


*An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta,
Brainse na Scrúdaithe,
Cor na Madadh,
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Co na hIarmhí.*



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To: The Authorities of Second Level Schools

Report of the Expert Advisory Group on Certificate Examinations in relation to arrangements for the assessment of candidates with special needs in the Certificate Examinations

1. Introduction

In late 1998 the Minister for Education and Science requested the Expert Advisory Group on Certificate Examinations (a body he had established in December 1997 to provide independent advice and evaluation on the operation of examinations) to prepare a discussion paper on special arrangements at the examinations for students with special needs. The discussion paper was published in May 1999. It proposed a number of principles that should underlie the provision of special arrangements and identified a series of issues requiring discussion. Responses were invited to the paper and altogether 210 responses were received. Having considered the submissions the Advisory Group prepared a report for the Minister. A copy of the report is enclosed. The text of the report is also available at the Department's website: www.irlgov/educ and you may print any additional copies you require by accessing the website.

The Minister has accepted the general set of principles identified by the Advisory Group as a sound basis for dealing with this complex and difficult area and has decided to begin the process of implementing their recommendations for the current year's examinations.

The following are the revised arrangements that enhance and extend the provisions set out in circular S40/94 which the Minister has decided should have immediate effect arising from the Advisory Group's set of principles and recommendations.

2. Provision of extra time

The Advisory Group noted that in terms of access to questions/tasks in an examination a demand for extra time to address a variety of candidate difficulties appeared in many of the submissions received.

The Advisory Group has recommended that a possible way forward that might meet the special needs of many candidates while, at the same time, preserving the integrity of the examination system, would be to

make the time element of an examination less critical. As an interim measure they recommended that all candidates might be given the option of availing of a limited increase in time (15-20 minutes) and proposed a pilot exercise in a small number of subjects at the Leaving Certificate Examination.

The Minister has decided that in 2000 the pilot exercise will be carried out in the subjects Irish, English, History (including Economic History) and Geography. An amended copy of this year's Leaving Certificate timetable showing the additional 20 minutes for each examination session in the subjects concerned will issue shortly.

Apart from this change which applies to all candidates the arrangements in relation to time set out in circular S40/94 will continue to apply.

3. New provision for exemption from elements of the standard assessment (i.e. modified assessment)

The Advisory Group noted that a candidate's special need may be such that it is not possible for him or her to participate in a particular mode of assessment (e.g. an aural examination for a candidate with severe hearing impairment) in which case it should be open to the candidate to apply for exemption from part of the assessment procedure.

The Advisory Group also recommended that where an element or elements of an examination have been waived, so that the purpose of the examination regarding the element or elements has not been met, or the method of examining has been significantly altered, this should be indicated by the presence of an explanatory note on the candidate's certificate.

In line with the recommendations of the Advisory Group the Minister has decided that a candidate with special needs may now request an exemption from an element(s) of an examination and have his/her grade determined on the balance of the work in the subject. The Department will be in contact with schools in respect of any existing application for this year's examinations where this provision appears an appropriate response to the needs of the candidate.

In approving an exemption the Department will also inform the candidate of the content of any explanatory note in relation to the subject concerned that may appear on the certificate. Any explanatory note will provide detail only on how the assessment procedure was altered. It will not record the nature of the candidate's disability.

Similarly an explanatory note will be included on the certificate in any subject where the nature of the arrangement precludes the testing of a particular competency for which marks are allocated.

4. Students whose general intellectual ability is below the average range

Applications will now be considered where it can be established that a student whose general intellectual ability is below the average range also has a more specific learning difficulty.

Applications will be required to attest to the existence of a specific learning difficulty not attributable to the student's general intellectual ability.

5. Changes to the Appeal procedures

Arrangements will again be put in place to have appeals against decisions on applications adjudicated by a small group. Heretofore a majority of the members of this group, including the chairperson, were external to the Department. The Minister has decided that in future the entire group should be drawn from outside the Department. The remit of the appeal group will cover appeals against all elements of a decision regarding special arrangements including any proposed inclusion of an explanatory note on an examination

certificate. The appeal group will be required to consider all cases in light of the principles set out by the Expert Advisory Group.

6. Identification of candidates and simplification of administration

The Advisory Group has recommended that schools should have a greater involvement in the identification and preparation of candidates and that the Department should provide guidelines regarding identification for students, schools and parents. Furthermore many schools have represented to the Department that they are best placed to attest to and understand a student's difficulties given the experience they have at first hand of the student's needs and capabilities.

As a first step a number of special arrangements from the range of special arrangements have been identified that can be approved by school authorities without reference to the Department. This will reduce the administrative burden on school authorities, as it will obviate any need for contact either in writing or by telephone with the Department. The Department will instruct examination superintendents to allow the arrangement where the school authority provides a note to the superintendent confirming that the school is satisfied that the arrangement is required. The range of measures involved are set out in appendix I of this circular.

7. The examining process and difficulty accessing material

As recommended by the Advisory Group assistant examiners will continue to be advised to refer to their advising examiner material from candidates which they have difficulty in accessing.

This means that it is not necessary for schools to apply in individual cases where the concern relates to difficulties that may arise in accessing the work of a candidate.

A number of schools have written to the Department regarding individual students taking the examinations this year. The general instruction to assistant examiners regarding accessing a candidate's work will of course apply in all those cases.

8. Applications for the examinations in 2001

The Department is actively considering how the application process for the examinations in 2001 and subsequent years can be simplified and expedited with a view to providing a better service to the students concerned while reducing the burden of work for schools that arises from making and supporting applications.

It is hoped to invite applications for the 2001 examinations shortly. This will happen as soon as the details of revised application procedures can be finalised.

Martin Hanevy
Principal Officer

26 January 2000

Appendix I – Circular I I/2000

It is no longer necessary for schools to apply to the Department in respect of the following arrangements for examination candidates with special needs.

- Granting breaks or rest periods in each examination session that are warranted by the physical or medical condition of the candidate. Under this type of arrangement the time taken for rest or as a break may be compensated for at the close of each examination period to a maximum of 20 minutes.
- Taking of medicine, food or drinks into the examination centre where this is required for medical reasons.
- Allowing the candidate to move within the centre.
- Use of a special desk or chair used in the classroom.
- Use of low vision aids used normally in the classroom
- Ensuring that a candidate with a hearing impairment is positioned close to the superintendent

A school may authorise any of the above based on local knowledge of what is in the best interest of the candidate. To activate any of the above arrangements the examination superintendent should simply be provided with a note stating that the school is satisfied that the arrangement is warranted.

The Department will advise all examination superintendents of this change and to permit an arrangement authorised by the school.