An Evaluation of the Impact of the Covid-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment

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Introduction

Modified arrangements for teaching, learning and assessment were established in Spring 2020 in response to Covid-19 related restrictions. This includes alternative arrangements and arrangements that overlap with those that were in place before the Covid-19 restrictions.

Broadly, the project is designed to evaluate, as best it can in the time available, what worked well and what did not. The evaluation will largely be based on a meta-analysis of existing and planned evaluations by providers and other relevant organisations that will be shared with QQI.

This approach will minimise any additional workload for providers and learners. Any additional work would only be required where there is a compelling benefit.

This work is urgent and it is important not least because some of these modified arrangements may be carried into the 20/21 academic year in some form given the short time available for modifying programmes before the start of the next academic year in September 2020.

QQI is leading a collaborative project that will produce

- a preliminary national-level evaluation of the impact of these by the end of July and
- an identification of questions for subsequent longer term more detailed evaluation and learning.

The project is being overseen by the Quality Integrity and Reputation (QIR) group. All key national organisations are represented on the QIR.

The main objectives driving the project are

- to maintain confidence and protect the reputation (quality and qualifications) of the Irish education and training system by accounting for the impact of the Modified arrangements (nationally but particularly internationally);
- to capture what learners and front-line staff considered to be noteworthy;
- to capture what managers considered to be noteworthy;
- to facilitate the sharing of good practice across the system;
- to identify longer term studies that stakeholders, particularly providers, consider useful; and
- to identify any adjustments that need to be made to QQI's national quality and qualifications infrastructure in response to any issues identified by the further education and training (FET) and HE systems;

The genesis of this project is in itself an indication that the core stakeholders in the tertiary education system are keenly interested in maintaining confidence in qualifications, supporting reputation, and learning from this experience.

For the avoidance of doubt please note that the project is not designed to apportion blame for any mistakes that may have been made. Nor has it been designed to usurp roles that are proper to the internal operations of autonomous educational institutions/organisations.

It is understood that the Covid-19 related modified arrangements established in haste this spring are in many cases likely to be far from what might have been done under normal conditions to convert largely face-to-face programmes to largely online programmes. Nevertheless, it seems that some have been remarkably resourceful in putting modified arrangements in place. It is anticipated that some of the modifications may have worked so well that they may be continued after the crisis.

It is recognised that providers, including their managers and teaching staff, and learners continue to be busy, under difficult personal and professional conditions, coping with the impact of Covid-19 and planning for the 2020/21 academic year with many unknowns and the likelihood that some form of social distancing will be required until an effective vaccine or treatment is widely deployed.

The project aims to make maximal use of available data[1] (in the form of reports than can be subjected to meta-analysis) that has already been gathered by stakeholders, including providers, and any relevant data that is planned to be gathered by them **by mid-June at the latest**. Any new surveys or focus group activities will be arranged by collaborators rather than by QQI. QQI is not planning to conduct any direct surveys, though it will collect information from providers whose programmes lead to QQI awards.

The project aims to have the first set of reports available by July 2020. The July report should be useful to providers and learners and provide insights in time for the 2020/21 academic year. Timely feedback based on a preliminary or even rudimentary evaluation is likely to be more beneficial than delayed feedback based on a more comprehensive evaluation. It is appreciated that not all the consequences of modified arrangements will have played out by July and not all the modified assessments will have been completed (e.g. because of appeals and deferrals); neither of these invalidates the approach.

The July report would at the very least try to determine, from a range of perspectives including educational managers, teaching staff and learners, in respect of the Covid-19 related modifications to teaching, learning, and assessment:

1. **What were the main differences?**
2. **What worked well?**
3. **What did not work as well as hoped but could have been improved?**
4. **What in hindsight might have been done differently?**
5. **What worked so well that it could be retained beyond the emergency?**
6. **How were the changes to TLA overseen, coordinated/quality assured?**
7. **What international developments are noteworthy and how does Ireland compare?**

We will agree with key stakeholders the questions to be addressed by the July 2020 report considering the information that is available. **These consultations have already begun.** We aim to achieve as coherent a national picture as possible.

While FET and HE sectors differ in many ways, the basic issues they face are sufficiently similar that we can consider the same broad questions for both. However, the answers to those questions may differ and we will not be reporting exclusively at a 'tertiary' level.

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[1] For the purposes of this project 'data' means any relative information.

The question banks at the end of this document indicate the scope of the project and represent things that QQI would ideally like to know. It is not necessarily feasible to answer all of them in the time available. They may be useful for organisations when identifying material that they already have that may usefully feed into this project. They can also be considered by organisations planning any additional data collection among their constituents. The questions are indicative, and we expect different organisations may make use of them in different ways, they can be adapted or adopted should that be useful.

One of the most urgent tasks is to determine precisely what relevant data is already available and what plans are in place by providers and other stakeholders to collect additional data to be reported on by **Mid-June 2020**. QQI has been collecting details about relevant existing data that will be available from organisations (providers and others such as student bodies, professional bodies, provider representative bodies, state agencies, department of education and skills and such like)[2]. The current findings are set out in table below.

Project phases

The project involves multiple overlapping phases.

Phase 1.   Started in April 2020. Consult with stakeholders to

  – establish project parameters
  – identify data that is available now or will be by mid-June 2020
  – begin to extract the data (reports or raw data as appropriate)
  – gather views on the possible approaches to the evaluation

Phase 2.   Started in May 2020. Develop and sense check the project methodology with a selection of providers in FET (ETBs, Independent and Private Providers, non-ETB post primary schools) and HE (IOTs, Universities, Private Providers) and with other key organisations (e.g. USI, Aontas, Unions, Professional Bodies, D/ES, Solas, HEA, NFETL, ETBI, THEA, IUA, HECA).

Phase 3.   Started in April 2020

Continue to extract the data

Consult with international agencies and bodies on global developments taking place

Analyse the data (the analysis will begin in May and hopefully conclude by early July).

Phase 6.   Starts in mid-June

Prepare the July report

Phase 7.   Next steps in consultation with stakeholders

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[2] As the national qualifications authority and quality assurance agency that spans the FET and HE system and as an awarding body for hundreds of providers, we have unique knowledge and understanding of the FET and HE systems, institutions and related organisations to inform this work. We already have information about contingency planning and modified arrangements that the many providers whose programmes we validate have made.

Available data:

QQI is currently engaged in discussions on the availability of data and any plans that core stakeholders have for further data collection in the short term. The focus is on data that can help us prepare the July report. **This table is incomplete and continues to evolve.**

Stakeholders	Existing Reports	Data gathered/to be gathered	timelines	Other information
QQI		Contingency plans for the FET/HE private colleges		Additional updates expected by mid-June
National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in higher Education	INDEx Survey Report 2020 for baseline information Profile of Assessment Practice in Irish HE 2016 for baseline information	Input from National Forum Associates and advisory/steering groups on lessons learned during the crisis	Initial insights available in 3-4 weeks	The National Forum is committed to ensuring that any new knowledge and/or useful perspectives gained during the sudden shift to online teaching, learning and assessment are gathered and synthesised for the benefit of the entire higher education community
USI	Some survey material already available and initial feedback from constituents	Focus groups and surveys with student representatives and learners to be arranged in a time appropriate way	After assessment periods are complete (June)	USI are in constant contact with their constituents and with non-constituents for support
Aontas	A number of survey/focus group reports available to date Recent surveys on Learner experience	Further work with students is under consideration including focus groups	Received any reports available to date – further work planned in coming weeks.	
THEA and constituency	A number of reports available to date	THEA working with Registrars on planning (Small focus group with IOT Registrars for this project to sense check approach and feasibility of the questions)		National guidelines on social distancing would be useful Planning for the next intake commenced
IUA and constituency	A number of reports available to date QQI is engaging with IUA on this project			The universities are supported by the *Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning Project*

				Planning for the next intake commenced
HECA and constituency	QQI has data on contingency planning arrangements and modified TLA	HECA working with cross sectoral quality committee on this project		HECA is committed to supporting a collaborative approach to this project

Additional updates expected by mid-June |
| Other HEI (RCSI, TU Dublin) | TU Dublin will provide data on their evaluations. | | | |
| ETBI and constituency | QQI has data on contingency planning arrangements and modified TLA
ETBs gathering data ongoing | ETBI working with the ETB executive leadership teams on the steps taken and impact on the learning environment | Available as analysis in 2-3 weeks | |
Other FET	QQI has data on contingency planning arrangements and modified TLA	Ongoing direct engagement monitoring by QQI		Additional updates expected by mid-June
PSRBs	Data gathered by QQI to date	Meeting with PSRBs on 21 May on COVID arrangements		Additional updates expected by mid-June
D/ES	DES survey work via THEA and IUA completed to date by Higher Education Unit		received	
HEA	Profile information and reports gathered to date	HEA to extract relevant information from any other working groups, reports or data for this evaluation	As soon as gathered	HEA is committed to supporting a collaborative approach to this project and avoiding duplication and burden on providers
Solas	Early survey feedback on FET responses in the ETBs	Looking at existing system level data to share with this project as appropriate		SOLAS is committed to supporting a collaborative approach to this project and avoiding duplication and burden on providers
TUI	TUI are considering what input they maybe in a position to make (FET and HE) to the project			TUI are supportive of the project and have received feedback from teaching staff
Ahead	Will contribute survey data on students with disabilities and FET practitioners especially SEN			

What will the project produce?

(1) A report on
   a. the *main* lessons learned from the evaluation of the impact of the modified arrangements with suggestions (where possible) on what needs to be put in place to address problems for the continued use of flexible and distributed approaches in the 2020/21 academic year.
   b. *available* evidence to support confidence and protect the reputation (quality and qualifications) of the Irish education and training system by accounting for the impact of the Modified arrangements (nationally but particularly internationally) **[July 2020]**
(2) A report on a review of relevant developments/approaches in other countries or a possible comparative analysis embedded in the report in (1) above. **[July 2020]**
(3) Other potential products **to be determined** in the longer term e.g.
   a. Establish a searchable online repository for Covid-19 stimulated initiatives. **[Repository opening by date to be determined with no specific home identified as yet]**
   b. A report on the lessons learned that can be applied to growing the contribution of flexible and distributed approaches to education and training in FET and HE. **[if appropriate and to be determined]**

Initial methodological approach

We have already outlined the project stages above. Here we provide a little more detain on the approach.

We are currently in discussions with key stakeholders about:

   − tuning the aims of, and approach to, the evaluation and
   − about datasets that they either have or expect to have by Mid-June.

For the preliminary report (July) we envisage a meta-analysis of relevant quantitative and qualitative data already collected and to be collected by organisations.

This paper may influence the data that institutions/organisations will collect for contribution by Mid-June.

We think it is essential to capture a sample of what

   − learners (students, apprentices, trainees, and such like),
   − frontline teachers (including lecturers, supervisors, mentors, teaching assistants, tutors, trainers and such like) and
   − managers

think of the modified arrangements while the experience is still fresh in their minds. Academic managers are key here but the views of the following managers (where they exist) may also be useful to capture if feasible:

   − Teaching, learning and assessment support service managers
   − Communications managers
   − Information technology managers
   − Library managers

- Learner health and welfare managers
- Disability support service managers
- International student service managers

Ideally, we would like to understand how different broad discipline areas are affected but we recognise that that might be difficult in the tight timeframe.

Once we are clear on what datasets are available or likely to be available, we will have a better idea about how the July 2020 report will be structured.

We will work with what is already available and what will be available by Mid-June. If providers or other stakeholders are planning any additional relevant data collection for their own needs that will be available by mid-June we would be grateful if they would be influenced by the questions in this project.

Feedback on what questions providers can answer using existing or planned data is important.

Questions that indicate the scope of the project

The remainder of this section provides a more detailed exploration of the kinds of questions that are within scope. Some may not be possible to answer in the short term, some key questions may be missing others may be better formulated. The questions can be used as prompts to help people reflect on the broad generalised questions set out on page 2.

We think that similar questions arise for FET and HE though the answers may be quite different. Nevertheless, we recognise that HEIs and FETIs are significantly different in important ways.

We recognise that people in different disciplines or sectors or operating at different NFQ levels may have significantly different issues. And we recognise that different people may be affected in significantly different ways by the crisis owing to their susceptibility to COVID-19, their home environment, their finances, their personalities, their life goals and such like.

These questions are a first cut. The purpose of setting these out at this stage is to mark out the scope of the overall project—to the kinds of things it may be useful to know—naturally, we do not expect that they will all be answered by July.

We think teaching[3], learning[4] and assessment, while being interdependent, involve different perspectives and give rise to different sets of questions. However, for this project we have arranged the questions from three perspectives, learners, teachers and managers.

Learner perspective question bank

(1) How well informed were you about what to expect?
(2) How did you interact with your classmates?
(3) How did you interact with your teachers?
(4) Were there any significant changes to the educational goals (i.e. learning outcomes) of your course/modules?
(5) What did you miss most about your learning environment?
(6) What kinds of important learning and teaching activities were most affected by the modified arrangement?

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[3] For this system wide study , teaching includes educating, supervising, instructing, training, guiding, demonstrating (labs) mentoring and such like). We can understand it as the endeavour to provide an opportunity for learning — i.e. for acquiring knowledge, skill and competence — in a planned, arranged setting. Teaching also implies that the teacher intends to teach a certain individual with the aim that this person attains certain intended learning outcomes. Self-teaching means that the teacher and learner are the same person.
The teacher and learner come together in the learning environment. The teacher has a role in shaping that environment and setting the learning agenda. In many settings teachers adapt to the learners they are dealing with using spoken and unspoken cues.
Covid-19 social distancing changes the learning environment and, independently of this, the teacher. Both affect teaching.

[4] For this system wide study, learning is a process that, while centred in learners (e.g. students, apprentices, interns, trainees, pupils, and such like), depends on the learning environment and their interaction with it. The learning environment has physical, social and cultural dimensions. It includes the people (e.g. teachers, tutors, supervisors, other learners, patients, clients, service users, co-workers, and such like) that the learner connects or interacts with. It includes the physical spaces, contexts, materials, and instruments (e.g. laboratories, studios) that the learner engages with. The learning environment is co-created by everyone involved.
Covid-19-related social distancing changes the learning environment, and independently of this, the learner. Both affect learning.

(7) What kinds of important learning and teaching activities were not really affected by the modified arrangement?

(8) Did you have enough information to prepare for the modified assessments?

(9) Do you think that there were arrangements in place to detect cheating in modified assessments?

(10) Do you think cheating levels changed with modified arrangements?

(11) Overall, comparing modified arrangements with prior arrangements what do you think was lost/gained?

(12) What did you like about the modified arrangements?

(13) What did you dislike?

(14) Did you feel particularly disadvantaged by the modified arrangements? How?

(15) Were your specific needs and personal circumstances given due consideration?

(16) Did your personal circumstances change significantly as a result of the crisis?

(17) What are the main obstacles that you encountered?

(18) What are the main supports that you relied upon?

(19) If you had to do it all again what would you do differently?

If classifying responses by course-type, field and stage, then the following additional questions may be worth considering.

(1) What kind of course are you studying? [drop down menus for first three]

(2) What is the field of education?

(3) What year are you in?

Teaching perspective question bank

(1) How did you facilitate learners to interact with their classmates?

(2) How did you interact with your learners?

(3) Were there any significant changes to the educational goals of your courses/modules?

(4) What _kinds_ of changes to the intended learning outcomes (if any) did you have to make to complete your teaching using modified arrangements?

(5) What were the most significant changes to the learning environments?

(6) What substitutions did you make to convert your course/module for online provision? [two lists]

(7) How did you compensate for the loss of access to laboratories, studios, workstations and such like?

(8) How did you compensate for the curtailment or cancellation of practice-placements, internships, work-experience and such like?

(9) What elements of the modified arrangements might be useful to adopt after the crisis?

(10) If you were severely restricted in the amount of on-campus time you could allocate to activities next year which activities would you prioritise?

(11) What kinds of important learning and teaching activities were most affected by the Modified arrangement?

(12) What kinds of important learning and teaching activities were not really affected by the modified arrangement?

(13) Did you have enough time and information to prepare the modified assessments?

(14) What substitutions did you make to convert your summative assessments for online provision? [two lists]

(15) How confident are you in the reliability and validity of the assessment results?

(16) What _kinds_ of changes to the assessed learning outcomes (if any) did you have to make to implement your assessment online?

(17) What kinds of assessments worked well?

(18) What kinds of assessments did not work well?

(19) Overall, do you think learner performance in the modified assessments differed significantly from their previous performance? How?

(20) Do you think that there were robust arrangements in place to detect cheating in modified assessments?

(21) What did you do to combat cheating (e.g. plagiarism)?

(22) Do you think cheating levels changed with modified arrangements?

(23) Overall, comparing modified arrangements with prior arrangements what do you think was lost/gained?

(24) What did you like about the modified arrangements?

(25) What did you dislike?

(26) Did you feel particularly disadvantaged by the modified arrangements? How?

(27) Were your specific needs and personal circumstances given due consideration?

(28) Did your personal circumstances change significantly as a result of the crisis?

(29) What are the main obstacles that you encountered?

(30) What are the main supports that you relied upon?

(31) If you had to do it all again what would you do differently?

(32) What resources did you use when designing the modified arrangements? [List, Institutional, QQI, NFETL, IUA, ETBI, …]

If classifying responses by course-type, field and stage, then the following additional questions may be worth considering.

(33) What kind of course are you teaching? [drop down menus for first three]

(34) What is the field of education?

(35) What year does your response refer to?

(36) What percentage of learners deferred rather than take a Modified assessment?

(37) What percentage of learners received an estimated grade?

Academic manager perspective

(1) What kinds of modifications were made to institutional/organisational communications processes to keep learners informed of Covid-19 arrangements?

(2) What were the main lessons learned (what worked well and what did not) regarding Covid-19 related communications?

(3) What kinds of modifications to institutional/organisational processes/structures were put in place to respond to Covid-19 related restrictions?

(4) What were the main lessons learned (what worked well and what did not) regarding modifications to institutional/organisational processes/structures?

(5) What kinds of internal consultation (e.g. approval processes) were involved in establishing modified TLA arrangements?

(6) What kinds of institutional/organisational supports were involved in establishing modified TLA arrangements?

(7) What kinds of external factors (e.g. PRB requirements or availability of internships and placements) complicated the establishment of modified TLA arrangements?

(8) What kinds of external supports were involved in establishing modified TLA arrangements?

(9) What were the main lessons learned (what worked well and what did not) relating to academic integrity in respect of the modified assessment arrangements?

(10) What do you see as the top three biggest challenges for the 20/21 academic year?