



Submission to the Workplace Relations Commission 19th April 2021

Claim for a revised minimum essential qualification for Special Needs Assistants

Nature of the Claim

The Union submitted a claim seeking a change to the minimal educational qualification for Special Needs Assistants from the current 3 passes at D grade in the Junior Certificate (or equivalent) to a QQI Level 6 award.

The claim was submitted to the National SNA Industrial Relations Forum in October 2019. The terms of reference allow for engagement at three meetings of the IR Forum before any claim can then be referred to the Commission for conciliation.

This referral was made under the terms of the PSSA (superseded by the Building Momentum Pay Agreement) which obliges the parties to utilise dispute resolution mechanisms to resolve disputes.

Rationale for the Claim

The minimum educational qualification for SNAs has not been reviewed or changed since the statutory scheme was first established, indeed the origins of the current minimum qualification date back to the introduction of the Childcare Assistant scheme within schools in 1979. Since then the role of the SNA has undergone considerable changes which have not been reflected in the minimum qualification.

Ireland is out of step with provision in other Countries. Some of the domestic and international comparisons on required qualifications for similar jobs show that the requirements in Ireland fall well below standards elsewhere as set out below -

Country	Job Title	Minimum/Recommended qualification
Ireland	Special Needs Assistant	three D grade passes in the Junior Certificate

Ireland	Social Care Worker	QQI Level 7 Award in Applied Social Care Studies/Social Care.
Ireland	Healthcare Assistant	QQI Level 5 award
United Kingdom	Special Needs Assistant/Specialised Teaching Assistant	Level 3 Certificate in Supporting Teaching and Learning in Schools or a Level 3 Diploma in Childcare and Education Early Years Educator or a Technical Level award (TQ) in Education and childcare
United States	Special Education Teaching Assistant / Teaching Assistant	State level requirements for a College Diploma /Certificate
Australia	Inclusion Support Assistant	Approved 3 rd level Early Childhood Certificate in Children's Services (or equivalent qualification)
Canada	Special Needs Education Assistant	College Diploma and further recognised training

In 2018 the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) published a Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistants Scheme. This review, commissioned by the Minister for Education and Skills made a number of recommendations for changes to the arrangements for the education, training and professional development of SNAs including:

- A national training programme for all SNAs
- A relevant level 5 qualification should be the minimum future entry level requirement
- SNAs should be able to access continued professional development and further training

The Department of Education issued a tender for a national training programme which was awarded to UCD, this course is not accredited by QQI. Whilst participants are more than happy with the quality of the programme the lack of accreditation fails to take account of the need to establish a revised educational framework for SNAs based on accredited QQI qualifications.

Revising the minimum qualification to a QQI Level 6 award would reflect the complexity of the role of the SNA as it has evolved and developed.

Current Educational Achievements of the SNA Staff Group

A survey of 2,510 SNAs conducted by the Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection (2016) indicated that the majority of SNAs surveyed possessed qualifications beyond the minimum criteria outlined in the DES circular 0021/2011.

Additionally it was found that a large number of SNAs had undertaken specialist training in the area of special education, at their own expense, throughout their careers. Overwhelmingly, SNA survey respondents felt strongly that the introduction of a standard, recognised and mandatory training course prior to working in the field would be beneficial. The majority of respondents would welcome the provision of CPD and training courses. In the same survey, it was outlined that approximately one third of SNA respondents stated that they administered medication but conversely it was reported that the level of training which had been offered to SNAs in relation to medical administration was extremely poor. While much of the research on SNA support in Ireland has focused on the role of the SNA, there has been a dearth of published research on the training needs of SNAs and, in particular, whether these training needs are commensurate with DES policy with regard to the role of the SNA.

In 2019 Fórsa surveyed over 4,000 SNA members on the level of their educational qualifications. Approximately 80% of respondents stated that they held qualifications at QQI Level 5 or above.

In April 2021 UCD published their Preliminary Evaluation Report following completion of Module 1 of the National Training Programme for Special Needs Assistants. This evaluation included data on the current level of educational achievement within the group of 500 students allocated places on the course. The data is set out below and demonstrates that 98% of students had progressed beyond the minimum qualification stipulated by the Department of Education and that 62% of the students had progressed to a Level 6 QQI or higher award.

Level of Qualifications	
Junior certificate	2.14%
Leaving Certificate	6.99%
Post Leaving Certificate	2.72%
QQI Level 5	14.56%
QQI Level 6	40.97%
Bachelors Degree	14.37%
Post Graduate Diploma	4.85%
Masters Degree	2.14%

Labour Market Trends

The labour market for Special Needs Assistants suggests that increasingly a Level 6 QQI award is desired by school employers who are obliged to list the 3 D grade passes in the Junior Certificate as the minimum essential qualification, many competitions then specify that a QQI Level 6 award is desirable.

There are many private sector providers offering short courses at QQI Level 6 to prospective SNAs, this level of qualification is advertised as the route to obtaining a post as an SNA, there are few major awards at QQI Level 6 for SNAs but the number of course is expected to increase over the next 2 years.

Summary

SNAs have never been considered as professional staff in the same manner as counterparts in social care or healthcare. Their role is to meet the needs of students with additional needs within our schools. This requires a level of practical and theoretical knowledge attained through a programme of study prior to entering the workforce. The need to review the minimum essential qualification was recommended by the NCSE in 2018, it is time to conduct such a review and establish a new educational pathway for SNAs with a QQI Level 6 award as the foundation.

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