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### *Profile of second-level students exempt from studying Irish*

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*Abstract:* Drawing on curriculum differentiation theory, this paper discusses exemptions from learning Irish granted to Irish post-primary students. In order to explore the profile of students granted such exemptions, the study utilises data from a national longitudinal study, Growing Up in Ireland. Additional information is provided by administrative data collected by the Department of Education and Skills to show trends in the number of exemptions granted over time. The findings show that factors impacting on being exempt include gender, social class, having a special educational need at primary school and being born outside Ireland.

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## Profile of second-level students exempt from studying Irish

### *Introduction*

There is now a growing literature on curriculum differentiation to meet the needs of diverse groups of students. Differentiating instruction involves responding constructively to what students know, but also targeting the teaching to the specific learning needs of students. It means providing multiple learning pathways so that students can have access to the most appropriate learning opportunities commensurate with their capacity to learn. While this may be benefitting students, research on school curricula has also found that the content of programmes play a notable part in the reproduction of social inequalities in education (Bernstein, 1973). Literature on curriculum differentiation has focused on the role of streaming, tracking and the distinction between vocational and academic curricula (Oakes, 1985), practices that are seen to disadvantage some students.

This study aims to broaden discussion on curriculum differentiation by exploring exemption from learning the Irish language. The second-level curriculum is made up of core and optional subjects, the former including the Irish language. The core subjects are compulsory but can be taken at Higher, Ordinary or Foundation level. While it is compulsory to study the Irish language, students can get an exemption from Irish in limited circumstances. Broadly speaking, exemptions are made for students of Irish nationality who have spent considerable time outside the jurisdiction, students from abroad who have no understanding of English when enrolled in schools in the jurisdiction and students diagnosed with significant educational needs.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that some second-level students who seek exemptions from Irish may only do so to avoid what they regard as a difficult or irrelevant subject<sup>1</sup>. In other cases, students applying for exemptions from Irish are reported as still doing modern European languages such as French, German, Spanish and Italian (Ó Laoire, 2013)<sup>2</sup>. A number of universities require students to have a pass grade in Irish in order to meet the matriculation requirements. These institutions include: University College Dublin (UCD), University College Cork (UCC), Maynooth University and NUI Galway. Trinity College Dublin (TCD) requires students to pass a language other than English (including Irish). The University of Limerick (UL) requires students to pass English and another language. However, if candidates hold an exemption from Irish from the Department of Education they may apply to the institutions for an exemption from language-related entry requirements. Students automatically exempt from Irish include candidates whose permanent address is in Northern

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<sup>1</sup> Donnelly, K. (2016), Probe as more pupils shun Irish, the Irish Independent, <http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/probe-as-more-pupils-shun-irish-26649606.html>

<sup>2</sup> See also:

<http://oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie/debates%20authoring/debateswebpack.nsf/takes/dail2013030700051?opendocument#WRE00950>

Ireland and who are presenting GCE/GCSE qualifications for matriculation; candidates whose permanent address is outside Ireland and who are presenting qualifications other than the Leaving Certificate for matriculation<sup>3</sup>. Data provided by the Central Applications Office (CAO) indicates that there have not been marked changes in the number of Irish language exemptions among students accepted to Irish higher education institutions. In 2015 there were 3,930 such exemptions<sup>4</sup> compared to 3,790 the year before; the number of students with other language exemptions has remained the same as in 2014 at 97; and there has been a slight increase in the number of students with both exemptions: 778, compared to 773 in 2014. The profile of students in each of the categories warrants further research.

**Table 1: Language Exemptions in Higher Education Institutions (number and percentage; 2012-2014)**

Year	Number with Irish Exemption only	Number with other language exemption	Number with both exemptions	Total
2014	3790 (8.06)	97 (0.02)	778 (1.64)	4665 (10)
2013	3882 (8.40)	84 (0.18)	672 (1.45)	4638 (10)
2012	4065 (8.78)	98 (0.21)	602 (1.30)	4765 (10)
Total	11737 (25)	279 (1)	2052 (4)	14068 (30)

Source: CAO personal correspondence; percentages – exemptions by acceptances - own calculation based on CAO data. Note: the table provides percentages within category – i.e. in 2014 about 8% of the total number of students were exempt only from Irish.

A report by the Task Group on Reform of University Selection and Entry has recommended that the Irish language requirement for college places should be removed for courses which are not taught through Irish. In instances where Irish would be the language of instruction, a D3 in honours Irish would be the recommended entry grade. According to Tuairisc.ie, this recommendation would "bring to an end a 100-year old tradition which saw a qualification in Irish as a basic requirement for all students entering the colleges of the NUI". The task group has also recommended that foreign languages be removed as an entry requirement<sup>5</sup>.

Though the First Official Language requirement has been dropped for wider public service jobs, certain professions still require applicants to be proficient in the Irish language. For example, in order to become a fully registered primary school teacher, candidates must be fluent in the language. In order to facilitate foreign trained primary teachers, an Irish language exam - the SCG (An Scrúdú le hAghaidh Cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge) / OCG (Oiriúnú le

<sup>3</sup> For further details for NUI admission criteria related to exemption from Irish see: [http://www.nui.ie/college/docs/matricRegs/matricRegs\\_2016\\_2017\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.nui.ie/college/docs/matricRegs/matricRegs_2016_2017_ENG.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> At the time of writing, data on acceptances was not available for 2015 from CAO for calculation of percentages.

<sup>5</sup> Cullen, Clare (2014): The Irish Independent, <http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/education/irish-language-requirement-for-college-places-should-be-removed-report-recommends-30808914.html>

hAghaidh Cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge) has been introduced. The need for a pass in Leaving Certificate Irish or English for entry to the Gardaí was introduced in September 2005, although applicants are given lessons in the language during the two years of training. It could be argued that exemption from Irish makes it more difficult for the students concerned to gain access to certain educational and professional pathways.

There has been a paucity of recent empirical research on the profile of students exempt from Irish (for an exception see Ó Laoire, 2013, available in Irish only). While the administrative data collected at national level is useful in gauging the changes in numbers among specific groups of students over time, more detailed information on the profile of students exempt from learning Irish is necessary to guide policy-making in the area. This paper seeks to answer the following questions:

- Have there been any changes over time among groups of students granted exemption from Irish (students arriving from abroad; students with special educational needs, etc.)?
- What factors are likely to predict not studying Irish at second-level?

In order to address these questions, administrative data obtained from the Department of Education and Skills and analyses of the national longitudinal study, Growing Up in Ireland (child cohort data), are used. The paper takes the following format. Section two presents the theoretical background guiding the paper. Section three discusses subject provision in the Republic of Ireland. This is followed by sections on the methodology used and research results.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

Research in the last forty years, mainly carried out by structural reproduction theorists, on school curricula has uncovered that the content of school programmes play an important part in the reproduction of social inequalities in education (Bernstein, 1973; Bourdieu, 1977). According to this view, higher social classes are already familiar with 'the rules of the game' and with what kind of knowledge has 'currency'. This initial disadvantage can then be exacerbated by students' allocation to different types of ability and curriculum groupings (lower versus higher stream; academic versus vocational), resulting in cumulative disadvantage among some groups of students (Gamoran and Mare, 1989). Early disadvantage or advantage is crucial in differentiation between individuals or groups (Ferraro and Kelley-Moore, 2003). While early educational advantage is often seen as a cornerstone for improved life chances, cumulative disadvantage is a process whereby individuals or groups carry forward those disadvantages of early life through different stages of their lives, often resulting in reduced life chances (Morgan and Kunkel, 2001). The origin of cumulative disadvantage theory (CDT) can be traced back to Merton's (1968) work on advancement in scientific careers. According to this theory, the disadvantage individuals experience early in their lives can accumulate over time and is likely to determine how

individuals or groups fare over time (Elder, 1995; Ferraro & Kelley-Moore, 2003). In the domain of education, early disadvantage may negatively affect the later outcomes and pathways of young people. Cumulative educational disadvantage is likely to be influenced by specific structural features of the education system (e.g., school choice, tracking, selection mechanisms and resource inequalities). At the same time, however, it has also been argued that low tracks and more vocationally oriented curricula can increase the opportunities of poor and minority groups by providing them with specific, marketable skills (Arum and Shavit, 1995). In addition, Noddings (2011) argues that students should be given the freedom to choose courses that interest them rather than taking courses where they may fail. It has been demonstrated that limited access to curriculum has a negative impact on the options available to students during their subsequent educational career (Smyth, et al., 2007). This paper focuses on the current debates in the Republic of Ireland on not studying the Irish language, one of the core curriculum subjects, at second-level and what potential implications this may have for the students.

### *The Irish language in second-level schools in Ireland*

Teaching and learning Irish is a complex issue, considering the fact that while some students are relatively fluent in Irish (often coming from Irish-medium primary schools), others have relatively low levels of Irish language proficiency. The NCCA is currently developing separate specifications in Irish at junior cycle for students in English-medium schools and Irish-medium schools. Such is referenced in the Department's progress report on implementation of educational measures in the 20 Year Strategy for Irish 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language – Progress Report 2010-2015 that was published in Dec 2015. Provision will be made in the new specifications for assessment of oral language. This reflects the DES commitment to the development of learners' oral language competence in particular. The NCCA is exploring how best to meet the needs of students in Irish-medium post-primary schools, including native Irish speakers, at junior cycle level in order to enable such students to achieve the highest standards of language competence. The NCCA convened a consultative forum at the beginning of October 2015 to discuss this issue. Due to this additional development work, it is now intended to introduce the Irish specifications for the Junior Cycle in 2017.

Proficiency in Irish is assessed at three levels: Foundation Level, Ordinary Level or Higher Level. For the Leaving Certificate, the learner's oral competency is assessed in spring of the final year, in an oral examination worth 40%, at each level, of the overall mark, and the other three skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) are assessed in summer. Aspects of literary works must be studied at Ordinary Level while at Higher Level these same works and additional material must be studied in greater detail<sup>6</sup>.

Compared to other core subjects, Irish is often perceived unfavourably by students. Research by Smyth et al. (2004, 2006, 2007) in post-primary schools showed that when asked to name the two subjects students liked least in second year, just over thirty per cent

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<sup>6</sup> The NCCA is currently undertaking a review of the Leaving Certificate Syllabus.

of students mentioned Irish followed by modern languages. It was also the subject most students cited as being least useful, being mentioned by nearly fifty per cent of the students; first year students also felt that the subject had too much time allocated to it. More than half of second year students named Irish as the subject they found most difficult (ibid.). Interestingly, student attitudes to, and perceptions of, Irish as a subject seem to be at odds with the attitudes of the adult population (see Darmody and Daly, 2015) that tend to be generally positive.

### *Exemptions from Irish in post-primary schools*

While studying Irish is compulsory in Irish primary and post-primary schools, the Department of Education and Skills allows students to apply to be excused from studying the subject in exceptional circumstances<sup>7</sup>. The granting of exemptions from the study of Irish at post-primary is provided for in limited circumstances as per the exemption criteria in Departmental circular M10/94. Under the circular the authority to grant an exemption has been delegated to school authorities. An exemption may only be granted where the student's circumstances comply with the exemption criteria.

Exemptions are granted to:

" Pupils in the following circumstances may be allowed to substitute any other subject from the list of approved subjects for Irish for the purpose of Rule 21 (1) (a) and (b) of the Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools:

(a) Pupils whose primary education up to 11 years of age was received in Northern Ireland or outside Ireland;

(b) Pupils who were previously enrolled as recognised pupils in a primary or second-level school who are being re-enrolled after a period spent abroad, provided that at least three years have elapsed since the previous enrolment in the State and the pupil is at least 11 years of age on re-enrolment;

(c) Pupils

(i) who function intellectually at average or above average level but have a **Specific Learning Disability** of such a degree of severity that they fail to achieve expected levels of attainment in basic language skills in the mother tongue, or

(ii) who have been assessed as having a **general learning disability due to serious intellectual impairment [i.e. mental handicap]** and are also failing to attain adequate levels in basic language skills in the mother tongue.

(iii) who have been assessed as having a **general learning disability due to serious sensory impairment**, and are also failing to attain adequate levels in basic language skills in the mother tongue.

(d) Pupils from abroad, who have no understanding of English, when enrolled, would be required to study one language only, Irish or English."

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<sup>7</sup> For primary schools see Circular 12/96.

The application procedure is the same for both second-level and primary schools. To secure an exemption, parents must make a written request to the School Principal and must provide a copy of an assessment report from a Psychologist and in the case of (C) must provide a copy of an assessment report. This report must be less than two years old.

The Department of Education and Skills collects information on the exemptions granted and exemptions held by different groups of people who are granted exemptions or who hold exemptions. 'Granted exemptions' refers to the number of pupils that had a new exemption granted in that academic year. 'Exemptions held' refers to the number of pupils in a particular academic year that hold a valid exemption. According to statistics for 2014, the total number of exemptions granted to post-primary students in 2014, which encompasses the 2014/15 academic year, was 8,558. The total number of Irish exemptions held in that year was 31,982. Tables 2 and 3 present the number and percentage of exemptions granted in each category (including all year groups) in 2014.

**Table 2: The number and percentage of new exemptions granted at post-primary level in each category in 2014**

	Junior Certificate (years 1-3)	Junior Certificate Schools Program (years 1-3)	Leaving Certificate+ repeat LC	Leaving Certificate Applied (years 1-2)	Leaving Certificate Vocational (years 1-2)	Transition Year
<b>Total number of students in the program in 2014 excluding PLC</b>	167,334	16,393	74,949	5,745	33,663	39,347
<b>Students with NEW exemptions in 2014 excluding PLC</b>						
Student from abroad who have no understanding of English when enrolled	1516	247	896	18	169	654
Student whose primary education up to 11 years of age was received in NI or abroad	357	56	86	1	38	36
Student with attested learning disability	2768	971	317	89	168	79
Student aged 11 or over who is being re-enrolled after at least 3 years abroad	59	5	13	0	9	6

Source: DES, personal communication regarding new exemptions; data on student numbers in each course obtained from DES interactive tables.

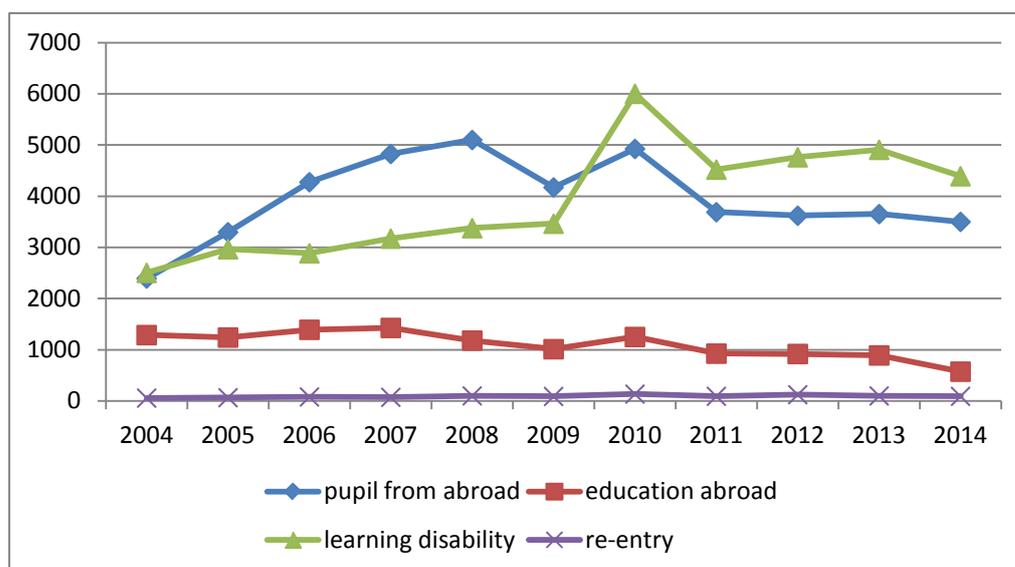
Table 2 indicates that the highest proportion of exemptions granted was among students with attested learning disability taking the Junior Certificate School Programme (6%), while the highest proportion of exemptions held was among students with attested learning disabilities who were taking Leaving Certificate Applied programme (29%)(see Table 3).

**Table 3: The number and percentage of exemptions held in each category in 2014**

	Junior Certificate (years 1-3)	Junior Certificate Schools Program (years 1-3)	Leaving Certificate+ repeat LC	Leaving Certificate Applied (years 1-2)	Leaving Certificate Vocational (years 1-2)	Transition Year
<b>Total number of students in the program in 2014 excluding PLC</b>	167,334	16,393	74,949	5,745	33,663	39,347
<b>Students with exemptions held in 2014 excluding PLC</b>						
Student from abroad who have no understanding of English when enrolled	2901	579	3263	269	1240	1169
Student whose primary education up to 11 years of age was received in NI or abroad	960	127	900	71	419	276
Student with attested learning disability	7461	2517	3406	1686	2447	1956
Student aged 11 or over who is being re-enrolled after at least 3 years abroad	130	12	107	14	37	35

Source: DES, personal communication regarding the number of exemptions held; data on student numbers in each course obtained from DES interactive tables.

**Figure 1: Irish language exemptions granted over time**



Source: DES, personal communication.

Figure 1 shows the number of exemptions held by students in different categories over time. The number of students who have been granted exemptions on the grounds of learning disability has risen between 2004 and 2014. The number of students from abroad who were granted exemption from learning Irish increased notably between 2004 and 2008 and has plateaued in the last three years. As there was no change in the reporting procedure during the years presented in the graph, this may also reflect trends in migration which peaked in 2007/2008. While interpreting these trends it is important to note that there was also an increase in student numbers from 2007 in second-level schools (see Figure 3).

**Figure 2: Exemptions held over time**

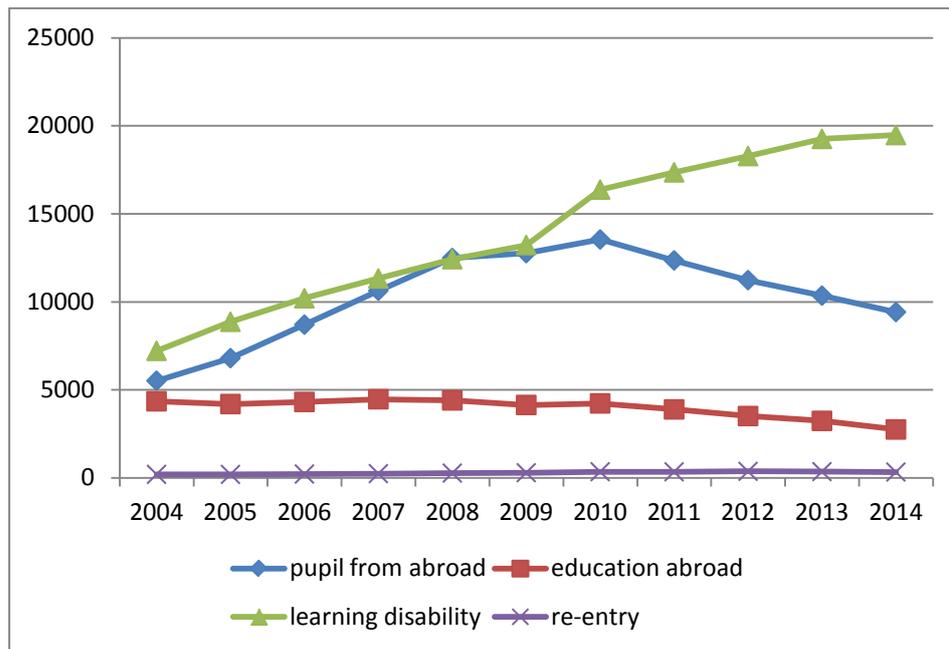
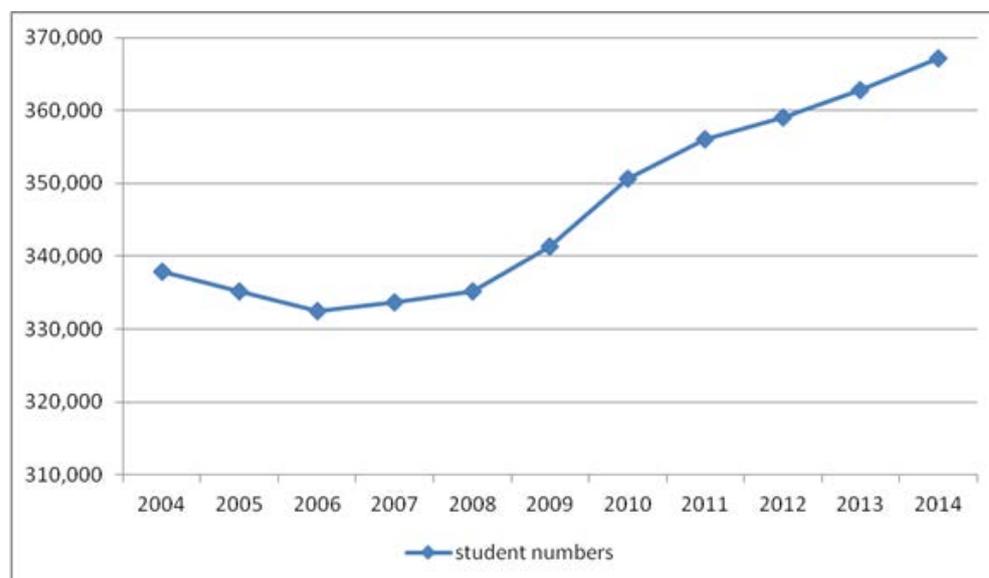


Figure 2 presents the number of students holding exemptions in post-primary school across the four categories over the last 10 years. The figures show that since 2004 there has been a steady rise in the numbers of students with learning difficulties who are holding exemptions. The number of exemptions held by non-Irish children also rose steadily between 2004 and 2008 and started to decline from 2010 onwards, broadly corresponding to general trends in immigration. There have not been notable changes in the number of students holding exemptions who were educated elsewhere or who have re-entered the Irish education system over time.

**Figure 3: All students in second level schools (number 2004-2014)**



Source: DES administrative data; available online: [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)

Exemptions from Irish is an area previously under-researched in Ireland. One existing study in Irish by Ó Laoire (2013) drew from DES data on exemptions and a survey of second level school principals and Irish-language teachers in 2011<sup>8</sup>; the data were supplemented by focus group interviews with teachers. The results showed that there were some students who started post-primary school without having learned Irish at primary level [but] who had not obtained an exemption. The author also reported that there were students who had learning difficulties and did not study Irish but who, nonetheless, studied other modern languages such as French<sup>9</sup>. Ó Laoire argues that 'the arrangements for applying for an exemption are ad hoc' and 'there is a lack of policy, uncertainty and a lack of transparency' surrounding the issue (ibid, p.5). Additional findings by the author showed that 44 per cent of exempted students stayed in the classroom during the class, while 8 per cent of them studied a different subject (ibid.). Information gathered from the focus group interviews revealed that there was little awareness of the benefits of bilingualism among pupils or parents who participated in the study (ibid.). The author suggests that information from studies showing the positive benefits of bilingualism might be brought to the attention of those seeking exemptions. This study builds on research carried out by Ó Laoire examining the trends of exemptions for different groups of students over time, as well as presenting a profile of students in second-level schools who are exempt from learning the subject.

### ***Methodology***

Growing Up in Ireland is a Government-funded study of children being carried out jointly by the ESRI and Trinity College Dublin. The main aim of the study is to paint a full picture of children in Ireland and how they are developing in the current social, economic and cultural environment. This information will be used to assist in policy formation and in the provision of services which will ensure all children will have the best possible start in life. The Child Cohort is made up of just over 8,500 children who were selected randomly through the National School system. A nationally representative sample of 900 schools was selected from all over Ireland including mainstream national schools, private schools and special schools. The sample of 8,500 nine-year-old children was then randomly selected from within these schools. In addition, over 2,300 individual teachers of the study children cooperated with the study as well as their Principals. The children and their parents were given an information pack on the study and invited to participate. Data collection for Wave One of the Child Cohort took place from September 2007 to June 2008. To gather as much information as possible about each child, information was collected from the child, their parent(s)/guardian(s), school teacher and Principal, and childminder (where relevant). Data collection for Wave Two took place from August 2011 to March 2012. This

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<sup>8</sup> In total, 168 principals of post-primary schools and 98 post-primary Irish language teachers participated in the study.

<sup>9</sup> More research is warranted on the rationale of taking modern languages but not Irish. It could be that this group includes foreign nationals who take their mother tongue. It can also be that languages other than Irish (e.g. Spanish, French) are considered to be easier to learn and could be used more widely outside the education system.

involved returning to the same group of 8,500 children at 13 years of age to find out how they had grown and how their lives had changed over the four intervening years.

### ***Analytic Approach and Research Results***

As a first step, descriptive analyses were carried out based on data from the Growing Up in Ireland study (13-year-old cohort). Students in the study were evenly divided between first and second year of post-primary education. The proportion of second-level students exempt from learning Irish in the sample is relatively small: 5 per cent (n=375). Male students are significantly more likely to be exempt from Irish than female students (6% versus 4%;  $p < 0.001$ ). Social class background also matters: students from higher social classes are significantly less likely to be exempt from Irish ( $p < 0.001$ ). The level of education of the mother does not have as strong an effect as social class; however, students of mothers who have lower secondary education are somewhat more likely to be exempt from learning Irish ( $p < 0.001$ ). The results of wave 2 data show that students attending schools with disadvantaged (DEIS) status are significantly more likely to not study Irish ( $p < 0.001$ ). Although a relatively small percentage of students in the sample attend private primary schools, the proportion of students not studying Irish is higher than in state-funded schools ( $p < 0.001$ ). As for fee-paying second-level schools, students attending these are slightly more likely to be exempt ( $p < 0.10$ ).

Not surprisingly, having special educational needs is positively and significantly associated with being exempt from studying Irish ( $p < 0.001$ ). The type of learning difficulty also matters, with exemptions being more prevalent for those with emotional and behavioural difficulties (34%) or learning disabilities (30%). As expected, children born abroad and whose mothers are immigrants (0.10) are more likely to be exempt from Irish ( $p < 0.001$ ). Those whose home language is not English are more likely to be exempt from Irish but this finding is not statistically significant. Both Drumcondra Reading and Mathematics test scores (quintiles) are significantly associated with not studying Irish, with those in the lowest quintile (fifth) more likely to be exempt from Irish ( $p < 0.001$ ). When considering placement of students in class groups, the analysis shows that students in lower stream classes are significantly more likely to be exempt ( $p < 0.001$ ). Some evidence (O Laoire, 2014) suggests that some students who are exempt from learning Irish are, nevertheless, taking other languages. The analysis presented here shows that students who are exempt from Irish are significantly less likely to be taking other languages ( $p < 0.001$ ).

**Table 4: Multilevel logistic regression models of the likelihood of not studying Irish at age 13**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	-2.726	-3.965	-2.677
Gender	-0.664***	-0.433**	-0.482**
Social class:			
Professional/managerial	-0.668**	-0.502*	-0.239
Non-manual/skilled manual	-0.292	-0.273	-0.220
Non-employed (Ref.: Semi/unskilled manual)	0.021	-0.246	-0.209
Mother's education:			
Leaving Certificate	-0.241	-0.321	-0.194
Post-secondary	-0.040	-0.014	0.205
Tertiary (Ref.: Lower secondary or less)	-0.137	-0.166	0.164
Lone parent household (Ref.: Two-parent household)	-0.087	-0.179	-0.252
DEIS status at primary level:			
Urban Band 1	-0.072	-0.139	-0.326
Urban Band 2	-0.089	-0.149	-0.299
Rural DEIS (Ref.: Non-DEIS)	-0.432	-0.757	-0.864*
DEIS second-level school	0.368*	0.379*	0.296
Second-level school sector:			
Girls' secondary	0.626*	0.493±	0.511±
Coeducational secondary	0.600**	0.501*	0.555*
Vocational	0.479*	0.277	0.200
Community/comprehensive (Ref.: Boys' secondary)	0.459*	0.269	0.191
Special educational needs at 9 (teacher report)		2.826***	2.168***
English not home language		0.614*	0.468
Time of mother's immigration:			
< 5 years		0.856***	0.639*
6 + years		0.221	0.181
Reading achievement at age 9:			
Quintile 2			-1.183***
Quintile 3			-1.835***
Quintile 4			-1.947***
Quintile 5 (highest) (Ref.: Quintile 1 (lowest))			-3.032***
Did not do reading test			1.279***
Year group:			
Second (Ref.: First)			0.270*
Between-school variation	0.120	0.100	0.209
N	7,282	7,282	7,282

The descriptive analyses take account of the relationship between factors and exemption singly. Table 4 shows a series of multilevel logistic regression models which explore the relationship between individual and school characteristics and being exempt from studying Irish, looking at the simultaneous influence of these factors. Multilevel models are used to take account of the fact that children were sampled within primary schools at the age of 9 and therefore this clustering should be taken into account in any estimates. A positive coefficient means that the specific factor is associated with not studying Irish while a negative coefficient means that having a particular characteristic reduces the likelihood of being exempt from Irish. The first model looks at the extent to which Irish exemption varies

by social background and school characteristics without taking account of differences in the criteria for exemption, namely, learning difficulties and early education outside of the State. Girls are much less likely than boys of the same social background and school type to be exempt from Irish; the difference is sizable with girls being only around half as likely as boys not to study Irish. Young people from professional and managerial backgrounds are also much less likely to be exempt from Irish than those from other social class groups. This difference is similar in scale to the gender gap in Irish exemption. Once social class is taken into account, maternal education is not significantly associated with being exempt from Irish. There are no differences between lone parent and two-parent households in the likelihood of not studying Irish. Having attended a DEIS primary school is not significantly associated with Irish exemption at age 13. However, those attending a DEIS second-level school are 1.4 times more likely not to study Irish than those in non-DEIS schools. Later models will explore whether this pattern reflects the concentration of particular groups of students in DEIS second-level schools. After taking individual's gender into account, some variation by school sector is also evident with lower rates of Irish exemption in boys' secondary schools than in other school types. Given the gender difference discussed above, this means that rates of Irish exemption are lowest overall in single-sex secondary schools, although this difference is not statistically significant.

Model 2 adds in measures of the grounds for exemption from Irish. As expected, having a special educational need at age 9,<sup>10</sup> as reported by the teacher, is very strongly associated with not studying Irish. Two measures of immigrant status are used in the model: whether the child's home language is not English or Irish; and the time of arrival in Ireland. Young people, whose families have arrived in Ireland more recently, that is, within the last five years, are much more likely to be exempt from Irish as are those whose home language is not English or Irish. The coefficients for gender and being from a professional/managerial background are somewhat reduced in magnitude compared with model 1; in other words, part of the gender and social gap in Irish exemption is related to differences in the prevalence of SEN across groups. The differences by school sector become less clear-cut in this model, reflecting differences in the SEN and immigrant composition of schools.

Model 3 takes account of reading achievement<sup>11</sup> at age 9, as measured by the Drumcondra standardised reading test, and year group. As would be expected, reading test scores are very strongly associated with exemption from Irish, with those in the lowest reading quintile (fifth) most likely not to be studying Irish. A group of students (less than 2% of the cohort) did not complete the reading test at age 9 either because they were absent from school or because they were deemed unable to take the test by their teachers. This group is much more likely to be exempt from Irish four years later, being 3.6 times more likely not to study Irish even than those who were in the lowest-scoring reading group. Interestingly, levels of Irish exemption among girls remain much lower than among boys, even taking account of

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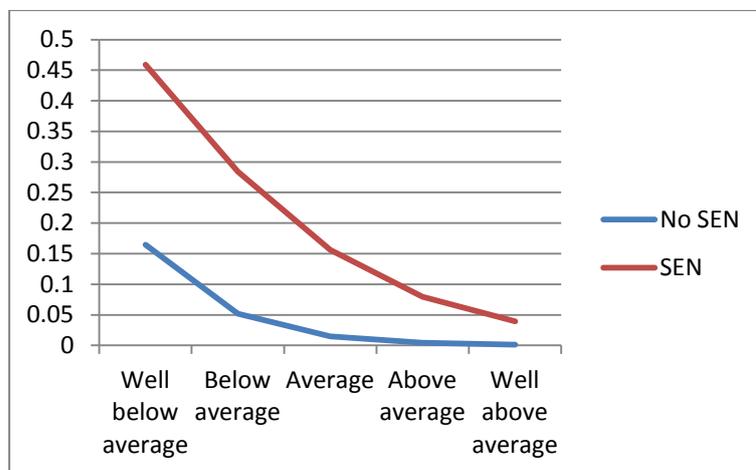
<sup>10</sup> The type of SEN is not included in this model as the relationship is so strong that the model will not converge. However, the descriptive analyses presented above give an indication of the variation in Irish exemption according to different special needs.

<sup>11</sup> Maths achievement at age 9 is highly correlated with reading achievement so is not included in the model.

prior reading achievement. Reading achievement mediates the effect of several other factors. Being from a professional or managerial background is no longer significant in this model; in other words, middle-class young people are less likely to be exempt from Irish because of their higher levels of reading achievement at primary level. Similarly, young people attending DEIS second-level schools are more likely to be exempt from Irish because of their lower prior levels of achievement. Having a home language other than English or Irish is no longer significant in this model so the effect of home language is explained by levels of prior achievement in English reading. Time of arrival in Ireland is reduced in magnitude in this model but remains significantly associated with Irish exemption. The effect of having a special educational need is reduced in magnitude when prior achievement is taken into account but remains a highly significant predictor of Irish exemption. Students in second year are 1.3 times more likely to be exempt from Irish than their peers in first year, all else being equal. This may reflect more students being made exempt as they are found to struggle with progression through the junior cycle curriculum. It may also relate to being closer in time to the Junior Certificate exam for which exemption will matter.

The analyses presented here group reading test scores at age 9 into five categories. However, there may be systematic differences between groups of students who fall into each of these categories. Alternative analyses were conducted using reading as a continuous measure but the patterns presented in Table 4 remained unchanged. Additional analyses were carried out to see whether the effect of gender or SEN varied by prior achievement. No such difference was found by gender; in other words, the gender gap in Irish exemption holds across the achievement range. However, having a SEN and level of reading achievement interact in complex ways. Figure 4 shows the predicted likelihood of being exempt from Irish by reading score at 9 and having a special educational need, holding all other factors constant. Those who have special educational needs are more likely to be exempt from Irish than their peers who have similar levels of English reading achievement. However, this gap is narrower for those with higher levels of reading achievement.

**Figure 4: Predicted likelihood of being exempt from Irish by reading score and SEN**



## *Conclusion*

This paper has considered the likelihood of post-primary students being exempt from learning Irish, one of the core subjects in the junior and senior cycle curriculum, taking learning differentiation as a framing concept. Differentiation is the recognition of and commitment to plan for student differences (Baumann, et al., 1997). The goals of differentiated learning are to maximize student growth and to promote individual student success. At present, four broad groups of post-primary students in Ireland are not required to study the Irish language. These include students from abroad; students whose primary education up to 11 years of age was received in Northern Ireland or abroad; students with an attested learning disability, and students aged 11 or over who are being re-enrolled after at least three years abroad. There is anecdotal evidence that students who do not take Irish, are, nevertheless taking other languages. However, empirical evidence on the profile of students is lacking. Considering the gap in evidence in Ireland regarding exemption from one of the core subjects, it is important to understand what factors most likely predict granting of exemptions, in order to guide policy making in this area. Not taking the Irish language at school may have implications for entry to some third-level institutions and professions in the Republic of Ireland. Having acquired primary education in another jurisdiction makes it difficult for students to study Irish in secondary schools as they would be at a disadvantage compared to the peers who have studied the language throughout their primary education. Languages, including Irish, can also be a challenge for students with learning difficulties. Differentiated learning (facilitated in numerous ways including differentiated curriculum content, programme delivery and assessment arrangements) may enable certain groups who would otherwise have difficulties with an aspect of the core curriculum still to learn the subject. Under very exceptional circumstances, such as special educational needs and not having taken the subject previously, are students exempt from learning the subject.

At present, the Department of Education and Skills collects administrative data on the exemptions granted and held. These data provide valuable information on trends over time. The paper has shown that while there has been a steady increase in exemptions granted on the grounds of learning disability over the last ten years, the number of foreign students who have gained exemption has fallen recently, possibly reflecting general migration trends. The numbers of exemptions given to those who have gained primary education elsewhere or who have re-entered the Irish education system, have been relatively stable. The analysis presented here also shows that in 2014 the largest category of students who have been given exemptions are those with learning disabilities. The figures presented in the paper need to be interpreted in the context of growing student numbers in second-level schools.

While this information is useful for gaining a broader picture, more detailed information is warranted in order to fully understand the reasons behind rising numbers of exemptions granted (and held). Multivariate analysis utilised in this study enables us to gauge the simultaneous effect of a number of demographic and institutional factors on not studying Irish at post-primary level. Gender is significant – girls are less likely to be exempt from Irish. There is no difference in social class, once prior achievement levels are taken into account.

The longitudinal element of the Growing Up Study enables us to link data on the same young people at 9 and 13 years of age. Having a special educational need at the age of 9 has a significant effect on not studying Irish at the age of 13. In addition, reading test scores at age 9 predict later exemption from Irish. Those who have special educational needs are more likely to be exempt from Irish than their peers who have similar levels of English reading achievement. As can be expected, recent arrivals to Ireland are also more likely to be exempt from Irish.

The main finding of the paper is that exemptions are mostly associated with special educational needs and ability. In this sense the results presented here suggest that the system is operating fairly – in a sense that exemptions are granted and held mostly by students for valid reasons (a previous study criticised ad hoc arrangements regarding applying for exemptions and policy in this area – see O Laoire). There is some support to the claims that those taking other languages are exempt from Irish, although the numbers doing so are very small and little is known about the profile of these students. Further research is warranted to profile these students. The gender effect regarding exemption from Irish showing that boys are more likely to be exempt could perhaps be explained by more negative perceptions of languages in general among boys as well as gender socialization, gendered curriculum practices and cultural narratives about boys and schooling (Carr, 2009). However, the effect of the gender composition of the school on exemptions remains difficult to explain and requires further research.

In addition to demographics, it is possible that other factors that drive the increase in the number of exemptions include student retention at post-primary level and the identification of students with special educational needs. At present over 90 per cent of students stay in school to complete their Leaving Certificate, according to a report published by the Department of Education and Skills in 2014<sup>12</sup>. Over the years there have been changes in the identification and assessment of special educational needs and the provision of additional supports. The policy trend towards inclusive education has resulted in broadening the definition of SEN, greatly affecting prevalence estimates (Banks and McCoy, 2011). In order to assess the broader picture of exemptions granted and held, it is also important to consider these broader trends. In addition, another area that warrants further research is associated with the impact of exemptions from Irish and/or other languages and college admission. Further research could also include the educational outcomes of those with and without exemptions with the same level of ability.

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<sup>12</sup>See: [https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Statistical-Reports/stats\\_retention\\_report\\_2007\\_cohort.pdf](https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Statistical-Reports/stats_retention_report_2007_cohort.pdf)

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