

AHEAD/DFI Joint Submission on the Calculated Grade Process for Leaving Certificate 2020 – Ensuring Fairness for Students with Disabilities

AHEAD and the Disability Federation of Ireland would like to commend the staff of the Department of Education and Skills for their work in devising a safe alternative to the face to face leaving certificate exams which will allow students to complete second level and progress to FET and Higher Education Programmes. We recognise how immensely difficult this decision was and we believe that by opting for a system of calculated grades, the Department has arrived at the fairest solution given the circumstances – one which places the safety and wellbeing of our students as the primary concern.

However, we wish to jointly raise some issues which need to be considered by teachers, schools and the department in the process of calculating grades for students with disabilities to ensure that they are treated fairly and receive a grade which reflects their true ability – one which provides them with equal opportunities to progress.

This submission is informed by consultation with the stakeholders of AHEAD and the members of the Disability Federation of Ireland.

The School-based phase: Indicators to inform teacher's calculated grade

There are a considerable number of reasons why students with disabilities may receive a lower than deserved grade from teachers following the current guidance issued by department. We have outlined some key reasons below and would urge the department to issue further support and guidance for teachers and schools to more equitably assess the ability of students with disabilities in this process.

Some key reasons why students with disabilities may receive a lower than deserved grade under the current guidance:

Attendance

There are a sizeable cohort of students with disabilities who have missed significant periods of the current/previous school year due to illness or medical appointments, resulting in them not being able to participate in class-based exams or coursework, or significantly impacting their performance within those class-based exams/course work. Teachers need to be cognisant that previous in class attendance, course-work or

previous exam results may be unreliable indicators of ability for students who have experienced significant absence due to the impact of disability and any grade derived from such indicators is likely to underestimate their true ability.

The following are just some examples of students with disabilities who might be impacted:

- A student who is absent periodically as they are receiving treatment for an ongoing illness such as cancer, cystic fibrosis.
- A student who was absent for part of term due to an episode caused by a mental health condition.
- A student who has acquired a physical disability during the last year due to an accident and had to take time out for treatment and training.
- A student who has a condition that causes periodic bouts of illness which impact their ability to attend or perform in school such as hydrocephalus. Students with this condition for example are impacted periodically with headaches, infections or shunt revisions.

As part of the calculated grading process, these factors should be taken in to consideration.

Reasonable Accommodations

Students with disabilities are often granted reasonable accommodations in the leaving certificate to minimise the impact of their disability on their exam performance and offer them a fairer opportunity to show their true ability. These accommodations can include anything from extra time added, to the assistance of a scribe or use of technology etc. However, these accommodations are often not available to students in their class-based tests or coursework so they are less reliable indicators of ability for students with disabilities. Any grade derived from such indicators is likely to underestimate their true ability. A comment from a current higher education student in the input gathered to inform this submission highlighted this problem - "As a dyslexic student, I achieved higher marks in both state exams (JC and LC) than in any class assessment. I was granted a reader, spelling and grammar waiver and extra time in my exams. It was not always possible to get these accommodations in in-class exams."

Another comment from a recent Leaving Cert student with Dyslexia (kindly gathered by the Dyslexia Association for this submission) also highlighted this issue – "I am not a leaving cert student but I was in 2018. The school I went to I had 2 particular teachers telling me daily that I was going to fail the leaving cert and that I needed to get my act

together as I failed nearly every test, I have dyslexia and was never once given any accommodations such as a reader, writer etc.. for any class tests or Christmas exams. I was advised on my dyslexic report to be given assistive technology such as a laptop, I was told by my school principal that this would distract other students and that I was not allowed a computer. My point being when I sat my Leaving Cert, I got the best grades I have ever gotten in that school as I was given a reader and a separate room for my Leaving Cert. How are teachers meant to predict grades when their students haven't been given the right resources to thrive?"

In point 6.6 of the Guide to Calculated Grades for Leaving Cert 2020, the Department has already acknowledged this issue but we believe that this point is not made strongly enough and that clearer guidance for teachers should be provided so that they understand how significant a factor this is in arriving at a fair grade.

Lower Teacher Expectations of Students with Disabilities

Research on public attitudes to people with disabilities indicates that people have low expectations of their potential to achieve and to participate fully in society. For example, a 2017 National Disability Authority report showed that between 1/3 and 2/3 of the population disagree or strongly disagree that people with disabilities are able to participate fully in life (range is dependent on disability type)¹.

Anecdotally, we know that many teachers also have low expectations of students with disabilities which do not match their true potential. These low expectations can be influenced by disability factors like difficulty with clearly expressing thought verbally or in the written word and difficulty with social interactions.

A comment from a current higher education student in the input gathered to inform this submission highlighted this problem - "I believe that some teachers have preconceived notions as to what students with disabilities can achieve. I believe they would mark me down if I were doing the LC this year."

It is imperative that any guidance provided to teachers by the department clearly highlights the importance of teachers understanding their own unconscious bias and

¹ <http://nda.ie/Publications/Attitudes/Public-Attitudes-to-Disability-in-Ireland-Surveys/Public-Attitudes-to-Disability-Survey-PDF.pdf>

builds in mechanisms to address this in grades calculated for the most likely affected cohorts.

Teacher Awareness of Diagnosis

A problem encountered by AHEAD, DFI and the Dyslexia Association in the past are issues surrounding the effective communication of a student's learning difficulty to all subject teachers, and as a result, some teachers may not even be aware of the presence of a specific learning difficulty or other hidden disability.

A lack of awareness by teachers of diagnosis means that they cannot take into consideration the impact of disability on school performance or as directed by the department in point 6.6 of the Guide to Calculated Grades for Leaving Cert 2020, the positive impact that reasonable accommodations in the leaving cert exam is likely to have had on performance.

Recent Diagnosis

A significant portion of students will only have received a recent diagnosis of disability e.g. Dyslexia or ADHD which are commonly diagnosed later in life. In the education system, diagnosis opens up access to in-school and state supports for students to minimise the impact of their disability on their learning. Often, the receipt of these accommodations enables learners to give a truer reflection of their ability in school. For the cohort of learners who have recently been diagnosed, their pre-diagnosis (and pre-support) record in exams and coursework may not provide an accurate reflection of their ability and exam performance and teachers need to be aware of this when arriving at a fair calculated grade.

Take for example, a student who was assessed late last year who is doing their Leaving Certificate and hoping to study medicine. They may have been working very hard but with grades not matching the work put in due to lack of required support/accommodations. Thus, all of their results from 5th/early 6th year are likely underestimations of their actual ability.

Decision on 100% Marks for Oral/Practical Component

AHEAD supports the government's decision to reverse full marks being awarded for any oral or practical component of the leaving cert. The original decision unfairly disadvantaged students with disabilities who due to disability had language waivers or chose to avoid subjects with practical components.

Despite some Teacher's Unions calling the decision not to factor 100% marks for these components into the calculated grading process unfair, we believe that it is fully merited and means that students are in fact operating on a more level playing field in the competitive points system operated for access to higher education.

The National Standardisation Phase

Like many other organisations and representative bodies, AHEAD and DFI are concerned by the use of school profiling in the adjusting of leaving certificate calculated grades. There is a higher prevalence of students with disabilities in DEIS schools² than other non-DEIS school across the country, primarily due to the fact that people with disabilities are approximately twice as likely to suffer from poverty or social exclusion than the rest of the population (Smyth, 2018; Eurostat, 2018³). A recent study by The Irish Times (O'Brien, 2018⁴) on post-secondary progression show how students from disadvantaged backgrounds are 14 times less likely to progress to university compared to students from affluent areas. By aligning students' marks to their school's data in the national standardisation phase, where there are historically poorer educational outcomes (Smyth, 2015) there is a danger of further reducing the opportunity for students with disabilities within these disadvantaged areas to be assessed based on their individual abilities by adjusting their marks to previous school results in a system where inequality is entrenched.

When compiling The State Examination Commission relevant data, the Department should consider whether using school profiling data to adjust marks is fair and necessary as it runs the risk of causing systemic discrimination against those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, including students with disabilities whose educational progression may also be impacted by their disability.

² <https://www.esri.ie/system/files?file=media/file-uploads/2015-07/RS39.pdf>

³ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/DDN-20191029-2>;
<https://www.irishexaminer.com/breakingnews/ireland/report-38-of-people-with-disabilities-in-ireland-at-risk-of-poverty-and-social-exclusion-995523.html>

⁴ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/affluent-students-14-times-more-likely-to-go-to-university-than-disadvantaged-peers-1.3718777>; <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/socio-economic-data-and-maps/lc-points-socio-economic-background-histograms/>



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If individual and/or national profiling is used by the Department to adjust the grade, then a positive adjustment should be applied to final result awarded to students with disabilities to account for the many issues raised above.

Many thanks for listening to our concerns. If you wish to liaise further on this matter, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

Submitted by AHEAD and the Disability Federation of Ireland

Care of:

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