



# Supplement to *Guide for Schools on Providing Estimated Percentage Marks and Class Rank Orderings*

28 May 2020

This supplement provides additional guidance to schools on matters that have been brought to the Department's attention since the publication on 21 May of *Guide for Schools on Providing Estimated Percentage Marks and Class Rank Orderings*. It deals with three issues:

1. Further guidance of the avoidance of unconscious bias
2. Interpreting evidence of achievement in the case of students with disabilities
3. Further guidance on bonus marks that would have applied for answering the written examinations through Irish

## 1. Further guidance of the avoidance of unconscious bias

The *Guide for Schools* states:

### 8.4 Avoiding unconscious bias

It is very important to remain alert to possible sources of unconscious bias that might affect estimates. For instance, research in many countries shows that teacher estimates of student performance are often affected by the teacher's experience and perceptions of the student's classroom behaviour. By being alert to this source of unconscious bias, there is a better chance of examining the evidence more objectively, focussing on evidence that is clearly about attainment in the subject and not about other factors. Similarly, research also suggests that teacher estimates can be unconsciously affected by what they know or think they know about students' backgrounds, such as their socio-economic or family background. Knowing that this can happen gives a teacher a better chance of focussing on evidence and considering why it is thought a particular student will achieve a particular standard.

The following additional information on objectivity in generating estimated percentage marks and rank orders is intended to aid schools and teachers in ensuring that the estimates that are made are as fair as possible. The information is based on existing research and analysis about how school-based assessments can be carried out as objectively as possible.

### Objectivity in generating estimated percentage marks

In order to remain objective, it is very important that the school's judgements should only take account of existing records and available evidence of a student's knowledge, skills and abilities in relation to the subject concerned. This evidence should inform teachers' professional judgements about each student's likely performance in the examination. Other factors **should**

**not affect** this judgement, including – but not limited to – characteristics protected under equality legislation: gender, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, race and membership of the Traveller community. Similarly, judgements **should not** be allowed to be influenced by a student's behaviour (whether good or challenging), character, appearance, social class, or absences from school-based summative assessments due to illness, for example.

## Unconscious effects on objectivity

To avoid unconscious bias, schools and teachers are encouraged to reflect on and question whether they may have any preconceptions about each student's performance and whether their perception of the evidence might be affected by any irrelevant factors.

Teachers and schools should be aware of:

- **Confirmation bias:** this is a tendency to search for and interpret information that aligns with one's preconceived opinions about a student. For example, if one makes a judgement about a student, one may subconsciously search for evidence to support that judgement, noticing only evidence about a student that fits with pre-existing views about them, thereby unduly affecting estimates of the student's level of achievement.
- **Halo or masking effects:** this is a tendency to perceive one very positive thing about a student and allow that "halo glow" of that one thing colour our opinions, which may hide, or overly accentuate, the student's actual knowledge, skills and abilities.
- **Horns effects:** this is the direct opposite of the halo or masking effect, and occurs when perception of someone is unduly influenced by one negative trait, for example challenging behaviour.
- **Primacy effects:** primacy bias error occurs when assessment is made based on information that was presented earlier, for example giving undue weight to 'first impressions' of a student.
- **Recency effects:** recency bias is the opposite to primacy bias and occurs when an assessment is overly affected by information that was presented later (more recently) rather than earlier in any given selection process, for example giving undue weight to the most recent interaction with a student or the most recent piece of work done by a student.
- **Selective bias:** this is a perceptions bias, whereby undue weight may be given to a student's performance on a particular part of the content of the specification rather than considering performance across all the material.
- **Contrast effects:** is the tendency to mentally upgrade or downgrade a student's likely performance when comparing it to a contrasting group of students. For example over- or under-estimating a student's likely performance having first considered a large number of students who are all working at a different standard.

Active consideration of the avoidance of unconscious bias – particularly that related to any of the nine grounds referred to in the Equal Status Acts – should apply during all stages of school-based phase of the Calculated Grades process: the preliminary work of individual teachers, the work of the subject alignment group, and oversight by the school principal.

## 2. Interpreting evidence of achievement in the case of students with disabilities

The material above in relation to the avoidance of unconscious bias applies in the case of students with disabilities. Additionally, the *Guide for Schools* deals specifically with the question of Reasonable Accommodations in the examinations. It states in Section 13:

### **Reasonable accommodations**

Where any reasonable accommodation has been approved for any student, (such as a reader, scribe or waiver), the estimate of the student's likely performance should be based on the assumption that this accommodation would have been available had the examinations been conducted in the normal way. Since accommodations are intended to reflect students' normal way of working in class, this should not require any special intervention beyond the teacher's existing understanding of how the student gets on with the relevant supports in place.

What follows is some additional guidance in relation to providing estimated percentage marks for students with disabilities.

As noted in the *Guide for Schools*, the scheme of Reasonable Accommodations operates on the premise that, in the vast majority of cases, any disability that affects a student's capacity to demonstrate their achievements in the examination has been identified earlier on the student's progress through school. Accordingly, it is assumed that the necessary supports for learning have been put in place and that appropriate supports and accommodations have also been in place for the formal and informal assessment activities that take place throughout the two years of whichever Leaving Certificate programme they are following. These arrangements will not necessarily have been identical to those provided during the certificate examinations, as the context and constraints are different, but will have been intended to achieve the same objective – to remove any access barriers that might stand in the way of a student fully understanding what they are being asked to do and/or demonstrating what they know and can do.

In interpreting any evidence from such tests or assessments when forming a judgment as to the likely performance of such a student, consideration should be given as to whether the arrangements in place at the time of that assessment were adequate for that purpose. If they were not, then the teacher will need to take account of this and, based on their knowledge of how the student does in class when normal supports are in place, consider how the student is likely to have achieved on the assessment concerned in the event that appropriate arrangements *had* been in place.

Likewise, it is very important to remain alert to possible sources of unconscious bias that might affect estimates. It is assumed that all teachers are aware of their students' individual learning needs and have provided the necessary classroom-based supports to remove any barriers that may have had an impact on their performance in formative and summative assessments. It is also assumed that teachers have a very good knowledge of their students. However, by being alert to the source/s of unconscious bias, there is a better chance of examining the evidence more objectively, focussing on evidence that is clearly about attainment in the subject and not about other factors, such as behaviour, learning disability, or absences from school-based summative assessments due to illness, for example. Teachers' knowledge and observations of individual students' learning, formative assessment of that learning during

classroom interactions, and summative assessment of attainment, may combine to inform a teacher's evidence-base for estimated percentage marks for students with disabilities, as indeed it does for all other students.

Additional care should be taken in any cases where there has been a late diagnosis of a disability – i.e. occurring some time during the two years of the programme concerned. In this case, account should be taken of the fact that outcomes from tests and other assessments that predate supports being put in place may under-represent the student's actual level of achievement in the subject, module or task under consideration.

With regard to any student with additional needs that necessitate support and/or accommodation in a learning or assessment environment, it is expected that all of the student's teachers will have been made aware of the nature of the need and the appropriate supports at the time they were first identified. In circumstances where school management is not confident that this has occurred, they should now ensure that all necessary information on students with disabilities is provided to all teachers, to inform their work in estimating percentage marks.

It should be noted that a close familiarity with the details of the scheme of Reasonable Accommodations operated by the State Examinations Commission, including the details of how various accommodations and waivers are implemented is not required in order to make the professional judgments required. It is the underlying principles of the scheme that are most important. Key among these are that the arrangements are not intended to compensate for any lack of achievement resulting from a disability but to remove, as far as possible, any barriers to the students' displaying their true underlying levels of achievement.

Some examination accommodations involve a 'waiver' or 'exemption', which means that there is an element or elements of the discipline that these students will not be tested on. Where a student has been granted a waiver or an exemption, then any deficiency that the student might previously have displayed in respect of the element waived should be ignored when arriving at an estimated mark. The focus should be solely on the aspects of the discipline that have not been waived. For example, if a student for Leaving Certificate English has been granted a *waiver of spelling and written punctuation*, then the teacher should consider the extent to which he/she might have penalised that student in the past for such errors in their classwork, tests and assessments. The teacher should then, when interpreting and weighing evidence of achievement in order to arrive at an estimated mark, take account of the fact that deficiencies in spelling and punctuation would have been removed from consideration if the examinations had happened as normal.

### 3. Further guidance on bonus marks that would have applied for answering the written examinations through Irish

The *Guide for Schools* states in Section 13:

#### Answering through Irish

In the case of students who are entered to take their examinations through Irish, the teacher should base her/his estimate of the student's likely mark on the assumption that the bonus that is applicable for answering the written paper through Irish is included in the estimate. It is anticipated that most teachers who are teaching through Irish will have internalised and taken account of the impact of the bonus when making their initial judgments, so that no explicit calculation of the bonus will be needed. Nevertheless, if any teacher is unsure how the bonus applies in their subject, information is available on the State Examinations Commission's website at <https://www.examinations.ie/?l=en&mc=ca&sc=im>.

Some requests have been received for more precise details of exactly how the bonus for answering through Irish is calculated. Notwithstanding these requests, it is not considered advisable for teachers to engage in explicit calculations of the Irish bonus, for the following reasons.

It must be noted that the bonus mark only applies to the **written component** of each examination. In order for a correct calculation to be made, a teacher of a subject involving a coursework or practical component would have to separate out their overall estimated mark into distinct marks for each component, calculate the bonus applicable to the written component, and then reassemble the overall mark. Apart from the complexity of this task, it is considered that this process of separation, calculation and reassembly is an unwarranted interference with the main judgmental task that teachers and schools are being asked to make, which is to give an overall holistic judgment, taking account of all relevant information.

It is much more preferable for teachers and schools, where possible, to work on the basis of their previous experience of how the bonus marks have mediated their expectations of student achievement. If teachers and schools consider that more concrete guidance is required, then the following should be considered fully adequate to the task:

- take full account of the fact that the bonus applies to the written paper only
- be aware of what the 'base rate' for the subject is (10%, 5%, or no bonus)
- take account of the fact that a 'sliding scale' applies to marks above 75% of the marks available, so that the effect of the bonus gradually diminishes from this point onwards. (That is, for example, in the case of a subject with a written paper only and which attracts a 10% bonus, a candidate achieving 75% would get an additional 7.5% from the bonus, which is the maximum possible benefit, and students scoring more than 75% would get a bonus that gradually decreases to 0 as the mark increases.)

As the following recently introduced subjects may not appear on existing lists of subjects to which bonus marks apply, it may be noted that the base rate for Politics and Society (written examination) is 10%, the base rate for Physical Education (written examination) is 10% and the base rate for Computer Science (combined written and programming examination) is 5%.

[Acknowledgment: some material in section 1 above has been adapted from: *Guidance for Heads of Centre, Heads of Department and teachers on objectivity in grading and ranking*, Ofqual, 2020]