

The System of Exemptions for the Study of Irish in Secondary Education

Comhchoiste na Gaeilge, na Gaeltacht and Pobal Labhartha na Gaeilge

12th October 2022, 13:30, Committee Room 4

Opening Statement – Dyslexia Association of Ireland

Please note, this document will also serve as the Summary Opening Statement as we have strived to create a focused, concise and dyslexia-friendly summary of key issues.

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon and thank you for your invitation to the Dyslexia Association of Ireland to attend the Committee today. My name is Gráinne O'Rourke, and I am Chairperson of the Association. I am joined today by my colleague Donald Ewing, Head of Education, Training and Policy.

THE DYSLEXIA ASSOCIATION OF IRELAND

The Dyslexia Association of Ireland is the national charity which works with and for people affected by dyslexia, by providing information, offering appropriate support services, and engaging in advocacy and raising awareness of dyslexia. Our vision is for a society where all people with dyslexia are enabled to fulfil their potential; and where every child and adult with dyslexia has access to appropriate identification and support to achieve their full potential in education, training, employment and all aspects of life.

DYSLEXIA

Dyslexia is a learning difference that can have a very significant impact on learning. It affects approximately 1 in 10 and occurs on a spectrum with some people mildly affected and others more severely. With the right understanding, accommodations and support people with dyslexia can achieve great success in education.

DYSLEXIA AND IRISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

Not all students with dyslexia have severe difficulties and this is reflected in the fact that many students with dyslexia can successfully study Irish and other languages.

However, for those with more severe dyslexia, written language learning can be very challenging. And learning more than one language code at the same time can obviously present exponential difficulties and lead to significant stress and anxiety.

DYSLEXIA AND THE IRISH EXEMPTION

Legislation and guidance in the area of disability and special education clearly sets out that authorities and schools have to make reasonable adjustments for children and young people who have additional learning needs by dint of their neurodiverse profile or arising from a diagnosis.

The Exemption from Irish represents a pragmatic reasonable adjustment given the very significant challenges with written language that some students with dyslexia face, and for whom other supports are not sufficient. The impact of being granted an exemption can be transformational for a young dyslexic person, as it allows them to concentrate on learning to read and spell in a single language code, and to achieve fluency therein that then allows them to access the curriculum to their fullest potential.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

As we have stated already, we recognise that not all students with dyslexia need an exemption. And it makes sense to have clear and rigorously applied eligibility criteria. However we also need fair and sensible ones. Whilst there have been some improvements in recent years to the Exemption guidance provided by the Department of Education, we are still keen to see the eligibility criteria improved with regard to its methodology and fairness.

For example, we continue to question the validity of the use of attainment score cut-offs as part of the eligibility criteria. Any decision of such importance should not be made based on one test, of one specific skill, on one particular day. Such an approach is inherently flawed and is also completely inconsistent with the rest of the evidence-gathering process. It also remains unexplained as to why specifically the 10th percentile continues to be employed as the cut-off point, and this seems to be a completely randomly chosen threshold.

LACK OF KEY DATA

Despite repeated requests, we have not been able to access up to date figures on the numbers of exemptions granted at post-primary level, and it would be useful to examine the figures around the appeals system that was brought in in 2019.

There is also a lack of research in the area of the positive impact of an Irish Exemption and much of the focus on any negative impacts can be speculative and inaccurate, not least on the impact of reduced vocational choice after school.

ARRANGEMENTS

We believe there should be more detailed guidance and quality assurance for schools as to what they provide for students who have the exemption, both in terms of scheduling appropriate alternative arrangements, and the provision of additional teaching support at such times.

Equally for those who continue with Irish, and who need additional teaching support, this additional support is often only available at a time when Irish is timetabled for this student. Effectively meaning that students and parents have to choose between Irish or accessing the specialist tuition that the student needs.

WIDER ISSUES WITH THE TEACHING OF IRISH AND LACK OF ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

At a wider level, we need to improve how we teach Irish in general. The quality of Irish teaching was highlighted in the Department of Education's Chief Inspector's Report, in 2022. At primary level, the report found that pupils' learning outcomes in Irish were "very concerning". And in post-primary the quality of Irish teaching was found to be considerably below the standards achieved in other core subjects. The same report identified a need for greater differentiation in teaching, and teaching that is adjusted to the individual needs of students.

Dyslexia Ireland is also concerned that the teaching of Irish is not informed sufficiently by the best evidence around Science of Reading, including explicit teaching of phonics in the early years, and the finding* that additional supports and extra teaching is very rarely provided for dyslexic learners. (And we have a reference to this research at the foot of this Summary Statement.)

IN CONCLUSION

For many students with significant difficulties caused by dyslexia, becoming fully literate in one language is a very significant challenge, let alone two or more. And for such students, being permitted to focus on one language can be transformational as it allows them to improve their literacy abilities in this language to the level where they can perform to their potential in day-to-day classes, state examinations and beyond.

Thank you again for the opportunity to present to the Committee today.

* Hickey, T.M. and Stenson, N. (2017) Teaching Irish reading: Tackling an elephant in the classroom. In B. Culligan and G. Mehigan (eds). Exploring the Literacy Landscape. Dublin: Literacy Association of Ireland, pp.178-186.)