.1 Introduction

149 written submissions (sent via email) were received by the DES in response to the public consultation. Of these, 24 were submitted by organisations and 125 by individuals. The chart below shows the breakdown of respondents according to stakeholder group. Of the submissions received from organisations, 5 broad stakeholder groups were represented. These include parents, the teaching profession and school management (primary and second-level), the university sector, the Irish language sector, and disability/special needs representatives. Among the 125 individuals who submitted written responses, 15 identified themselves as parents and 35 as teachers. The remaining 75 individuals did not state whether they were parents or teachers. These individuals are grouped under the label 'Other' in Figure 20 below.

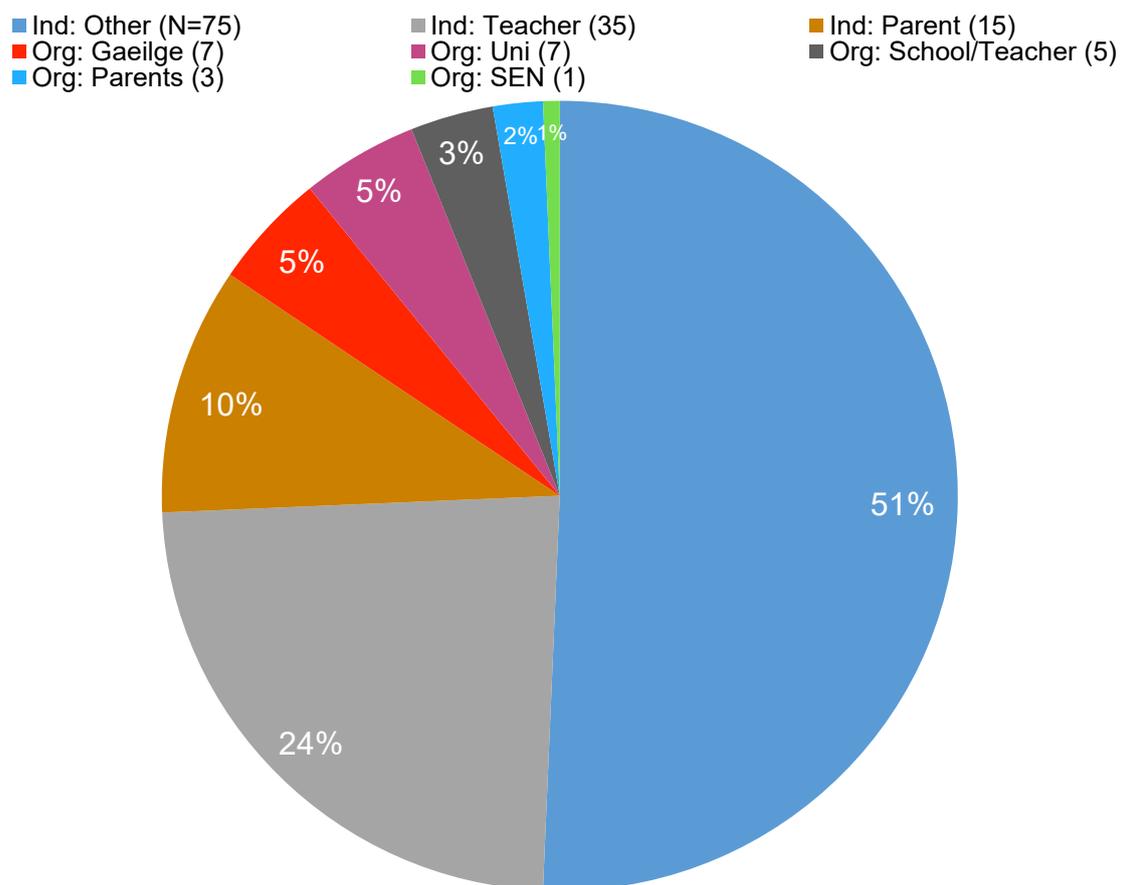


Figure 21. Breakdown of respondents according to stakeholder group for the written submissions data.

The submissions were analysed separately to the survey responses but according to the same analytic framework, as described in Section 2.5.2.2 of this report. While the length of the submissions ranged from approximately 250 words to over twenty pages, the submissions were not weighted or clustered but were each treated as discrete units of analysis. The inductive approach to the analysis, involving line-by-line coding, aimed to capture as much of the nuance and heterogeneity of responses as possible, while also identifying areas of significant agreement or consensus. 25% of the submissions were in Irish and the remaining 75% were in English. The submissions were analysed by bilingual team members to ensure that analysis was carried out on the primary data rather than on a translation.

Five key themes emerged from the analysis, which will be outlined briefly in the following section and described in more detail in Section 5.4. Further themes emerged which, while they were less prevalent than the key themes, were recurrent across a number of the submissions. These are outlined in Section 5.5. Given the open nature of the analysis of the written submissions, the themes which emerged were not necessarily focused only on the proposed circulars but encompassed the broader context of Irish language education. However, the process of analysis also included drawing out the positions of the respondents *vis-à-vis* the proposed criteria for exemptions, as detailed in the draft revised circulars. These findings are listed according to stakeholder group in Section 5.3, along with specific recommendations that were made around the refinement or amending of the proposed criteria.

5.2 Overview of Key Themes

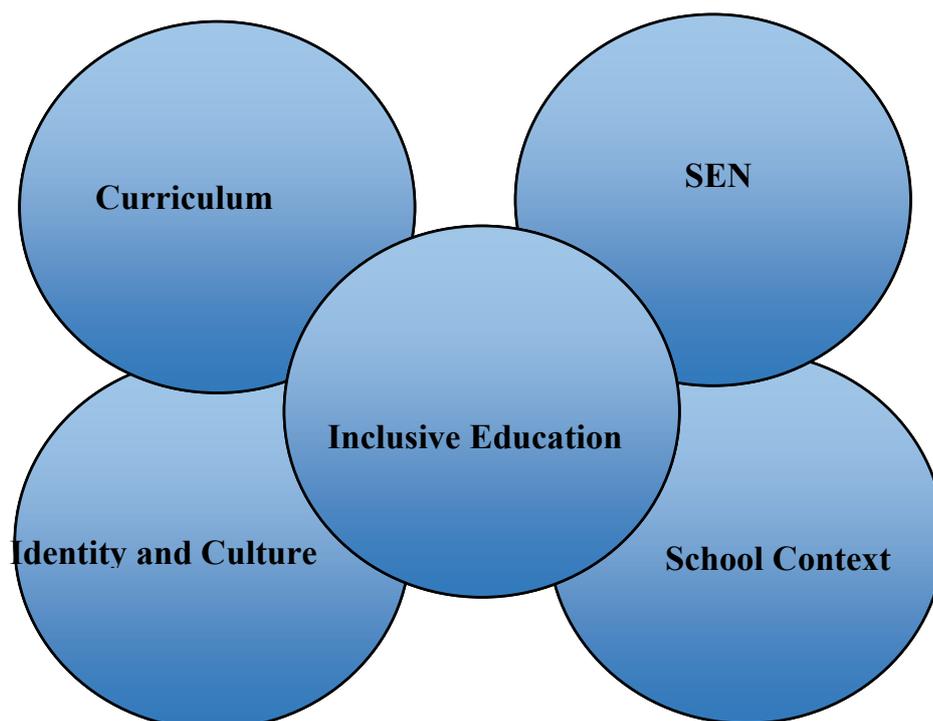
Across all of the written submissions, there was significant agreement on the inadequacy of the current system of exemptions. Points raised in this regard included: a lack of focus on learner needs; a failure to cater for inclusivity; the perceived misuse of the exemptions system and misinterpretation of criteria for exemption; and a call for the introduction of on-going monitoring and evaluation of decisions on granting of exemptions.

Arising from the perceived inadequacy of the current system, there was broad agreement around the need for reform of the exemptions system. The public consultation process was welcomed as an opportunity to raise concerns and queries around the exemptions process. However, the diversity of perspectives within the written submissions received gives rise to a range of positions towards the concept of

exemption itself, ranging from calls for abolishing exemptions entirely to calls for making exemptions automatically available upon request.

These positions, while seemingly at odds, were anchored in a common call for reform of the approach to Irish language education. The core message arising from the diverse positions encompassed by the written submissions is that reform of the system of exemptions from Irish cannot be considered in isolation from its educational and social context. Given the dominance of this message in the submissions, the description of the findings includes points directly relating to the exemptions system but also points relating to the broader educational and social context.

Five key themes emerged from the analysis of the written submissions (presented in the graphic below). Of these five, the theme of *Inclusive Education* functions as an umbrella theme and was positioned throughout the written submissions as a necessary foundation to any proposed changes. The other four key themes, each of which is linked to the central theme of *Inclusive Education*, include *Curriculum*, *SEN*, *Identity and Culture*, and *School Context*. Within each of these themes, there were some areas of consensus but also a significant diversity of opinion. Section 5.4 below presents the findings within each of these themes, in as much detail as is possible within the scope of the report to convey the diversity of perspectives within each theme. Excerpts from the submissions (using the original language) are included to provide an illustration of the various stakeholders' comments and perspectives.



5.3 Proposed Criteria for Exemptions

This section outlines the positions taken by the respondents regarding the proposed changes to the criteria for the exemption of the study of Irish presented in the draft revised circulars. For each point of the criteria a summary is given of the broad areas of agreement or dissent. This is followed by a more detailed outline of the views of the stakeholders, grouped as per: a) parents; b) teachers and schools; c) university sector; d) Irish-language sector; e) SEN representatives; f) other individuals. This section includes points raised that *specifically* referenced the proposed criteria. Where the points were of a broader nature, they have been included under the relevant theme in Sections 5.4 and 5.5.

5.3.1 The language of instruction in the school.

Exemption from the study of Irish should only be available to pupils/students in schools where all subjects except Irish are taught through the medium of English.

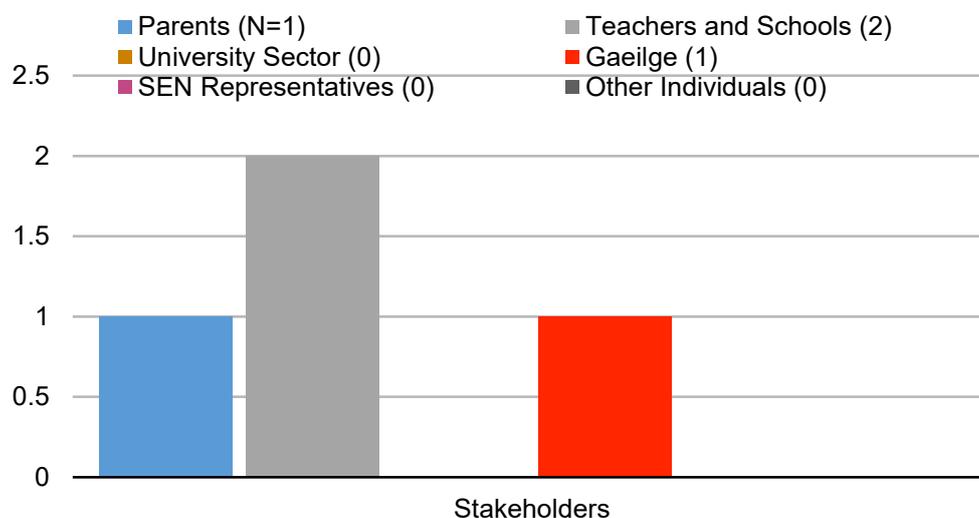


Figure 22. Number of written submissions according to stakeholder group that referenced the language of instruction in the school.

This point was addressed in four of the written submissions in total and, while there was broad agreement with the proposal, there were some nuanced issues identified. These are outlined below with illustrative quotes³ from the relevant submissions.

³ Throughout the report, excerpts from the written submissions are quoted in the original language in order to avoid misrepresentation. Excerpts are quoted verbatim for the purposes of transparency and validity.

5.3.1.1 Submission from parents groups.

A parents' representative group who surveyed parents⁴ on the proposed criteria reported in their submission that 55% of parents agreed or strongly agreed with this point. 28% disagreed or strongly disagreed, while 17% neither agreed nor disagreed. No further comments were given in response to this particular question in their survey.

5.3.1.2 Submissions from teachers and schools groups.

Two organisations from the teachers and schools cluster addressed this proposed change in their written submissions. While both agreed with this provision, they pointed out that there should be scope for exceptional cases, such as in the case of newcomer students to Gaeltacht schools:

However, there is a need to retain an exceptional needs element in this context. (Organisation: Teacher 02)

While this provision is reasonable and should be retained, certain newcomer and SEN students attending Irish-medium schools may struggle with the new Junior Cycle L1 curriculum specification and, while outside the scope of this circular, access to Gaeilge L2 should be provided-for under certain circumstances in scoileanna lán Gaelach. (Organisation: School Management).

5.3.1.3 Submissions from university sector.

This point was not specifically addressed in the submissions from the university sector.

5.3.1.4 Submissions from Irish language sector.

One organisation from the Irish language sector highlighted a problematic situation relating to this criterion; namely, the situation where students who have received their primary education in Irish-medium schools are applying for exemptions from Irish at post-primary level. The organisation requested that clarity be provided around this issue for school principals in Irish-medium primary schools:

[L]jorgaíonn tuismitheoirí na mbunscoileanna lán-Ghaeilge litir thacaíochta go minic ó Phríomhoidí dá n-iarratais ar dhíolúine ó staidéar na Gaeilge sa mheánscoil. Bíodh is nach bhfuil ciall ná réasún le hiarratas mar seo, ní mór treoir shoiléir a bheith ar fáil do Phríomhoidí na mbunscoileanna lán-Ghaeilge i leith iarratais den chineál sin. (Organisation: Gaeilge 04)

⁴ The overall number of respondents to the parent representative group's survey was 4483.

5.3.1.5 Submissions from SEN representatives.

This point was not specifically addressed in the submission from SEN representatives.

5.3.1.6 Submissions from other individuals.

This point was not specifically addressed in the submissions from other individuals.

5.3.2 Pupils/students who received their education outside the state.

Pupils/students who have received their education outside the State (where they did not have opportunity to study Irish) and who have completed the final year of their primary education or have reached age 12 years may be granted an exemption from the study of Irish.

As shown in Figure 23 below, this proposed change was addressed by 14 of the written submissions. Of these, six broadly agreed with the proposed change from 11 years to 12 years, while eight disagreed. There were, however, differing perspectives within these positions, the most prevalent of which related to the difficulty in providing a balance between the needs of students of English as an additional language and the compulsory study of Irish. Another common point raised was that intensive Irish language courses should be provided for newcomer students to allow them the option of studying Irish, regardless of their age upon arrival in the State.

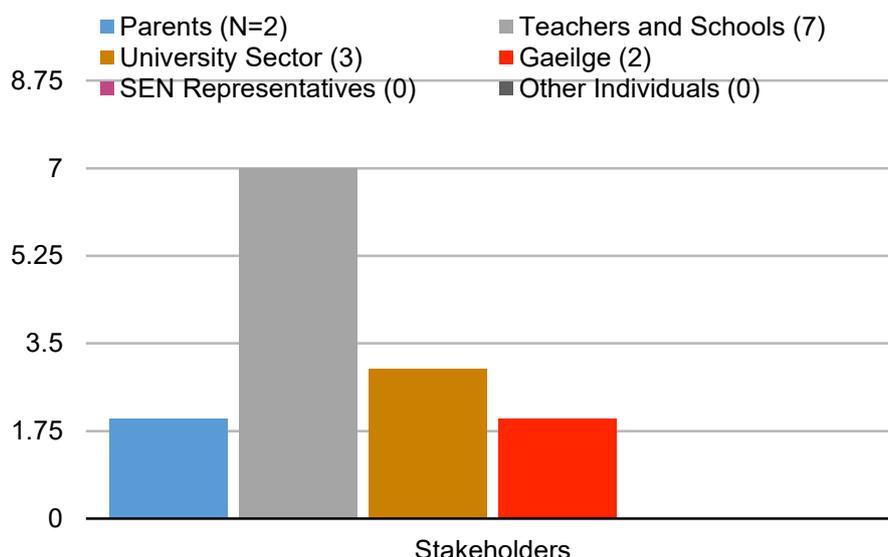


Figure 23. Number of written submissions according to stakeholder group that referenced pupils/students educated abroad.

5.3.2.1 Submissions from parents groups.

Where parents responded to this question in the parent representative group's survey, 80% agreed or strongly agreed. 13% disagreed or strongly disagreed, while 7% neither agreed nor disagreed. The point was made in an individual submission from a parent that the provision for the exemption from Irish should remain open to children of highly mobile parents (e.g., diplomatic staff):

[W]e ask that the Department of Education retains the exemption for children of foreign consular staff/foreign diplomats and expand it to include all non-Irish children of international parents, in particular in circumstances where the family are regularly uprooted and move from country to country. (Individual: Parent 04).

5.3.2.2 Submissions from teachers and schools groups.

Primary school teacher representative organisations maintained that the age for exemption should be retained at 11 years, while post-primary teacher representative organisations supported the change to 12 years. Individual teachers pointed to their experience in supporting EAL students to suggest that there should be greater flexibility regarding the age for exemption, particularly where the student had not yet reached a level of proficiency in English to allow them to engage fully with the curriculum. The point was also raised that DES guidelines would be necessary around the supporting documentation required for an exemption under this criterion. For example:

[A]n EAL student who enrolled in a primary school before the age of 12 but who has not attained the necessary language proficiency to access the post primary curriculum and achieve at the level of their ability, should be considered for an Irish exemption in 1st year if this is the best way to deliver ongoing EAL support. (Individual: Teacher 01).

[T]he current situation that a child must continue to study Irish at second level, if they arrive in Ireland before the age of 11, is in the vast majority of cases, not in the best educational interests of the students. I have frequently been asked by parents, if their child could drop Irish at second level in order to access EAL lessons. Many parents and students would much rather have the opportunity to strengthen English language skills rather than persisting with Irish through 5-6 years of second level education. (Individual: Teacher 23).

Díolúine do dhaltáí nach bhfuil fiú Béarla acu...níl fadhb agam le sin. (Individual: Teacher 13).

[I]t is important that the DES issue clear guidelines as to what supporting documentation parents must provide to a school to support such a claim for an exemption (Organisation: Teacher 02).

5.3.2.3 Submissions from the university sector.

Within the submissions from the university sector, while there was agreement that the age should be raised to 12, the emphasis was placed on introducing a differentiated curriculum or resourcing additional Irish-language support in order to restrict exemptions to exceptional or rare cases.

While we accept that the award of an exemption may be appropriate for pupils in the first category, we also believe that an immersion programme or an ab initio course in Irish for children in this category should be developed and offered as an option to them. (Organisation: University Sector 04)

There should be no exemption from Irish for pupils who have spent any length of time outside the Irish education system, but there may be need for an appropriately adapted pedagogy in such cases. (Organisation: University Sector 05).

5.3.2.4 Submissions from the Irish language sector.

Representatives of the Irish-Language sector also recommended providing intensive courses in Irish for newcomer students to allow them the option of studying Irish and to reduce the number of exemptions required. They suggested that this could follow the model already in place for English language support for newcomer students.

[Molaimid] go mbreathnaítear ar réimse de bhealaí eile le dul i ngleic leis an cheist, mar shampla trí chúrsaí ab initio, dianchúrsaí srl. (Organisation: Gaeilge 01).

Cén fáth nach mbeadh dianchúrsa sa Ghaeilge ar fáil dóibh ag an am céanna agus an rochtain céanna a thabhairt dóibh ar an teanga Ghaeilge? (Organisation: Gaeilge 04).

5.3.2.5 Submissions from SEN representatives.

This point was not specifically addressed in the submission from SEN representatives.

5.3.2.6 Submissions from other individuals.

This point was not specifically addressed in the submissions from other individuals.

5.3.3 Pupils/students who are re-enrolling following a period abroad.

Pupils/students who are re-enrolling following a period of at least three consecutive years abroad (and where they did not have opportunity to study Irish) and who are at least 12 years of age on re-enrolment may be granted an exemption from the study of Irish.

As shown in Figure 24 below, this proposed change was addressed in five of the written submissions. Of the submissions where the point was addressed, one agreed with the proposal, one suggested changes to the timeframe and the other three recommended providing extra Irish-language support to returning students.

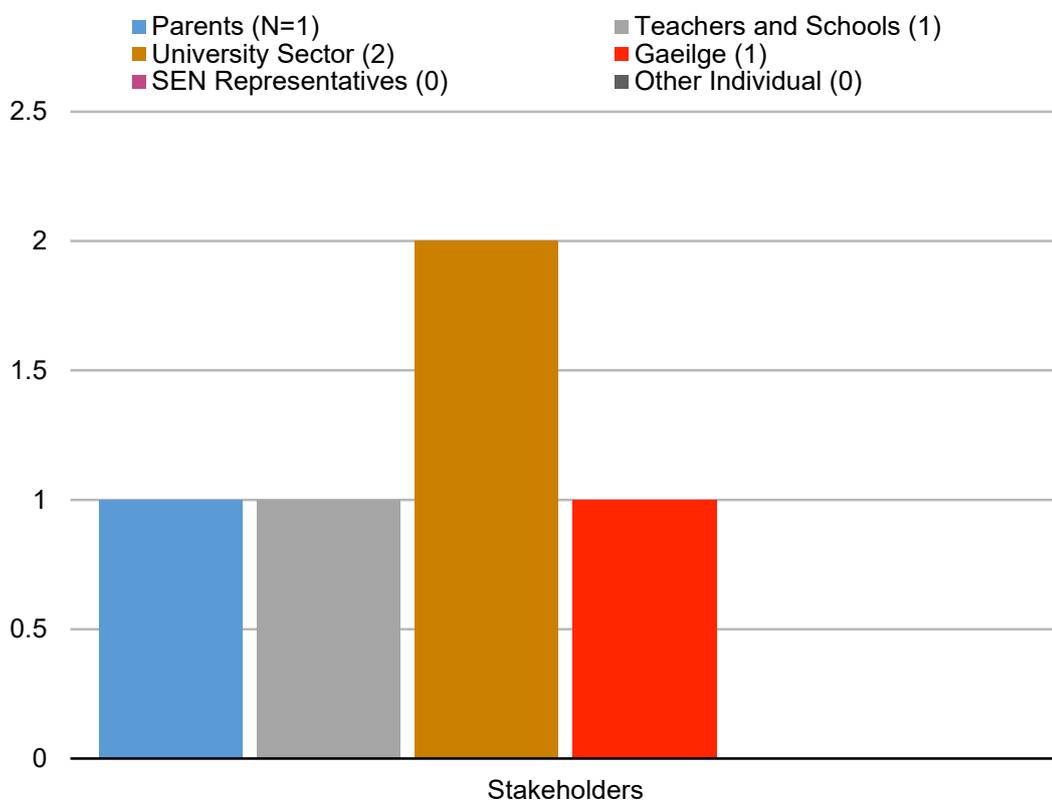


Figure 24. Number of written submissions according to stakeholder group that referenced pupil/students who are re-enrolling following a period abroad.

5.3.3.1 Submissions from parents groups.

Where parents responded to this question in the parent representative group's survey, 71% agreed or strongly agreed. 19% disagreed or strongly disagreed, while 10% neither agreed nor disagreed.

5.3.3.2 Submissions from teachers and schools groups.

Again, the recommendation was made here that, while the option of exemption from Irish should be available to returning students meeting the criteria, the uptake of exemptions in such cases could be reduced through provision of intensive Irish-language support:

Qualifying for such a newcomer or returning criterion should nonetheless leave open the possibility of taking-up Gaeilge as an ab-initio language as many children come to Ireland with well-established bi and multi-lingual skills and, for educational, cultural, social and employment reasons, school and parents should at least have an open-minded conversation around all possibilities. (Organisation: School Management).

5.3.3.3 Submissions from the university sector.

In the case of the university sector, one submission recommended extending the time period referenced from three years to five years, while another submission again recommended the provision of intensive Irish-language support.

Is dóigh linn go bhfuil an tréimhse sin róghearr i gcás na bunscoile agus go mba chóir é a shíneadh go tréimhse cúig bliana. (Organisation: University Sector 02)

We believe that students who were out of the Irish system for three years could still benefit from the Irish language programme, especially if some supplementary materials were devised to bring them up to speed. The assumption shouldn't be made that a return to Irish would be too challenging for them, especially if they have had experience of language learning while abroad. (Organisation: University Sector 04)

5.3.3.4 Submissions from the Irish language sector.

As was the case with students entering the State for the first time, representatives of the Irish-language sector recommended providing the same language support for Irish as is currently available for English as an Additional Language (EAL):

Dar [linn] go bhfuil dualgas ar ROS an chomhairle chéanna agus an chóir chéanna a chur ar fáil maidir leis an Ghaeilge agus go mbeadh dianchúrsa sa Ghaeilge ar fáil le haghaidh daltaí gan tuiscint acu ar an Ghaeilge (Organisation: Gaeilge 01)

5.3.3.5 Submissions from SEN representatives.

This point was not specifically addressed in the submission from SEN representatives.

5.3.3.6 Submission from other individuals.

This point was not specifically addressed in the submissions from other individuals.

5.3.4 Irish exemptions in special schools and in special classes in mainstream schools.

The draft revised circulars recognise the authority devolved to the authorities of special schools and mainstream schools where there are special classes in decision making concerning pupils'/students' Irish language learning needs.

- i) Pupils/students in special schools or classes should not have to apply for an official exemption from the study of Irish.
- ii) Decision making concerning the Irish language learning needs of pupils/students in special schools and special classes in mainstream schools is a matter for school authorities.

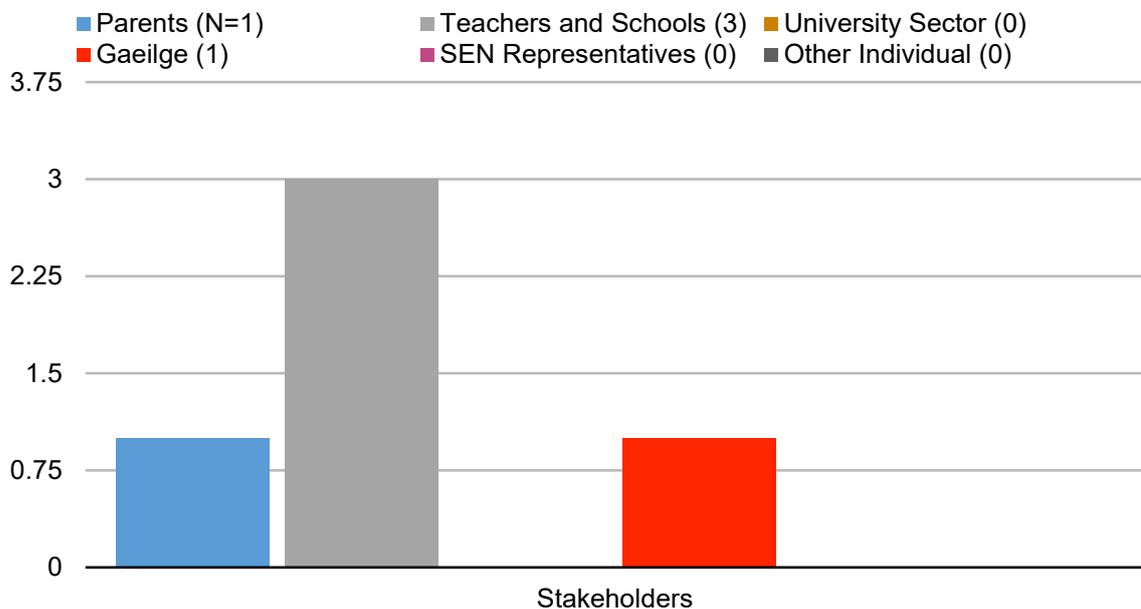


Figure 25. Number of written submissions according to stakeholder group that referenced Irish exemptions in special schools and special classes.

As shown in Figure 25, this proposal was addressed in five of the written submissions and there was broad consensus around the proposed changes. The respondents agreed that students in such cases should not have to apply for an official exemption and welcomed the prioritising of students' individual needs. There were some specific suggestions with regard to the nuance of these criteria, as outlined below.

5.3.4.1 Submissions from parents groups.

The survey responses from the parent representative group indicated that 72% agreed or strongly agreed with the first point; that is that students in special schools should not have to apply for an official exemption. 17% disagreed or strongly disagreed, while 11% neither agreed nor disagreed. Regarding the second point, that decision making concerning the Irish language learning needs of pupils/students in special schools and special classes in mainstream schools is a matter for school authorities, 55% agreed or strongly agreed, 32% disagreed or strongly disagreed and 14% neither agreed nor disagreed. The survey asked whether parents should be involved in this decision-making, to which 89% responded with “agree” or “strongly agree”. 6% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 5% neither agreed nor disagreed with this recommendation. In addition, the survey asked whether children should be involved in this decision-making. 62% agreed or strongly agreed that they should, 19% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 18% neither agreed nor disagreed.

5.3.4.2 Submissions from teachers and schools groups.

The proposed change was welcomed by the school and teacher representatives who referenced this point. However, there were some concerns raised around the continuity of provision for exemptions in cases where a child moved from a special school or special class setting into mainstream education.

[We] very much welcome this new provision as it removes both the administrative and anxiety burdens from principals and parents. (Organisation: School Management).

Notwithstanding the need for flexibility in special classes/schools, issues often arise for these pupils when they integrate into a mainstream setting at a later stage of their education as they then require an exemption certificate to excuse them from the study of Irish at the time of enrolment. Arrangements need to be put in place to support the seamless transition of a defacto exemption from a special class in primary to a mainstream class in post-primary. (Organisation: Teacher 03).

5.3.4.3 Submissions from university sector.

This point was not specifically addressed in the submissions from the university sector.

5.3.4.4 Submissions from Irish language sector.

Representatives from the Irish-language sector pointed to the need for monitoring of the implementation of the criteria in special schools:

Dar le [eagraíocht] go bhfuil sé tábhachtach go mbeidh bearta á gcur in áit ag ROS lena chinntiú go bhfuil scoileanna, scoileanna RSO san áireamh, ag cloí le polasaithe an stáit i leith na ceiste seo. (Organisation: Gaeilge 01).

5.3.4.5 Submissions from SEN representatives.

This point was not specifically addressed in the submission from SEN representatives.

5.3.4.6 Submissions from other individuals.

This point was not specifically addressed in the submissions from other individuals.

5.3.5 Pupils with significant and persistent learning difficulties.

The draft revised circulars propose that where a pupil/student presents with significant and persistent learning difficulties, decisions to grant an exemption should only be considered in the case of:

i. Pupils who have at least reached third class

and

ii. present with significant learning difficulties that are persistent despite having had access to a differentiated approach to language and literacy learning in both Irish and English over time. Documentary evidence to this effect, held by the school, should include Student Support Plans detailing:

-regular reviews of learning needs as part of an ongoing cycle of assessment.

-target setting.

-evidence-informed intervention and review, including test scores (word reading, reading comprehension, spelling, other scores of language/literacy) at key points of review.

and iii. at the time of the application for exemption present with a Standardised Score on a discrete test in Word Reading or Reading Comprehension at/below the 10th percentile.

This point was addressed in 23 of the written submissions. While there was broad agreement that the proposal represented a positive move towards focusing on children's individual learning needs rather than psychological assessment and

diagnosis, there were certain concerns raised. These fell into three categories. The first category of concerns centred around the perceived arbitrary nature of the cut-off points for exemption and the exclusion of certain categories of SEN from the grounds for exemption, in particular Autism Spectrum Disorder. The second category raised the issue of workload and the implications of the additional documentation practices required at school-level. The third category challenged the perceived assumptions made around the connection between language-learning and SEN.

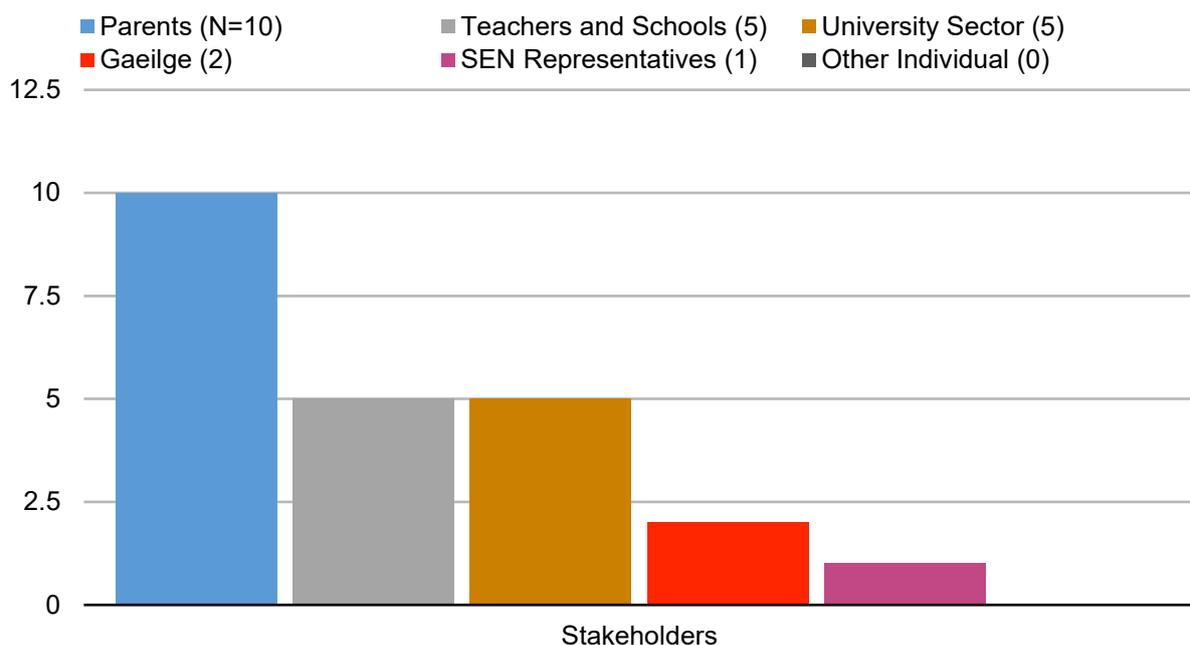


Figure 26. Number of written submissions according to stakeholder group that referenced pupils/students with significant and persistent learning difficulties.

5.3.5.1 Submissions from parents groups.

The parents’ representative group who conducted their own survey found that 76% of parents agreed or strongly agreed, 11% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 11% neither agreed nor disagreed with this proposed change. Within the submissions from individual parents, consensus was observed around the need to place the learner’s needs at the centre of decision making on exemptions. However, the proposed criteria were criticised as being too narrow and lacking in nuance. Specific concerns included: 3rd class being too late for the granting of exemption where need had been identified earlier; the Standardised Score not being an appropriate measure to capture a sufficiently wide range of learning needs; the need to satisfy all three criteria for exemption being too narrow. Some parents also voiced concern at the removal of the

need for a professional or clinical report, recommending that such a perspective should still be included in a holistic assessment of the child's needs. For example:

No set of criteria can ever fairly cover all circumstances so I strongly believe they should be used only as a framework within which professionals with clinical experience are allowed to exercise their own judgement and discretion. (Individual: Parent 03)

Removing that report however takes away the view of an experienced professional who assesses the child's needs on a holistic basis. Simply deleting the requirement does not address the underlying issue. (Individual: Parent 01).

[L]ooking at the circumstances where a pupil may be granted an exemption in the new circular, we feel that Section 2.2 (C) parts (ii) and (iii) should be an "AND/OR" rather than an "AND" - in other words, both (ii) and (iii) do not both have to be satisfied in order for the exemption to be granted. (Individual: Parent 10).

[A] consistent approach doesn't mean a very narrow approach which is what is being proposed. I would like to see a more child-centred approach developed. (Individual: Parent 07).

[T]he criteria for exemption should be as broad as possible to ensure no child's need is potentially overlooked. (Organisation: Parent 02).

5.3.5.2 Submissions from teachers and schools groups.

The submissions from organisations representing teachers and schools highlighted the difficulty caused by the exclusion in the existing circulars of a range of SEN as grounds for exemption and, arising from this, they were broadly supportive of the move towards focusing on the learner's individual needs. However, a number of the submissions recommended that educational psychologists should still have a role in identifying the learner's needs. The submissions from this stakeholder group were also broadly supportive of the 3rd class threshold for exemption, although it was pointed out that some exceptional cases may require earlier exemption.

The primary issue flagged by the submissions from the teacher and school sector was the increase in workload that will arise from the need to supply documentary evidence in support of exemptions under these criteria. The current policy context, whereby schools are already operating under reduced resources and two of the teacher unions have advised their members not to engage in the preparation of Individual Education Plans and Student Support Files, was highlighted as a particular

challenge in the implementation of the proposed circular. In light of this, representatives of school management made specific recommendations around the implementation of the criteria, as excerpted below:

[Organisation] 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. (Organisation: Teacher 01).

Autism/mutism/verbal dyspraxia etc should be encompassed in the circular. Children with such difficulties should have an entitlement to a NEPS assessment, thereby determining whether their level of need would require the granting of an exemption from the study of Irish. (Organisation: Teacher 02)

[T]he workload of school principals is overwhelming and, while each step in the course of processing an exemption application is necessary, such steps may equally be carried-out by a deputy principal acting on the principal's behalf. The Department might consider making such delegation explicit in the circular. (Organisation: School Management).

It is the position of [...] that in advance of the issuing of this circular:

(a) a ring-fenced allocation of 10% of special education "profile hours" be provided to schools each year to provide for the administrative workload associated with the new set of responsibilities arising from current policy.

(b) the term "Student Support Plans" be removed from the circular, leaving each school to decide on what "documentary evidence" is relevant and realistic to underpin its decision, and,

(c) an advisory document accompanies the circular providing explanatory information on how the "significant and persistent learning difficulties" criteria should operate. This could include advice on testing instruments, the nature of acceptable documentary evidence, process timeframes, expectations around recording of relevant information, case-study examples to demonstrate what is comprehended by terms such as "differentiated approaches", "target-setting", "evidence informed interventions" etc. (Organisation: School Management).

5.3.5.3 Submissions from university sector.

While there was broad agreement that the provision of exemptions should focus on individual learner needs, the written submissions from the university sector also highlighted a number of concerns around the criteria for exemption for learners with SLD and SEN. Concerns were raised around the particular measures and thresholds chosen as criteria for exemption, particularly the use of standardised testing. Other recommendations included the need to define what is meant by "exceptional" and "rare" within the circular and to monitor the number of exemptions to ensure that the number correlates to the statistical prevalence of SLD and SEN in the population.

The submissions from the university sector also recommended that, while the removal of the requirement for a diagnosis was welcome, there should be a role retained for clinical and professional personnel in the identification of individual learner needs.

Ba ghá go mbeadh aon chur chuige nua bunaithe ar norm staitistiúil éigin faoi cén céatadán den ghnáthphobal scoile i dtír ar bith a mbeadh riachtanais foghlama “eisceachtúla” acu. (Organisation: University Sector 02)

[...] welcomes the focus on educational needs rather than the use of diagnostic, categorical models in the granting of exemptions. The proposal to discontinue psychological assessments and cognitive ability scores as part of the exemption application process would also greatly simplify the process and the requirement that only one literacy attainment score should be at or below the 10th percentile to satisfy the criteria is also welcome. (Organisation: University Sector 03)

We welcome the provision that access to additional educational resources be based on learning needs as identified in a school setting rather than on a clinical diagnosis of disability, but we believe that a decision to exempt a pupil from a subject area without some clinical evidence that that pupil would not benefit from appropriate tuition in that area is misguided. (Organisation: University Sector 04)

Tá easpa eolais sa pháipéar comhairliúcháin faoin mbunús atá leis an gcinneadh an 10ú peircintíl a roghnú. Ní insítear dúinn faoi líon na ndíolúintí reatha a thitfeadh sa raon seo ar thrialacha caighdeánacha. Tá an chuma ar an scéal gur roghnaíodh an scoithphointe seo le bealach níos fusa a chruthú do chinntí ag leibhéal na scoile seachas é a bheith bunaithe ar chritéar bailí bunaithe ar fhianaise. (Organisation: University Sector 02)

In particular, the removal of external assessment in favour of a reading and comprehension test is of particular concern. One assumes, as it is not stated, that this would be in English. The connection between comprehension and reading in English and a possible exemption from Irish is not based on scientific grounds, but on conjecture and misplaced intuition. (Organisation: University Sector 05)

Is cúis mhór imní dúinn na tástálacha liteartha caighdeánaithe a bheith chomh lárnach sin sna critéir. Ba cheart gnéithe eile den bpróiseas foghlama teanga -cumas labhartha agus cluastuisceana, agus straitéisí foghlama, mar shampla, a chur san áireamh sa phróiseas measúnaithe chomh maith. (Organisation: University Sector 01).

The process outlined here would put great pressure on teachers and principals who would need a high level of professional competence and confidence if they were to make an accurate diagnosis in each case, without specialist advice or support. We believe that the process as outlined would result in increased

numbers of exemptions and appeals in non-exceptional cases. (Organisation: University Sector 05).

5.3.5.4 Submissions from Irish language sector.

Within the submissions from the Irish-language sector, it was emphasised that the granting of exemptions should be made only in exceptional cases. The submissions making this point recommended that the draft circular be amended to define more clearly what is meant by “rare” and “exceptional”.

Ba mhaith linn a mheabhrú gur eisceachtaí atá sna cásanna seo. (Organisation: Gaeilge 05)

5.3.5.5 Submissions from SEN representatives.

The written submission from the representative organisation within the SEN sector welcomed the move towards basing the granting of exemptions on individual learner needs rather than clinical diagnosis. However, concern was voiced at the proposal to base the decision on a discrete test score. Furthermore, it was recommended that the 3rd class threshold should be removed in favour of allowing exemptions to be granted at the point of the identification of need, regardless of the learner’s age. Another point raised in this regard was that the particular type of test proposed is too narrow to capture the range of learning difficulties and may result in learners who should be eligible for an exemption not receiving one. For example:

This change also supports equity of access, as we know that access to a formal diagnosis is often linked to financial means. (Organisation: SEN Representative)

Any cut-off on a discrete test (one test, of one skill, on one day) is inherently flawed and will unfairly penalise some people. (Organisation: SEN Representative)

Such a randomly chosen cut-off point is not reasonable and flies in the face of the accepted benefits of early identification and intervention. We would recommend that a student should be able to get an exemption when need has been clearly established, without undue delay. (Organisation: SEN Representative)

If single attainment scores do have to be used, then the tests allowed should be extended to include measures of Nonword Reading, Reading Speed and Spelling, reflecting the fact that students with dyslexia often struggle considerably in these areas. Assessment of only Word Reading and Reading Comprehension is far too narrow an approach, and does not reflect the full

range of areas where dyslexia may impact, and would deny access to an exemptions to many children who need one. (Organisation: SEN Representative)

5.3.5.6 Submissions from other individuals.

This point was not specifically addressed in the submissions from other individuals.

5.3.6 Students who have reached 18 years of age.

Students who have reached age 18 years may make their own application for an exemption from the study of Irish.

This point was addressed in two of the written submissions. Both submissions were in favour of the proposal. However, a submission from the teacher and school sector raised some concerns around guidelines for school leaders.

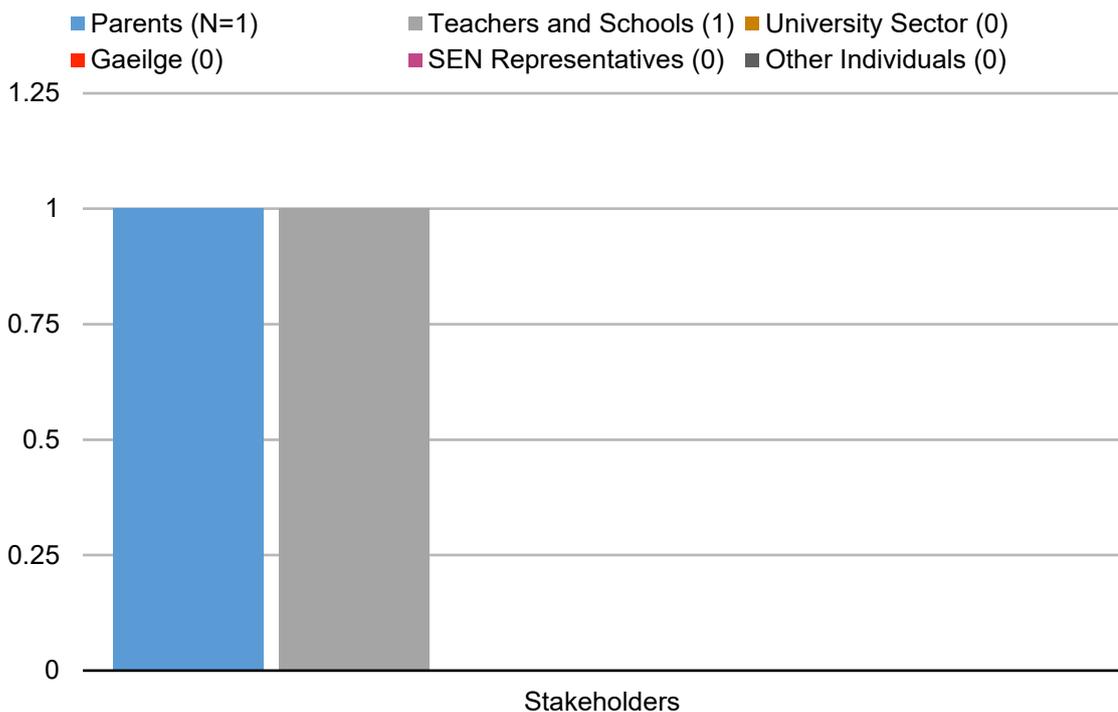


Figure 27. Number of written submissions according to stakeholder group that referenced students who have reached the age of 18 years.

5.3.6.1 Submissions from parents groups.

In the survey responses submitted by the parent representative group, 76% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that students who have reached the age of 18 may make their own application for exemption from the study of Irish. 16% disagreed or strongly disagreed, while 8% neither agreed nor disagreed.

5.3.6.2 Submissions from teachers and schools groups.

Concerns were raised in a written submission from the school sector around a lack of guidelines for school leaders in this regard, and it was recommended that such guidelines could be provided in the form of a discussion framework for supporting students and school leaders in such a decision. The question of the misalignment between the National University of Ireland (NUI) and DES exemption policies was also raised. This is one of the sub-themes that emerged from the data and it will be discussed in more detail in Section 5.5.

While it is not intended to challenge any of the school-related rights and responsibilities conferred on students once they reach 18 years of age, school leaders should be supported (perhaps in the accompanying advice document proposed above) with a discussion framework in favour of retaining participation in Irish, particularly when a student has already secured an exemption from the NUI. There should also be a set of advices to parents on this issue as, given the overwhelming anxiety experienced by many final-year students, the temptation to make a unilateral decision on sitting the Gaeilge paper, may well prove short-sighted in some cases. In others, however, such a decision may require to be balanced against wellbeing issues and both parents and principals will require as much advice and support as can be provided. (Organisation: School Management)

5.2.6.3 Submissions from university sector.

This point was not specifically addressed in the written submissions from the university sector.

5.3.6.4 Submissions from Irish language sector.

This point was not specifically addressed in the written submissions from the Irish-language sector.

5.3.6.5 Submissions from SEN representatives.

This point was not specifically addressed in the written submissions from the SEN representatives.

5.3.6.6 Submissions from other individuals.

This point was not specifically addressed in the written submissions from other individuals.

5.3.7 Appeals Mechanism.

The draft revised circulars set out that applications for exemption from the study of Irish are in the first instance made to the school principal. Where an application is declined, and where parents/guardians/students wish to challenge that decision, an appeal should be addressed to the board of management using the school's appeals mechanism.

Due to the volume of references in the written submissions to this point (107 references in total), it will be dealt with in two parts: i) *The draft revised circulars set out that applications for exemption from the study of Irish are in the first instance made to the school principal;* and ii) *Where an application is declined, and where parents/guardians/students wish to challenge that decision, an appeal should be addressed to the board of management using the school's appeals mechanism.*

5.3.7.1 Applications for exemption to be made to the school principal.

The role of the school principal in the application process for exemptions was addressed in 96 of the written submissions. Of these, the majority of the submissions disagreed in varying degrees, whereas approximately a tenth of the submissions were in agreement to some degree with the proposal. The scope allowed by the circulars to place the learner's individual needs at the centre of the exemption process was the primary reason given by those who agreed with the proposal. Of the remaining references to the school principal's role, there were a number of concerns raised around both the implementation and the implications of the proposal. While there were a number of written submissions where disagreement was explicitly expressed, many of the submissions expressed a degree of reservation rather than outright disagreement and made recommendations as to how these reservations could be addressed.

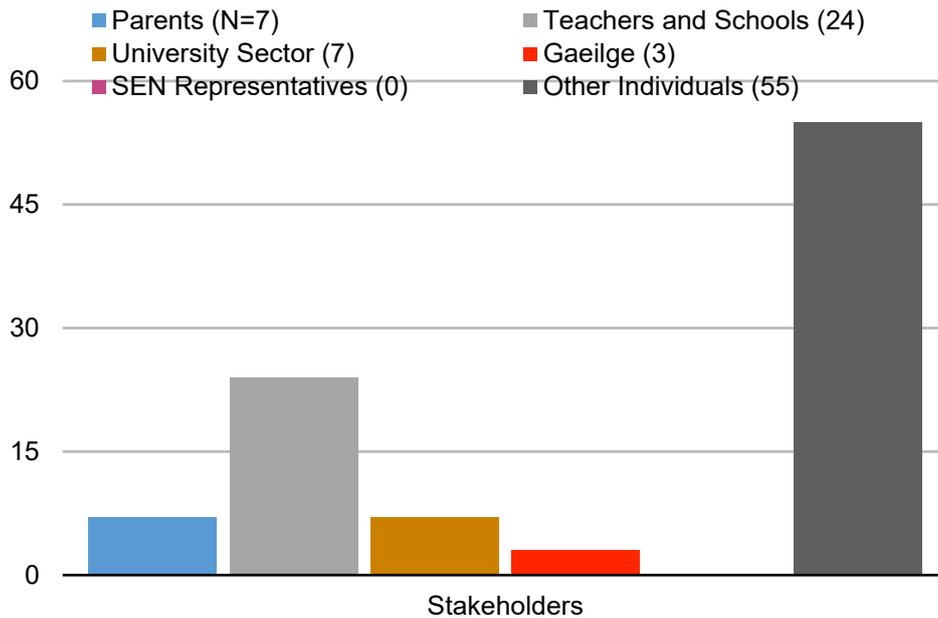


Figure 28. Number of submissions according to stakeholder group that referenced the role of the principal in the exemptions application process.

In terms of the concerns raised around the proposal that the school principal should be responsible for applications for exemption, the most prevalent was a concern that this would inevitably lead to a long-term increase in the number of exemptions granted. The second most prevalent concern was that this situation would place school principals under undue pressure from parents to grant exemptions. Two closely linked themes were the next most dominant concerns: subjectivity in the decision making process and a lack of clinical expertise among school personnel. These themes were raised as concerns by submissions both supporting and rejecting the concept of exemption more broadly. A further two concerns raised were the implications for school principals' workload and the need for thorough guidelines for the implementation of this proposal.

5.3.7.1.1 Submissions from parents groups.

The parent representative group's survey reported that 64% of parents agreed or strongly agreed with this point.⁵ However, only 15% of these respondents strongly agreed. This is a lower proportion than the other questions in their survey, where the agree/strongly agree ratio tended to be more or less equal. 21% of respondents

⁵ The point was not divided into two parts in the survey, therefore the responses indicate agreement/disagreement with both parts of the proposed change.

disagreed or strongly disagreed, while 15% neither agreed nor disagreed. While the parents who referenced this point in their written submissions were broadly in agreement with removing the need for a diagnosis and placing the emphasis on the individual learner's needs in the decision to grant an exemption, they expressed concern that this responsibility would lie solely with the school principal. The two primary reasons for this concern were that there was still a need for clinical personnel to play a role in the identification of learner needs and that there would be too much subjectivity involved in the process if the school principal were to be the sole decision maker. For example:

The changes that are sought we believe should not impact the already crowded workday of the school management, but instead greater scope given to other qualified professionals to assess a student's ability and skill level. (Organisation: Parent 02).

The parents and students themselves will no doubt push for exemptions that may not be justified or needed, putting undue pressure on already pressured principals. (Individual: Parent 15)

5.3.7.1.2 Submissions from teachers and schools groups.

While there was a tentative welcoming of the scope for this change to place the learner's individual needs at the centre of decision making, the written submissions from the teacher and school sector raised two issues in particular regarding the proposal.

The first concerned the perceived pressure that school principals would face from parents and from students to grant exemptions. Some submissions from this sector recommended that a role be retained for clinical or trained personnel in order to relieve some of this pressure and to avoid accusations of subjectivity. The question of school context was also raised in this regard, whereby as it stands, certain schools have higher numbers of students availing of exemptions than others. Again, there were concerns raised here around parental pressure, decision making autonomy, and subjectivity.

The second issue raised centred on workload and the practical implications of the proposal. It was suggested that the time required by principals to review applications would need to be resourced and that there should be provision for other school personnel to assist in the process. There were also calls for clear and thorough

guidelines and templates to assist school personnel in the preparation and review of applications.

Parental Pressure

Allowing school principals to make judgements over whether or not a student should receive an exemption seems problematic considering the likelihood of parents applying pressure to obtain exemptions on a dishonest basis. (Individual: Teacher 16)

It places school principals in a very difficult position in which they will be under undue pressure from parents to grant exemptions. (Individual: Teacher 08)

Níl sé seo cothrom in aon chor do na Príomhoidí ná do mhúinteoirí Gaeilge na tíre seo. Samhlaigh an brú a d'fhéadfadh teacht ó roinnt tuismitheoirí ar Phríomhoidí agus ar mhúinteoirí!! (Individual: Teacher 10)

While stating that exemptions should be granted in “exceptional circumstances” is a reasonable position, the word “rare” should be omitted from the circular text as it is undefined, relative and puts pressure on school management in circumstances where (as is currently the case) identified need for such exemptions in some schools is greater than in other settings or at other times. (Organisation: School Management).

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. (Organisation: Teacher 01).

Allowing principals to assign exemptions is an awful idea. I have taught in a school where students receiving A/B grades in the junior cert habitually opt to do ordinary level for the leaving because of the parents' attitudes. Parents will choose schools based on the principal's record of allowing them. Students' whose parents do not allow them to apply for an exemption from what remains a stressful unappealing course will feel resentment for having to learn Irish. Many students, looking at their exempt classmates, already feel this way. Our socially polarised school cultures will be further divided. (Individual: Teacher 03)

Workload and Guidelines

Time and space must, however, be provided for Principals, class teachers and SEN teams to consider and review applications for exemptions. A serious decision of whether to grant an exemption or not cannot be made lightly and will involve significant time, thus, presenting a workload issue. (Organisation: Teacher 03).

It is not satisfactory for the DES to move additional work on to schools. Schools are already under significant pressure from initiatives. [Teacher unions have]

a workload agreement with the DES and it is not acceptable for the DES to do anything to breach the terms of the agreement. If new work is to be foisted on hard pressed schools then some existing work must be removed. (Organisation: Teacher 02).

The consultation draft of the circular has not been accompanied by any templates or formats to support schools and parents. An advisory document (if not the circular itself) should provide exemplar documents on:

- Initial application letter from parents/guardians/students over 18 years*
 - Acknowledgement and response letter(s) from the school*
 - Explanatory letter or leaflet setting out the criteria and timeframe for such an application*
 - Certificate of Exemption*
 - GDPR requirements associated with the process*
 - Rights and responsibilities of all parties (e.g. the right not to exercise the option)*
 - A template appeal letter to the Board of Management*
 - Template response letters from the BOM*
 - Expected format of record-keeping by the school.*
- (Organisation: School Management).*

5.3.7.1.3 Submissions from university sector.

The written submissions from the university sector broadly recommended retaining a role for clinical or trained personnel in the decision making process and called for clarity in the guidelines around exemption in order to ensure that they are only granted in cases where there is a clearly established need. The submissions from this sector highlighted concerns around subjectivity, parental pressure and the long-term implications for students of an exemption from Irish.

[W]e believe that decisions in relation to pupils' language education should be based on clearly-defined objective criteria and that there should be some scientific basis to the decision-making process. (Organisation: University Sector 04).

The position of my Department and School regarding these specific proposals is that they will lead to increased pressure on the Principals and on the Schools to accede to parents' requests, and that the astonishing statistics that are presented in the early parts of this consultation document, will only increase in years to come. (Organisation: University Sector 06).

The proposed changes to both primary and secondary level exemptions appear to place great pressure on the schools as a consequence of giving authority to them in an area in which they may not have expertise. (Organisation: University Sector 05).

The process outlined here would put great pressure on teachers and principals who would need a high level of professional competence and confidence if they were to make an accurate diagnosis in each case, without specialist advice or support. We believe that the process as outlined would result in increased numbers of exemptions and appeals in non-exceptional cases. (Organisation: University Sector 04).

Aithnímid gur céim dhearfa é seo i dtreo riachtanas an dalta féin a chur san áireamh seachas a bheith ag brath ar shainchomhairle chliniciúil ón dtaobh amuigh. Ach tá baol láidir ann ní hamháin go gcuirfear go mór le suibiachtúlacht an phróisis ach go bhféadfadh na múinteoirí / an príomhoide, agus iad ag plé le tuismitheoirí agus leis na daltaí féin, a bheith faoi bhrú cinneadh a dhéanamh i bhfábhar an díolúine, gan teacht acu ar aon tacaíocht sa bhreis, ná ar aon ghuth níos oibiachtúla ón dtaobh amuigh. (Organisation: University Sector 01).

5.3.7.1.4 Submissions from Irish language sector.

The written submissions from the Irish-language sector expressed concern that the process for exemptions is misused as it stands, with exemptions being granted too widely, and that the proposed change would heighten this misuse, leading to greatly increased numbers of exemptions. The question of parental pressure, the subjective nature of the decision making process, and the absence of a role for clinical personnel were flagged as key issues of concern regarding this proposal:

Níl an cháilíocht ag príomhoidí le measúnú eolaíochta a dhéanamh ar an dalta an bhfuil fadhb foghlama acu. Is gá saineolas ó síceolaí a bheith curtha ar fáil don scoil. (Organisation: Gaeilge 02).

Tá an líon ard daltaí/scoláirí a bhfuil díolúine deonaithe dóibh go míchuí scannalach, agus tá an chontúirt ann, in áit dul i ngleic leis na cleachtais mhí-chuí seo go bhfuil i gceist ag ROS rialacháin níos éadroime a shocrú leis na cleachtais reatha a cheadú. (Organisation: Gaeilge 01).

Faoi mar a sheasann sé, ceadaítear an díolúine i go leor cásanna gan riachtanas ná na critéir sásaithe agus is nós é a leathnaítear laistigh de chultúr na scoile. (Organisation: Gaeilge 04).

5.3.7.1.5 Submissions from SEN representatives.

The written submission from the SEN representatives did not specifically address this point.

5.3.7.1.6 Submissions from other individuals.

The written submissions from other individuals (i.e., those who did not identify themselves as parents or teachers) overwhelmingly disagreed with the proposal. The reasons given were the same for the vast majority of these submissions and they included the implications for the numbers of exemptions granted and the subjective nature of the process. It was also recommended that a role be retained for clinical or trained personnel:

I strongly believe that if the responsibility for choosing who gets exemptions is left at school level that there will be a gradual increase over time on the number of Irish exemptions. (Individual: Other ⁶)

Chuirfeadh sé brú ollmhór ar na múinteoirí a thioctadh ó thuismitheoirí na ndaltaí. Ba mhór an feall a bheadh ann dá mba rud é go mbainfí an siceolaí amach as córas bronnadh na ndíolúintí. (Individual: Other 43)

Please do not inflict huge pressure on schools by putting principals in the position where parents are badgering them to let their kid off Irish, it's not fair. Please just make the subject into an ordinary language subject, instead of a difficult, badly designed subject that students with problems try to escape. (Individual: Other 08).

In relation to exemptions it must remain the way it is and must involve educational assessments by educational psychologists if the need arises for students with learning difficulties. Otherwise students should not be exempted from the language unless it is proven with an educational assessment. (Individual: Other 62).

I feel that such a system would put extreme pressure on teachers and principals and that as a result, a large number of students would become exempt. This is neither fair on the teachers, principals nor the students. (Individual: Other 41).

5.3.7.2 Appeals to be made to Board of Management.

As shown in Figure 29 below, the mechanism for appeals was addressed in 11 of the written submissions, that is, there was a specific reference made to the appeals process as opposed to the school role more generally. In the submissions that referenced this point, there was significant disagreement with the proposal to make the Board of Management the arbiter of appeals, and it was recommended across these submissions that there be another body or organisation to which appeals can

⁶ This excerpt is taken from a submission that was submitted by 45 separate individuals who came under the category of 'Other'.

be addressed. The reasons for this recommendation included subjectivity, workload issues, and the lack of clinical expertise on school Boards of Management.

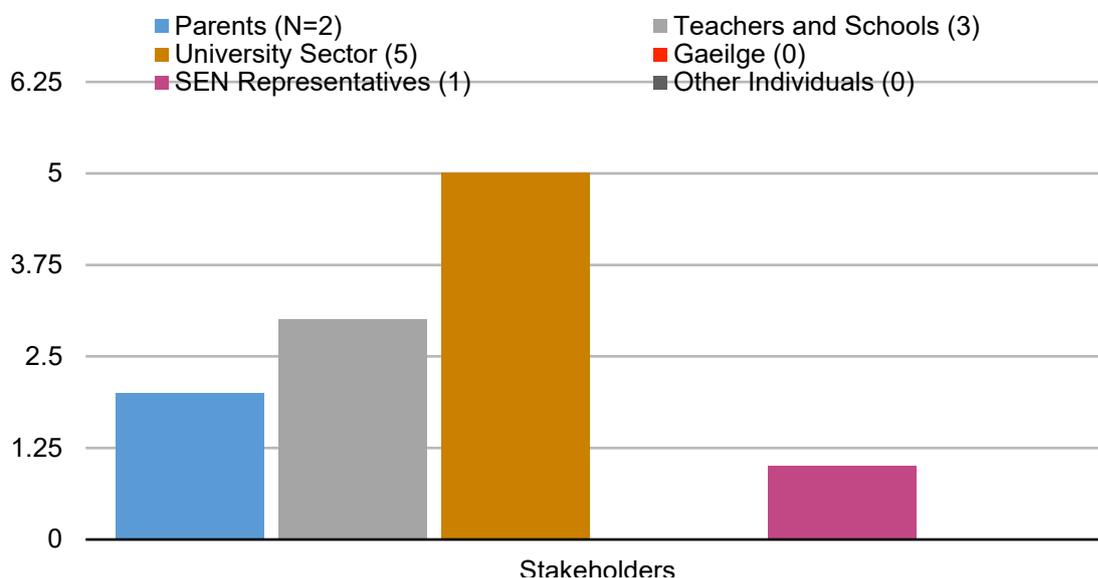


Figure 29. Number of submissions according to stakeholder group that referenced the mechanism for appeals.

5.3.7.2.1 Submission from parents groups.

The survey from the parent representative group asked for respondents' views on this point as a whole (school principal role and appeals mechanism) and the responses are indicated above in Section 5.3.7.1. Two written submissions from individual parents addressed the appeals mechanism specifically and both recommended that there should be an independent body for appeals.

The school principal should not have the final say. There should be an appeal to a body outside the local school. (Individual: Parent 07)

I also believe that appealing to the board of management is problematic. Boards of managements are mostly parents, many of whom have no understanding of dyslexia. (Individual: Parent 02)

5.3.7.2.2 Submissions from teachers and schools groups.

The submissions from the teacher and school sector recommended that an independent body for appeal be put in place and highlighted the issue of workload and the risk of inconsistency of approach as primary concerns:

Given that there has been a steady increase in the number of cases submitted for review since 2010, [organisation] has concerns regarding increased workload and paperwork at school level if the review process is reassigned to the BoM. (Organisation: Teacher 03).

It is the position of the [organisation] that the BOM not be left as the final arbiter of an appeals procedure and that the Department puts in place an independent layer of referral to which parents may appeal in the event of a final rejection by the Board of Management. (Organisation: School Management)

[Organisation] strongly disagrees that the appeals process should be moved from the DES to the local level. There are issues here of administrative overload and double jeopardy at local level. However, even more importantly, there is currently a difficulty with a lack of consistency across the system in how exemptions are operated. This is noted by the DES in the Inspectorate report and in the consultation paper. Such inconsistency cannot be eliminated if there is no central system of appeals (Organisation: Teacher 02)

5.3.7.2.3 Submissions from university sector.

The submissions from the university sector recommended retaining a role for clinical or trained personnel in the appeals mechanism, and highlighted the role that parental pressure and subjectivity would play in an appeals mechanism at Board of Management level. For example:

If the School Principal refuses the exemption, under the proposed arrangements, parents could appeal to the Board of Management. This puts an unnecessary burden of pressure on the principal in each school, who would most likely have to yield to parental pressure rather than to defend a decision which was taken without professional, outside assistance. One notes that the 40% of exemptions granted under the current system were already awarded without the relevant information that is currently required. (Organisation: University Sector 05)

Sa chás go gcuirtear iarratas ar dhíolúine os comhair phríomhoide agus bhord bainistíochta na scoile, níor mhór go mbeadh an oiliúint chuí acu le go mbeidh sé ar a gcumas breithiúnas gairmiúil cóir a dhéanamh agus tuiscint acu go n-imreoidh an cinneadh a dhéanann siad tionchar fadtéarmach ar dheiseanna saoil an fhoghlaiméora. (Organisation: University Sector 02)

5.3.7.2.4 Submissions from Irish language sector.

The appeals mechanism itself is not specifically addressed in the written submissions from the Irish-language sector.

5.3.7.2.5 Submissions from SEN representatives.

The written submission from the SEN representative group recommended establishing an independent body for appeals, who would be qualified to review complex cases:

We welcome the introduction for the first time of an appeals process. However, in addition to the process proposed at local level. There is also a clear need for an independent appeals mechanism to be established by the DES to address cases which are not resolved at the local level proposed. The only other mechanism available for appeal would be the Ombudsman for Children or legal avenues. There is also a need for the DES or an independent body to give guidance for complex cases (as identified by principals in case study schools in the associated research). (Organisation: SEN Representative)

5.3.7.2.6 Submissions from other individuals.

The appeals mechanism itself is not specifically addressed in the written submissions from other individuals.

5.3.8 Recommendations for amendments to proposed circulars.

This section outlines specific recommendations that were made in the written submissions regarding amendments to or refinement of the proposed circulars. As has been the case throughout Section 5.3, the discussion here focuses on specific and explicit references to the criteria or circulars. Recommendations around the broader educational context, including curriculum, are discussed in Section 5.4

5.3.8.1 Modern foreign languages.

The most prevalent recommendation made was that the criteria for exemption from the study of Irish should be amended to include the proviso that, if pupils/students were exempt from Irish, they should not be eligible to study modern foreign languages. It was seen to be an anomaly of the current system for exemption that a student could avail of an exemption from the study of Irish due to learning difficulties but that the same student could then study a modern foreign language. It was pointed out that, where learning difficulties existed with regard to language and literacy, they would pertain to all languages, not solely to Irish and that, therefore, the exemption process was being misused or misinterpreted where students who were exempted from Irish did study another language. However, the point was also made that, given the

perceived greater educational and employment prospects associated with modern foreign languages than with Irish, it was a valid strategy for learners to focus their efforts on acquiring those languages, particularly where a learning difficulty made the study of three languages inaccessible.

Is iad na scileanna agus na réimsí céanna cumais a bhaineann le foghlaim chuile theanga sa gcóras ideachais, go háirithe teanga a bheadh á teagasc/foghlaim mar T2. Dá réir sin, sa gcás go bhfaigheann dalta díolúine teanga ba cheart go mbainfeadh sí leis na teangacha uilig agus níor cheart go mbeadh cead ag dalta díolúine a fháil i dteanga amháin (mar shampla, sa nGaeilge) agus ansin staidéar a dhéanamh go leibhéal Ardteiste i dteanga(cha) eile (Gearmáinis, Fraincis srl.). Níl aon loighic ná ciall ná réasún ag baint le leagan amach ar bith eile ar an gceist seo. (Organisation: Gaeilge 05).

If these changes do happen to be brought about, could you please ensure that no candidate who is studying a foreign language be granted an exemption from Irish as this is ridiculous and non-sensical. (Individual: Teacher 33).

Tá an baol ann go ndéanfaí beag is fiú suntasach den chóras iomlán díolúine má táthar ag bronnadh díolúine do dhalta a bhfuil sé ar a c(h)umas teanga(cha) eile a fhoghlaim. Má tá fadhb foghlaim teanga ag dalta, ní féidir go mbaineann sé sin le teanga amháin thar teanga eile, agus is ag déanamh beag is fiú don chóras a bheadh sé díolúine a bhronnadh sa chás sin. (Organisation: Gaeilge 07).

Má tá díolúine le bronnadh ar dhaltaí, moltar díolúine ó theangacha a fhoghlaim seachas díreach ón nGaeilge. Níl aon réasúnaíocht ag baint leis gurb í an Ghaeilge an t-aon teanga atá i gceist. (Organisation: Gaeilge 04).

Many children with dyslexia have no difficulty learning a language and take their exemption in Irish but continue to study a foreign language such as French. The exemption is taken not from necessity but as a means of managing subject choice. (Individual: Parent 03).

5.3.8.2 Stress and anxiety.

It was recommended that the proposed circulars should provide clarity on whether stress and anxiety could be considered as grounds for an exemption. There were opposing viewpoints on this question within the written submissions, with the anxiety and stress being positioned as both valid and invalid grounds for exemption, depending on the respondent's perspective. However, there was significant consensus that the question should be explicitly addressed by the DES and that clarity should be provided within the circular. For example:

We would also urge the Minister to include in the criteria a reference to the admissibility of persistent student anxiety as a justifiable reason for granting an exemption. Such provision may require medical certification in some form, but we cannot, as a system, claim to be prioritising wellbeing while simultaneously ignoring the reality that for some students, the burden of studying Irish can present as a trigger for the erosion of positive learning experiences and outcomes in other areas and, indeed, their mental health in some circumstances. (Organisation: School Management).

[M]oltar go láidir chomh maith céanna gur chóir aghaidh a thabhairt ar straitéisí teagaisc a fhorbairt a laghdódh strus sa seomra ranga teanga seachas díolúintí a thabhairt do dhaltaí a bhfuil strus agus imní orthu mar gheall ar fhoghlaim na Gaeilge. Creidimid go láidir nach réiteach oiriúnach ar an bhfadhb seo é an díolúine ó staidéar ar an nGaeilge atá ag daltaí áirithe. (Organisation: University Sector 02).

My concern is that the proposed changes leave not enough scope for many genuine cases, where the student is suffering from a medical or psychological condition that is not specifically listed in the new circulars but is maybe at least as problematic for the student as those that are. In these cases it would be beneficial if there were scope within the new circulars for the school principal to grant an exemption (in exceptional medical circumstances) based on documented medical facts and their own observational judgements. (Individual: Parent 12).

I think that exemptions should not be given in any cases where stress is mentioned. How come if I didn't like maths and it was stressing me out I would not be allowed to get an exemption for that? (Individual: Parent 13).

The subjective nature of the current decisionmaking process becomes very clear when the Consultation Paper identifies that 'Anxiety/ stress associated with the learning of Irish is cited more frequently as grounds for exemption from the study of Irish. "Anxiety" and "stress" are often used interchangeably, and with no specific reference to clinical anxiety' (ibid.,14). Immediately after this reference to stress and anxiety, the Department's commitment to student wellbeing and resilience is cited: 'The Department is committed to supporting student wellbeing and resilience through a variety of programmes and initiatives including the Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines (2017)' (ibid.,14). Though some link is clearly being inferred, there is no reference to Irish or any other curricular subject as source of stress or anxiety in the Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines, nor is there any recommendation therein that relates to subject-related stress or anxiety.(Organisation: University Sector 04).

5.3.8.3 Indemnification.

A recommendation was made by one of the organisations in the teacher and school sector that the DES should provide clarity in the circulars around the question of indemnification for schools and Boards of Management; that is, that parents should be responsible for any implications arising from a decision to avail of an exemption. In

light of this, they recommended that parents and students should be made aware of the potential medium and long-term implications of availing of an exemption from Irish.

Principals and teachers are conscious that there are potential future consequences for a pupil who does not study Irish. In the rare event that a pupil requires an exemption, based on the criteria set out in the draft circular, it is essential that principals, teachers and Boards of Management (BoM) are legally assured that they are not responsible, now or in the future, for granting an exemption. In this regard, [organisation] demands that clarification is required in the final circular around the indemnification of principals, teachers and BoM. Consideration should be given to the provision of a standard letter of indemnification seeking a parent's consent to assume responsibility for any future implications that may arise as a consequence of an exemption. In the interest of clarity and transparency, [organisation] recommends that parents who are seeking exemptions for their child should be provided with clear information highlighting the potential implications of being exempt from the study of Irish. It is the responsibility of the DES to ensure that parents are aware of the implications of the exemption in terms of future career and third level options. (Organisation: Teacher 03).

5.4. Key Themes

As discussed in section 5.2, five key themes emerged from the analysis of the written submissions. These themes were not identified in advance but emerged from an open-coding approach to the data. This section will discuss each of these themes in turn, outlining the various perspectives and positions taken by the respondents and providing excerpts from the written submissions to illustrate the various interpretations of the themes. The themes were Inclusive Education, which is a foundational theme, Curriculum, SEN, Identity and Culture, and School Context. It is important to note that, while these themes are being discussed separately to the discussion of the references to the criteria in Section Three, a holistic view is necessary in order to understand the core messages arising from the written submissions. In summary, the key argument is that it is impossible to address the concept of exemptions from the study of Irish without also considering the broader educational and social context.

5.4.1 Inclusive education.

Inclusive education was a core concept across the majority of the written submissions. While there were disparate views on the exemptions process and on the Irish language itself, there was a broad consensus that any decisions taken around the future

direction of education policy on the Irish language should be made from a foundational commitment to inclusive education. To this end, the articulation in the consultation document of the DES' commitment to inclusivity was broadly welcomed. However, despite the common agreement on the position of inclusive education as a foundation to policymaking, there was significant variance in the interpretations of inclusive education and in the recommendations pertaining to inclusivity. Similarly, the concept of exemptions from the study of Irish was linked to inclusive education in disparate ways, with significantly varying perspectives on whether the provision for exemptions represented a commitment to inclusivity or a neglect thereof.

In the analysis of the written submissions, the theme of inclusive education functioned as a touchstone for each of the other themes that emerged. Respondents referred to inclusivity as the basis for many of the comments, recommendations, and arguments that were presented in the submissions. This section outlines the most common points made within the submissions around the broad concept of inclusive education and its positioning as a foundation to the future direction of education policy. Sections 5.4.2 to 5.4.5 will discuss the other four major themes which emerged from the analysis, each of which, although prevalent enough to merit discussion in its own right, can also be located within the overarching theme of inclusive education.

5.4.1.1 Inclusivity as a foundational philosophy.

The submissions referencing the concept of inclusivity as a foundation to education policy recommended that the Irish language should be available to all students, regardless of ability, and that it is incumbent on the DES to make provisions for this to be so. Thoughts on how this could be achieved included: changes to the curriculum; better resourcing of language support; and developments in teaching methodologies, points which will be discussed below in the relevant themes. It was emphasised that excluding children and young people from the opportunity to learn the Irish language impinged upon their right to inclusive education and ran the risk of isolating them.

However, in tandem with the arguments around the right of all learners to access Irish in an inclusive education setting, it was also argued that the compulsory study of Irish presented a barrier to inclusivity, particularly with regard to the increasingly diverse demographics of the Irish population. The point was made that, in an inclusive education environment, the compulsory position of the Irish language in the curriculum

was at odds with a commitment to the best interests of the child and a respect for parents' wishes. For example:

The [organisation] 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. (Organisation: Teacher 01).

Creideann [eagraíocht] go bhfuil sé de dhualgas ar an Stát oideachas den scoth a chur ar fáil d'óige na tíre d'fhonn chuile sheans a thabhairt do chuile dhuine óg atá faoina gcúram fás agus forbairt a dhéanamh mar dhaoine daonna agus mar shaoránaigh de chuid na tíre seo. (Organisation: Gaeilge 05).

Our recommendation for the direction in which policy should go is that Irish should be part of the curriculum for all children. (Individual: Parent 05).

The Irish Citizen no longer fits into the boxes that once contained them and this must be reflected in the choices that are made available. Again, the [organisation] must highlight that the parents we represent are asking for things to be done differently so that our children can reach their fullest potential. (Organisation: Parent 02).

Tacaíonn [eagraíocht] leis an phrionsabal sin [an ionchuimsithe], agus dar linn gur chóir muinín a chur i ngairmiúlacht lucht ceannais agus teagaisc ár scoileanna cloí le téarmaí an phrionsabail seo. (Organisation: Gaeilge 01).

If one places into the balance the importance of promoting and developing Irish language and culture on the one hand, with the welfare and best interests of the child, it is difficult to see how the mandatory learning of Irish can supersede the best interests principles, and ensure that the welfare of the child is firmly rooted at the centre of Ireland's education policy. (Individual: Parent 04).

It also represents a critical crossroads in the Department of Education and Skills' policy of inclusion. No pupil should be deprived unnecessarily of access to the full range of curricular subjects, and the question of language education and the right to language education should be central to discussion and debate about inclusion. (Organisation: University Sector 04).

I gcomhréir le beartas na Roinne maidir le hionchuimsiú, mar sin, níor mhór níos mó tacaíochta a thabhairt do chur chuige d'fhoghlaim agus do mhúineadh na Gaeilge a chuimsíonn prionsabail ionchuimsitheacha, dearadh uilíoch don fhoghlaim agus idirdhealú. (Organisation: University Sector 02).

Tá sé mar pholasáí ag an Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna córas ionchuimsitheach oideachais a bheith ann agus go bhfoghlaim na páistí ar fad le chéile. Moltar na páistí ar fad a bheith le chéile agus gan páistí a

thógáil amach as rang don tacaíocht foghlama, mar shampla, ach tacú leis an bpáiste sa seomra ranga. Ní ceart páiste a fhágáil amach as obair ranga. D'fhéadfaí dochar a dhéanamh do fhéinmhiuinín an pháiste trí náiriú mar seo. (Organisation: Gaeilge 03⁷).

5.4.1.2 Aspects of inclusivity.

The submissions positioned two aspects of inclusivity as core to the concept of an inclusive education policy. These were the inclusion of students with SEN and SLD, which is discussed in more detail below in Section 5.4.3, and the inclusion of students from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This latter aspect of inclusion was highlighted as being increasingly important as the demographics of the school population in Ireland continue to become more diverse. The future policy on the position of Irish in the curriculum was positioned as being an important question in light of parents' wishes and rights. The point was also made, however, that the assumption that students from migrant or newcomer backgrounds should be automatically excluded from the study of Irish was erroneous. It was argued that a commitment to inclusive education should, in fact, support these students in accessing the Irish language as part of their education. For example:

[Organisation] appreciates the challenges facing the Department and the schools sector in implementing public policy on the Irish language in a greatly changed, diverse and multicultural society. (Organisation: University Sector 03).

[E]ducators face a challenge responding to the needs of this diverse group which no longer only (CSO, 2018) includes the 'white, Irish, Catholic' student. (Organisation: Parent 02).

Over the years I have encountered and shared the struggles and frustrations of migrant/newcomer students who, under current regulations, are forced to study Irish in secondary school against their will and against the will of their parents/guardians. (Individual: Teacher 23).

Is tír ilchultúrtha í Éire anois. Ba cheart don Roinn a bheith sásta Gaeilge a chéiliúradh agus a chur chin cinn. Bíonn na daoine ag teacht isteach ó áiteanna cosúil le Polainn, an Ghearmáin, an Liotuáin lán sásta Gaeilge a fhoghlaim. Tuigeann siadsan cé chomh tábhachtach is atá an teanga dhúchais. (Individual: Teacher 10).

⁷ The excerpt quoted here was taken from a submission which was submitted separately, in slightly varying forms, by 5 organisations and 20 individuals.

Is cúis imní nach mbíonn tacaíocht ar fáil do daoine as tíortha eile leis an nGaeilge. Ba chor go mbeadh polasaí oideachais curtha i bhfeidhm chun tacaíocht a chur ar fáil don chlann. (Organisation: University Sector 07).

[Organisation] believes that in general there should not be an assumption of homogeneity or low expectation of students with SEN. Rather the default assumption should be that every child can learn the Irish language when proper supports are in place. In this regard, the DES must make particular provision for pupils with SEN and English as an additional language (EAL) in order to reduce the need for exemptions. (Organisation: Teacher 03).

Our schools are also meant to be inclusive environments. Telling students that one particular subject is beyond their abilities is unfair. (Individual: Teacher 03).

The current rules for exemption from the Department of Education are archaic, overbearing and inconsiderate for children with learning differences and need re-evaluation to enable all children to achieve their best in school. This is your chance to put in place a new child centric system that recognises all children's educational needs and can respond to these needs in a more appropriate and compassionate manner. (Individual: Other 14).

Do not consider the exemption from Irish as a school subject in isolation. Remove this exemption entirely and instead consider the educational needs of students with special needs in a holistic way across the curriculum. (Organisation: University Sector 05).

5.4.1.3 Rights and responsibilities.

A number of the submissions raised the question of citizens' rights and the State's responsibilities with regard to inclusive education. The most prevalent point made was that, by exempting a child from Irish, their right of access to a full range of education and employment opportunities was being removed. It was argued that the State has a responsibility to provide an education for its citizens that ensures full equality of opportunity in this regard. It was also argued that an exemption from Irish had implications for a child's access to citizenship in its fullest expression, which includes language and identity, and that the State had a responsibility to provide for full access to citizenship for all of its citizens.

However, the argument was also made that the compulsory study of Irish impinged on parents' constitutional right as the primary educator of the child as per Article 42 of the Irish constitution, and that parents should have the right to choose whether their child should study Irish or not. This point was raised in particular in relation to children of newcomer, migrant, and internationally mobile parents.

Tá de cheart ag gach saoránach sa tír gnó a dhéanamh leis an Stáit trí mheán na Gaeilge. Tá freagracht ar na scoileanna/An Roinn Oideachais daltaí a chumasú le rogha a bheith acu cé acu Gaeilge nó Béarla a roghnóidh siad. Tá an ceart seo á shéanadh orthu siúd nach bhfoghlaímíonn an Ghaeilge. (Organisation: Parent 03⁸).

[I]t arguably raises questions as to the impact such a stringent policy might have on a family such as this, in the exercise of their EU citizen rights to move, and reside freely in the EU. (Individual: Parent 04).

In áit rochtain uathoibríoch ar an teanga agus ar na luachanna uile a bhaineann léi a bhronnadh ar an bpáiste, tá an Stát ag déanamh cinnidh ar a son, cinneadh a ghearrann amach iad ó rannpháirteacht iomlán i gcúrsaí sochtheangeolaíoch agus cultúrtha na tíre ina bhfuil siad ag cur futhu, gan trácht ar dheiseanna céim a bhaint amach sa bhunoideachas agus i réimsí eile a bhaineann leis an nGaeilge. (Organisation: Gaeilge 04).

Má tá an córas oideachas le bheith ionchuimsitheach agus comhionannach, is gá é a bheith mar seo don nGaeilge - céad-theanga na tíre - chomh maith leis na hábhair eile. (Organisation: University Sector 01).

Ní mór a chur san áireamh freisin go bhfuil fostaíocht mhaith ardghradaim le fáil anois sa nGaeilge, in Éirinn agus san Aontas Eorpach, agus dá réir sin go gceilfí deiseanna suntasacha amach anseo ar dhaoine óga dá gcoinneofaí an Ghaeilge uathu ag an leibhéal is airde sa gcóras bun- agus meánoideachais. (Organisation: Gaeilge 05).

Please don't forget that by exempting students we are excluded them from certain careers in particularly the Guards. (Individual: Other 17).

5.4.2 Curriculum.

The open nature of the format for written submissions meant that respondents were not confined to specific references to the proposed circular and, as a result, the majority took the opportunity to discuss the Irish language in a broader educational context. Of the topics addressed in the written submissions, after the overarching topic of inclusivity, curriculum was the most prevalent.

There was significant consensus across the written submissions that it was not satisfactory to undertake a review of the future direction of policy on exemptions from the study of Irish without also reviewing the curriculum and assessment policy for the subject. There was broad agreement that the current curriculum for Irish, particularly at second-level, was a contributory factor in the demand for exemptions from the

⁸ The excerpt quoted here was taken from a submission which was submitted separately, in slightly varying forms, by 5 organisations and 20 individuals.

subject. This position was taken both by respondents who supported the concept of exemptions and those who did not, and both by those who were in favour of compulsory Irish and those who were not. In other words, there was consensus across the written submissions from stakeholders in every group and from diverse perspectives that a review of the Irish curriculum was necessary and that the question of exemptions could not be considered in isolation from the question of curriculum.

This section discusses the theme of curriculum as it emerged from the written submissions. The section divides the contributions into four sub-themes for clarity. These include curriculum reform, the position of languages within the curriculum, the question of teaching methodologies, and a call for a review of policy on Irish. The core arguments in each sub-theme are outlined briefly, accompanied by excerpts from the submissions. An effort has been made to capture as much of the heterogeneity of opinion as is possible within the scope of the report. Due to the volume of references to curriculum within the submissions, illustrative excerpts are used rather than quoting every reference individually.

5.4.2.1 Curriculum reform.

The majority of references to curriculum within the submissions related to the issue of curriculum reform. Respondents across all stakeholder groups argued that the current curriculum for Irish is unsuitable for a variety of reasons, including its inaccessibility for students across a spectrum of abilities, its over-reliance on prose and poetry, its lack of focus on the spoken language, and its inflexibility with regard to teaching and learning. Respondents argued that a wholesale reform of the curriculum would have positive implications in terms of a reduction in the numbers of students seeking exemptions. A number of respondents, particularly those from the university sector, the Irish-language sector, and the teacher and school sector, recommended moving away entirely from the provision of exemptions, except in exceptional cases, and focusing instead on reforming the curriculum.

It was highlighted that teachers and schools should be provided with a curriculum that allowed enough scope to enable them to adapt the subject to their learners' needs. Respondents across every stakeholder group emphasised this particular point as being crucial, arguing that a one-size-fits-all approach to the Irish language curriculum would inevitably lead to students seeking exemption. A variety of ways in which this could be done was suggested, the most common recommendation being to align the

curriculum with CEFR in order to better identify learners' needs and to focus on the necessary communicative competencies, as set out in the framework.⁹ A similar recommendation made across a number of submissions was that the Irish curriculum should be more similar to the curriculum for modern foreign languages, and should focus on developing learners' basic communicative competencies before they study the literature of the language. To this end, it was recommended creating two separate curricula, one of which would focus entirely on communication and would be compulsory and the other which would include the study of literature and would be optional.

The level of the DES' commitment to the Irish language was another prevalent question emerging within this theme, whereby it was argued that the provision of exemptions reflected negatively on the commitment to the language at official levels. It was argued that the efforts made to improve the uptake of higher-level Maths at Leaving Certificate could be replicated for Irish, with a Project Maths style overhaul of the curriculum at Junior Cycle and the award of bonus CAO points in the Leaving Certificate examination for higher-level Irish.

While there were fewer specific references to the curriculum for Irish at primary-level, respondents again emphasised the need to prioritise communicative competencies and to tailor the curriculum to individual learners' needs.

Necessity of reform

I have been teaching Irish in a Community School for 13 years and it is so disheartening having to teach such an unsuitable curriculum and thus spoiling teenagers' love of the language. I love the language and use it every day at home and it is my children's first language. The government should not be ruining students' experience of Irish. (Individual: Teacher 35).

Tá géarghá mar chuid bhunúsach den obair seo breathnú arís ar shiollabas na hArdteiste nach bhfuil ann anois ach creatlach bocht suarach díchultúraithe de chúrsa seachas siollabas nuálach, dearfach, cuimsitheach. (Organisation: Gaeilge 05).

I strongly believe that the issue of exemptions would be better tackled by having complete oral exams at both junior and senior levels and by removing all prescribed poetry and prose at junior and senior ordinary level and by

⁹<http://www.teg.ie/english.167.html>

reducing the amount at leaving cert higher level and choosing more appropriate and enjoyable texts. (Individual: Other/Teacher¹⁰).

[Organisation] has consulted parents on this matter and we would also like to bring attention to the way Irish is taught to our students. Many parent and student comments, to us and more widely, suggest that there is very significant concern about the current Irish curriculum, how the subject is taught and those charged with teaching it. Unlike the other foreign languages (to which Irish is often compared) Irish is viewed as “boring” and “uninteresting” and “useless”. These labels are perhaps slightly anecdotal; however they do highlight an underlying issue that surrounds Irish, in that the population perceive it as such. This needs to be altered and perhaps this could be done by changing the format through which students learn and understand Irish. Most comment and interested suggestion indicate that where there is a focus on oral or spoken language in the classroom, that language is made more interesting, vibrant and therefore more “useful”. This is an issue that needs to be examined separately and in depth but we suggest that, if this is addressed, it may lead to some reduction in those seeking to drop Irish (either actually or effectively) due to boredom or a focus on maximising potential point scoring in state exams. (Organisation: Parent 02).

There is a tremendous need to overhaul the syllabi at both levels to modernise them and promote Irish as a living and enjoyable language. Before the exemption process is looked at there is immense need to actually look at the course content and realise that it by no means promotes student wellbeing nor does it to a large degree facilitate the promotion of Irish as a valuable, enjoyable subject. (Individual: Teacher 32).

I would suggest a review of the course content for Irish instead. For example students feel under pressure to study a large amount of literature. I would like to see a course that more reflects the level of Irish required in the study of modern European languages currently. (Individual: Other 41).

Comments on Junior Cycle specification

[T]he bizarre removal of Bonnleibhéal at junior cycle is not conducive to student wellbeing as many students who would have been comfortable with a Bonnleibhéal exam are now panicked with the overwhelming amount of literature introduced in the new specification thus would be looking toward an exemption to alleviate the stress and anxiety. There is an overwhelming need to review the prescribed poetry and prose at junior and senior cycle ordinary level and by reducing the amount of Sraith Pictiúr and choosing more appropriate and enjoyable texts. (Organisation: School 01).

[T]he difficulty and volume of literature at Junior Cycle (T2) is so great that it creates disengagement and disincentive especially to those struggling with specific educational needs. Focusing on communication skills would ensure

¹⁰ This excerpt is taken from a submission which was submitted separately by 57 individuals, 9 of whom identified themselves as teachers and the remaining 48 of whom came under the category ‘Other’.

more utility and enjoyment in the language. Emphasis should be on communication of the language especially at ordinary level. (Individual: Other 64).

Research must be continue to be conducted by the NCCA on the implementation of the new specifications [at Junior Cycle] 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. (Organisation: Teacher 01).

I believe that students wish to opt out of the language because it is perceived to be too difficult based on the amount of literature (studied and unseen) that was on the old junior cert course and also by the huge amount of literature that is on the new Junior Cycle Irish course. Especially for ordinary level students. (Individual: Teacher 17).

There is far too much emphasis in the new junior cert on prose and poetry and not enough on learning to enjoy and speak the language. As an Irish teacher I want my students to enjoy learning the language and come out with a positive attitude regarding it. This is difficult to do with the current junior and leaving cert courses. This is probably one of the reasons there are so many students looking for exemptions from Irish while going on go study a foreign language. (Individual: Teacher 08).

It has taken years to try to change the negative image the language has as a result of forcing non-native speakers to study Irish literature, yet I do believe that a huge amount of progress has been made in this area in recent years. Having reverted back to such a curriculum will no doubt undo all the good work that has been done. This will guarantee that huge numbers of weaker students will seek exemptions and understandably so. I believe that efforts should be made to explore this issue as there would be no need for these exemptions (except in exceptional circumstances) if the language was taught as other languages are taught. There is no need to spend millions seeking different ways of teaching it, there are satisfactory models in place for the teaching of French and other modern languages as it stands. (Individual: Teacher 33).

Reform based on CEFR

D'fhéadfaí foghlaim na Gaeilge sa chóras oideachais a cheangal leis an gCreat Eorpach d'Fhoghlaim Teangacha agus sa slí seo d'fheadfadh na foghlaimeoirí laga nó aon dalta ag teacht isteach déanach ar scoil foghlaim ag na leibhéil is oiriúnaí dóibh, m.sh. A1 - túsphointe an Chreata, agus marcanna ardteiste a bheith ar fáil dóibh bunaithe air seo. (Organisation: Gaeilge 03¹¹)

¹¹ The excerpt quoted here was taken from a submission which was submitted separately, in slightly varying forms, by 5 organisations and 20 individuals.

I feel the Irish language should adopt a new teaching approach across the board. Students and teachers should be sticking to the European Framework for learning languages instead of pressurising students to develop levels of fluency in the language without being given the correct learning framework. This would further emphasise the spoken aspect of the language and lead to a greater use of the language outside of schools. (Individual: Parent 13).

Changing the exam is vital as teachers will ALWAYS teach towards the exam. If you do this, you will find that the exemptions are needed less. If you go by the European framework, the weaker students will simply need to be guided towards the more elementary levels -A1 or A2 instead of the B1 exam. A1 would do very well for jr cert, and either A2 or B1 for leaving cert, depending on the pupil.(Individual: Other 08).

We suggest looking at European Framework for language learning. In this way, all students, regardless of learning difficulties, special educational needs or late entry to our educational system could learn at a level most suitable to them. (Individual: Other 53).

Reform based on Maths approach

Nuair a bhí fadhb ann le foghlaim an mhata sna scoileanna níor cuireadh córas díolúintí ar bun leis an bhfadhb a réiteach - cuireadh 'Project Maths' ar bun agus bronntar 25 pointe CAO breise ar aon duine a bhaineann pas amach i scrúdú Ardleibhéal na hArdteiste mar spreagadh do na daltaí. (Organisation: Gaeilge 02¹²).

5.4.2.2 Languages within the curriculum.

Along with the points raised in the section above regarding a reform of the Irish curriculum within a modern foreign languages model, there were two other significant points raised under the sub-theme of languages within the curriculum. The most prevalent of these was the recommendation discussed in Section 5.3.8.1 that exemptions from Irish should not be granted where a student was studying another language. Another common argument within this sub-theme was that the emphasis in both the primary curriculum and the new Junior Cycle specifications on transferable language skills was a positive aspect of curricular policy and should be considered before any exemption from Irish was granted. However, a number of submissions, particularly within the parent and SEN sectors, took a different position on this question, arguing that compulsory Irish had a negative effect on the development of

¹² The excerpt quoted here was taken from a submission which was submitted separately, in slightly varying forms, by 5 organisations and 20 individuals.

learners' language and literacy skills in English or in another first language, due to the time and effort involved. The points around SEN will be further discussed in Section 5.4.3 below.

It is considered a positive feature of Irish primary education that children, from the beginning of schooling, have an experience of language learning in at least two languages. [Organisation] is of the view that an engagement with the Irish language throughout the period of primary education extends the child's overall linguistic experience and specifically enhances their language acquisition skills and awareness. (Organisation: Teacher 03).

Is gá feidhm agus oiriúnacht choincheap na díolúine féin a athbhreithniú i gcomhthéacs an dátheangachais sula ndéantar aon pholasáí nua a fhoilsiú nó a chur i bhfeidhm. (Organisation: University Sector 02).

De réir taighde idirnáisiúnta, tá buntáistí suntasacha cognaíocha ag roinnt le staidéar a dhéanamh ar an dara teanga, agus dá réir sin is buntáiste oideachasúil agus intleachtúil don scoláire staidéar a dhéanamh ar an nGaeilge go dtí leibhéal na hArdteiste. (Organisation: Gaeilge 05).

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. (Organisation: Teacher 01).

Leagann an curaclam comhtháite teanga ag leibhéal na bunscoile agus na hathruithe curaclaim ag leibhéal na hiar-bhunscoile béim ar thraschur scileanna thar theangacha, agus ar mhúineadh agus ar fhoghlaim éifeachtach teangacha. (Organisation: University Sector 02).

We respectfully submit that in a context such as this, where a child is already bilingual or even trilingual, the mandatory learning of Irish can be unduly onerous. This being so, the family should be permitted to prioritise the focus of the linguistic and cultural education of their children as they deem appropriate. (Individual: Parent 04).

It can be argued that asking an EAL pupil who enrolls in the later stages of primary education to take on a second new language before they have achieved sufficient proficiency in the language of the curriculum is making their successful integration more challenging than it needs to be. (Individual: Teacher 01).

While the importance of being able to communicate in more than one language has its benefits such as increased cognitive flexibility, stimulation of the mind through mental gymnastics and increased flexibility, the impact of psychological distress which has been associated with compulsory educational achievement may negate these benefits. (Organisation: Parent 02).

5.4.2.3 Irish language policy.

In addition to the recommendation that the curriculum itself be reformed, a number of the written submissions recommended that such a reform should be part of a review of education policy around the Irish language more broadly. It was suggested that there should be a review of Irish language education at all levels of the system and that a policy should be developed to address teaching and learning through the continuum of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), primary, second-level, and tertiary education. The Polasaí don Oideachas Gaeltachta was suggested as a model for such a policy.

Mar fhocal scoir, creidimid gur cheart aithbhreithniú iomlán a dhéanamh ar theagasc na Gaeilge sa gcóras oideachais, ó leibhéal na naíonán go leibhéal céime agus fiú iarchéime, le teacht ar pholasaí úrnua dúshlánach don todhchaí a mheallfadh daltaí chun na Gaeilge seachas iad a chur ó dhoras ag cuartú díolúintí. (Organisation: Gaeilge 05).

Tá gá le Polasaí Oideachas do Mhúineadh na Gaeilge ina iomlán Ba chóir an comhairliúchán seo a chur ar ceal agus próiseas a thosú le polasaí oideachas do mhúineadh na Gaeilge ina iomlán a chur le chéile. (Organisation: Gaeilge 02¹³).

5.4.3 SEN.

As highlighted above, inclusion of learners with SEN and significant learning difficulties was one of the two key aspects of inclusivity referenced in the written submissions. Where the references dealt specifically with the proposed criteria for exemption, they have been included in Section 5.3. Other references to SEN were broader or more oblique and they are captured here under two sub-themes, firstly, differentiation and secondly, SEN and language learning.

5.4.3.1 Differentiation.

Three principal points were made in the written submissions with regard to differentiation. The first, and most prevalent, was that a curriculum that allowed teachers more scope to differentiate according to the needs of individual learners would have a positive effect on student engagement with Irish and an associated reduction in the uptake of exemptions. Connected to this point, it was emphasised that

¹³ The excerpt quoted here was taken from a submission which was submitted separately, in slightly varying forms, by 5 organisations and 20 individuals.

teachers needed to be supported in developing methodologies and pedagogical approaches that had the principle of differentiation at their core. The key argument made regarding these points was that it would be more beneficial for learners and for the language itself if policy reviews focused on developing differentiation rather than facilitating exemptions.

Other points made were that, even where a student with SEN or SLD was exempt from Irish, an inclusive approach to education should allow for a differentiated approach where exempted students could still have access to the language. It was suggested that this could be done by providing courses that focused on the oral language and on developing language skills but did not contain a formal assessment. Written submissions from the parent sector in particular made the point that, while it was felt to be right that their children with SEN should not have to undergo examination in the current Irish curriculum, they nonetheless felt that their children should have some contact with the language due to its cultural significance.

The final point made around the topic of differentiation was that the compulsory nature of Irish in the school curriculum was at odds with the principle of inclusive education because, particularly at primary school, students with SEN could not be appropriately differentiated for due to the integrated nature of the curriculum. It was argued that exemptions from Irish should be allowed under a principle of differentiation because the exemption allowed teaching to focus on the learner's individual needs, for example by assigning more time to developing his or her first language.

We believe that there is a need for a fundamental reconceptualisation of the central educational issue: how to cater for the full spectrum of abilities in an educational system that is based on the principles of inclusion and equality of educational opportunity? In the case of Irish as a curricular subject, we believe that the positive principle of differentiation should replace the negative practice of exemption. (Organisation: University Sector 04).

In the interest of promoting an inclusive approach to the study of Irish, it is important for the DES to put resources and supports in place to enable teachers to develop differentiation skills and strategies for teaching Irish to a diverse range of learners. (Organisation: Teacher 03).

Molann [eagraíocht] mar sin gur i muinín difreálú curaclaim agus oiriúnú seachas díolúintí a rachaidh ROS leis an cheist seo a réiteach, ag teacht leis an méid a thugann taighde na Cigireachta le fios. (Organisation: Gaeilge 01).

[L]éiríonn taithí pháistí na Gaeltachta agus taithí na nglúnta inimirceach go mbíonn páistí ar gach leibhéal cumais in ann an dara agus an tríú teanga a fhoghlaim ach na cúinsí foghlama a bheith dearfach agus tacúil. (Organisation: University Sector 02).

[W]e would wish for our son to continue studying a “differentiated” Irish program which fully takes into account his difficulties with the language. However, what we do wish for is that he has the Official Exemption Certificate so that he is not obliged to sit state exams in Irish when the time comes should he continue to greatly struggle with the Irish language. (Individual: Parent 10).

X's story is a very good example of how students with dyslexia can achieve and are very capable of achieving when their learning needs are identified and catered for in both primary and secondary school. I have no doubt that his Irish exemption in second class was crucial to him improving his English reading and reasoning skills. (Individual: Parent 02).

5.4.3.2 SEN and language learning.

Two primary arguments emerged from the written submissions on the topic of SEN and language learning. The first, and most prevalent, was that there was a need to address the misconceptions in this area. The respondents referred to a range of research, including the DES' own reports, that indicates that learners with SEN can benefit from learning a second language. The respondents suggest that an assumption exists that this is not the case and that this assumption is one of the factors leading to an increase in applications for exemption from Irish. Related to this point, the issue of misinformation around language learning and SEN was raised, with anecdotal examples highlighted whereby clinical personnel have displayed a lack of understanding in this particular area. The cognitive benefits of language learning were highlighted by a number of respondents, particularly those from the university sector, and the argument was made that an inclusive and differentiated approach to the curriculum could support students of all abilities in accessing the benefits of bilingualism.

The second argument made on the topic of SEN and language learning emerged in particular from the parent and SEN sectors. Here, while the potential benefits of bilingualism were acknowledged it was argued that, despite this, the burden of learning two languages is too onerous for learners with a range of SEN but particularly Dyslexia. It was recommended that the focus be placed on the development of the first language and that, where the negative impact of the addition of a second language is

seen to outweigh the benefits thereof, students should be eligible for exemption. Parents of children with SEN argued that, due to the difficulty it posed, the compulsory study of Irish directly affected the wellbeing and educational attainment of their children. For example:

International research has established that the concept of 'foreign language learning disability', used to support policies of language exemptions and waivers, is not empirically valid (Sparks 2009; Wight 2015), yet the concept has operated to undermine policies of inclusion and the practices of differentiation on which they are based. (Organisation: University Sector 04).

There is now no support in the linguistics and psycholinguistics community for any educational benefit or cognitive development based on reducing linguistic input; the opposite is the case. (Organisation: University Sector 05).

Is é scrúdú Gaeilge na hArdteiste an scrúdú is oiriúnaí san Ardteist do dhaoine le dislicse de bharr go bhfuil suas le 50% le gnóachtáil ar an gcaint/cluastuiscint. Baineann níos mó iarratasóirí grád ard amach sa Ghaeilge ná in aon mór ábhar eile. (Individual: Other 01¹⁴).

Our experience of raising a child on the autistic spectrum has been very challenging, but the second language was not in itself a problem. [...] We are relating this story because our personal experience of accommodation and inclusion, rather than exemption, may be exceptional. Along the way we met many parents of highfunctioning children on the autistic spectrum who believed that an exemption was something out there to be sought and acquired for their child. [...] Advocacy groups would often have the question of exemption on their agenda, and prejudices against the subject were seldom refuted by professionals. In fact, we had the experience of hearing a professional who works in a disability support role in a third-level college express derogatory views about Irish as a subject in front of a large group of parents of children with high functioning autism. (Individual: Parent 05).

Ní mór a thuiscint go bhfuil speictream cumais i ngach rang teanga ach nach bhfuil a leithéid de rud ann agus míchumas foghlama teanga ann féin. (Organisation: University Sector 02).

For him it is like attempting to learn an alien prose, he has to undergo a spelling test each week in which he fails dismally; he has to learn poems by rote which may as well be lines of computer code for all the sense they make to him. In essence he is forced to fail in front of his peers on a weekly basis. (Individual: Parent 09).

I fully appreciate the benefits of bilingualism or multilingualism (and would dearly love for my son to be able to study Irish) however that presupposes that students have actually acquired a competency or fluency in all aspects of

¹⁴ The excerpt quoted here was taken from a submission which was submitted separately, in slightly varying forms, by 5 organisations and 20 individuals.

language acquisition in the primary language [...] The burden of proficiency imposed by a compulsory exam on such people, when they are already working overtime to achieve that particular efficiency in their first language, impacts on their ability to thrive generally in the education system. (Individual: Parent 01).

I imagine interest groups advocating for the protection of the Irish Language will make some very strong and impassioned arguments on their side of the issue but please bear in mind that at the heart of this debate are children. The system as it currently operates is open to abuse and there are certainly children granted exemptions that do not require them but this should be used as an argument for reform of the system and not against. Children in genuine need should not be left struggling with profound educational difficulties that will affect the direction of their entire lives because of ideological ideals.(Individual: Parent 03).

This proposal means that students with significant dyslexia will be left struggling with learning both English and Irish for far too long. Such a randomly chosen cut-off point is not reasonable and flies in the face of the accepted benefits of early identification and intervention.(Organisation: SEN Representative).

It is the duty of us all in education to serve the needs of the individual children in our schools and to try to ensure that their experience in school allows them to fulfil their potential without putting extra burdens on them that we already know they won't be able to overcome. (Individual: Teacher 22).

5.4.4 Identity and Culture.

The theme of identity and culture was linked in the written submissions to discussions around inclusive education, where the point was argued that an inclusive model of education which aimed to promote cultural awareness should encompass the Irish language. The language's official national status and its importance for culture and heritage were used to justify retaining it as a compulsory subject, under the proviso that the curriculum be reformed and differentiation developed as discussed above. However, a number of respondents argued that the compulsory study of Irish was detrimental to the fostering of a culturally sensitive society. Due to its perceived connection to a particular model of "Irishness", the compulsory study of the subject was seen to be at odds with the increasingly diverse identities of learners in Irish schools.

Three key topics under this theme are Irish as a heritage language, the link between exemptions and the status of Irish, and a call to challenge negative public perceptions of the language.

5.4.4.1 Heritage.

Respondents drew attention to the constitutional status of Irish as the State's first official language and pointed out that, arising from this, the State has a responsibility to promote the language through its education system. As well as the legal argument for promoting the language, respondents pointed to its heritage value and to its importance in terms of identity and self-understanding of the citizens of the State. It was suggested that, in a multicultural society, an inclusive education system should educate students about heritage and history to broaden their cultural awareness. It was also pointed out that the language is recognised by the EU as an official language and that this gives weight to the arguments for supporting the language in the education system. Respondents challenged the commitment of the DES to the heritage of Irish, arguing that an unwillingness to engage in review of the curriculum is an indication of the low value placed on the language at an official level.

Moreover, exposure to and engagement with the Irish language in school also deepens the child's cultural awareness and promotes increased opportunities for social engagement. [Organisation] acknowledges that experience and knowledge of Irish contribute to a child's sense of national identity. (Organisation: Teacher 03).

Is í an Ghaeilge príomhtheanga na tíre de réir Bhunreacht na hÉireann. [...] Baineann an teanga ní hamháin le hoidhreacht mhuintir na tíre ach ina theannta sin le cúrsaí féiniúlachta agus aitheantais an duine i saol iolchultúrtha na linne seo. (Organisation: Gaeilge 05).

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. (Organisation: Teacher 01).

Irish is the most important aspect of our heritage and culture and everything else that we have as a nation has stemmed from this. The fact that our unfortunate history tried so many times to rid us of our cherished language makes it all the more important to us. (Individual: Teacher 14).

Baineann oideachas an duine (an pháiste) le haithne a chur ort féin in iomlán, ar do theanga agus ar theanga na tíre agus an cultúr san áireamh. (Organisation: Parent 03).

What is the actual agenda regarding Irish, as we approach the centenary of the foundation of our state? (Individual: Other 60).

It is imperative that Irish remain compulsory to maintain and protect a vital part of our heritage and culture. It is an integral part of our lives in Ireland. (Individual: Other 62).

5.4.4.2 Status of Irish.

A number of respondents linked the existence of a provision for exemptions with a perceived fall in the status of Irish relative to other subjects, and argued that this had a knock-on effect for the language's status outside the education system. The point was made that exemptions were not made for other subjects but that, rather, differentiated teaching approaches and learning support were facilitated.

It was recommended that any initiatives around making the subject optional or widening the provision of exemptions would need to be carefully considered in light of the likely negative implications for the status of Irish, both as a subject and as a language. The question of subject management was also raised, with respondents both for and against the case that the relative perceived value of Irish outside the education system was a valid reason for making the subject compulsory. For example:

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. (Organisation: Teacher 01).

Ní hamháin go bhfuil taithí ar fhoghlaim an dara teanga á ceilt ar fad ar dhaltáí áirithe ach tá treise á cur leis an tuiscint nach bhfuil fiúntas ar bith ag baint leis an nGaeilge mar ábhar scoile. (Organisation: University Sector 02).

As well as depriving children of a second language learning opportunity at a young age, there is no doubt but that the policy of exemption is having a more general negative effect on the image of Irish as a school subject. [...] The issue to be resolved is how to include Irish in policies of inclusion. How come Irish was the only subject singled out for exclusion/ exemption in the first place? (Individual: Parent 05).

Dá ndéanfaí an Ghaeilge roghnach don Ardteist, leanfaidh dá réir sin íslíú stádaís don teanga sa gcóras oideachais (agus i saol na tíre fé chéile). (Organisation: Gaeilge 05).

I have serious concerns that the core fundamental question is not addressed in the consultation document. Why should Irish be singled out as the subject in the curriculum that presents the greatest impediment to learning for those who may have special needs or other educational or developmental issues? That Irish is the only school subject for which an exemption can be given is

extraordinary, and should be tackled during this consultation. [...] The proposal, in its current form, perpetuates a sentiment that Irish is both a kind of additional rather than core subject and that it can be removed without any educational or social consequence, because it is seen in some way as an unnecessary and difficult subject. (Organisation: University Sector 05).

Léiríonn na dréacht-chiorcláin maidir le díolúine go bhfuil an Stát ag déanamh idirdhealú idir an tábhacht a bhaineann le staidéar ar an Ghaeilge agus an tábhacht a bhaineann le hábhair eile churaclaim - nach bhfuil an tábhacht chéanna ag an Ghaeilge le hábhair eile, agus gur gá socrú ar leith a bheith ann ina leith. Is teachtaireacht dhiúltach í sin ón Rialtas i leith na chéad teanga oifigiúla. Ní mar sin a phléitear leis na Bhéarla ná leis an mhatamaitic, agus níl gá lena a leithéid de chur chuige i leith na Gaeilge. (Organisation: Gaeilge 01).

Plurilingual competence, ‘Mother tongue + 2’, is the European Union’s language education objective (European Council 2002: 19), and the relationship between the status of Irish, as a heritage tongue and as a second language, and the status of languages in general within the Irish education system, has long been identified (see: Department of Education and Science/Council of Europe 2007.) (Organisation: University Sector 04).

[T]here is a wider question that is not addressed at all in this document, and, for that reason, seems to be taken for granted. That is that Irish alone among all subjects in the primary and secondary curriculum continues to be represented as an obstacle or an impediment to learning and education. (Organisation: University Sector 06).

In an increasing globalised world it is becoming more and more redundant to waste time teaching it to such a high level. The lobby who want to retain the status quo do so because they will lose out financially. Students are being put under a lot of pressure to attain excellence in STEM subjects and there's calls for extra skills to be learned while in school. There's only so many minutes in a day to try take all this in. Let it be retained as an optional subject for those who want to become Irish or primary school teachers or those who require it for civil service jobs, etc. (Individual: Other 49).

I would take issue with your points on studying a MFL even when you have an Irish exemption. In our experience the MFL are simply taught better than Irish. [...] Also many pupils are far more motivated to study a language they see themselves actually using it in the future. (Individual: Parent 07).

5.4.4.3 Public perceptions.

Arising from the points made around the perception of Irish as being of a lower status than other subjects, a number of respondents recommended that a public awareness campaign should be developed that would aim to counter this. It was recommended that such a campaign could emphasise the cross-curricular cognitive benefits of bilingualism. It could also raise public awareness of the education and employment

opportunities available through Irish both nationally and at an EU level. The respondents suggested that such a campaign would be in alignment with the commitments made in the Languages Connect Strategy 2017-2026¹⁵. It was argued that such an awareness campaign should also be made available to educational psychologists and other personnel in the area of SEN.

[Organisation] suggests that the approach to the Irish language in schools adopted by the Department, as reflected in these circulars, has the potential to exert a profound influence on public opinion in relation to the Irish language and that care should be taken that the influence is positive rather than negative .(Organisation: University Sector 03).

Creidimid nár mhór aghaidh a thabhairt ar an gceist seo ar bhonn práinne agus feasacht phobal na scoile agus feasacht an phobail i gcoitinne a ardú maidir leis na buntáistí a bhaineann le foghlaim teangacha i gcoitinne agus le foghlaim na Gaeilge mar dhara teanga, go háirithe. (Organisation: University Sector 02).

This [...] needs to be addressed imaginatively and urgently, so that the general public, as well as advocacy organisations representing certain disability areas, are made aware of the educational and developmental importance. (Organisation: University Sector 04).

Tá gá lena chinntiú leis, go gcuirfear gairmithe ar nós síceolaithe, teiripeoirí urlabhra agus síciatraithe a d'fhéadfadh cur leis an bpróiseas cinnteoireachta faoi dhíolúintí ó staidéar na Gaeilge i gcás scoláirí ar leith, go gcuirfear ar an eolas iad faoi na buntáistí a ghabhann le foghlaim na Gaeilge, faoi na deiseanna le haghaidh cláir fhoghlama oideolaíocha shaincheaptha sa Ghaeilge do scoláirí agus faoi phróisis díolúine. (Organisation: Gaeilge 04).

It is [organisation]'s experience that a proportion of students and parents do not see the value of studying Irish, and consider that their chances of securing points would be improved if they were not required to study the language. [Organisation] suggests that it would be helpful if the Department, drawing on the research to which it has access, and in the context of the Languages Connect strategy could continue to promote the advantages of bilingualism, particularly in terms of acquiring other languages at a time when the importance of language proficiency is increasingly appreciated. (Organisation: University Sector 03).

5.4.5 School context.

Some contextual factors were highlighted that could create obstacles to the implementation of a new policy on exemptions from the study of Irish. These factors

¹⁵https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Curriculum-and-Syllabus/Foreign-Languages-Strategy/fls_languages_connect_strategy.pdf

were also seen to be relevant to any potential review and reform of the curriculum. The factors fall into three groupings, the first around resources and training, the second around the policy context, and the third around questions of socio-economic inequality.

5.4.5.1 Resources and training.

The question of resources and training was raised in relation to three key issues. Firstly, it was recommended that a greater emphasis on differentiation was necessary in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) in order to develop teachers' skills in catering for a diverse range of abilities in their classrooms. It was also suggested that teachers should be made more aware of the benefits of language learning for all learners and that resources should be provided to support them in working with students of diverse needs. It was argued that supporting teachers to develop their knowledge and methodologies in this way could have a positive influence on learners' engagement with the language.

A second issue raised, which also relates to ITE and CPD, was that the language proficiency of primary teachers and of teachers of Irish at post-primary level was not always at a satisfactory level. It was recommended that language support be provided for teachers to develop their confidence and to ensure that their own language proficiency was at an appropriate level for the delivery of a communication-based language curriculum.

The third issue raised in relation to resources and training was discussed above and concerned the level of support that schools and school principals would need if the application for exemptions was to be made at a school-level, as proposed in the draft circulars.

[T]here is a need for professional development for teachers regarding language learning and language acquisition in diverse and multilingual settings. (Organisation: Teacher 02).

A dominant theme from recent [organisation] 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. (Organisation: Teacher 01).

Ní mór oideachas agus forbairt ghairmiúil leanúnach a chur ar fáil do mhúinteoirí le cabhrú leo teacht i dtuiscint ar fhoghlaim chomhtháite teangacha

agus conas tabhairt faoi go praiticiúil sa seomra ranga.(Organisation: University Sector 02).

There are also broader issues that must be addressed in relation to the teaching and learning of Irish in our schools. [Organisation] notes the Chief Inspector's Report 2013-2016 where concerns were expressed about the teaching of Irish at both levels. [Organisation] regards the introduction of the Primary Language Curriculum as a critical juncture and an ideal opportunity to better support teachers in teaching Irish by providing ongoing, high quality professional development. (Organisation: Teacher 02).

The non-availability of qualified teachers of Irish is a key driver in the teacher supply crisis at second-level. (Organisation: Teacher 01).

Mar atá aitheanta ag ROS féin, bíonn deacrachtaí le caighdeán an teagaisc i líon mór cásanna. Is léir go gcaithfidh ROS dul i ngleic leis an cheist seo ag leibhéal na hoiliúna tosaigh múinteoirí, lena chinntiú go mbíonn bunmhúinteoirí in inmhe an Ghaeilge a theagasc go héifeachtach [agus] go bhfuil tuiscint acu ar bhuntáistí an dátheangachais. (Organisation: Gaeilge 01).

Caithfidh an Roinn Oideachais dul i ngleic leis an bhfadhb i leith na Gaeilge agus a job a dhéanamh cabhrú le múinteoirí ar bheagán Gaeilge. Lig dóibh na huaireanta Pháirc an Chrócaigh a úsáid chun a scileanna sa Ghaeilge a mhúscailt, a neartú agus a muinín a spreagadh. Ta sé an-deacair ar go leor phríomhoidí teacht ar mhúinteoirí atá muiníneach Gaeilge a mhúineadh sna hardranaganna. (Individual: Teacher 12).

Molaimid go mbeadh a thuilleadh deiseanna agus cúrsaí san Fhorbairt Ghairmiúil Leanúnach, a phléann leis an Tacaíocht Teanga agus leis an gComhairliú Teanga (Advising for Language Learning) mar ghort agus mar chleachtas, ar fáil do mhúinteoirí bunscoile agus meánscoile (Organisation: University Sector 01).

5.4.5.2 Policy context.

Two broad areas of policy were highlighted as being relevant to the development of a policy on exemptions from the study of Irish. The first area related to educational policy and, particularly, to the range of pressures and disputes already in existence in the context of primary and second-level education. Factors such as the teacher union workload agreements, the reduced resource and staffing allocations, the teacher supply crisis, the difficulties around the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act and IEPs, and the contention around Junior Cycle reform were highlighted as questions that needed to be carefully considered before any new policy was enacted. It was recommended that the wording of the circulars around what provision would be made for students who were exempt from Irish should be carefully

considered. While submissions from parents highlighted the need to provide constructive alternative arrangements for these students, school representatives highlighted the strain that schools would be placed under in terms of resources and staffing if extra classes had to be timetabled for exempt students.

The second area related to language rights, the constitutional position of Irish, and the EU policy on multilingualism. It was suggested that any perceived neglect of the DES' statutory commitment to the promotion of the Irish language in the education system would be problematic under this policy context.

The demand that an evidence-base be constructed utilising a strongly contested framework will not alone add to the paper-trail required before an exemption may be granted but may equally trigger local industrial relations disputes. (Organisation: School Management).

[Organisation] 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. (Organisation: Teacher 01).

Over ten years ago, TUI (2006) emphasised that schools were not sufficiently resourced to implement specific elements of the EPSEN Act, in particular designing and delivering Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for SEN students. (Organisation: Teacher 02).

The suggested revisions requires more learning support staff and schools than is possible with current available resources. (Organisation: Parent 02).

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 (Organisation: Teacher 01).

Twelve percent of post-primary students were not born in Ireland but 17% of the overall school population is foreign-born. Hence the post-primary system will soon see a dramatic increase in the number of students who were not born in Ireland. This will lead to huge pressure on allocation as an alternative subject will need to be offered due to numbers. (Organisation: Teacher 02).

There should be resources given to school so that students can usefully employ their time when they are not in Irish class and allow students to benefit from that time rather than sitting in Irish class but not participating. (Individual: Parent 07).

[Organisation] is anxious, however, that schools are not locked into making provision for Irish language or cultural experiences for exempted students on foot of a sentence in a circular. Our pupil-teacher ratios have not been restored

since the succession of cuts during the recession and voluntary secondary schools have neither the teaching or financial resources available to offer parallel Irish cultural courses or other experiences beyond those within the scope of curricular and extracurricular experiences provided to all. (Organisation: School Management).

The DES (2012, 2017) suggests that the number of students in the primary school system will rise by forty-nine thousand (516,460 to 565,696) between 2011 and 2019 and by almost one hundred thousand in second level between 2011 and 2025 (322,528 to 416,897). In this context, it is not sufficient to suggest that a world-class out of school support system can be sustained with inadequate resources of time, money or personnel. (Organisation: Teacher 02).

Dá réir sin tá sé de cheart (agus de dhualgas bunreachtúil) ar an Stát an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn tríd an gcóras oideachais (agus i ngnéithe eile den saol poiblí. (Organisation: Gaeilge 05).

Dá réir, tagann bronnadh na ndíolúine salach ar chuspóirí an Stát i leith na Gaeilge, mar atá leagtha amach sa Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge. (Organisation: Gaeilge 07).

5.4.5.3 Socio-economic inequality.

The topic of socio-economic inequality was raised in a small number of submissions, relating both to inequality between schools and also between learners. In terms of the school context, it was recommended that the resourcing and support provided to DEIS schools would need to increase in the case of exemptions being provided based on the 10th percentile threshold. This was recommended because it was perceived to be the case that there was a higher proportion of students with literacy difficulties in DEIS schools and that, as a result, there would be a higher number of students seeking exemptions and needing extra support in those schools. It was also suggested that socio-economic inequality meant that, for some students, extra-curricular activities such as summer schools, which had positive implications for engagement with Irish, would be inaccessible.

The second point made with regard to socio-economic inequality related to anecdotal evidence that professional consultations were more easily accessed by parents with greater financial means. It was suggested that this resulted in a disparity in ages of diagnosis between learners from different socio-economic groups, meaning that learners who received a diagnosis at a younger age were able to access the necessary supports sooner and, in addition, were granted exemptions more often than learners who were delayed in accessing a diagnosis.

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. (Organisation: Teacher 01).

Ta céatadán i bhfad níos airde de dhaltaí faoin 10ú peircintíl i scoileanna DEIS i gcomparáid le scoileanna eile. Sa bhliain 2016 bhí 18% de dhaltaí rang a 6 i scoileanna DEIS faoin 10ú peircintíl. Sa bhliain 2010 bhí 26% de dhaltaí faoin 10ú peircintíl (Kavanagh, Weir & Moran, 2017).(Organisation: University Sector 02).

Many parents, especially in DEIS schools or schools with a high proportion of English as a Additional Language students, have little interest in their children learning the Irish language. Parents support their children in their unwillingness to do Irish which causes huge issues in term 1 after transition points. Parental support to the school is essential.(Organisation: Teacher 02).

Close examination of all relevant data indicates that schools in the ETB and C&C sectors enrol, by far, the largest proportion of students with SEN. (Organisation: Teacher 02).

I am fully aware that certain sen students are rightly exempt from the study of languages however it is the buying of exemptions from psychologists that upsets me. (Individual: Teacher 19).

There certainly needs to be a consistent approach found as currently people who can pay or people who find a sympathetic school/psychologist are getting Irish exemptions when those who really need them are being denied. This is not fair. (Individual: Parent 07).

5.5 Further Points Raised

There were three further points raised in the written submissions which, while not directly linked to any of the five core themes, were highlighted as being necessary points to consider in the review of the public consultation. The first point related to the monitoring and review of the provision of exemptions, the second to the NUI policy on exemptions and the third to the validity of the consultation process itself.

5.5.1 Monitoring and review of exemptions.

A number of respondents referred to the Inspectorate's report on the anomalies and inconsistencies within the current system of exemptions. They argued that, if the decision making on exemptions were transferred to school-level, such inconsistencies would increase unless a system of monitoring and review were put in place by the

DES. It was recommended that the quantity of exemptions granted be monitored to ensure that they were only being granted in exceptional cases, and that this figure would correspond with the statistical norms on prevalence of SEN and SLD. It was also recommended that, if the proposed circulars were adopted, the policy would be put under full public review after an initial period and periodically thereafter.

[T]he 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. (Organisation: Teacher 01).

Close monitoring would be required to ensure that decision-making based on these criteria would result in the awarding of exemptions in exceptional cases only. The section of the Draft Circular, 'Monitoring and reviewing the revised Circular', states that: 'The operation of the revised Circular will be monitored regularly by the Department and reviewed periodically' (21). Such monitoring and review should be governed by a clear understanding of what percentage of pupils would be likely to present as exceptional cases. (Organisation: University Sector 04).

Ba cheart córas athbhreithnithe cuí a chur i bhfeidhm maidir le haon pholasáí nua chun go mbeidh deis cheart ag gach cuid d'earnáil an oideachais ionchur a bheith acu i bhfeidhmiú an pholasáí. Moltar athbhreithniú éadrom tar éis bliana agus athbhreithniú cuimsitheach tar éis tréimhse trí bliana. (Organisation: University Sector 02).

5.5.2 NUI policy on exemptions.

The discrepancy in numbers between the students eligible for DES exemption from Irish for examination purposes and NUI exemption from Irish for matriculation purposes was highlighted in a number of submissions. It was recommended that research be undertaken on this question and that some effort be made to better align DES and NUI policy in this area.

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 (Organisation: Teacher 01).

This will have an immediate effect on the NUI regulations, and inevitably, at some time in the future, it will surely also have consequences for the status of Irish as a matriculation subject in NUI universities, which we have worked hard to preserve, and which are vital to the future of Irish as a subject in all sectors. (Organisation: University Sector 07).

The Consultation Paper indicates that in 2016, 8496 did not take Irish in the Leaving Certificate, noting that this is higher than the number of students granted exemptions by the Department and suggesting that it may include 'candidates who may have secured a National University of Ireland exemption'. The NUI data above shows that in 2016, the numbers receiving NUI exemptions (2,703) are equivalent to only 32% of those who did not sit Irish in the Leaving Certificate. As the Consultation Paper notes clearly there are other reasons for the numbers not taking Irish in the Leaving Certificate which would merit further study. (Organisation: University Sector 03).

Dar le [eagraíocht] gur léiriú cur chuige OÉ go bhfuil siad neamhairdeallach ar pholasaí an Stáit i leith na Gaeilge, agus cé nach é atá an toradh atá beartaithe acu é, go bhfuil polasaí OÉ i leith díolúintí a dheonú ag baint as faoi pholasaí ROS. Dar le [eagraíocht] gur gá, mar chuid den athbhreithniú seo maidir le díolúine a dheonú, dul i ngleic leis an ghné seo de, i dtreo deireadh a chur leis an chur chuige reatha. (Organisation: Gaeilge 01).

5.5.3 Validity of consultation process.

The validity and transparency of the consultation process was questioned by a number of respondents. Issues were raised regarding: the wording and accessibility of the online survey; the fact that the survey was only made available online; the timing of the consultation; the overly-narrow scope of the issues addressed; a lack of publicity; a perceived lack of transparency around the DES' aims and objectives; and a failure to engage with all relevant stakeholders in the design of the consultation.

The accompanying research report makes very interesting reading but lacks balance. The voice of those with dyslexia, their families and other experts in the field have been ignored. The fact that this process saw fit to link in with schools, principals and other stakeholders before the 'public consultation' stage but not young people with dyslexia or their parents or their representative body is a major oversight. The lack of consultation with people with disabilities while writing a proposal that will impact significantly on their lives flies in the face of the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability and the idea of 'nothing about us without us'. In addition, the references and research referred to also does not seem to be comprehensive or balanced. As a result of these flaws, the conclusions drawn in the report are not necessarily reflective of the reality of the rationale for, the implementation of, or the impact of the Exemption. In an era where we are promised citizen led

government, our members and all those effected deserve better. (Organisation: SEN Representative).

I get a very strong feeling from the Draft Circular that it was not written from the point of view where the needs of the individual child are paramount but rather as a response to a perceived threat to the language. (Individual: Teacher 22).

This survey is flawed. Questions are geared towards an encouragement of exemptions, rather than to find ways to allow struggling students to continue to study Irish in a way which lessens the pressure. Or indeed in a way which takes the growing problem of exemptions. (Individual: Teacher 29).

The survey is not very accessible for someone with literacy difficulties, and is also poorly designed in general. We have been contacted by numerous members who found it exceedingly difficult to answer the survey questions as asked. Many of the questions asked could be answered exactly the same by individuals with diametrically opposed views, e.g. on question 4 someone who thinks that no child should be exempt and someone who thinks that children should be able to get an exemption before third class could both give Strongly Disagree as their response. We are therefore quite concerned that a basic analysis of responses to the questions will be have limited validity. A detailed analysis of the additional information provided by respondents in Section Two will hopefully give more meaningful information, where people had the opportunity to express their thoughts more accurately. (Organisation: SEN Representative).

I am e-mailing as I found your survey very badly worded and the questions were missing the point. (Individual: Other 23).

Ba mhaith linn a chur in iúl ar dtús ár dtuairim go bhfuil an suirbhé atá mar chuid den phróiseas comhairliúchán teoranta agus lochtach. (Organisation: Gaeilge 02).

Níor fógraíodh an comhairliúchán go dtí 5.00p.m. Dé hAoine, 7 Nollaig, agus tá sé le críochnú ar 11 Eanáir. Is féidir glacadh leis go bhfuil páirtithe leasmhara (ar nós príomhoidí, daltaí, tuismitheoirí, srl..) an-ghafa leis an Nollaig ag teacht agus ní bheidh ach 5 lá scoile nuair a thagann daoine ar ais san athbhliain le páirt a ghlacadh ann. Tá amhras mór ann faoin líon daoine atá fiú ar an eolas go bhfuil an comhairliúchán ar siúl faoi láthair. [...] Tá an comhairliúchán fhéin agus an modh le hionchur ón bpobal a bhailiú tríd suirbhé ar-líne an-an-teoranta; agus níl ach an suirbhé ar líne amháin ar fáil le páirt a ghlacadh ann. Tá gach cuma ar an scéal go bhfuil an suirbhé ar líne ann le daoine a theorannú do na dréacht ciorcláin amháin atá curtha le chéile ag an Roinn. Níl aon áit ann chun moltaí nua a chur chun cinn, mar shampla, a laghdódh an gá le díolúintí sa thodhchaí. (Individual: Other 02¹⁶).

¹⁶ The excerpt quoted here was taken from a submission which was submitted separately, in slightly varying forms, by 5 organisations and 20 individuals.

[T]he way that this consultation has been conducted is unsatisfactory. Carrying out the consultation over the Christmas period when teachers are under pressure marking exams or preparing for exams is completely unacceptable. Even the online survey lacks clarity and is vague in parts. (Individual: Parent 13).

Surely a matter of such national importance should have been notified to every school? The question of exemptions from one of the official languages of our country is not a matter to be taken lightly. (Individual: Other 04).

Níl sa suirbhe seo ach iarracht chun dallamullóg a chur ar mhuintir na hÉireann gur deineadh taighde agus ag eascairt as an taighde nach raibh aon éileamh do theanga na Gaeilge. (Individual: Teacher 12).

Re-read the survey. A number of the questions are too ambiguous to answer. (Individual: Other 60).

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APPENDICES

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Appendix 1: Draft Revised Circular for Primary Schools.

(Retrieved online from:
https://www.education.ie/en/Parents/Information/Irish-Exemption/irish_exemption_consultation_paper.pdf)

PROPOSED DRAFT CIRCULAR REVISING CIRCULAR 12/96 EXEMPTION FROM THE STUDY OF IRISH
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To: Boards of Management, Principal Teachers and all Teaching Staff of Primary Schools

1. Introduction

1.1 The purpose of the circular

The purpose of this Circular is to advise recognised Primary Schools¹⁷ of the revised arrangements for the exemption of pupils from the study of Irish. It supersedes Circular 12/96 and the 2009 revision of that Circular both of which are hereby withdrawn. The revised arrangements set out in this Circular apply to English-medium Primary Schools¹⁸ only. Existing exemptions from the study of Irish granted under Circular 12/96 and held by pupils will continue to apply until the end of their post-primary education.

Exemption from the study of Irish will not apply in Primary Schools where Irish is the medium of instruction.

The Language component of the Primary Curriculum is for all pupils and comprises both Irish and English. In exceptional circumstances, some pupils may be granted an exemption from the study of Irish. In order for pupils who are exempt from the study of Irish to be recognised when the Department validates school enrolment returns for grant payment and teacher allocation purposes, schools will continue to be required to record data on pupils who are exempt from the study of Irish and the reason for that exemption on the Primary Online Database (POD).

Special Schools

The policy of the Department of Education and Skills is to provide for the inclusive education of children with special educational needs in mainstream education, other than in circumstances where it would not be in the best interest of the child, or the effective education of children with whom they are to be educated¹⁹.

¹⁷ Recognised School – means a school recognised by the Minister in accordance with section 10 of the Education Act, 1998.

¹⁸ An English-medium school is a school where English (L1) is the primary language of instruction, except in the case of Irish. (Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011- 2020, DES (2011)).

¹⁹ 16 Section 2 Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004

The majority of children with special educational needs are included in mainstream school placements, or special class placements in mainstream schools. A relatively small number of the overall pupil population attend special schools. Pupils attending special schools are those with the most complex levels of special educational needs²⁰. They include pupils who have severe and profound learning difficulties, or who may have a range of co-occurring conditions. Teachers in special schools and special class placements in mainstream schools differentiate the curriculum to take account of the abilities of each pupil. While all pupils in special schools and classes should be given the opportunity to study Irish, or to participate in Irish language activities, given the range of learning needs which pupils attending special schools and classes have, a certificate of exemption from the study of Irish will not be required in the case of pupils not engaged in the study of Irish. Special schools and classes should continue to use their professional judgement to differentiate the curriculum, including Irish, for pupils taking account of their learning needs, ability and capacity to participate in education.

1.2 The principles underpinning this circular

This Circular aims to support schools in addressing a wide diversity of needs by providing a differentiated learning experience for pupils in an inclusive school environment. It is informed by the benefits of bilingualism for all pupils as well as the principles of inclusion that underpin the Primary Language Curriculum (2015). The Primary Language Curriculum is for children of all abilities in all school contexts. It recognises and supports pupils' engagement with Irish and English at different stages and rates along their language-learning journey. It builds on the language knowledge and experience that pupils bring to the school. The Progression Continua in the Primary Language Curriculum provide a framework for teachers to identify the pupil's stage of language development and to plan interventions that support the development of language skills and competences in Irish and in English in an integrated manner, emphasising the transferability of language skills across languages.

This Circular is also set in the context of the Special Education Teaching Allocation²¹ model that allows mainstream schools to provide additional teaching support for all pupils who require such support in their schools based on their identified learning needs in school, as opposed to being based primarily upon a diagnosis of a particular disability.

Schools will be supported in implementing the terms of this Circular by:

- the Guidelines for Primary Schools: Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools developed by the National Educational Psychological Services (NEPS), the Inspectorate and Special Education Section, DES (2017) and
- Special Educational Needs: A Continuum of Support, NEPS (2007)

²⁰ NCSE Policy Advice 'The Future Role of Special Schools and Classes' 2011.

²¹ Circular 0013/2017 Circular to the Management Authorities of all Mainstream Primary Schools: Special Education Teaching Allocation

What are the key changes in this draft circular on exemptions from the study of Irish in primary schools?

Consideration of the language of instruction in the school This draft circular is for implementation in English-medium primary schools only.
The language learning needs of pupils in special educational needs contexts The authority devolved to special schools in decision making concerning the Irish language learning needs of students in these context is recognised. Similarly, mainstream post-primary schools where there are special classes or to which students may be returning having spent a period in a special education setting are afforded the flexibility to make decisions that are in the best interest of the student's learning in the area of Irish.
The exceptional circumstances in which an exemption may be granted The circumstances in which pupils may be granted an exemption from the study of Irish reflect developments in curricular provision and education more generally including current understandings of learning difficulties and differences.
Consideration of the most appropriate stage at which to grant an exemption from the study of Irish Reflecting the principles underpinning the Primary Language Curriculum and the Continuum of Support, this draft circular sets 12 years of age or the final year in primary education as the most appropriate time to consider an application for an exemption from the study of Irish where pupils may have received their primary education outside the state or are re-enrolling following a period abroad. In the case of pupils with significant and sustained learning difficulties, an exemption may be considered where they have at least reached third class in primary school.
Moving from away diagnosis towards the identification of pupils' learning needs In line with other Department policies in the area of special educational needs, this draft circular supports the identification of need rather than using a diagnostic, categorical model.
Psychological assessments and cognitive ability scores Average/Above Average IQ is no longer used as a diagnostic specifier. Psychological assessments are therefore no longer necessary to process applications for exemption from the study of Irish.
Literacy attainment scores as criteria In the case of pupils with significant learning difficulties, the criteria for exemption include only one literacy attainment score at/below the 10th percentile.
Appeals mechanism The draft circular makes provision for an appeals mechanism at local level.

2. Granting an exemption from the study of Irish

2.1 An exemption should be granted only in exceptional circumstances

Exempting a pupil from the study of Irish should be considered only in rare and exceptional circumstances. The decision to exempt a pupil from the study of Irish is an important decision that has implications for his/her access to the curriculum and his/her future learning. The decision to grant an exemption from the study of Irish is made by the principal teacher but it must be made following detailed

discussion with the pupil's parent(s)/guardian(s), the class teacher, special education teachers, and the pupil. A decision to grant an exemption should only be considered in the circumstances set out in section 2.2 below.

2.2 The circumstances in which a pupil may be granted an exemption from the study of Irish

Pupils in the following exceptional circumstances may be allowed exemption from the study of Irish:

a. pupils whose education up to 12 years of age or the final year of their primary education was received outside the State and where they did not have opportunity to engage in the study of Irish

b. pupils who were previously enrolled as recognised pupils in primary schools who are being re-enrolled after a period spent abroad, provided that at least three consecutive years have elapsed since the previous enrolment in the State and are at least 12 years of age on re-enrolment

c. pupils who:

i. have at least reached third class

and

ii. present with significant learning difficulties that are persistent despite having had access to a differentiated approach to language and literacy learning in both Irish and English over time. Documentary evidence to this effect, held by the school, should include Student Support Plans detailing

- regular reviews of learning needs as part of an ongoing cycle of assessment
- target-setting
- evidence-informed intervention and review, including test scores (word reading, reading comprehension, spelling, other scores of language/literacy) at key points of review.

and

iii. at the time of the application for exemption present with a Standardised Score on a discrete test in Word Reading or Reading Comprehension at/below the 10th percentile.

2.3 Procedures for granting an exemption from the study of Irish

A parent/guardian makes an application in writing to the principal of the school for a Certificate of Exemption from the study of Irish on behalf of a pupil.

a) Considering an application for exemption

The principal will consider the application and:

- Discuss the application with the parent(s)/guardian(s) as soon as practicable following receipt of the application.
- Inform the parent(s)/guardian(s) regarding the consequences of an exemption from the study of Irish for the pupil while in primary education and into the future

- Explain that the principal will need to consider evidence of the child's progress over a period of time, the views of the child's teachers, and the views of the child before making a decision.

The principal will:

- Review any relevant evidence about the child's educational experience (for example, periods of enrolment abroad) and/or educational progress; in the case of applications made under criterion 2.2c, account will be taken of the relevant documentary evidence in the Student Support Plan in line with the Continuum of Support provided
- Discuss the application with the pupil's class teacher and special needs teacher(s) as relevant
- Discuss the application with the pupil
- Confirm that the application meets or does not meet the relevant criterion in section 2.2 above under which the application is made
- Inform the parent(s)/guardian(s) of the decision made and that a written Certificate of Exemption, signed by the school principal and granted in accordance with this circular, is required in order for any pupil to be deemed exempted from the study of Irish.

b) Recording the decision

A decision to grant or refuse an exemption from the study of Irish will be conveyed in writing by the school principal to the parent(s)/guardian(s).

Where an exemption is granted, this decision will be conveyed to the parent(s)/guardian(s) by way of a written Certificate of Exemption, signed by the school principal, stating that the exemption has been granted in accordance with this circular.

The Certificate of Exemption will also state the name and address of the school, the school roll number, the pupil's name, date of birth, ID number, and the sub-paragraph under which the exemption is being granted.

The application, all supporting documentation and a copy of the Certificate of Exemption will be retained by the school in accordance with data protection legislation and will be made available for inspection by authorised officers of the Department. In maintaining such documentation, schools should ensure that they have obtained appropriate parental consent for the retention and use of such records.

Parents/guardians and pupils should be informed of the option not to exercise the exemption granted, without any loss of the right to exercise it at a future time.

2.4 Appeal process

Where an application for an exemption from the study of Irish is refused, a parent/guardian has the right to appeal the decision to the school's board of management. The appeal will be confined to a review of whether the criteria set out in this Circular have been correctly applied in considering the application

made by the parent(s)/guardian(s) for a Certificate of Exemption from the study of Irish for their child. This written appeal should contain the specific reason(s) why the decision is being appealed by the applicant and the circumstances in which it is considered that the criteria have not been correctly applied.

3. Arrangements for pupils who are exempt from the study of Irish

Schools, where appropriate, should take account of the literacy learning needs of pupils who are exempt from the study of Irish when deploying available special educational needs resources. To support inclusion practices, a pupil who is exempt from the study of Irish should be included in a meaningful way in aspects of Irish language and cultural activities in line with his/her ability and interests.

4. Supports for pupils who have no understanding of English when enrolled

A pupil from abroad, who has no understanding of English when enrolled before he/she reaches 12 years of age or who is in the final year of primary education should be provided with intensive English as an Additional Language (EAL) in preparation for his/her full engagement with the Primary Language Curriculum at a level commensurate with his/her ability.

5. When will the terms of this Circular come into effect?

The terms of this circular will apply with effect from the beginning of the school year 2019/2020. It will apply to all applications for exemption from the study of Irish for pupils who are currently enrolled in English medium primary schools and to pupils who will enrol in English-medium primary schools in the future.

An exemption granted to a pupil may be operative throughout his/her enrolment in primary and post-primary school.

6. Reporting on exemptions granted to the Department

The school management will be required to provide statistical information relating to the number and the grounds on which exemptions were granted under this Circular in the previous school year as part of the Primary School Annual Census.

As set out in 2.3.b) above, a copy of the Certificate of Exemption must also be given to the parent(s)/guardian(s) of the pupil being exempted.

7. Pupils transitioning to other schools

A copy of the Certificate of Exemption should be included in the pupil's Student Support File when transferring to another primary school. In the case of pupils transitioning to post-primary school, the Certificate of Exemption should be included in the pupil's Education Passport.

8. Monitoring and reviewing the Circular

The operation of the revised Circular will be monitored regularly by the Department and reviewed periodically.

9. Privacy Statement

Text to be inserted once the draft circular is finalised after the consultation process.

Appendix 2: Draft Revised Circular for Post-Primary Schools

(Retrieved online from:

https://www.education.ie/en/Parents/Information/Irish-Exemption/irish_exemption_consultation_paper.pdf)

PROPOSED DRAFT CIRCULAR REVISING CIRCULAR M10/94 EXEMPTION FROM THE STUDY OF IRISH

To: Boards of Management, Principal Teachers and all Teaching Staff of Post-Primary Schools

1. Introduction

1.1 The purpose of the circular

The purpose of this Circular is to advise Post-Primary Schools²² of the revised arrangements for the exemption of students from the study of Irish. It supersedes Circular M10/94 and the 2008 revision of that Circular both of which are hereby withdrawn. The revised arrangements set out in this Circular apply to English-medium Post-primary Schools²³ only. Existing exemptions from the study of Irish granted under Circulars 12/96 and M10/94 and held by students will continue to apply until the end of their post-primary education.

Exemption from the study of Irish will no longer apply in Post-primary Schools where Irish is the medium of instruction.

Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools (2004) and the Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)²⁴ set out the list of subjects to be studied by students in junior cycle and in senior cycle in order to be recognised for the purposes of teacher allocation and other payments to the school by the Department. Irish and English are the languages in which schools must provide instruction for all junior cycle and senior cycle students. In order for students who are exempt from the study of Irish to be recognised by the Department for grant payment and teacher allocation purposes, schools will continue to be required to record data on students who are exempt from the study of Irish and the reason for that exemption on the Post-Primary Online Database (P-POD).

²² Recognised School – means a school recognised by the Minister in accordance with section 10 of the Education Act, 1998.

²³ An English-medium school is a school where English (L1) is the primary language of instruction, except in the case of Irish (Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011- 2020, DES (2011)). 21

²⁴ Circular 0015/2017 sets out the programme of study for junior cycle students in order for them to be recognised by the Department for the purposes of teacher allocations and other payments to the school.

Special Schools

The policy of the Department of Education and Skills is to provide for the inclusive education of children with special educational needs in mainstream education, other than in circumstances where it would not be in the best interest of the child, or the effective education of children with whom they are to be educated²⁵.

The majority of children with special educational needs are included in mainstream school placements, or special class placements in mainstream schools. A relatively small number of the overall pupil population attend special schools. Students attending special schools are those with the most complex levels of special educational needs²⁶. They include students who have severe and profound learning difficulties, or who may have a range of cooccurring conditions. Teachers in special schools and special class placements in mainstream schools differentiate the curriculum to take account of the abilities of each student. While all students in special schools and classes should be given the opportunity to study Irish, or to participate in Irish language activities, given the range of learning needs which students attending special schools and classes have, a certificate of exemption from the study of Irish will not be required in the case of students not engaged in the study of Irish. Special schools and classes should continue to use their professional judgement to differentiate the curriculum, including Irish, for students taking account of their learning needs, ability and capacity to participate in education.

1.2 The principles underpinning this circular

This Circular aims to support schools in addressing a wide diversity of needs by providing a differentiated learning experience for students in an inclusive school environment. It is informed by the principles of inclusion and the benefits of bilingualism for all students that underpin the Framework for Junior Cycle (2015) and curricular provision in senior cycle.

Building on students' language learning experience as provided for in the Primary Language Curriculum, the specification for Junior Cycle Irish (L2)²⁷ aims to consolidate and deepen their knowledge, understanding, values and language skills supporting their personal, cognitive and social development. The learning outcomes presented in the specification apply to all students. Students should be encouraged to study the language and achieve a level of personal proficiency that is appropriate to their ability.

As students progress along their language learning journey into senior cycle, they are provided with opportunities to engage further with Irish at a level appropriate to their needs through a variety of programmes offered.

²⁵ Section 2 Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004

²⁶ NCSE Policy Advice 'The Future Role of Special Schools and Classes' 2011

²⁷ The L2 specification for Junior Cycle Irish is aimed at students in English-medium schools.

This Circular is also set in the context of the Special Education Teaching Allocation²⁸ model that allows mainstream schools to provide additional teaching support for all pupils who require such support in their schools based on their identified learning needs in school, as opposed to being based primarily upon a diagnosis of a particular disability.

Schools will be supported in implementing this Circular by

- the Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools: Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools developed by the National Educational Psychological Services (NEPS), the Inspectorate and Special Education Section, DES (2017) and
- Special Educational Needs: A Continuum of Support, NEPS (2007).

What are the key changes in this draft circular on exemptions from the study of Irish in post-primary schools?

<p>Consideration of the language of instruction in the school</p> <p>This draft circular is for implementation in English-medium post-primary schools only.</p>
<p>The language learning needs of students in special educational needs contexts</p> <p>The authority devolved to special schools in decision making concerning the Irish language learning needs of students in these context is recognised. Similarly, mainstream post-primary schools where there are special classes or to which students may be returning having spent a period in a special education setting are afforded the flexibility to make decisions that are in the best interest of the student’s learning in the area of Irish.</p>
<p>The exceptional circumstances in which an exemption may be granted</p> <p>The circumstances in which pupils may be granted an exemption from the study of Irish reflect developments in curricular provision and education more generally including current understandings of learning difficulties and differences.</p>
<p>Consideration of the most appropriate stage at which to grant an exemption from the study of Irish</p> <p>Reflecting the principles underpinning the Primary Language Curriculum and the Continuum of Support, this draft circular sets 12 years of age or the final year in primary education as the most appropriate time to consider an application for an exemption from the study of Irish where pupils may have received their primary education outside the state or are re-enrolling following a period abroad.</p> <p>Typically, applications for exemption are made by parents/guardians on behalf of students. This draft circular provides that students who have reached the age of 18 years may apply for an exemption from the study if Irish.</p>

²⁸ Circular 0014/2017 Circular to the Management Authorities of all Post-primary Schools: Special Education Teaching Allocation

Moving from away diagnosis towards the identification of pupils' learning needs

In line with other Department policies in the area of special educational needs, this draft circular supports the identification of need rather than using a diagnostic, categorical model.

Psychological assessments and cognitive ability scores

Average/Above Average IQ is no longer used as a diagnostic specifier. Psychological assessments are therefore no longer necessary to process applications for exemption from the study of Irish.

Literacy attainment scores as criteria

In the case of students with significant learning difficulties, the criteria for exemption include only one literacy attainment score at/below the 10th percentile.

Appeals mechanism

The draft circular makes provision for an appeals mechanism at local level.

2. Granting an exemption from the study of Irish**2.1 An exemption should be granted only in exceptional circumstances**

Exempting a student from the study of Irish will be considered only in rare and exceptional circumstances. The decision to exempt a student from the study of Irish is an important decision that has implications for his/her future learning. The decision to grant an exemption from the study of Irish is made by the principal teacher but it must be made following detailed discussion with the student's parent(s)/guardian(s), the class teacher, special education teachers, and the student. A decision to grant an exemption should only be considered in the circumstances set out in section 2.2 below.

2.2 The circumstances in which a student may be granted an exemption from the study of Irish

Students in the following exceptional circumstances may be allowed exemption from the study of Irish:

- a. students whose education up to 12 years of age or the final year of their primary education was received outside the State and where they did not have opportunity to engage in the study of Irish
- b. students who were previously enrolled as recognised students in a primary or post-primary school who are being re-enrolled after a period spent abroad, provided that at least three consecutive years have elapsed since the previous enrolment in the State and are at least 12 years of age on re-enrolment
- c. students who:
 - i.) present with significant learning difficulties that are persistent despite having had access to a differentiated approach to language and literacy learning over time (Irish and, or, English). Documentary evidence to this effect, held by the school, should include Student Support Plans detailing
 - regular reviews of learning needs as part of an ongoing cycle of assessment
 - target-setting
 - evidence-informed intervention and review, including test scores (word reading, reading comprehension, spelling, other scores of language/literacy) at key points of review.

and

ii) at the time of the application for exemption present with a Standardised Score on a discrete test in Word Reading or Reading Comprehension at/below the 10th percentile.

2.3 Procedures for granting an exemption from the study of Irish

A parent/guardian on behalf of a student or in the case of a student who has reached the age of 18 years, the student, makes an application in writing to the principal of the school for a Certificate of Exemption from the study of Irish.

a) Considering an application for exemption

The principal will consider the application and:

- Discuss the application with the parent(s)/guardian(s)/student as soon as practicable following receipt of the application
- Inform the parent(s)/guardian(s)/student regarding the consequences of an exemption from the study of Irish for the student while in post-primary education and into the future
- Explain that the principal will need to consider evidence of the student's progress over a period of time, the views of the student's teachers, and the views of the student before making a decision.

The principal will:

- Review any relevant evidence about the student's educational experience (for example, periods of enrolment abroad) and/or educational progress; in the case of application made under criterion 2.2c, account will be taken of the relevant documentary evidence in the Student Support Plan in line with the Continuum of Support provided
- Discuss the application with the student's class teacher and special needs teacher(s) as relevant
- Discuss the application with the student
- Confirm that the application meets or does not meet the relevant criterion in section 2.2 above under which the application is made
- Inform the parent(s)/guardian(s)/student of the decision made and that a written Certificate of Exemption, signed by the school principal and granted in accordance with this circular, is required in order for any student to be deemed exempted from the study of Irish.

b) Recording the decision

A decision to grant or refuse an exemption from the study of Irish will be conveyed in writing by the school principal to the applicant.

Where an exemption is granted, this decision will be conveyed to the parent(s)/guardian(s)/student by way of a written Certificate of Exemption, signed by the school principal, stating that the exemption has been granted in accordance with this circular.

The Certificate of Exemption will also state the name and address of the school, the school roll number, the student's name, date of birth, ID number, and the sub-paragraph under which the exemption is being granted.

The application, all supporting documentation and a copy of the Certificate of Exemption will be retained by the school in accordance with data protection legislation and will be made available for inspection by authorised officers of the Department. In maintaining such documentation, schools should ensure that they have obtained the appropriate consent of the parent(s)/guardian(s)/student as relevant, for the retention and use of such records.

Parents/guardians and students should be informed of the option not to exercise the exemption granted, without any loss of the right to exercise it at a future time.

2.4 Appeal process

Where an application for an exemption from the study of Irish is refused, the applicant has the right to appeal the decision to the school's board of management. The appeal will be confined to a review of whether the criteria set out in this Circular have been correctly applied in considering the application made by a student or by the parent(s)/guardian(s) on behalf of a student for a Certificate of Exemption from the study of Irish. This written appeal should contain the specific reason(s) why the decision is being appealed by the applicant and the circumstances in which it is considered that the criteria have not been correctly applied.

3. Arrangements for students who are exempt from the study of Irish

Schools, where appropriate, should take account of the literacy learning needs of students who are exempt from the study of Irish when deploying available special educational needs resources. Students who are exempt from the study of Irish may also be allowed to substitute another subject, short course or area of learning for Irish.

4. When will the terms of this Circular come into effect?

The terms of this circular will apply with effect from the beginning of the school year 2019/2020. It will apply to all applications for exemption from the study of Irish for students who are currently enrolled in Post-primary Schools (English-medium) and to students who will enrol in Post-primary Schools (English-medium) in the future.

An exemption granted to a pupil may be operative throughout their enrolment in primary and post-primary school.

5. Reporting on exemptions granted to the Department

The school management will be required to provide statistical information relating to the number and the grounds on which exemptions were granted under this Circular as part of the annual October returns on the Post-Primary Online Database (P-POD).

As set out in 2.3.b) above, a copy of the Certificate of Exemption must also be given to the parent(s)/guardian(s) of the pupil being exempted.

6. Students transitioning to other schools

A copy of the Certificate of Exemption should be included in the student's Student Support File when transferring to another post-primary school.

7. Monitoring and reviewing the Circular

The operation of the revised Circular will be monitored regularly by the Department and reviewed periodically.

8. Privacy Statement

Text to be inserted once the draft Circular has been approved following the consultation process.