



Challenges of Organising Examinations with Social Distancing Requirements

The Department of Education and Skills has been engaging with the Department of Health in relation to the impact of the Government's approach to managing the Covid-19 virus.

Health requirements

Among the key issues which the Department of Health asked DES to have regard to were:

- (1) Arrangements for students travelling to and from examination centres, avoiding the use of public transport
- (2) Maintaining social/physical distancing at all times; avoiding any congregation of students when travelling, while entering or leaving examination halls, and before and after examinations
- (3) Maximising physical distancing between candidates in exam halls and rooms;
 - in practical terms this would mean that the numbers of candidates in centres would probably halve making it impossible to run both the LC and JC examinations simultaneously in the accommodation available in post-primary schools
 - it would also mean that the number of special centres (and superintending adults for students with SEN) could double
- (4) Ensuring that no student attends who is or should be self-isolating or showing a single symptom
- (5) Considering reduced length of exams; i.e. consider arrangements whereby a candidate could remain in the examination hall for a maximum of 2 hours (i.e. 90 mins for examination and 30 mins (15 ins + 15 mins) for the before and after periods)
- (6) Considering holding only one exam a day (rather than the two examinations per day typically held under normal conditions; (currently examinations are held over a three week period; holding only one examination a day would lengthen this to a period of four to five weeks)
- (7) Considering students taking fewer exam subjects than planned (for example, requiring all students to take a minimum core of subjects and one or two optional subjects)
- (8) Considering separate sittings of the same subject (i.e. having half of candidates sit an examination such as Geography on one day and the second half of candidates sit a similar but different Geography paper on another day)

- (9) Ensuring that extensive arrangements were put in place for the protection of superintendents

SEC Planning

The State Examinations Commission (SEC) had been planning towards running the Leaving Certificate, with written examinations commencing on 29 July 2020. It has been doing so in consultation with the advisory group for contingency planning for the 2020 state examinations.

The SEC had been planning to announce the timetable and arrangements for exams in the first week of June.

The following is a summary of the arrangements which the Commission considered and these issues were discussed with the advisory Group:

Transport and social distancing

- Potential non-use of public or school transport or the use of socially distanced public or school transport. Not to provide transport would have a significant impact on students from socially disadvantaged and rural communities
- Strict staggering of the arrival and departure times of sets of students would be required to prevent congregation of students
- Leaving Certificate and Leaving Certificate Applied candidates would have to be spread over all available spaces in schools, requiring the use of the number of superintendents normally required for Leaving Certificate and Junior Cycle examinations.
- In addition, multiple students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) could not be accommodated as usual in a single school classroom, given the need for social distancing. At most, two candidates could be accommodated in a single classroom where previously, depending on the accommodations, 3 or 4 candidates might have shared. This would greatly increase the number of classrooms required and it may be the case that schools do not have sufficient accommodation available within the school. Other venues might be required to provide the needed accommodation.

Examination timetabling

- Two main options were considered– one or two exams a day. While the preference is for two exams, it is most likely that the health advice would be for one a day.
- If written examinations took place using one examination per day on six days per week (Mon-Saturday inclusive), the examinations could be completed within 33 days (say, from Wed, 29 Aug-Fri, 5 Sept).
- This would delay the start of the new academic year for all post-primary student potentially to mid-September.
- A normal timetable of 2 exams a day would delay the start of term into early September.

Shortening examinations

- The health advice available during planning indicated that there was likely to be a need to shorten exams. The advice from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) was that a change in the structure of exams would impact negatively on the wellbeing of the students and that if any changes were to be made the papers should remain the same and there should be increased choice.
- The SEC contingency was to follow the NEPS advice and the SEC sought to plan on this basis. However, the SEC has indicated that this would only be possible for a limited number of papers. The SEC advised that running truncated examinations (with greatly shortened papers and the significantly altered examination formats required to fulfil health requirements) would be grossly unfair to students and would undermine the reliability and validity of the examinations.
- The SEC expressed particular concern about the impact of any changes to examination formats on candidates with reasonable accommodations (SEN students).

Candidates that do not attend, or are sick during exams

- The presence of an ill candidate, or indeed an ill superintendent, has the potential to disrupt an examination after it has started and to lead to the need to declare the session a system failure and to put in place measures to assess results for all of the candidates in the centre.
- Were it to be found that a candidate, or a superintendent, actually had coronavirus it may be the case that none of the candidates near that candidate/superintendent in the centre could attend for any future examinations.
- There is also a need to consider the candidates who cannot attend because they are socially isolating, recently bereaved or anxious about the examination arrangements.
- The advisory group considered what the options could be for these students.

Practical examinations

- The emerging consensus at the advisory group was that it was not practicable to hold the practical examinations in Engineering, Construction Studies and Art Life sketching given the need for adequate supervision of students when working with specialist tools and equipment; the need for cleansing of tools and equipment between students (e.g. students have to share equipment such as lathes and saws); and the need for social distancing.

Project work

- Project work is normally completed under the supervision of teachers in schools and teachers are able to “sign-off” that the work is the authentic work of the student concerned. SEC suggested that some project work (largely written projects) could be completed in students’ homes, if the normal rules were relaxed by the SEC.

- For some subjects there would be a need to complete the projects at school for safety reasons. It was suggested that should these proceed, they could probably be undertaken in early July subject to health advice – there are over 20,000 such projects here involving over 15,000 students. For other projects, there would be a need, at a minimum, to remove the projects from schools to allow students to complete these at home.

Superintendents

- There would be a need for a significant expansion in the number of superintendents. SEC anticipated difficulties in recruiting superintendents. Within the 2020 cohort of applicants for superintendents (6700), 973 are age 50 – 60, 1151 age 60 – 70 and almost 300 are over 70. With the ongoing health situation, a very high attrition rate must be provided for in considering the availability and willingness to superintend this summer's examinations.

Health and Safety

- Concerns have been raised regarding the health risks posed during the running of exams, these are being considered and health advice will be sought on these. Issues raised with the SEC at the advisory group have included:
 - Will arrangements need to be in place for testing of students and staff?
 - What PPE will be needed? There is concern about the psychological impact of this.
 - What will be the arrangements for the enhanced cleaning of buildings?
 - Need for clear documented plan for all Covid-related safety requirements and contingency plans (e.g. arrangements to be followed if a candidate becomes ill)
- In addition to a duty of care to students the SEC also owes a duty of care to superintendents as employees to safeguard their health and safety in the workplace. The SEC has been reviewing the arrangements for the packing and distribution of examination papers and their daily collection and checking in order to minimise the health risks. The measures under consideration included: machine packing of examination papers (hand bagged at present); courier delivery of papers directly to schools on a periodic basis over the course of the examinations; provision of guidance for the maintenance of social distancing in all aspects of the role; and provision of PPE and sanitising materials for wiping down keys, boxes, plastic packets, etc.
- The SEC is also conscious of the risks that the appointment of superintendents poses for the spread of Covid-19. Currently, to guarantee the impartiality of superintendents, they are not employed to superintend in schools in which they work as teachers. Instead they travel to schools some distance from their own school. This approach would need to be considered in the context of health advice.

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