



**An Roinn Oideachais  
agus Scileanna**  
Department of  
Education and Skills

**An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta  
Síceolaíochta Oideachais**  
National Educational  
Psychological Service

**The Wellbeing and Mental Health of Young People in Ireland:  
Factors for Consideration for the Leaving Certificate Examination in the  
context of the Covid-19 Pandemic**

**Advice from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)**

**May 2020**

## Executive Summary

This paper sets out what we know from the research literature about the mental health/wellbeing of young people in Ireland, prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. In essence the known level of mental health difficulties across young people in Ireland is already concerning (c. 33%). In addition, Irish young people experience significantly higher levels of schoolwork-related anxiety and significantly lower rates of wellbeing than do their OECD counterparts together with high levels of examination-related anxiety.

The evidence reviewed suggests that the pandemic will likely lead to an increase in anxiety and stress across the whole population, an understandable response to a real threat. While for some this anxiety will be manageable due to the collective experience and societal recognition and response to the situation, for others this anxiety will be heightened and traumatic, for a broad range of sometimes inter-related and compounding reasons that include the impact of personal or family illness, bereavement, worry about vulnerable family members being exposed to the virus due to another family member's job, and financial stress, amongst others.

For some of our more vulnerable young people the necessary public health measure of closing schools and requiring the population to physically distance, has cut off access to key protective factors for their mental health/wellbeing (school support structure, friendships, physical activity) and has increased exposure to key risk factors (difficulties within family relationships/structures). For some of our Leaving Certificate students, additional risks to mental health/wellbeing are identified, in the context of disrupted education at a time when preparing for a high-stakes examination and uncertainty in relation to revised examination arrangements. This means that it is likely that an increased number of our Leaving Certificate students, compared with previous years, whose support systems and coping strategies are diminished by the Covid-19 experience, may struggle to adjust and cope.

The research is clear about responses that are made in the aftermath of an emergency situation in order to ensure optimal returning to normalcy and wellbeing: interventions need to promote a sense of safety, calming, self- and community-efficacy, connectedness and hope. Any revised arrangements for the Leaving Certificate examinations for 2020, need to

be evaluated in terms of how these principles are incorporated and embedded within such arrangements.

The options being considered for the Leaving Certificate 2020 include an option to proceed with the examinations, commencing on July 29<sup>th</sup>, with safety measures being put in place (Option 1), or the option to cancel the examinations and replace them with a calculated grading system for the entirety of the Leaving Certificate (Option 2). In terms of the potential impact on student wellbeing and mental health of both options NEPS advises the following:

- Significant risks for heightened anxiety, inherent in the former option, include the requirement to change the length and format of the examinations in the context of student expectation and preparedness, the worry about safety issues despite the introduction of safety procedures and the sense of emerging unfairness due to a lack of equitable access to supports (Wi-Fi, devices, quiet place to study, school support and classes) in the period of school closure since mid-March. Furthermore, the risk that this option will need to be changed again, later in this process, due to public health advice, with further disruption and change closer to or during the scheduled examination times has the potential for additional heightened student anxiety.
- If the former option proceeds, it is the case that some of our students may manage and cope quite well. This must be balanced, however, with the risks for other groups of students - those already vulnerable, and those rendered vulnerable by this crisis - for whom this experience will be anxiety-provoking and, for some, over-whelming. For these, rather than promoting a sense of efficacy, the option will promote a sense of helplessness likely to undermine wellbeing.
- On this basis NEPS would advise that planning for these written examinations should not be advanced. With the knowledge that an alternative, calculated grades option is deliverable, and more reliable and valid in terms of evaluating student performance, this advice is strengthened. The alternative calculated grades option, with its rationale of fairness, inclusivity, reliability and validity, is the option that, in the current circumstances, better promotes for most, a sense of efficacy, resilience and wellbeing.

## 1. Background Discussion

The closing of all schools and the cancellation of certain oral and practical components of certificate examinations, are exceptional measures which have been taken by the Government, the Department of Education and Skills and the State Examinations Commission in line with advice from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), in order to slow down the spread of the Covid-19 virus. In Ireland, 126,000 students were due to take State examinations, either the Junior Certificate or the Leaving Certificate, in 2020. The latter examination is a high-stakes examination, on which entry to third level education and to certain areas of employment largely depends. 61,000 students are due to sit this high stakes Leaving Certificate examination in Ireland this year. Across the world, jurisdictions are responding differently to managing similar high-stakes examinations, within the current Covid-19 context, either through cancellation, postponement or allowing their continuation in a modified form, depending on what is possible within each jurisdiction's existing examination system/structure (World Bank, April, 2020). In Ireland, the Government has communicated its hope that the State examinations will go ahead this year, and has asked that options be drawn up to allow for this to happen. Options being considered include deferring the examinations until late summer, with a consequent delay in the commencement of the college year, or running a modified examination in certain subject areas only. It may not be possible for the Leaving Certificate to be held in time to support the selection of students for third level education in the next academic year, and a different approach may be required, such as the use of a calculated grades model, using reliable proxy indicators, that may include mock examination results, Junior Certificate results and possibly teacher-assessed grades based on student prior performance. Ultimately whatever option is agreed will depend on the public health situation and will need to be demonstrably equitable, transparent and robust. Within this decision-making process the physical safety and wellbeing/mental health of students will also need to be guiding factors.

This paper first sets out what we know about the pre-existing mental health/wellbeing of young people in Ireland (prior to the Covid-19 pandemic) with a strong focus on risk and protective factors, including what we know about Irish students and examination anxiety/stress. Secondly this paper outlines the risks to mental health/wellbeing of the Covid-19 pandemic, including additional risks to student mental health that are emerging as a result

of the pandemic, and the necessary public health measures that have been put in place. Based on this knowledge, a set of recommendations are presented for consideration when decisions are being made with regard to arrangements for the 2020 Leaving Certificate examination.

## 2. The Wellbeing and Mental Health of Young People in Ireland

### 2.1 Wellbeing

The Department of Education and Skills' *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018-2023)* (DES, 2018) has adapted the WHO definition of mental health to define wellbeing:

*Wellbeing is present when a person realises their potential, is resilient in dealing with the normal stresses of life, takes care of their physical wellbeing and has a sense of purpose, connection and belonging to a wider community. It is a fluid way of being and needs nurturing throughout life* (Department of Education and Skills, 2018).

The *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (DES, 2018) recognises that wellbeing does not necessarily mean the absence of stress, or negative emotions in life, and that people's experience of wellbeing may vary, with everyone experiencing vulnerability at some stages in their journey through life.

### 2.2 Risk and Protective Factors

There are known risk and protective factors associated with wellbeing and mental health. Risk factors are associated with increased probability of onset, greater severity and longer duration of major health problems (WHO, 2004) and act as threats to the young person and cause distress (Dooley & Fitzgerald, 2012). Protective factors may modify, ameliorate or alter a person's response to a risk factor and are associated with positive outcomes, health and wellbeing, even in the presence of risk factors (WHO, 2004). Generally it is the cumulative effects and interplay of multiple risk factors and the lack of protective factors at within-child, relational, environmental and contextual levels that result in a person being more vulnerable to developing mental ill-health (WHO, 2004). These are complex interactions which influence peoples' perceptions of their sense of self concept, self-efficacy, their attributions, relationships and sense of belonging (connectedness).

There has been considerable research conducted to consider the risk and protective factors relating to wellbeing/mental health for young people in the Republic of Ireland, including the My World Survey (Dooley & Fitzgerald, 2012) and the Young Lives in Ireland Study (McMahon *et al.* 2017). These studies have identified protective and risk factors for our young people.

Protective factors include amongst others physical activity, effective regulation and coping strategies, family support systems, supportive friendships and connectedness with teachers and schools. Identified risk factors include pre-existing mental health difficulties, learning difficulties and academic failure, exams, difficulties within family structures, loss and bereavement, low socioeconomic status and financial stress.

### **2.3 Resilience**

The concept of resilience acknowledges that life can require adaptation to change, loss and sometimes trauma. Resilience signifies a positive adaptive response to adversity. Ireland's *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018-2023)* (DES, 2018) acknowledges that factors related to an individual's personal skills and competencies, the affectional ties they have with family, the existence of supportive relationships, safe communities and support systems, including school systems, provide positive contexts and multiple opportunities to support the development of wellbeing and enhance the capacity to cope in the face of adversity (DES, 2018). The PISA report (2015) highlighted the importance for wellbeing of feeling a sense of belonging to a school community and feeling supported by teachers who treat young people fairly, with disadvantaged and first-generation immigrant students less likely to feel that they belonged at school.

### **2.4 Wellbeing and Mental Health Disorders: Prevalence Amongst Irish Young People:**

PISA (2018) reported that 61% of students in Ireland reported that they were very satisfied with their lives, a rate that is significantly lower than the overall average across OECD countries, at 67%. The evidence is also clear that many of our young people are also experiencing high levels of anxiety and stress and a high proportion (estimated to be one in three by the time they are 13 years old) have also reported having some kind of mental health disorder (Cannon et al, 2013). The *Young Lives in Ireland Study* (McMahon et al., 2017) surveyed just over a thousand young people aged 13-16. It is interesting to note that despite the high rates of self-reported levels of anxiety (23.7%) and depression (13.8%), only 12.7% of these young people rated themselves as having poor wellbeing on the WHO-5 Wellbeing Index. These findings may support the idea that it is possible for young people to experience difficulties and yet still retain a sense of wellbeing.

That being said, childhood and adolescence are times of vulnerability for the onset of mental health difficulties. Anxiety and depression have been found to be the most prevalent mental health difficulties and often co-occur. Pre-existing mental health difficulties have been identified as risk factors to maintaining wellbeing, amongst young people both in Ireland and internationally.

## **2.5 Anxiety related to Schoolwork and Examinations**

Irish children tend to experience high levels of school-work related anxiety, with PISA (2015) findings indicating an average score for such anxiety amongst 15-year old Irish students to be significantly above the corresponding OECD average. The stressors on Irish teenagers sitting state examinations here are heightened in the PISA (2018) report with 44.8% reporting that they often or always felt they would never do as well as others in exams. 51.6% worry about what would happen if they failed an exam, and 43.1% stated they felt nervous and stressed when thinking about doing exams. These figures indicate the pressures our young people face when doing exams fully supported by and attending their school.

In essence, high rates of life satisfaction for young people in Ireland are significantly lower (61%) than the overall average across OECD countries (67%) and that in Ireland significantly fewer female students are highly satisfied with their lives (55.5%) compared with male students (67.3%). Many of our young people are experiencing high levels of anxiety (23.9%) and depression (13.8%) (McMahon et al, 2017) and a high proportion (estimated to be one in three by the time they are 13 years old) have reported having some kind of mental health disorder (Cannon et al, 2013). The extent of difficulties reported for young people in Ireland in relation to their mental health is very concerning.

## **2.6 Summary of Findings**

In essence, high rates of life satisfaction for young people in Ireland are significantly lower than the overall average across OECD countries and that in Ireland significantly fewer female students are highly satisfied with their lives compared with male students. Many of our young people are experiencing high levels of anxiety (23.9%) and depression (13.8%) (McMahon et al, 2017) and a high proportion (estimated to be one in three by the time they are 13 years old) have reported having some kind of mental health disorder (Cannon et al, 2013). The



extent of difficulties reported for young people in Ireland in relation to their mental health is very concerning.

There are known risk and protective factors associated with wellbeing and mental health. Research conducted in Ireland has identified the protective factors most relevant to Irish young people, as including physical activity, effective regulation and coping strategies, family support systems, supportive friendships and connectedness with teachers and schools. Identified risk factors for young people in Ireland include pre-existing mental health difficulties, learning difficulties and academic failure, exams, difficulties within family structures, loss and bereavement, low socioeconomic status and financial stress. Young people in Ireland tend to experience high levels of schoolwork related anxiety compared with their OECD counterparts, with female students experiencing significantly higher levels of school-related anxiety than males, and specifically high levels of examination-related stress (up to c.50%).

### **3. The Covid-19 Pandemic and its impact on Wellbeing & Mental Health**

The Covid-19 Pandemic has brought a very real risk to the physical health of our citizens which quite validly and understandably has led to heightened anxiety and worry across the population as a whole. This is a normal and healthy response to a real threat (Hobfoll et al, 2007). Kelly (2020) has identified three key challenges for all citizens in relation to the management of mental health during this crisis as:

- learning to keep our anxiety proportionate to the risk
- learning how to live with a certain amount of worry and
- navigating the uncertainty that the Covid-19 virus has brought to our broader lives.

The public health measures that have been put in place in Ireland as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic including the closing of all schools, the requirement for all to physically distance (since March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020), and more recently (since March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020) the requirement to largely stay at home, have resulted in additional challenges for all, and for some more than others. These include adjusting to the challenge of living for large parts of the day with the whole family in a single space, while trying to maintain usual daily activities (work for parents and education for children and young people), within the context of restrictions on movement and restrictions on access to usual support and social networks. Many parents have become unemployed. In addition, some families have family members who have become ill with the virus and are self-isolating at home, where possible; some are already recovering from the virus while some will have already been bereaved. The virus has not yet peaked in Ireland and we do not know to what extent the population will be infected or for how long the public health measures that have been introduced will remain in force. There is a measure of uncertainty of what will happen over the next weeks and months that cannot be predicted or controlled for.

#### **3.1 The impact on psychological wellbeing of separation and restriction of movement on people who have potentially been exposed to a contagious disease**

The closure of schools and the restrictions placed on everyone in this country and in many other countries around the world is an extraordinary phenomenon, which few have previously experienced. There is, however, a body of literature, which has considered the psychological impact of restrictions of movement and association in response to a number of

pandemics internationally, which has recently been reviewed by Brooks et al (2020). The studies reviewed considered the impact of quarantine (defined as the separation and restriction of movement of people who have potentially been exposed to a contagious disease) rather than isolation (defined as the separation of people who have a contagious disease from others). Data was evaluated from studies conducted between 2004 and 2018 on the impact of a variety of viruses internationally, including SARS, Ebola and H1N1. Their analysis suggests that even relatively short periods of quarantine may have an adverse impact on psychological wellbeing. This includes poorer mental health, post-traumatic stress symptoms, confusion, avoidance behaviours and anger following periods of quarantine  $\approx$  10 days, with a significantly higher incidence of post-traumatic stress symptoms after +10 days. Brooks et al (2020) also report on a qualitative Australian study of schools communities following H1N1 influenza. This study noted behavioural changes including vigilant hand-washing, avoidance of crowds and delays in returning the school community to normality (Braunack-Mayer et al 2013).

Brooks et al (2020) report on several emerging themes, but of relevance to the current context are reports of anxiety and stress, fear of infection & infecting others. They note that loss of routine, reduced social and physical contact caused distress, boredom, frustration and a sense of isolation. They conclude that the psychological impact of quarantine is wide ranging, substantial and long lasting, with impacts detectable for months and in some cases years after the events. There is no strong evidence of particular demographic risk factors for poor psychological outcomes, however, a history of mental illness and psychiatric history is associated with psychological distress. Of particular note, however, Healthcare workers are reported to be particularly at risk for poor psychological outcomes. While this is not necessarily relevant to the current considerations, it is possible that the children and young people of those front line Healthcare workers may perhaps be a high risk group themselves by nature of the levels of extreme stress or illness or absence of a parent/caregiver. This cohort of children and young people may therefore experience a heightened perception of risk and fear of loss.

### **3.2 Psycho-social care following traumatic events and their aftermath**

Hobfoll et al (2007) presented a seminal paper on how best to respond to major traumatic events and their aftermath. This paper contends that most people will have transient stress reactions to restriction on their everyday lives. It identifies the following elements which impact on stress to create trauma:

- Sheer physical, social and psychological demands of the situation may become overwhelming
- Disruption of resources, both economic and psycho-social, can impact on an individual's coping capacity, particularly in situations of socio-economic disenfranchisement
- Loss, or threatened loss, of attachment bonds and personal safety

Hobfoll et al (2007) highlights 'five essential elements' necessary for immediate and mid-term mass trauma intervention. These are promoting:

- A sense of safety
- Calming
- A sense of self- and community-efficacy
- Connectedness and
- Hope.

### **3.3 The critical role of social relationships**

Social relationships are critical to the maintenance of health and a lack of social contact and behavioural interaction can result in social isolation/ loneliness which is linked to higher levels of stress. Lacy, Jumari and Bartley (2014) contend that socially isolated children have lower educational attainment and poorer socioeconomic outcomes. While this study considers the impact of social isolation and the role of social relationships over time, it is clear from the Brooks et al (2020) review above that even short periods of social isolation can create anxiety and stress. One impact of stress hormones in the typically developing individual has the effect of causing people to seek out social contact. Such social support is associated with feelings of coping and the ability to deal with stressful situations (Martin, Carlson & Buskist,

2017). Social supports help children and young people cope more easily with high level of stress.

### **3.4 The impact of anxiety on students' abilities to prepare for and perform at examinations**

Emotional reactions to high stakes examinations are well documented, with students who feel unprepared, unsure of their ability, or feel they have not performed to their best experiencing feelings of unease, distress or depression (McDonald, 2001). While a certain amount of test anxiety is necessary for optimal performance, McDonald (2001) notes that higher levels of test anxiety have a detrimental effect on test performance. In the current context it may be helpful to consider the impact of anxiety and stress on the cognitive skills required in preparing for and sitting examination. These cognitive skills, known as executive functioning skills, regulate our working memory, processing speed and the ability to switch between tasks, as well as our planning and organisational ability, cognitive flexibility and ability to sustain attention. Executive functioning skills are still emerging in young people taking examinations and, as with all emergent skills, are vulnerable to external disruption. In the context of the current crisis, external factors such as stress and anxiety, may impact on the organisational and attentional ability of young people which may impair their ability to concentrate and perform to their optimum at this time.

### **3.5 State Examinations in the Covid-19 environment**

We already know that Irish teenagers experience heightened worry and anxiety in relation to examinations (PISA, 2018), and this is despite having access to the typical supports provided by their school, outside of an environment disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. While continued access to education has continued, uninterrupted, for some Leaving Certificate students via online platforms, for most, access to education has, at a minimum, been disrupted, and for some likely to have been severely disrupted. This disruption is likely to be anxiety-provoking for many students preparing for their Leaving Certificate examination. While for some students, families will provide a protective structure, enabling continuance of study and motivation to engage with the process, for others, particularly the most vulnerable and marginalised, these resources may not be available. There is a real risk of an equity divide and these groups are at particular risk of disengagement from the education system resulting in poorer long term outcomes and opportunities (Hobfoll et al., 2007).

In addition to this, the public health situation and the necessity to ensure the health and safety of all, has meant that the timing of the examinations for 2020 remains uncertain. Should examinations proceed, the need for the physical distancing of students and examination invigilators/superintendents will require changes to what might be typically expected for a state examination. This may include an alteration to the duration of individual subject examinations and the length of time it takes to complete the full suite of examination subjects, which typically takes place over a two to three week period. The psychological impact of such uncertainty in relation to the high-stakes Leaving Certificate examination is likely to create further anxiety amongst our Leaving Certificate students. In fact this is borne out by the findings of a recent survey published by the Irish Second-level Students Union (ISSU, 2020) looking at student response to state examination contingency plans as a result of Covid-19. The ISSU survey is of particular interest due to the level of response it has attracted, with 46,493 respondents, 28,343 of whom are verified Leaving Certificate students. These figures may represent the views of approximately 1/3 of all 126,000 state examination candidates, and c.46% of registered Leaving Certificate examination students. A brief analysis of the qualitative responses provided reveal a number of themes, which are reflected in the literature reviewed by Brooks (2020) and others referenced in this paper, and are perhaps in some ways more telling than the quantitative data gathered. These include:

- **Anxiety** – due to the lack of certainty and the unknown
- **Fear** – of infection, sickness and death of friends and family members
- **Fairness** – being used as a rationale for those who would prefer to sit the examination and those who would prefer if the examination were cancelled
- **Loss** – leaving school unfinished/without closure, friendships, being unable to demonstrate their knowledge or receive acknowledgement for their work

While the disruption in accessing education for Leaving Certificate students at this time is in and of itself worrying for many students, there are further risks to the wellbeing of students not being able to physically attend school at this time. These risks involve the removal of, or disruption of access to, the range of protective factors typically provided by the school system/setting (school support structure, friendships, physical activity) and the possible increase in risk factors for individual students arising as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (loss and bereavement, financial stress) and those typically mitigated by physical school

attendance (difficulties within family structures). For some, familial, environmental, trauma-related, intrapersonal or a combination of inter-related factors may produce what are termed cascades of risk (Kendall et al, 2014).

### **3.6 Summary of Findings**

People at risk of infection from contagious diseases experience increased levels of anxiety as a normal and healthy response to a real threat (Hobfoll et al, 2007). The challenge for maintaining good mental health at such times is to learn to manage this anxiety in terms of proportionality and to learn to live with some worry and uncertainty in our broader lives (Kelly, 2020).

People who have family members who die as a result of this pandemic, will experience loss and grief, which may be heightened due to the restrictions that have been placed on attendance at funerals.

There are further risks to people's mental health/wellbeing due to the public health measures that are necessarily put in place during these times.

- The psychological impact of quarantine may be wide ranging, substantial and long lasting, with impacts detectable for months and in some cases years after the events.
- Distress may become more serious if the sheer physical, social and psychological demands of the situation become overwhelming. Disruption of resources, both economic and psycho-social, can impact on an individual's coping capacity, particularly in situations of socio-economic disenfranchisement. Loss, or the threatened loss, of loved ones and personal safety further increase the risk of experiencing trauma (Hobfoll et al., 2007).
- Social relationships are critical to the maintenance of wellbeing/mental health and a lack of social contact and behavioural interaction can result in social isolation/loneliness which is linked to higher levels of stress.

For our young people there may be added risks to mental health/wellbeing during this period of Covid-19 pandemic. The public health measures of physical distancing and the requirement to stay at home places the wellbeing/mental health of some students at risk, due to the consequent removal of, or difficulty accessing, key school-based protective factors (school

support structure, friendships, physical activity), and the possible increase for some students in exposure to key risk factors arising as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (loss and bereavement, financial stress) and those typically mitigated by physical school attendance (difficulties within family structures).

In addition, for our Leaving Certificate students, further risks to mental health/wellbeing may be experienced:

- Disruption to regular education is likely to be anxiety-provoking for many students preparing for the high-stakes Leaving Certificate examination.
- Uncertainty in relation to the timing and nature of the Leaving Certificate is likely to further amplify already existing anxiety and stress.

Anxiety and stress may impact adversely on the executive functioning skills required for preparation for examinations and for demonstrating learning and knowledge in examination settings. A recent survey of students due to sit state examinations in Ireland has identified themes of anxiety, fear, fairness and loss, themes that mirror those found in the research literature on the impact of traumatic events on psychological wellbeing.



#### **4. Guiding Principles for evaluating approaches to the Leaving Certificate examination in the context of the Covid-19 Pandemic and its impact on Wellbeing & Mental Health**

While many of our young people will experience some heightened levels of anxiety, fear or loss, during this time, not all will experience this to the same level, and it is likely that some will cope quite well with the changes and adjustments that may need to be made to the format and timing of the Leaving Certificate examination. Others, whose support systems and coping strategies are diminished by the Covid-19 experience, may struggle to adjust and cope. It is crucial, therefore, that any changes to the Leaving Certificate examination take cognisance of the five essential elements recommended by Hobfoll et al. (2007), required for optimal return to normalcy and wellbeing: interventions need to promote a sense of safety, calming, self- and community-efficacy, connectedness and hope. Any revised arrangements for the Leaving Certificate examinations for 2020, need to be evaluated in terms of how these principles are incorporated and embedded within such arrangements.

##### **4.1 Five Essential Principles:**

The five essential principles of promoting a sense of safety, calming, self- and community-efficacy, connectedness and hope are expanded upon here:

**4.1.1 Sense of Safety:** In order to promote a sense of safety, revised arrangements need to explicitly communicate the safety measures that will be in place to reassure the examination candidates that their health and safety will not be placed at risk as a result of these revised arrangements.

**4.1.2 Calming (Minimising Anxiety):**

- It is essential that certainty in relation to the arrangements for the state examinations for our young people, be provided. The lack of certainty within the system currently, and the almost contagion of anxiety being experienced as a result, needs to be addressed as early as possible. Once agreement has been reached on a revised format and timing, this needs to be communicated clearly, definitively and without ambiguity, in order to bring clarity and certainty back to the system.

- Calming also requires that fears around fairness are addressed. Any revised arrangements will need to communicate fairness, that the hard work already done by students will be acknowledged within these new arrangements and that those whose hard work has been disrupted due to the Covid-19 situation, will not be disadvantaged.
- Extending the period of time through which we are expecting students to engage with study and revision will extend this period of anxiety for them, and this should be avoided or minimised to the greatest extent possible.
- Students should be reassured that within any new arrangements, reasonable accommodations will be made available as appropriate; if written examinations proceed, then the possibility of a second chance for those who are ill or have been bereaved may be built into the revised arrangements.

4.1.3 A sense of self- and community-efficacy: It is important that the revised arrangements, when introduced, convince our students that, given the extraordinary circumstances, this is the best way of proceeding, that their welfare, safety and wellbeing have been paramount in the decision-making process, and that the system believes that they can do this, both individually and together, with the support of their school community.

4.1.4 A sense of connectedness: PISA (2018) highlights the importance of school life for Irish teenagers, with connectedness and positive school climate being closely related to their wellbeing. This protective factor has to a large extent been removed in the current situation. Embedded in any new arrangements should be an acknowledgement of the need for heightened connectedness between Leaving Certificate students and supportive school structures at this time. This is particularly important for those who may have experienced a loss of key protective factors or an increase in risk factors due to the public health measures that have been put in place. Continuity of teaching and learning needs to be prioritised for Leaving Certificate students. Arrangements need to explicitly communicate and acknowledge that the students' school communities will support them through this period, and schools need to be proactive in doing this, and supported if necessary.

4.1.5 A sense of hope: Whatever revised arrangements are put in place, they need to be able to communicate hope. This includes hope for the student that this is the best

way forward, and that while different than expected, is now the best route towards their new post-school lives. It also includes hope that if this does not work out as expected that there may be a second chance and that this difficult time will pass and things will get back to normal. Finally it includes hope that they will be able to get back on track to the future that they had planned for themselves.

#### **4.2 A comparison of two options for Leaving Certificate 2020:**

The options for the Leaving Certificate 2020 that are now being considered include an option to proceed with the examinations, commencing on July 29<sup>th</sup>, with safety measures being put in place (Option 1), or the option to cancel the examinations and replace them with a calculated grading system for the entirety of the Leaving Certificate (Option 2). An evaluation of both options, in terms of their potential impact on student wellbeing and mental health, has been conducted, by comparing the potential of each option to deliver on the five key principles considered essential for the promotion of wellbeing during or in the aftermath of a traumatic or emergency event (Hobfoll et al. 2007), described in the previous section. Findings are set out in the following section, and in greater detail in Table 1, Appendix 1.

##### **4.3.1 Findings and analysis of evaluation of two options for Leaving Certificate 2020:**

The National Educational Psychological Service has considered the relative potential impact on student wellbeing and mental health of undertaking the examinations under the conditions described as Option 1 versus using a calculated grades model (Option 2). Analysis has found that while neither option is a perfect solution, and both options will expose students to change and disrupted expectations, the former option poses significantly greater risk to the wellbeing and mental health of the majority of students at this time than does the latter option.

Significant risks for heightened anxiety, inherent in the former option, include the requirement to change the length and format of the examinations in the context of student expectation and preparedness, the worry about safety issues despite the introduction of safety procedures and the sense of emerging unfairness due to a lack of equitable access to supports (Wi-Fi, devices, quiet place to study, school support and classes) in the period of

school closure since mid-March. Furthermore, the risk that this option will need to be changed again, later in this process, due to public health advice, with further disruption and change closer to or during the scheduled exam times has the potential for additional heightened student anxiety.

If the former option proceeds, it is the case that some of our students may manage and cope quite well. This must be balanced, however, with the risks for other groups of students - those already vulnerable, and those rendered vulnerable by this crisis - for whom this experience will be anxiety-provoking and, for some, over-whelming. For these, rather than promoting a sense of efficacy, the option will promote a sense of helplessness likely to undermine wellbeing.

On this basis NEPS would advise that planning for these written examinations should not be advanced. The knowledge that an alternative, calculated grades option is deliverable, and more reliable and valid in terms of evaluating student performance, strengthens this advice. The alternative calculated grades option, with its rationale of fairness, inclusivity, reliability and validity, is the option that, in the current circumstances, better promotes for most, a sense of efficacy, resilience and wellbeing.

## Bibliography

Braunack-Mayer A, Toohar R, Collins JE, Street JM, Marshall H (2013). Understanding the school community's response to school closures during the H1N1 2009 influenza pandemic. *BMC Public Health* 13: 344.

Brooks, S.K. Webster, R.K., Smith, L.E., Woodland. L., Weserly, S., Greenberg, N., Rubin, G.J. (2020) The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: rapid review of the evidence. *Lancet* 2020; 395: 912–20 retrieved 2 April 2020 [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30460-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30460-8)

Cannon, M., Coughlan, H., Clarke, M., et al. (2013). *The Mental Health of Young People in Ireland: a report of the Psychiatric Epidemiology Research across the Lifespan (PERL) Group*. Dublin: Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland.

Dooley, B., O'Connor, C., Fitzgerald, A., & O'Reilly, A. (2019). *My World Survey 2: The National Study of Mental Health in Ireland*. Jigsaw & UCD School of Psychology: Dublin.

Department of Education and Skills (2017). *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018-2023)*. Dublin: Author.

Hobfoll et al (2007). Five Essential Elements of Immediate and Mid-Term Mass Trauma Intervention: Empirical Evidence. *Psychiatry*. 70 (4) Winter, 283-315.

ISSU (2020). Covid-19. The Student Response – Report on Survey Results. retrieved 2 April 2020 [https://issuu.com/issu4u/docs/state\\_examination\\_survey\\_report](https://issuu.com/issu4u/docs/state_examination_survey_report).

Kelly, B. (2020). *Coping with Coronavirus: A Psychological Toolkit*. Newbridge, Merrion Press.

Kendall, P.C., O'Neill Rodriguez, K.A., Villabø, M.A. et al. (2014). Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy with Children and Adolescents. In J. Ehrenreich-May & B.C. Chu (Eds.) *Transdiagnostic Treatments for Children and Adolescents, Principles and Practice*. (pp. 59-83). London: The Guildford Press.

Lacey, R. E., Kumari, M. & Bartley, M. (2014). Social isolation in childhood and adult inflammation: Evidence from the National Child Development Study. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 50, 85 – 94.

Martin, Carlson & Buskist, (2017, June 21<sup>st</sup>) How does social isolation affect a child's mental health and development (:[www.noisolation.com/global/research/how-does-social-isolation-affect-a-childs-mental-health-and-development/](http://www.noisolation.com/global/research/how-does-social-isolation-affect-a-childs-mental-health-and-development/) Retrieved 2 April 2020)

McDonald (2001). The Prevalence and Effects of Test Anxiety in School Children. *Educational Psychology* 21.1. 89 -100.

McMahon, E., O'Regan, G., Corcoran, P. et al. (2017). *Young Lives in Ireland. A school-based study of mental health and suicide prevention*. Cork: National Suicide Research Foundation.

OECD. (2019e). *PISA 2018 Results Volume 3: What school life means for students' lives*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

World Bank (2020, April 20). *High Stakes School Exams during Covid19 – what is the best approach*. ( <https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/high-stakes-school-exams-during-covid-19-coronavirus-what-best-approach>. Retrieved 2 April 2020)

**APPENDIX 1**

**Table 1: Comparison of Two Options for Leaving Certificate 2020 in terms of Student Wellbeing and Mental Health**

	<b>Option 1 (July/August Examinations)</b>	<b>Option 2 (Calculated Grades)</b>
<b>Safety:</b> Intervention needs to promote a sense of safety.	A comprehensive and rigorous safety routine would need to be put in place to ensure that physical distancing is adhered to and that candidates are confident that they are physically safe from exposure to the Covid-19 virus while sitting their examinations and while entering and egressing the examination centre. While every effort would be made, the risk that candidates, superintendents and others of contracting the virus during this process cannot be discounted.	Completely safe – as an intervention to promote safety, calculated grades remove the safety risks to students and superintendents and alleviate fear of both physical and perceived risk to all concerned.
<b>Calm:</b> Intervention needs to promote a sense of calm. This means that it will need to: Provide certainty Minimise anxiety Minimise the period of time for which anxiety is experienced Ensure fairness Provide reassurance	There are a number of factors pertaining to this option that will impact on its ability to promote a sense of calm: This option, if properly communicated, with adequate detail and reassurance, will provide certainty at this point. However, is a real risk that we cannot provide certainty? This option may need to be changed again later in this process, due to further public health advice, therefore this option has the potential to create more uncertainty/disruption closer to or during the scheduled exam times. Extending the period of time during which students are expected to engage with study and revision will extend the period of anxiety for them, and this should be avoided or minimised to the greatest extent possible. The required safety regulations outlined above, while seeking to ensure physical safety of candidates and superintendents, will communicate the <u>need</u> for such precautions, which may inadvertently increase anxiety for some students. Safety regulations will mean that examination times may need to be shortened, which in turn means a change to the structure or format of papers. Changes, to the examination structure/format, in the context of student preparation and expectation, will be anxiety-provoking.	There are a number of factors pertaining to this option that will impact on its ability to promote a sense of calm: This option, if properly communicated, with adequate detail and reassurance, will provide certainty. While some students will be relieved by the decision to introduce calculated grades, others may feel they have been denied the opportunity to demonstrate their ability/skill in the examination situation for which they have prepared. Fear that they will be disadvantaged by this arrangement may be anxiety-provoking for these students. Unfortunately, the examinations for which they have prepared, are not an option in 2020. The knowledge that calculated grades are more reliable/valid than grades obtained under changed conditions may provide a protective factor for this cohort and will provide reassurance in uncertain times, which will help to reduce this anxiety. Reassurance is inbuilt into this model, as for those dissatisfied with their calculated grade, or the outcome of an appeal, the option of sitting the Leaving Certificate at a time when it is safe to do so, is proposed

	<b>Option 1 (July/August Examinations)</b>	<b>Option 2 (Calculated Grades)</b>
	<p>Inequity across the Leaving Certificate cohort is unfair in the context of examinations. There are cohorts of students for whom the period of school closure since mid-March has been less than optimal. Some students will have had reduced, if any, access to continuity of education and an environment in which meaningful study and revision is possible. For these students, examinations will be experienced as an unfair assessment of their skills when compared to others. Fear of unfairness leads to stress and anxiety. Heightened anxiety may impact on the organisational and attentional ability of young people, which may impair their ability to concentrate and perform to their optimal in the run-up to and during examinations.</p>	
<p><b><u>A sense of self- and community-efficacy:</u></b> Revised arrangements need to convince our students that, given the extraordinary circumstances, this the best way of proceeding, that student welfare, have been paramount in the decision-making process, and that the system believes that they can do this, both individually and together, with the support of their school community.</p>	<p>With Option 1 some of our students will manage and cope, and will have the positive experience of being able to cope in the face of adversity (resilience and self-efficacy). The benefits of this option for some must be balanced with the risks for other groups of students. These include those already vulnerable and those rendered vulnerable by this crisis, for whom this experience will be anxiety-provoking and, for some, overwhelming. For many students, rather than promoting a sense of efficacy, Option 1 is likely to promote a sense of helplessness, anxiety and undermine wellbeing.</p>	<p>Option 2 reduces the uncertainty of sitting an unknown examination. With clear communication that the welfare, safety and wellbeing of our students has been paramount, Option 2, provides the required sense of community-efficacy and reinforces a sense of self-efficacy and personal ability to cope in the face of adversity This should be underpinned with an explanation of why calculated grades are actually more reliable/valid than examinations under changed conditions and are protective of student wellbeing and mental health This option may be disappointing for some of our students who have focused on exam preparation and who may have a positive experience of being able to cope in the face of adversity (resilience and self-efficacy). However, these are likely to be those students who are already resilient, and who have not been rendered vulnerable by this crisis.</p>



	<b>Option 1 (July/August Examinations)</b>	<b>Option 2 (Calculated Grades)</b>
<b>Connectedness:</b> Promotes a sense of belong and is closely related to wellbeing and positive mental health	Embedded in any new arrangements should be an acknowledgement of the need for heightened connectedness between Leaving Certificate students and supportive school structures at this time. This is particularly difficult to provide to those who may have experienced a loss of key protective factors or an increase in risk factors due to the public health measures that have been put in place.	Arrangements need to explicitly communicate and acknowledge that the students' school communities will support them through this period. Schools will need to be proactive in doing this, and supported as necessary. PISA (2018) highlights the importance of school life for Irish teenagers, with connectedness and positive school climate being closely related to their wellbeing. This protective factor has to a large extent been removed in the current situation, therefore Option 2 is considered to be the stronger option to support wellbeing reduce anxiety and stress
<b>Hope</b> Hope can be facilitated by communication which removes the fear that the individual will do badly because the problem is internal to the self.	There are a number of factors pertaining to this option that will impact on HOPE:  Any revised arrangements need to be able to provide reassurance that those whose work has been significantly disrupted due to the Covid-19 situation will not be unfairly disadvantaged. It needs to take account of the work already done by students This option is likely to be perceived as less fair, than Option 2 in terms of students hope for the future.	Option 2 offers a sense of hope due to its inclusivity, equity, reliability/validity It includes some reassurance that they may sit the Leaving Certificate at a later date, when it is safe to do so.  It communicates that, while different than expected, this option is now the best route towards their new post-school lives.