

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

In response to COVID-19-related social restrictions, further education and training (FET) institutions including community education providers, and higher education (HE) institutions established modified arrangements for teaching, learning and assessment starting in mid-March 2020. Institutions implemented these modifications rapidly on an emergency basis over days to weeks to enable learners where feasible to complete the academic year under the COVID-19 social distancing regime. The special issues faced by apprentices who were furloughed or made redundant is outside the scope of this report.

This report is a high-level preliminary analysis of experiences reported to us in a range of different formats by a wide range of organisations including universities, institutes of technology, education and training boards, private HE institutions, the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), AONTAS, AHEAD, and others. Our analysis is broad, and focusses on issues rather than on institutions. In broad terms, we aimed to determine as best we could in the time available and given the available data what was done, what worked well, and what did not work well.

The main objective of this work is to provide an early, authoritative account of the impact of the modified teaching, learning and assessment arrangements. We expect this account will support confidence in qualifications awarded in 2020 and help protect their reputation nationally and internationally.

Chapter 1 explains our motivation for producing this report.

Chapter 2 sets out the further education and training (FET) and higher education (HE) context in Ireland in and around March 2020 when the COVID-19 global pandemic struck.

Chapter 3 provides an illustrative overview of the global response by tertiary education systems to the challenges posed by COVID-19 social distancing restrictions, particularly in relation to the supports put in place by the tertiary education and the quality assurance communities to meet the challenges.

Further education and training

Chapter 4 of the report deals with the further education and training (FET) sector.

The range of provision, services and learner cohorts within the FET sector is broad and diverse. The lockdown occurred towards the end of the academic year for a sizeable proportion of the FET sector. FET providers¹ had covered much of the curriculum by 12 March and learners were focussing mainly on coursework and assessment. Learners working towards terminal qualifications and those seeking to avail of progression opportunities such as CAO (Central Applications Office) offers were a priority. The social inclusion dimension of ETB provision, especially at NFQ Levels 1-4, was another priority where the focus was primarily on maintaining engagement with learners and supporting remote teaching and learning where possible.

The value of peer support was frequently identified in the FET submissions, at both practitioner and provider levels, through sectoral fora such as the Education and Training Board (ETB) Directors of Further Education Forum; the Quality Strategy group; or the Quality Network supported by Education and Training

¹ Providers of programmes of education and training.

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Boards Ireland (ETBI).

The FET quality assurance governance groups (e.g. Quality Councils), FET management groups and quality assurance services provided oversight and guidance for the management of change with the required flexibility. This inspires confidence in the reasonableness of those changes.

Teaching and learning: After the lockdown, teaching and learning continued remotely by email, VLE, digital communications platforms, online video channels, collaborative file-sharing software, telephone calls, text messages and post. Responses from practitioners, AHEAD and AONTAS suggest that some marginalised and vulnerable groups were particularly disadvantaged by the experience of remote teaching and learning.²

Practical instruction and 'learning by doing' are defining characteristics of much FET provision and the lack of access to work placements, specialist equipment or facilities was a tough challenge.

Despite the extraordinary efforts of many teaching staff to keep learners engaged, both parties overwhelmingly missed the face-to-face interaction of the physical classroom environment.

Feedback from learners on what worked well during this period consistently commended the availability and responsiveness of teaching staff, the lengths to which practitioners went to keep learners engaged in their learning, and the level of support and flexibility they received.

Learners also identified that remote learning provided greater flexibility and control in how and when they accessed programme material.

Assessment: Several providers reported producing procedures on arrangements for modifications to assessments informed by guidance produced by QQI. One partnered with the Further Education Support Service (FESS) to this end.

Providers also described an element of peer review either by colleagues or external authenticators to quality assure the standard of assessment. Some providers received very positive feedback on arrangements for online external authentication and have indicated that sharing of good practice in this area would be useful.

Learner survey data suggest that the majority of learners felt confident in their ability to complete their assessments and felt that they were fair. Practitioners – particularly at Levels 5-6 – also commented that many of the written assessments and open-book examinations worked well and in several cases the alternative assessment was found to be a better assessment instrument than the original. Both practitioners and learners commented that some learners found the completion of assignments a less stressful experience than an examination.

However, staff also found it challenging to engage learners at NFQ Levels 1-3 in remote assessment and for some cohorts the majority of certification was deferred until the autumn.

Responses from practitioners indicate confidence in the integrity of assessment although some responses indicate a lack of awareness among practitioners of measures to support academic integrity in an online/remote context. A majority of learners felt that the assessment arrangements prevented cheating, but learner survey data also indicate an element of uncertainty on this point. The submissions indicate an awareness that remote/online provision poses new challenges for academic integrity and that practitioners need to be equipped with appropriate technology (e.g. anti-plagiarism software) and

² Evidence suggested that particular learner cohorts (e.g. Travellers, Roma, learners in Direct Provision, and learners with a disability) faced greater challenges in relation to teaching and learning, particularly around areas of access and engagement.

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expertise to navigate these challenges with greater confidence and to ensure the continued confidence of all stakeholders in the integrity of awards.

Many practitioners found the arrangements for online submission of assessments and tools for the provision of feedback to be preferable to those previously used and would like to retain these practices.

Providers identified the safe reopening of FET centres including community education as a key challenge for 20/21. While COVID-19 remains a threat, centre capacity will be lower than normal, and providers will have to prioritise access.

A backlog of deferred work experience placements, combined with the potential for ongoing challenges in securing placements, is a concern – particularly for programmes such as traineeships and apprenticeships with large workplace components.

Learner engagement difficulties may be exacerbated if remote teaching and learning extends over a longer period and therefore their causes need to be understood.

The delivery and assessment of practical skills, and provision at Levels 1-3, were two of the major challenges identified by respondents and these are areas in which sectoral collaboration may be of particular benefit in identifying effective responses.

Some practitioners lacked experience in assessment design and online assessment methodologies and would have welcomed more by way of guidance and examples. Also, as blended teaching and learning is likely to be an ongoing feature of FET provision, providers have indicated that professional development for practitioners is required to enhance capacity.

The sharing of practice and the development of case studies and exemplars across communities of practice, providers, and on a sectoral basis will continue to help reduce the ‘trial and error’ nature of some of the COVID response and provide greater confidence to providers and practitioners in more effective approaches and methodologies.

Higher education

Chapters 5 to 9 of the report deal with the higher education sector. The higher education sector comprises the institutes of technology (currently 11, all members of THEA); Technological University Dublin (the only TU in Ireland at the time of writing); RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences; the seven universities in the IUA and the National University of Ireland, and their linked colleges, and the independent higher education institutions.

The findings in this summary are based mainly on responses (received by 24 July 2020) from seven universities, nine institutes of technology, the RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences and Technological University Dublin. Our independent HE findings are reported in **Chapter 8**.

In-person teaching and learning activity ceased in mid-March 2020. Institutions quickly reconfigured to complete the academic year online with staff and students dispersed – most working from home and some students in other countries – and remote interactions between people were mediated by information and communications technology. Education, research and related services for students and staff were all affected. The change management process used to make this transition demonstrated significant leadership qualities at all levels within institutions. The main goals were to:

- protect the health and welfare of students, staff, and the wider community

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- enable students to graduate or accumulate as much as possible of their scheduled academic credit in a timeframe as close as possible to normal
- preserve academic integrity.

Teaching and learning: All institutions sought to continue programmes where at all feasible. Mass deferral was not a practicable option because many higher education systems were operating at capacity before the crisis.

Institutions primarily used their existing management and quality assurance infrastructure to govern change management. Considering what was achieved in such a short time, we were impressed by the success of higher education institutions at finishing out the academic year under the COVID-19 restrictions within the normal timescale and completing the groundwork for next year. The quality assurance infrastructure established by institutions proved to be crucial in approaches to change management, which inspires confidence in the reasonableness of those changes.

The principle of the conservation of essential learning outcomes helped focus minds on what needed to be done rather than what could no longer be done. Time invested by the institutions in the elaboration of intended programme and module learning outcomes over the past 20 years stood them in good stead during this emergency.

Institutions strove to provide learners with opportunities to achieve the originally intended module, stage, or programme learning outcomes³. In some cases, e.g. work-based learning, this was impossible, and the choice was either to defer or to supplement with the best approximation.

Information technology infrastructure was critically important in enabling the rapid change. Without it, almost everything would have ground to a virtual halt. However, resource problems e.g. access to reliable broadband or suitable devices made remote access a challenge for some students and staff.

An effective strategy for communicating with (remote) students (including international and exchange students) and staff was critical for managing the change process and for providing continuity of higher education, research and related services.

It was helpful that institutions had been making increasing use of blended⁴ teaching and learning approaches. This meant that all institutions had a core of staff who were available to help support the transition to remote teaching, learning and assessment. However, understandably, many staff and students were not prepared for the abrupt transition to remote teaching and learning.

It was clear from the responses that the institutes of technology and universities are relatively cohesive groups regularly cooperating with one another at different levels. THEA (the Technological Higher Education Association) played a key role in facilitating cooperation among the institutes of technology – brokering agreements, constructively representing the institutes' interests to key stakeholders and facilitating effective communication. Meetings of the IOT Council of Registrars and other THEA network groups were held as frequently as necessary during the crisis. Similarly, the IUA played a key role in representing the interests of the universities and facilitating cooperation and effective communication between them on a range of fronts, including at President/Provost and IUA Registrars/VP Academic Affairs meetings which were held as frequently as necessary during the crisis.

The COVID-19 emergency disrupted research students to varying degrees. However, supervision continued remotely, and institutions continued to pay research stipends. **Chapter 7** covers the impact

³ The term 'learning outcomes' was not explicitly addressed in all responses though.

⁴ Blended teaching and learning means using a mixture of face-to-face and online tuition in the same course.

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on research and research degree programmes in detail.

From a teaching and learning perspective international and exchange students required additional consideration. COVID-19 led to some students returning to their countries of origin to complete the academic year online. For some, differences in time zones complicated participation in any synchronous activities. Some returned to countries that implement internet censorship. Arrangements for exchange students were also potentially more complicated depending on the situation.

While the achievements of the higher education sector are impressive as is the level of positivity of many students about their experience (**Chapter 6**), there were notable challenges to be faced and some level of dissatisfaction. Challenges arose for some in following areas: the quality of technology-mediated interactions between people; other limitations of available educational technology; adapting pedagogy at short notice; restricted activities; the changes to the learning environment from a student perspective; staff workload; delays in securing professional recognition body approvals in some cases; library, copyright and data issues; issues arising from individual circumstances.

Many students were positive about the efforts made by their institutions. In some cases, this experience revealed better ways of doing things. It has given some staff an opportunity to try out online learning approaches for the first time and become acquainted with its possibilities.

The emergency transition to remote teaching and learning was not a conclusive test of what can be achieved by online approaches to teaching and learning. Nevertheless, it may have opened eyes to new possibilities and challenged the necessity of some ingrained practices that may have been considered sacrosanct until COVID-19 struck.

This report provides preliminary findings based on responses from institutions including surveys of students and staff. A comprehensive determination of how teaching and learning were impacted would be difficult, and it is yet too early for that. For now, it can be said that in the circumstances the teaching in second semester seems to have gone reasonably well in that higher education programmes have generally not been delayed (with some exceptions) or completely derailed.

Assessment: Unseen written examinations normally conducted in examination halls under strict invigilation are a mainstay for summative assessment in higher education and were all cancelled from mid-March 2020. Institutions had to find alternative arrangements for assessing students for eligibility for graduation or to progress to the next stages of their programmes. Three overarching principles guided the majority of providers and the development of their alternative proposals:

- designing alternative assessment methodologies to examinations that appropriately assess programme, stage or module learning outcomes
- protecting the academic integrity of qualification-awarding processes
- ensuring that students were not 'disadvantaged'⁵ by the alternative modes of assessment.

In March 2020 there were calls from some quarters for 'no detriment' approaches to assessment, some of which would have been problematic as they sought to guarantee a prior grade average held by the student regardless of the assessment that was to follow. USI excelled in terms of the leadership position it took in this debate and the sensible approach it promoted. The nucleus of USI's approach was

"A core consideration for SUs to work with their institutions on is that all circumstances that may affect student performance in assessment are taken into account at the appropriate board (ordinarily examinations board or equivalent) and in doing this, this is taken into account on a wider programme

5 'Disadvantage' here is a term of art that is addressed in **Chapter 5**.

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level rather than examining this on a module-by-module basis. It might be helpful for Guidelines for Examinations Boards to be produced in support of this principle.”⁶

Institutions found various alternatives to invigilated in-person written exams for assessing learners’ achievement of intended learning outcomes (ILOs) including the use of one or more of the following:

- continuous assessment
- non-proctored online⁷ examinations with a long time-window
- non-proctored online examinations with a short time-window
- proctored⁸ online examinations.

Non-proctored exams were typically ‘open-book’.

We include, in **Chapter 5**, an outline of the various kinds of approaches institutions took to modifying their arrangements for assessment. We group the approach-elements under the following headings: assessment policy, principles and oversight; communication about assessment; assessment support for students; assessment support for staff; the development of assessment modifications; the implementation of modified assessments; academic integrity; external examining and examination boards and assessment of candidates for research degrees.

We do not yet have sufficient information on outcomes (e.g. results) to analyse or draw conclusions. However, during our quality dialogue meetings, the institutions indicated that an initial analysis of the assessment results and overall grades yielded no remarkable findings in comparison with previous years.

Naturally there were challenges for institutions, students and staff in making the emergency transition to remote-only assessment. Some challenges echoed those encountered in teaching and learning.

The timescale for the completion of examinations was broadly similar to normal. This led to a substantial increase in the workload of all staff involved in making alternative arrangements.

Non-proctored open-book examinations were more susceptible to cheating than the proctored unseen written examinations that they sometimes replaced. Contract cheating can be difficult to detect. This situation provided an opportunity for institutions to place an increased emphasis on advising students to be aware of approaches from essay mills and of the risks for anybody who engages with them. The assessment of coursework is also susceptible to cheating, but this is not new.

Designing open book-examinations to replace invigilated unseen written examinations is challenging for the academic developing the test, especially if they are new to this type of examination. Similarly, it can be more challenging for students to sit an examination with an unfamiliar format.

The early indications are that things went reasonably well considering the circumstances. The crisis stimulated assessment innovation. Some assessors “observed instances of deeper learning from their students”. External examining worked well online. The learning outcomes approach helped.

The assumed heightened risk to academic integrity due to the replacement of invigilated in-person examinations with non-proctored online examinations or increased continuous assessment will require continued vigilance in 20/21 and some more robust ways of remotely assessing but we cannot yet quantify the change in risk. We have described the strategies that institutions have used to draw students’ attention to the expectations regarding academic integrity. In their communications to

6 <https://usi.ie/education/statement-on-student-concerns-regarding-assessment/>

7 Here we mean the examination is delivered online and the student submissions are collected online.

8 Invigilated is an alternative term that is widely used in Ireland.

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students they draw students' attention to codes of academic conduct (e.g. honour codes) and they require students to sign integrity declarations when taking non-proctored examinations.

Chapter 6 presents a secondary analysis of national surveys of HE students, particularly the Union of Students of Ireland survey.

While many students were satisfied or at least neutral there were some students who were dissatisfied with various aspects of how things were handled. Some of this is inevitable e.g. dissatisfaction about the loss of things precluded by the COVID-19 realities, but not all of it is like that and we need to understand what can be done to enhance the response for 20/21.

Further studies will clearly be required to fully understand the implications of COVID-19 in 2020 and the consequences for students, staff, programmes, professions and institutions.

On the basis of the responses we have received, and our knowledge of the higher education sector, we are confident that higher education institutions will continue to respond to the many challenges and adapt their practices reflectively to provide high quality programmes and credible academic qualifications during the COVID-19 crisis.

Conclusion

Social distancing will continue to constrain tertiary education teaching, learning and assessment modalities in 20/21. People are learning to adapt to COVID-19, but it is highly contagious, and its exponential growth potential is ruthless. On-campus capacity will be reduced while COVID-19 remains a threat and some kinds of work placements may also be more difficult to secure. The risk of reescalation of social distancing restrictions remains.

Choosing how to use onsite activity to best effect will be critical. The induction of new students and returning progressing students will need to be a priority as will access to specialist facilities and equipment.

Enhancing remote and blended/hybrid teaching, learning and assessment will be an ongoing priority for institutions as will the need for online delivery of academic and professional support, care and guidance services to students and staff. The institutional effort and resources required to establish a planned blended format for all 20/21 programmes are significant.

The short timeframe of this study means that we do not know how sustainable some of the emergency measures are and whether fatigue might increase if these measures were to be implemented over a longer time span.