



An Roinn Oideachais
agus Scileanna
Department of
Education and Skills

Oireachtas Members' Questions: Covid-19

Answers Due: Monday, 20 April 2020

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1. Introduction

The Oireachtas has put in place a new and interim process whereby Covid-19 related queries can be submitted by TDs on a weekly basis and forwarded to Departments for reply in lieu of the Parliamentary Question process which has been temporarily suspended. The Minister's responses to queries received will be presented in a single document for circulation to all Deputies and for publication on the Department's website subsequently.

This document is the second of the weekly response documents prepared under the revised question system. It has been prepared within particular constraints, namely in a context of significantly increased demands, in circumstances where Departmental officials are having to work remotely without access to offices and files and against a background where the Department itself has had to redeploy staff to meet crisis-related pressures in other parts of the public service.

Similar and related questions have been grouped for answer to allow this response document to be as concise as possible whilst also addressing each question received. Section 5 sets out, for information, any questions received or forwarded on transfer from or to another Minister\Department.

The Department also maintains a special page on its website for updates on matters related to Covid-19: <https://www.education.ie/en/The-Department/Announcements/information-for-schools-preschools-and-third-level-institutions-on-the-coronavirus.html>

All major announcements are also available on the Department's website in the "What's New" section on the Department's homepage (when issued) and also in the Press release section of the website for older items.

2. State Examinations Questions

2.1. Arrangements for State Examinations

No.	Question	TD
37	To ask the Minister for Education and Skills the position regarding the written components of the state examinations; and, if he will provide clarity on the matter for the students and families affected.	Holly Cairns
69	Could the Department of Education provide clarity on whether the Leaving Cert Orals are still cancelled, if the practicals that were set to take place in March/April will now happen for Leaving Certs/Junior Cert and if any orals or practicals will take place for Junior Certs as part of their school-based tests set to begin in the next academic year.	Peter Burke
96	Can the Minister give specific detail on what exactly he envisages will be involved in the Junior Cert exam? What exactly will be examined in each subject area? Will there be tuition time prior to the exam?	Norma Foley
126	Can the Minister confirm if he is examining the potential of providing an amnesty for the remaining course work and practicals to be completed by Leaving Cert students. A similar amnesty was previously announced for oral languages, music etc.	Norma Foley

2.1.1. Response

On 10th April I announced a series of changes to the 2020 State Examinations as part of measures to respond to Covid-19, including postponement of the Leaving Certificate written examinations and of other practical, project and course work components of these examinations. The decisions were taken based on updated advice from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET).

More than 61,000 students are expected to sit the Leaving Certificate or Leaving Certificate Applied in 2020 which includes 44,396 students sitting the established Leaving Certificate and 13,668 for the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and 2,999 sitting the Leaving Certificate Applied.

Leaving Certificate oral language and some Leaving Certificate and Junior Cycle practical performance examinations had been scheduled to take place between 23 March and 3 April. These were cancelled and candidates awarded 100% for these components. This remains the position.

Plans are being put in place for the postponed written Leaving Certificate examinations and other practical examinations to be rescheduled for late July or early August, subject to public health advice. The deadline for submission of project work and course work across a number of subjects will now be immediately prior to commencement of the rescheduled written examination. A number of examination components of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programmes (LCVP) have also been rescheduled to take place in late July/early August, with an LCA Personal Reflection Task to be completed immediately prior to that period.

The Junior Cycle final examinations due to take place in June will be replaced by school-based examinations and assessments held early in the new school year. Discussions will take place with teacher unions and school management to allow these examinations, linked Classroom-Based Assessments, Assessment Tasks and project work to be completed as school-based assessments.

The revised Leaving Certificate examination timetable will be confirmed by the State Examinations Commission (SEC) in early June.

The final arrangements for the examinations, the examination centres, social distancing and other measures will be determined by the SEC on foot of public health advice in June. The postponement of the examinations is considered the fairest way of assessing students and giving them certification of achievement in school and a pathway to higher and further education and training, apprenticeship or work.

It is my intention to allow at least two weeks of class time, for students to prepare with their teachers in school, before the Leaving Certificate examinations begin.

I want to again acknowledge the positive engagement with unions, management bodies, the further education and training and higher education sectors on all of these issues. This engagement is continuing and contributing to the planning for the revised arrangements. My Department hosted a meeting of the State Examinations Working Group on Friday last and this group has scheduled a further intensive series of meetings in order to confirm the revised arrangements for the exams. This Group brings together representatives of students, parents, teachers, school leadership and management bodies, the SEC and my Department, under the chair of my Department's Secretary General.

2.2. State Examinations Logistics

No.	Question	TD
80	To ask the Minister for Education and Skills, is it envisaged that the grading of Leaving Certificate papers be held contemporaneously with the commencement of the 2020/2021 academic year, and if so, will the DES provide substitution for those teachers serving as SEC examiners, and will he make a statement on it?	Cormac Devlin
82	To ask the Minister for Education and Skills, given the continued need to maintain social distancing will schools be allocated extra resources to allow for the safe supervision of the delayed 2020	Cormac Devlin

No.	Question	TD
	Junior Cycle Assessments for the JCPA, and will he make a statement on it?	
95	Can the Minister give specific detail on plans for reopening of schools and the operation of state exams. Specifically can the Minister confirm how it will be possible to reopen schools, conduct Junior Cert exams and correct them whilst also provide correctors for Leaving Cert examinations all in the month of Sept.	Norma Foley

2.2.1. Response

On 10th April I announced a series of changes to the 2020 State Examinations as part of measures to respond to Covid-19. These decisions were taken based on updated advice from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE).

One of these decisions was that the Junior Cycle final examinations which were due to take place in June will be replaced by school-based examinations and assessments held early in the new school year. Discussions will take place with teacher unions and school management to allow these examinations, linked Classroom-Based Assessments, Assessment Tasks and project work to be completed as school-based assessments.

I also announced on 10th April the postponement of the Leaving Certificate written examinations and other practical examinations until late July or early August, subject to public health advice. It is my intention also to allow at least two weeks of class time, for students to prepare with their teachers in school, before the rescheduled Leaving Certificate examinations begin. The final arrangements for the reopening of schools to facilitate student preparation for and participation in the Leaving Certificate examinations will be based on updated public health advice. The State Examinations Commission is working on putting in place detailed arrangements to ensure that the Leaving Certificate examinations can be marked as quickly as possible. The higher education institutions and colleges of further education have confirmed to my Department that they will delay the entry date to college for first year students as necessary in line with the postponement of the Leaving Certificate examinations.

3. Schools Sector Questions

3.1. Capital Programme

No.	Question	TD
57	Re: Ballycurrane National School, Co. Waterford - Rolla no. 07441S, which is based in my constituency, ... in relation to the update on the school's application for new build and has confirmed that the 2B Submission was sent in to the Department approx. two weeks ago. ... I would be grateful if you could advise the present position in relation to projects such as this and indicate the situation regarding the tendering process in this particular case.	Mary Butler

3.1.1. Response

In line with National Public Health announcements by Government, all construction sites in relation to the Education Sector are now temporarily closed. The impacts around the closure of these sites are currently being assessed.

A sustainable and flexible construction sector is crucial to the delivery of Project Ireland 2040 and the continued contribution of public investment to our economic well-being. The Office of Government Procurement has published central guidance for managing the impact of Covid-19 on construction projects and construction procurement arrangements. This guidance provides a framework for dealing with the impact across the public sector including in respect of the school building programme. Individual schools and Design Teams are being informed accordingly and my Department is providing additional support through its responses to queries etc.

While construction sites are currently closed, the pipeline of projects in design continues to be progressed albeit in an online and remote working environment. The progression of this pipeline will help smooth the impact of Covid-19 on the overall rollout of Project Ireland 2040 within the education sector.

My Department is also engaging with School Patrons and relevant schools in relation to necessary school accommodation provision for the 2020/21 school year in light of any impact of COVID-19 on project delivery timescales and develop and implement contingency arrangements as required.

The Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government has provided flexibility to local authorities to extend time periods for the operation of the planning process. Officials from my Department have ongoing engagement with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and the Local Authorities in relation to housing, development plans and planning applications for schools. This engagement helps to ensure that planning applications for schools are progressed as quickly as possible during this time.

3.2. Continuity of Learning

No.	Question	TD
79	To ask the Minister for Education and Skills, is it envisaged that current first, second, fourth and fifth years will return to school after Friday 29th May if circumstances allow and it is safe to do so, and will he make a statement on it?	Cormac Devlin
81	To ask the Minister for Education and Skills, given the projected loss of class contact time for current second and fifth year students, are some once off curriculum and assessment adjustments being considered to ensure equity for students preparing for the Junior and Leaving Certificate in 2021, and will he make a statement on it?	Cormac Devlin

3.2.1. Response

As announced by the Taoiseach on April 10th, schools will remain closed until further notice and will re-open when the public health advice available suggest it is safe to do so. Whilst schools are closed until further notice it is not envisaged that classes will be scheduled beyond the end of the normal school year with the exception of students who are preparing for this year's Leaving Certificate examinations as previously announced.

Since the announcement that schools would close and the extension of that closure, my Department has made it clear that teachers and other staff in the education sector would continue to work and to engage with their students. The Department has written to school management and asked schools to put in place arrangements to continue the delivery of education to students. A series of guidance notes to support schools in how to effectively support and engage with their students continues to be compiled to address challenges in providing programmes of continued learning in the current context.

Guidelines for schools on continuity of learning issued on Thursday April 2nd and are available at: <https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/guidance-on-continuity-of-schooling.pdf>

Feedback directly from the schools' surveys was that some schools were seeking such guidance and so this material should be particularly useful. The next iteration will focus on matters relating to disadvantage and children with special educational needs.

The nature of that work has primarily shifted to a model based on digital and remote teaching. The Department is aware of many schools that have used e-platforms to enable their teachers to provide work to students, particularly to students in examination classes, and to enable students to complete tasks and tests for assessment.

Resources to support this have been provided by the Department support service, the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), covering distance learning at <https://www.pdst.ie/DistanceLearning> and providing access to extensive educational resources including Worldbooks, at www.scoilnet.ie.

3.3. Special Educational Needs Provision

No.	Question	TD
119	What considerations have been given to retain the July Provision under COVID-19 restrictions.	Jennifer Whitmore

3.3.1. Response

The Department intends to run the extended school year (ESY) scheme – also known as the July Provision Scheme – this year if possible given the current school closures. The Department, in conjunction with the public health authorities, will keep the situation under ongoing review. The Department is considering contingency measures, including changes to the format of the scheme, should it prove necessary to delay the start of the scheme. Any changes will be communicated widely.

3.4. Technology and broadband access

No.	Question	TD
123	To ask the Minister for Education and Skills if assistance can be provided for Leaving Certificate 2020 students who do not have access to up-to-date technology and/or students living in areas with inadequate Broadband coverage and if he will make a statement on the matter.	Brendan Smith

3.4.1. Response

Schools have been asked to be conscious of students who may not have access to online facilities and to consider this actively in their responses. School buildings have been available to staff who wished to access the facilities in order to provide online delivery, or essential services, as long as this was in line with public health advice.

Officials in my Department have liaised with colleagues in the DCCA to raise the issue of barriers to connectivity impacting access to remote learning. Minister Bruton has announced a package of additional supports from the telecoms companies including that access to healthcare and educational resource websites identified by the Government will be zero-rated for all customers where technically feasible.

The Department is supporting a pilot initiative, under which Cisco and IBM are providing support directly to schools to operate the *WebEx* platform. This facilitates schools, with no

alternative capability, with a collaborative platform to enable them engage with their students and staff.

My Department is also engaging with IBEC on the potential for companies to donate devices and other supports to be targeted at disadvantage students who otherwise would not have a device.

The Department will continue to work with the education partners to provide solutions in areas where digital and remote learning options may not be possible, and work is underway to provide guidance to schools about how best to use digital and other solutions to provide ongoing learning for students at this time.

3.5. Use of school facilities

No.	Question	TD
17	Will the Minister provide funding for schools who are prepared to use school facilities /equipment to produce PPE but are in need of resources?	Norma Foley

3.5.1. Response

Under the public health measures all schools will be closed to staff until at least May 5th except in special limited circumstances. In accordance with public health measures, everyone is urged to stay at home for the period up to May 5th. An exception is in place for the schools in the School Meals Programme. This essential service can continue.

School Management Bodies have been advised that any positive contribution that can be made by the sector to help in the current crisis is very welcome. Where schools have been approached by the HSE or other state organisations requesting the use of their facilities or equipment to assist with limiting the impact of Covid-19, schools must first consider the length of the time the school will be required by the HSE or other organisations and any impact on the reopening of the school to staff and pupils should also be considered in responding to such requests.

It should be noted that under current circulars the prior approval of the Minister would be required where a school is being used during what normally would be school hours for a purpose other than primary or post-primary education.

4. Tertiary Sector Questions

4.1. Admissions

No.	Question	TD
72	To ask the Minister for Education if he has considered the implications of the new Leaving Certificate exam proposals for students who opted to take a gap year after last years results. If the new arrangements will inflate CAO points and disadvantage those students depending on last year's results for college places; if he will make provision for such students and make a statement on the matter.	Brendan Howlin

4.1.1. Response

The Minister previously announced that the Leaving Certificate oral language examinations would be cancelled and candidates awarded 100% for these components. This was considered the best and fairest decision that could be taken at that time. In deciding to award full marks for the oral component of the Leaving Certificate language subjects, it was noted that students taking these subjects in general perform very well in the oral component. Consequently, it is not anticipated that any inflation in overall marks for language subjects and therefore in CAO awarded points will significantly impact on the points necessary for students to secure third level places through the CAO system for the coming year.

The admissions process for higher education, managed by the Central Applications Office (CAO), will operate as closely as possible to the usual timeframe for offers and the entry date for first year students will be delayed. The Department has asked the Higher Education Authority and the higher education sector to explore ways of assisting access to higher education for students from under-represented groups. The Department is also engaging with the UK authorities on admission of Irish students to universities in Northern Ireland and Britain.

4.2. Tertiary Level Assessment 'No Detriment Policy'

No.	Question	TD
92	Can the Minister confirm if she will implement a No Detriment policy in our Third Level Institutions so as to ensure no student's academic achievements will be negatively impacted by the current Covid 19 pandemic?	Norma Foley

4.2.1. Response

Further and higher education institutions will not be holding written, oral or practical assessments in examination centres during the Covid-19 emergency. This was announced on April 8th by the Minister for Higher Education. Universities and colleges have finalised alternative assessment arrangements, with options including online exams, written assignments or rescheduling. The new assessment arrangements have been communicated to all their students.

The alternative arrangements have been put in place in a manner that ensures quality standards will be upheld giving confidence that qualifications achieved this year will be valued and regarded exactly as in any other year. Institutions will be ensuring that students suffer no academic disadvantage, with flexible arrangements in relation to exam formats, marking and re-sits. Students who are not able to participate in alternative assessment arrangements will not be penalised. They will have opportunities to complete their studies at a later point in time.

The development of the alternative assessment methods was a collaborative effort involving the Irish Universities Association (IUA), the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), Aontas, Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin), Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and our other sectoral stakeholders.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), will continue to provide guidance to all its education and training partners on both the immediate and longer-term impact of this current crisis. A guidance document to provide clarity and assurance about assessments and exams has been published by Quality and Qualifications Ireland, the national body responsible for qualifications and quality assurance in higher education and further education and training. It sets out:

- No written, oral or practical assessments in higher or further education will be physically held in an examination or test centre until the Covid-19 restrictions have been lifted.
- Alternative arrangements for assessment will be made where at all possible, including online exams or rescheduling.
- While the education and training of all students is continuing, students expecting to graduate this year are a top priority.
- While some students will not be able to complete their programme or graduate in the timescale originally expected, as many as possible will graduate this year as planned.
- Students who are not able to participate in alternative assessment arrangements will not be penalised. They will have opportunities to complete their studies at a later point in time.
- Standards will be upheld, and the integrity of awards will be maintained. Qualifications achieved this year will be valued and regarded exactly as in any other year.

Institutions have also been asked by QQI to be aware of the particular needs of students who are more vulnerable; those who contract Covid-19 or are caring for others; students from overseas; work-based learners; broadband access; students with disabilities or those with mental health issues.

This QQI guidance document is available at: <https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/>

5. Transfers

5.1. Transfers received from other Departments

No.	Question	TD
119	What considerations have been given to retain the July Provision under COVID-19 restrictions.	Jennifer Whitmore

All transferred questions received are answered in the relevant sections above.