Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

A Guide to State Examinations and Accredited Grades for Leaving Certificate 2021

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Version 1.0

1. Introduction

A key objective of Government has been to run the Leaving Certificate examinations in 2021 as closely as possible to the normal arrangements. However, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the recent national lockdown, students have experienced a significant loss of face-to-face teaching and learning in the early months of 2021 as well as in the later part of the 2019/2020 school year. While teachers and school management have provided extensive online learning opportunities for post-primary students during the period when school buildings were closed, there is considerable evidence to suggest that emergency remote learning while effective and successful for the majority of students is less effective for others. As a result, Leaving Certificate students have had uneven access to teaching and learning opportunities as they prepare for their examinations.

The Minister for Education has worked closely with representatives of students, parents, teachers, school management authorities, the State Examinations Commission and the other members of the Advisory Group on Planning for the State Examinations 2021 to examine the issues arising for students because of these circumstances.

Based on current public health advice available to the Minister, the planned written Leaving Certificate and Leaving Certificate Applied examinations can proceed in June, and the Minister has asked the State Examinations Commission to make the examinations available in as normal a manner as possible. The completion and assessment of additional components (course work, practical examinations and oral examinations) will also take place where possible in accordance with COVID-19-related restrictions.

However, following consultation with the Advisory Group, the Minister has determined that it would be unfair to have students rely entirely on the conventional Leaving Certificate process as the sole means of assessment for their Leaving Certificate in 2021. The Minister recognises the need to facilitate these students to progress to further or higher education, apprenticeship or the world of work through conventional examinations or through a system of Accredited Grades. To ensure, as far as possible, equity of opportunity for students, the Minister is making arrangements to put in place the necessary legislative requirements to enable the State Examinations Commission (SEC) to operate a system of Accredited Grades in addition to conventional examinations (inclusive, where applicable, of additional assessment components) for current Leaving Certificate students.

In summary, Leaving Certificate 2021 results will be awarded on the basis of the better of

either

- Students' performance in Leaving Certificate examinations in any subject taken by them, including, where appropriate, their performance in the completion of additional components (coursework, orals, etc.)

or

- SEC Accredited Grades awarded to students in each subject based on schools' estimates of students' likely performance in the 2021 examination[1] and a national standardisation process.

2. State Examinations

All students may opt to take Leaving Certificate examinations, (including written examinations and related additional components in each subject as appropriate) in 2021. The State Examinations Commission will put in place the necessary arrangements to provide these examinations, subject to prevailing health advice. Students who wish to take the examinations will be able to participate in orals and coursework while those who do not will have the option of the SEC Accredited Grade.

2.1 Adjustments to the Written Examinations

In response to the disrupted learning experienced by students during the periods of school closures in 2020 and 2021 adjustments have already been made to the assessment arrangements for post-primary students taking State certificate examinations in the 2020/21 school year. Details of those adjustments were communicated to schools, teachers and students in the **Assessment Arrangements for Junior and Leaving Certificate Examinations 2021** available here. These adjustments will be reflected in the written examinations.

The changes made can be viewed as reflecting and recognising disruption of normal teaching and learning patterns and some associated loss of learning time, while

[1] Note that changes have been made to the examinations in 2021. See section 2.1 and Assessment Arrangements for Junior and Leaving Certificate Examinations 2021

acknowledging that teachers have made very significant efforts to provide for continuity in learning through remote teaching.

In addition to the adjustment to the examinations previously communicated to schools, further adjustments will be made to the written papers. These further adjustments will aim to reduce the load on students, leaving intact the general overall structure of the written examination papers. In the majority of cases these adjustments will involve reducing the number of questions that students will be required to answer. The duration of the examinations will remain the same as set out in the published timetable, thus providing students with additional time to read the paper and answer the required number of questions.

Further subject-by-subject guidance in relation to these adjustments will be issued by the SEC in the week of 22 March .

The time available to complete each written examination will remain the same as is set out the published timetable.

Written examinations are scheduled to commence on 9 June 2021.The timetable for these examinations is available .

2.2 Additional components (coursework, oral and practical examinations)

The majority of subjects are examined through a combination of additional components and a written examination. The additional components are used to ensure that students have opportunities to demonstrate their learning across a range of practical and applied knowledge and skills.

The examinations will be marked and graded on the basis of all components that are run.

Details of altered arrangements for subjects with additional components (including adjusted dates for the submission of coursework and the completion of other components) will be published separately, but the general approach adopted will be as follows:

2.2.1 Coursework

Coursework will be completed by students and submitted to the SEC for marking or to be marked by the SEC examiners in schools. Flexibility in the arrangements for the completion and submission of coursework was notified to schools in January 2021. Details of the new submission dates, which take account of the continued school closures in January and February 2021, will be available shortly. In making these adjustments due consideration has been given to has been given to the need to protect students' tuition time for the remainder of the school year and ensuring that public health requirements are adhered to.

2.2.2 Practical examinations

Due to COVID-related restrictions it will not be possible to hold practical skills tests (day practicals) in Construction Studies or Engineering nor will it be possible for the Performance Assessment in Physical Education to proceed. In these subjects the proportion of marks normally allocated to these components will be reallocated to the project component. The proportion of the marks for the written examination will remain unchanged.

In the case of Music, planning is being advanced for revised arrangements in respect of the conduct of the practical performance component of the examination which it is hoped can take place in the Easter period. Engagement is ongoing with public health experts and further details on this will be provided as soon as possible.

2.2.3 Oral examinations

Oral examinations in Irish and modern foreign languages will take place in schools during the period from 26 March 2021 to 15 April 2021. Schools will hold the examinations at times outside of normal tuition time so that students' normal tuition is not interrupted to take the examination. For example, examinations may be scheduled in periods before or after the normal school day, during the Easter vacation, or at weekends. The scheduling of the examinations, within the period 26 March to 15 April, will be a matter for the management of the school, following consultation with the relevant teaching staff, but schools should seek to limit the period for the running of each language examination as far as practicable to a period of five consecutive days.

Oral examinations will be conducted under examination conditions by a teacher or teachers, qualified in the relevant subject/s, appointed by the management of the school. The teacher may be a suitably qualified member of staff of the school, a neighbouring school, or another suitably qualified teacher engaged by the school. Teachers carrying out this task will be remunerated by the SEC under arrangements

similar to those which apply to the local appointment of examinations personnel. Normal rules with respect to the vetting of teachers will apply.

Teachers conducting the examinations will be provided with guidance by the SEC. The oral examination will be recorded electronically and the recording will be sent to the SEC for marking.

Schools will have the authority to appoint an examination aide to assist in administering the oral examinations. The examination aide will be remunerated by the SEC under its scheme of examinations aide provision to support the delivery of examinations in schools.

2.3 Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA)

LCA written examinations are scheduled to commence on 9 June 2021.

In advance of the start of the current school year the Department published advice for management and teachers of Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) 2020/21 in Second-Level Schools and Centres for Education.

The advice note set out the curriculum and assessment arrangements for the LCA Year 1 and Year 2 students for the current academic year 2020/21. The revised arrangements also take account of the varying levels of student engagement in learning during the 2019/20 school year and acknowledge the modular nature of the LCA.

Adjustments were made to the assessment arrangements for students taking LCA certificate examinations. Details of those adjustments were communicated to schools, teachers and students in the **Assessment Arrangements for Junior and Leaving Certificate Examinations 2021**.

Separate guidance will be provided on the detailed arrangements for LCA examinations.

3. State Examinations Commission (SEC) Accredited Grades

Teachers and students have adapted to alternative approaches to teaching and learning, through emergency remote teaching and learning. However, despite additional resourcing to schools, disparities remain in accessing technology, connectivity and digital skills, which may have impacted on learning. Therefore, all Leaving

Certificate 2021 school students will be able to opt in to receive a set of SEC Accredited Grades. The grades will be arrived at through a process by which the teacher will use a range of available evidence to support her/his judgement-making in estimating the percentage marks to award to students, following which these estimated marks will be subjected to an in-school alignment process and later a national standardisation process.

SEC Accredited Grades will be provided:

- **In addition to examinations:** As far as possible, students will be provided with SEC Accredited Grades for all subjects for which they are entered in the Leaving Certificate examinations in 2021, provided that adequate evidence is available on which to base an SEC Accredited Grade.
- **To students who are unable to sit the examinations at the scheduled time:** For example, some students may be at very high-risk from COVID-19; some students may be required to self-isolate and/or restrict their movements for all or part of the period of the examinations; or they may have a bereavement or other medically certified illness which prevents them from sitting the examinations. Having the SEC Accredited Grade will enable the student to receive a grade in such cases. There will be no opportunity to sit the 2021 examinations at a later date.
- **When it is not possible to take the examinations**: It may not be possible to run the examinations in one or more examination centres because of COVID-19 related restrictions. In such cases, students will instead rely on an SEC Accredited Grade.

Students will be required to register on the SEC's Candidate Portal; confirm their subject and level entry details; opt for the examinations and/or to receive SEC Accredited Grades. The SEC's Candidate Portal is expected to open in the week of 8 March 2021 to allow students to make their choices. Students will have approximately one week in which to do this. Details of the students' choices will be provided to each school.

The portal will re-open in late April/early May to enable candidates to review their choices. The final confirmed candidate details will be provided to schools in advance of the in-school process.

3.1. What is an SEC Accredited Grade?

An SEC Accredited Grade is a grade that can be provided to a student in respect of a subject following the combination by the SEC of a school estimated percentage mark for a student's expected performance in an examination and national data available in relation to the performance of students in examinations over a period of time. Accredited Grades therefore take cognisance of performance in all aspects of an examination including, where relevant, oral, practical and coursework components and tasks.

An SEC Accredited Grade results from combining data as follows:

- A **school**[2] estimation of a percentage mark to be awarded to a student in respect of her/his expected performance in an examination in that particular subject.

- Data available from the **state examinations** – this includes, but is not necessarily limited to, national data on past Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate/Cycle examination performance (pre-2020) of students in each subject.

The combination of these data sets through a process of national standardisation will determine the grade to be awarded to each student in each subject, thereby resulting in an SEC Accredited Grade being awarded.

The Minister is committed to bringing forward legislative amendments (to the Education Act, 1998) that will allow the SEC to administer the Accredited Grades Scheme for Leaving Certificate 2021. However, until those legislative amendments are in place the planning for and early stages of implementation of the system of Accredited Grades will be managed by the Minister's Department.

3.2 What are the principles underpinning a system of SEC Accredited Grades?

The system of SEC Accredited Grades that is being offered is based on the following key principles:

- ***Teacher professionalism:*** Teachers know their students and can balance a variety of factors in arriving at a professional judgement in relation to their

In this document, "school" is taken to refer to any recognised school or centre for education or any examination centre recognised by the State Examinations Commission.

students' expected performance. Their
underpinned by the values of *Integrity, Trust, Care and Respect* informs how they work in schools to ensure the best outcomes for their students.

- ***Support for students:*** The offer of SEC Accredited Grades ensures that a clear alternative route to students progressing to further and higher education, or the world of work, is in place, and brings certainty to the overall process. It thus takes account of the need to support student wellbeing and satisfies the requirement for valid certification.
- ***Objectivity:*** Teachers and schools will be objective in their assessment of the student's expected performance and will take into consideration a range of evidence to support the judgements that are made. Schools and teachers will work collaboratively to ensure that no bias, conscious or unconscious, influences the decisions made in relation to a student's expected performance.
- ***Fairness and equity:*** Schools and teachers will strive to achieve fairness and equity in the way in which they apply the process at school level.
- ***Collaboration:*** A collaborative approach will be used in schools to ensure that each stage of the process is completed.
- ***Timeliness:*** Schools and teachers will ensure that the deadlines set for the completion of the in-school processes are met and that each stage is completed within the designated timeframe.

3.3 What are the key features of the system of SEC Accredited Grades?

In recognising the need for all current Leaving Certificate students to progress to further or higher education, apprenticeship or the world of work, students will be provided with Accredited Grades where it is possible to do so. The SEC Accredited Grades will be generated using the estimated percentage marks provided by schools (following provisional estimation by subject teacher(s) that will be subject to a process of in-school alignment and oversight by the principal) and national standardisation.

The key features of the system of SEC Accredited Grades include:

- ***Recognition of student achievement:*** The system recognises student achievement across the two years of the Senior Cycle, and the student's expected performance in the examination, including written examinations and where relevant, tasks, oral, practical and/or coursework components. Learning

during the school closure period of January-February-March 2021 should be taken into account, and (with caveats)) learning during the period of school closure in 2020. Learning and outcomes from March until 14 May will also be taken in to account.

- ***Reflection of learning:*** The SEC Accredited Grade system recognises that students learn in different ways and they develop a range of knowledge, skills and competences in subjects through the course of their study. It also reflects that school closures have affected students' engagement in different ways; many have adapted well to learning on-line, while others have found it harder to engage or fully access on-line learning.
- ***Continuity in learning****:* The arrangements for the SEC Accredited Grades seek to ensure that student engagement with their schools is encouraged for the remaining period of the 2020/21 school year. It is hoped that with the support of their teachers, students will be able to progress in their learning and work towards completing their course of study. This will assist in preparing students for progression to further and higher education, apprenticeship and the world of work.
- ***Safeguards for teachers' professional judgement***: Re-engaging with their teachers and peers in a face-to-face environment provides an opportunity to support student wellbeing and to discuss future education and career options. However, overtures or approaches by parents/guardians, students and others to, and/or discussions with teachers and/or school management in relation to school estimated marks submitted, as part of the Accredited Grades process are prohibited.[3]
- ***Consistency of approach****:* Schools and subject teachers will be supported in taking a consistent approach through the provision of additional detailed guidance in relation to the SEC Accredited Grades system.

4. Key steps in the process of arriving at an Accredited Grade

There are **two main phases** in the process of arriving at an SEC Accredited Grade:

- A school-based phase

[3] Additional guidance is provided in Section 14

- A national standardisation phase

Both phases are underpinned by the principles noted above

The process of arriving at an SEC Accredited Grade applies to:

- Established Leaving Certificate – subjects
- Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme – Link Modules
- Leaving Certificate Applied – subjects, tasks and vocational specialisms for LCA year 2 students and where relevant LCA year 1 students.

In the specific circumstances created by the COVID pandemic, the SEC Accredited Grade process is being made available in addition to the Leaving Certificate examination process. All Leaving Certificate students may sit the Leaving Certificate examinations which encompass the written examinations in June and related components in each subject (orals, coursework etc).

5. The role of the school

In the context of the school-based process, the role of the subject teacher is to provide marks that reflect:

- An **estimation of the percentage mark** in each subject that each candidate is likely to have achieved if they had sat the Leaving Certificate examination in 2021[4]

  For subjects that are examined through a written examination and additional components it is important that students' learning and competences across the range of practical and applied knowedge and skills are considered. Therefore, teachers will need to have regard to the student's likely performance in the written examination and their likely performance in the additional component(s) when arriving at the estimated percentage mark. .

- **Individual performance:** Teachers will demonstrate that no two students are placed on the same estimated percentage mark. Percentage marks may include up to two decimal places i.e. 83.22%, 83.33%, etc.

[4] Note that changes have been made to the examinaitons in 2021. See section 2.1 and Assessment Arrangements for Junior and Leaving Certificate Examinations 2021

In providing the above estimated marks, there will be **four main school-based steps**:

1. The teacher's estimation of student percentage marks
2. School alignment of marks for a subject through a subject alignment group comprising teachers who are teaching the subject to Leaving Certificate students this year
3. Oversight of the alignment process by the school principal
4. Transmission of the marks for national standardisation.

Each of these steps is set out in detail below.

6. Teacher's estimation (Step 1)

Teachers are asked to use their professional judgement, drawing on existing records and available evidence, to arrive at a provisional estimated percentage mark for each student undertaking a Leaving Certificate programme.

The assessment of students' learning should reflect the aims and learning outcomes of specifications and syllabuses as relevant.

In reaching their estimate in subjects with more than one component, teachers will have regard to the written examination and the additional component. The estimation will also take in to consideration the appropriate weightings for all of the components. Teachers will be asked to formally record their consideration of each component part. Teachers' knowledge and experience of the curriculum and the examination are essential to this process of arriving at the estimated mark.

6.1 What informs the teacher's estimated marks?

The range of evidence that teachers will draw on may include both formative and summative assessment activities undertaken, over the two years of study including those undertaken during periods of emergency remote learning in the current school year 2020/21. Teachers' professional judgement should not be allowed to be influenced by a student's behaviour (whether good or challenging), character, appearance, social class, ethnicity, or absences from school-based summative assessments due to illness, for example. It is important that aspects such as work habits and effort, homework,

participation, attendance and punctuality are not conflated with achievement in the subject in question.

In coming to their judgements, teachers should draw on existing records and available evidence. It is important that the judgements are objective, and they should only take account of information about student performance. This will include the following, where available:

- Records of each student's performance over the course of study including for example, assignments, projects and practical work and key assignments and practical work in the case of Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA)
- Performance on any class assessments, for example, tasks, questions, house or term examinations etc. taken over the course of study. Evidence of learning from the period of school closures in 2021 should be used. In using this evidence account must be taken of students whose circumstances made effective engagement with remote teaching and learning particularly difficult. Teachers should exercise great care in using evidence of learning from the period of school closure in 2020, especially if the teaching and learning experiences of students were very different at that time.
- Performance on any coursework component, even if this has not been fully completed including tasks in the case of LCA
- Any other relevant information related to student performance.

6.2 What are the key information sets available that inform teacher professional judgement?

Teachers will review the information available for each class group during senior cycle. Data may be drawn from the results entered on the school's administration software system, teachers' own records and, if available, samples of students' work that includes written qualitative feedback.

Results from summative assessments that are typically available include, for example: end-of-term reports for fifth and sixth-year, taking into account that these may have been conducted under variable conditions either formally in school or in an unsupervised remote remote environment. Teachers' records of in-class assessments, for example: end-of-topic tests, continuous assessments, aural and oral assessments,

presentations, project work, and/or coursework over the two years of study may also be considered.

Teachers should reach an "on-balance" judgement in relation to a student's expected performance and an occasional dip or peak in a student's performance should not be treated as indicative of overall performance.

Statistical or algorithmic models, such as those offered by commercial companies must not be used in the process of data analysis and review and the estimation of percentage marks.

6.3 What are the characteristics of the assessments selected?

Outcomes of formative assessments that can be considered to include, for example:

1. Observations of students' learning and progression in lessons
2. Written formative feedback provided to students
3. Students' demonstration of knowledge and key skills in the subject, including in the context of subjects with oral or other components their engagement with these aspects

In selecting summative assessments for consideration:

1. There should be evidence of the learning and assessment completed
2. Students should have been provided with feedback in relation to the work completed including for example: narrative written feedback, marks, percentage scores, grades, or descriptors

6.4 Are additional assessments required?

Following the return to school, teachers may set a limited number of additional assessments up to 14 May 2021.

It is important in the period leading up to the determination of estimated percentage marks that over-assessment is avoided and that an appropriate balance is achieved between formative and summative assessment.

Insofar as possible, during this period, teachers should maintain the modes of assessment and feedback that are familiar to students and that are consistent with the methodologies and approach that they would normally adopt at this stage of the year. The provision of feedback to students on completed assessments will be particularly important given the context of school closure periods where opportunities for the provision for feedback to students on their work varied. The feedback provided should be aligned to the type of assessment used, which means that it can include a formative comment, descriptor of achievement or a numeric indicator such as a mark or percentage.

Should a teacher set additional assessments up to 14 May, these assessments should be considered proportionately with other forms of evidence of the student's learning over the programme.

6.5 What types of assessment may be used during this period?

If administering an in-class teacher-designed test, the test should be no more than one lesson in duration (maximum one hour) and a maximum of three class tests may be administered up to 14 May 2021. Examples of tests that may be administered are written, oral, aural or practical tests.

Assessment approaches used should:

1. Include ongoing formative assessment approaches mediated through typical classroom teaching and learning methodologies that check on progress and assist in identifying the next steps for progressing learning
2. Support students' understanding of the feedback provided through the provision of success criteria
3. Ensure that learning is not unduly disrupted by students preparing for tests and frequent testing
4. Be free of influence by a parent/guardian, student or any other person as to its possible contribution to the SEC Accredited Grades[5]
5. Avoid being influenced by perceived assessment practices of other teachers and/or other schools.

[5] Additional information included in Section 14 of this guide

Where relevant the method or format of the in-school assessment should be inclusive of students with special educational needs (SEN) and provide differentiated approaches to allow students with SEN to access the appropriate assessment mode and be adaptable to their particular context. These arrangements do not necessarily have to be 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 being able to demonstrate what they know and can do.

More subject-specific advice and guidance on assessment approaches will be available in due course.

6.6 What assessments should not be used during this period?

Information from the following should not be used:

- **Self or peer-assessed work** for which there is no oversight or role for the teacher in assessing the work completed.
- **Short written class tests** of less than one class period that assess a limited aspect of learning, for example, spelling or vocabulary tests.

M**ock examinations** (i.e. examinations involving full class groups sitting written examinations under conditions that mirror those of the certificate examinations) are neither required nor recommended for use as evidence for the Accredited Grades process. The period following the return to in-school teaching and learning should be used to maximise opportunities for teaching and learning with students.

7. Specific Considerations

7.1 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 judgements, 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

7.2 Fairness and equity

As noted in Section 3 of this Guide, principles of equity, fairness and objectivity are paramount in the SEC Accredited Grades system. Teachers should do their best to remain alert to possible sources of unconscious bias that might affect the estimates, including for example a student's decision to take the examination. Research shows that teacher estimates of student performance may be affected by the teacher's experience and perceptions of the student's classroom behaviour, or their knowledge about a student's socio-economic or family background. By being alert to this source of unconscious bias, teachers can focus objectively on information that is clearly about attainment in the subject and not about other factors.

If there is a real or perceived conflict of interest involved in giving an estimated mark to a particular student (such as a close relative) in a teacher's class, the teacher will draw the attention of the principal to this. There will be additional oversight by a nominated teacher and/or deputy principal in such cases. If the conflict of interest arises for a principal who is teaching the student, she/he will so advise the deputy principal.

7.3 Reasonable accommodations for students with special educational needs

Where any reasonable accommodation has been approved for any student (such as a reader or scribe), the teacher will base the estimate of the student's likely performance on the assumption that this accommodation would have been available. 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.

7.4 Students who are new to the class or school

If a student has joined the class from another class in the school, the teacher will consult with the previous teacher (if possible) and get whatever relevant records they have. If the student has joined the class from another school, and if the length of time is such that the teacher considers he/she does not have enough evidence to make a sound judgement, he/she should consult with school management about acquiring additional information from the student's previous school. It may not be possible to get this, in which case the teacher will still need to make the best judgement he/she can on the information available.

7.5 Repeat Students

If a student is repeating in the school, having previously been enrolled in that school for their first sitting of the Leaving Certificate, evidence of achievement from both cycles should be considered, but particular weight should be given to the student's work and level of achievement during the repeat year. If the student was a Leaving Certificate student in 2020, teachers should exercise great care in using evidence of learning from the period of school closure in 2020. If the student has a different teacher during the repeat year from the one he/she previously had, arrangements should be made to ensure that the most recent teacher (who will be making the estimate) is in a position to consult with the previous one and has access to any necessary documentation.

If the student was previously enrolled in a different school, the same procedures as described above in respect of students new to the school apply.

7.6 Students studying individual subjects out of school and students studying entirely out of school

The SEC Accredited Grades process will seek to make accredited grades available to as many students as possible, including students who are studying one or more subjects outside of school and those studying entirely out of school. For these candidates, robust evidence will have to be available on which an estimated mark may be based. In some cases, it may not be possible to provide estimated marks and/or SEC Accredited Grades to candidates, but every reasonable effort will be made to accommodate as many students as possible.

Further details of the processes to enable these candidates to seek an Accredited Grade will be provided as soon as possible.

8. School alignment of marks (Step 2)

In this step of the process, subject teachers together review the teachers' estimated percentage marks for students who are taking that subject. Following this element of the alignment process, each teacher will finalise the estimated percentage marks. If there is only one teacher of the subject in the school, the subject teacher conducts the in-school alignment process with the Deputy Principal of the school or another teacher of the same subject in the school, who does not have a Leaving Certificate class in 2021, subject to the agreement of the school principal.

8.1 What is the purpose of school alignment of marks?

The purpose of school alignment of marks is to ensure that:

- the process of estimating percentage marks within a class is correctly and consistently applied by each teacher.
- The teachers have applied consistent standards when estimating marks; this may result in some variations in patterns of attainment across different classes taking the same subject within the school.

8.2 How is the school alignment process organised?

Prior to the alignment process, each subject teacher of a Leaving Certificate class group drafts the initial estimated percentage marks for each of her/his students and class groups.

Teachers will need to demonstrate that no two students are placed on the same estimated percentage mark. Where there is more than one examination component in the subject, teachers will have regard to the written element and the additional assessment component(s). Percentage marks may include up to two decimal places, i.e. 83.22%, 83.33%, etc. Teachers will demonstrate that no two students, at each level (Higher, Ordinary and Foundation) are placed on the same estimated percentage mark.

The alignment process in 2021 will be conducted in two phases.

- **Phase one:** Phase one of the subject alignment process will take place during the period 14 May to Friday 28 May. During this phase, the teachers may individually prepare for subject alignment meetings including reviewing records of work and available information, and may commence the subject alignment process without impacting on tuition time.

- **Phase two:** Phase two of the subject alignment process will take place in the week beginning 31 May 2021. From the 31 May to 3 June, schools will finalise the alignment process and prepare the estimated percentage marks for transmission to the SEC by 3 June.

8.2.1 What happens during the alignment process?

A consultative engagement that is inclusive of all the relevant teachers, who are teaching the subject to sixth-year Leaving Certificate students in 2021, is put in place. The alignment process should be designed in a way that enables group reflection and discussion by the teachers of a particular subject (the subject alignment group) with a focus on ensuring that the process of arriving at estimated marks has been consistently

and correctly applied and that marks have been properly aligned for all students of the subject.

8.2.2 What is the next step in the alignment process?

Following the consultative engagement, each teacher reviews his/her class group data set (i.e. estimated percentage marks), adjusts if necessary, and finalises a completed estimated mark form for each student in the class group. These individual student forms are then submitted to the school principal through the subject alignment group as the product of the subject alignment process.

It should be noted that in the course of the process only the class teacher can change the estimated mark for a student/students in their class group/s.

9. Oversight of the alignment process by the school principal (Step 3)

The third school-based step in the provision of marks is **the oversight of the alignment process** by the school principal. In line with the principles of fairness, equity and objectivity, the principal supports teachers in the preparatory phase of the subject alignment process and reviews the process applied to the collection of evidence to assure the fair treatment of individual students and to ensure that a uniformity of standard is applied within the school and in situations where more than one class group is entered for a subject. In this regard, the principal will ensure that different teachers of the same subject within the school are applying similar standards.

In this step of the process, the principal:

- Supports teachers in the initial preparatory phase at whole-school level including referring teachers to the guidance documents and instructional video(s) provided to support the process
- Provides each subject department with the relevant data to support the alignment process
- Reviews the data sets submitted to him/her by the subject alignment groups
- Assures himself/herself of the fairness of the processes to that point
- Where it appears that an anomaly or error has arisen, returns a data set for further review to the subject alignment group. In such circumstances, the principal does not have a role in altering a student's estimated mark; his/her role is to return the queried marks to the subject alignment group for further review.

9.1 What are the grounds on which a principal may return data sets for further review?

A principal may return the data sets to the subject alignment group for further review if he/she reasonably believes that one or more of the following grounds may apply:

- There was a procedural flaw in the process up to this point
- There were unexplained inconsistencies in the data sets submitted following the subject alignment stage
- There is persuasive evidence that a student's estimated mark is inconsistent with the school's information on the student's achievement from a range of sources (See Section 6.1. above).
- There is evidence of lack of objectivity (bias, discrimination) in the procedures as applied.

In instances where the data sets are returned by the principal to the subject alignment group for further consideration, the principal indicates the reason(s)/stated grounds for the return of the data. The stated grounds are confined to one or more of the above grounds. The group will consider the stated ground(s), make necessary adjustments, if any, and return its final consideration to the principal.

Once the process of reviewing the data sets is concluded and the principal is satisfied that the process of alignment and, where applicable, the review has transacted in good faith, he/she will sign-off that the process has been completed in accordance with the published guidance.

10. Transmission of estimated marks for national standardisation (Step 4)

The finalised data sets will be submitted by the principal with the assistance of the examination aide no later than 3 June 2021. Detailed guidance will be provided to schools in relation to the process for the transmission of data.

11. Standardisation and Processing of Data by the State Examinations Commission

Research makes clear that because teacher judgements are made in the context of each school, they need to be examined and adjusted at a national level to ensure

comparability across different schools and that a common national standard is applied. For this reason, the school estimated percentage marks will be combined with recent national data through a process called standardisation in order to generate the SEC Accredited Grade for the students in the subject. This standardisation process will bring the data sets into alignment with each other and will be used to ensure the SEC Accredited Grades reflect standards that are aligned across schools and with a common national standard.

The standardisation process being used will not impose any predetermined mark on any individual in a class or a school, nor will it use historical school-level data on past performance in Leaving Certificate Examinations.

Estimated percentage marks will be collected from each school. Though the prior performance of the class group in Junior Cycle may be used in this process, the individual performance of the student at Junior Cycle would not be a determinant of their performance at Leaving Certificate, other than when the subject is being taken outside of school.

If the group of students in a school in the current year is particularly “strong”, the expected level of achievement of the group will reflect that fact. Likewise, if one or more individuals stand out as particularly strong, that will be reflected in the school’s estimated marks and thereby be taken into account.

After the standardisation process, the marks will be converted into SEC Accredited Grades, which will be expressed in the same manner as currently applies to Leaving Certificate grades – H1 etc.

11.1 Issuing of results

Candidates will receive the combined outcomes of their SEC Accredited Grades and their examinations (if they choose to sit examinations) at the same time. Where, in any subject, a student has also sat the examination, he/she will be credited with the better of the two results. The candidate’s results will be transferred to the CAO to facilitate progression to higher education.

A short time following the issue of results, candidates will have access to more detailed information about both sets of results. They will be able to see the estimated marks submitted by their school and the SEC Accredited Grades following the standardisation process. For candidates who took the certificate examinations, they will be able to see

the marks awarded in the written examination, and the marks awarded in any components**.**

For candidates who did not take the Leaving Certificate Examinations the estimated percentage marks submitted by the school and the SEC Accredited Grades only will be available.

This information will aid candidates who may opt to appeal a result in a subject.

12. Ensuring objectivity and fairness

12.1 Processing of school's estimated marks

At the core of both the school-based and national standardisation phases of the system of Accredited Grades is a commitment to objectivity and fairness. To ensure this, the school-based process must not be compromised.

Therefore, the principal, deputy principal(s), teachers or other members of the school staff must not under any circumstances discuss with any student or with the parents or guardians of any student the estimated marks that the school is submitting. There are two reasons for this:

- The estimated percentage mark assigned by the school is not necessarily the final mark that the student will receive and it would therefore be misleading for the student to receive that mark before the SEC Accredited Grade processes are complete
- Allowing access to and discussion of estimated grades before the Accredited Grades process is complete would interfere with the process being carried out objectively and fairly. If teachers discussed the marks with some students but not others, of if some teachers did this and others did not, these discussions might actually influence (consciously or unconsciously) or be represented or construed as influencing the mark the teacher submits to the subject alignment group.

Where a person seeks to improperly influence the estimation process, this may lead to withholding of results or more serious consequences. This aspect is being considered further and detailed information on consequences of such behaviour will be published as soon as possible.

12.2 Appeals

It will be open to a candidate to appeal his/her result in the Leaving Certificate Examination and/or their SEC Accredited Grade.

12.2.1 Certificate Examinations

Candidates appealing the result of an examination will follow the SEC appeals process. This will include an opportunity to view the scripts marked by SEC examiners.

12.2.2 SEC Accredited Grades

In the case of candidates appealing an SEC Accredited Grade, the appeals process for the appeal of an SEC Accredited Grade is a process review. The review is focused on looking for errors in the transmission and receipt of student data.

The SEC Accredited Grade appeals process includes three stages as follows:

Stage 1: Checks will be undertaken on the forms completed by the school to check that the information was transferred correctly from the forms to the data collection system

Stage 2: A review will be carried out to ensure that the data was correctly received and transmitted through the systems used in the national standardisation process conducted by the SEC

Stages 1 and 2 will be taken together.

Stage 3: Students unhappy with the outcome of the above process may invoke a separate process to have their appeal reviewed by independent Appeals Scrutineers. These Scrutineers are independent of the SEC.

The Independent Appeals Scrutineers will check to ensure the correct procedures were followed throughout the appeals process. The Scrutineers will have access to the records and documentation considered at Stages 1 and 2.

Students who having exhausted the appeals process as outlined consider that their case has not been processed correctly can make a complaint to the Ombudsman or, in the case of students under 18 years of age, the Ombudsman for Children.

13. Legal Indemnity

As teachers, school leaders and educational professionals working in education centres and other settings will be implementing the SEC Accredited Grades process in these settings on behalf of the State Examinations Commission arrangements are being put in place to extend a State indemnity to them, to the boards of management, patrons/trustees and owner/managers of these settings. The indemnity could be invoked where someone is sued in their own capacity (i.e. named in civil proceedings as an individual teacher, principal or board of management/ETB or other patron).

This indemnity will be subject to conditions around notification and cooperation with the State in defending any legal cases should they arise and will only be capable of being invoked where a person has acted bona fide, i.e. has made every reasonable effort to carry out their role in accordance with the guidance provided in this Guide and the relevant circular(s) of the Department and the State Examinations Commission.

14. Student-teacher contact and the SEC Accredited Grades

The principal, deputy principal(s), teachers or other members of the school staff will follow the specified procedures for SEC Accredited Grades and must not under any circumstances discuss with or disclose to any student or parent or guardian of any student the estimated marks that the school is submitting.

Conversely, parents/guardians and students must not under any circumstances contact, either formally or informally, directly or indirectly, a teacher or other member of staff at any stage to discuss, or with a view to influencing the decision-making process relating to the estimated marks to be assigned to a student in any subject or which may confer an undue advantage to a particular student. The holding of formal sixth-year parent-teacher meetings in the period 1 March 2021 to 28 May 2021 is not advised. An individual parent-teacher meeting may be sought and arranged in expectional circumstances only.

Teachers and school personnel, the employees of the SEC and the Department of Education must not be subjected to any type of influence, inducement (including gifts), pressure or coercion by a parent/guardian, student or any other person in relation to a student's mark either before or after it has been assigned. This includes any financial, economic or other personal interest which might be perceived to compromise the impartiality and independence of the teacher or principal in the context of the decision-making process.

Such contact would be inappropriate, as it could objectively be viewed as an attempt to interfere with the fairness, equality of treatment and objectivity required of teachers and schools in the assigning of estimated marks for the individual student concerned, and for the students in the school as a whole. This would in turn undermine the integrity of the SEC Accredited Grades model.

Where a person seeks to improperly influence the estimation process, this may lead to withholding of results or more serious consequences. This aspect is being considered further and detailed information on consequences of such behaviour will be published as soon as possible.

15. Confidentiality and Data Protection

In the course of the work, documentation that includes personal data about individuals will be accessed, generated, and discussed. It is important that all involved remain at all times in compliance with the school's data protection policies, whether that be in relation to generating, accessing or transmitting records, or in relation to the channels through which confidential information is discussed.

If a school receives a data access request from a student for their estimated marks before the issue of results, the school should respond to say:

- that in line with section 56 of the Data Protection Act, it is not possible to respond to the request at present, and
- that the request will be taken to have been made on the later of either the date of the first publication of the results of the 'examination' (i.e. the Accredited Grades process), or the date of the request.

16. Detailed Guidance

Detailed guidance will be provided to schools to support them in providing SEC Accredited Grades for Leaving Certificate students. This guidance will include additional detailed information on the areas outlined in sections 13, 14 and 15 of this

guidance. Separate guidance will also be provided to schools on the collection and transmission of data.

17. SEC Accredited Grades 2021

Finally, it should be noted that SEC Accredited Grades are being provided to students in 2021 because of the unprecedented impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on their education. It is recognised that exceptional measures are required in 2021 for the assessment and certification of students' learning but that implementation of these measures will not be regarded as a precedent to operate such measures in future years.

18. Further Information

The most current information on all matters relating to Leaving Certificate examinations and the Accredited Grades process will be available on an ongoing basis on gov.ie/LeavingCertificate.

If you have a query, please read this source of information in the first instance. If you cannot find the response to your query, please submit a request for an update to gov.ie to this email address: LCinfo@education.gov.ie

This mailbox will be monitored periodically and queries that raise issues not already addressed in the information already published will be used to update the information on gov.ie so that it is available to all candidates. Queries to this email address will not be responded to individually.