



An Roinn Oideachais
agus Scileanna
Department of
Education and Skills

Briefing on Covid-19 responses in the Education and Training Sector

8 April 2020

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1. Introduction

On 1 April, Minister McHugh and Minister of State Mitchell O'Connor, supported by senior Department officials led by the Secretary General, provided a briefing to education and skills spokespersons and other representatives of the political parties and groupings on the education and skills sectoral response to the challenges posed by Covid-19. The purpose of this briefing document is to provide further detail to that provided at the 1 April session.

This single briefing document is being provided to each of the Deputies present at the 1 April briefing session and covers the issues raised at the session. It will also be published on the Department's website.

The briefing document has been prepared within particular constraints, namely in a context of significantly increased demands, in circumstances where Departmental officials are having to work remotely without access to offices and files and against a background where the Department itself has had to redeploy staff to meet crisis-related pressures in other parts of the public service.

The Oireachtas has put in place a new process whereby Covid-19 related queries will be submitted by TDs via a dedicated email address (covidqueries@oireachtas.ie) on a weekly basis and forwarded to Departments for reply.

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

2. Whole of System Approach

The Department is participating in the **central co-ordination structures** in relation to Covid-19 to ensure a joined-up approach across Government.

The education and training system's response is aligned to our core national priority of saving lives, while being focused on ensuring continuity of education for learners, including a particular focus on more vulnerable students.

The Department has put in place a range of **steering and engagement structures** to support the education and training system in navigating these new challenges:

- The Department's **Management Board** has been meeting daily to ensure there is a timely and senior level consideration and co-ordination of developments across and within the sector.
- In the **schools sector**, stakeholder engagement groups have been set up to engage with school management bodies, school administration and continuity of teaching and learning.
- In the **tertiary sector** (higher and further education), a steering group on tertiary education was established to ensure a coherent approach to the challenges presented for Ireland and for the sector by the Covid19 pandemic. A number of working groups have been established to focus on the different issues emerging from the steering group.

The Department participates daily in the **Government's Crisis Communications Group**. This ensures consistency of approach and clear messaging across sectors. Significant communication work has happened with sectoral stakeholders and is ongoing with all audiences, both to ensure wide dissemination of important public health messaging, and also to address sectoral-specific issues. In addition, work is ongoing to **enhance existing communications materials** to ensure their accessibility to a wide range of audience, e.g. advice from NEPS (National Educational Psychological Service) has been made available as a podcast and animation work is ongoing to create further user-friendly material for children.

3. State Examinations

The Minister announced on 19 March the cancellation by the State Examinations Commission (SEC) of some of the earlier components of the examinations; that is a number of oral and practical performance tests at Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate level. Students who had been due to take these tests will be awarded full marks for that portion of their examination as this was felt to be the fairest response in the circumstances.

At the same time the Minister also announced an extension until 15 May of the date for submission by students of various elements of project work and coursework at Junior and Senior Cycle, that had originally due to be submitted at various dates between 20 March and 24 April.

The current health advice is that all schools will remain closed to students until 19 April, which will be the end of the normal school Easter holidays. The SEC is planning on running the remainder of the Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations.. Information on exam and assessment schedules, including in respect of Leaving Certificate Applied and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme is available on the website of the State Examinations Commission: <https://www.examinations.ie/misc-doc/BI-SE-67826275.pdf>

Proceeding with the State examinations remains our priority and the Department and the SEC are working towards this. Every effort will be made to support all of our students through this challenging time, particularly those involved in State examinations. Students facing examinations have been asked to keep focused and to keep working and try, as much as possible, to prepare as normal for the exams.

The SEC and Department are examining all arrangements and contingencies in order to have regard to any advice from the public health authorities in respect of the conduct of the examinations.

4. Continuity of Education (Schools Sector)

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

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

The guidelines aim to address parental feedback about a lack of engagement by some schools, especially at primary level. Feedback directly from the schools' surveys was that some schools were seeking such guidance and so this material should be particularly useful. The next iteration will focus on matters relating to disadvantage and children with special educational needs.

The DES is working with the NPC on a survey of parents to ascertain their views on school closures. The survey will include a focus on wellbeing.

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

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

The PDST and the Teaching Council are also hosting a series of live webinars for school leaders, teachers, parents and students which commenced on 31st March with 1,000 participants, addressing their experiences and concerns at this time. Through live panels and live links, participants are engaging in conversations about the realities currently being faced as well as highlighting the major effort being made to maintain continuity in learning for students. The first webinar, which was oversubscribed (over 5,000 registrants), can be viewed on playback. Subsequent webinars will be informed in response to emerging developments and the needs of the education community.

RTE has developed the RTE Home School Hub, which is an additional support for parents and primary school pupils. Pupils are able to watch, download and engage with curriculum-based content, project work, and fun activities to keep them entertained and learning. The presenters are bilingually qualified teachers, identified and engaged by RTE, and many aspects of the programme are delivered in both English and Irish. This broadcast is a supplement to the ongoing learning being provided by teachers.

The Department is also supporting a pilot initiative, under which Cisco and IBM are providing support directly to schools to operate the *WebEx* platform. This facilitates schools, with no alternative capability, with a collaborative platform to enable them engage with their students and staff.

The Schools Broadband Programme, whereby all schools are provided with broadband, remains fully operational, supported by a Schools Broadband Helpdesk. This service includes webhosting for those schools who are updating their websites with relevant information, and remote access for staff to school servers if required. Guidance information on relevant technologies can also be found on the PDST Technology in Education website.

NEPS has also developed a podcast to guide young people through some relaxation exercises at this time and this is be available through the Department's website and at: <https://soundcloud.com/user-719669409/relaxation-techniques-30-03-2020>

A collaborative effort, involving the Department, management bodies and other partners is underway to develop further support and advice and this will be made available on an ongoing basis.

This support and advice will also include a specific focus on supporting children at risk of educational disadvantage. In addition, building on the cooperative engagement on school meals provision, my Department is working with DCYA and the Tusla Education Support Service to ensure that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are adequately supported and work on exploring innovative initiatives which can assist is underway.

5. Data/broadband and related issues

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

The Schools Broadband Programme, whereby all schools are provided with broadband, remains fully operational, supported by a Schools Broadband Helpdesk. This service includes webhosting for those schools who are updating their websites with relevant information, and remote access for staff to school servers if required. Guidance information on relevant technologies can also be found on the PDST Technology in Education website.

The Department has been working closely with the tertiary education system to address issues raised in relation to accessing online provision including broadband issues. The Department is also working closely with Educampus, the education research network and with HEAnet, which provides quality IT shared services across Higher Education. These experts are working with stakeholders to identify specific issues encountered and to develop solutions. We recognise the urgency and are driving this process with stakeholders to ensure solutions can be implemented as soon as possible.

Officials in this Department are also liaising with DCCAIE to engage on the issues of barriers to connectivity impacting access to remote learning across all parts of the education and training system.

6. Wellbeing (incl. physical activity)

NEPS, the Department's National Educational Psychological Service, has developed advice and resources for keeping Children and Young People well during Covid-19. These resources aim to support children and young people's learning and wellbeing at this time. All of these resources are aligned with the main messages from the Government and the HSE. Work is underway to create animated versions of the guidance to young people and their parents. NEPS and the JCT will be working together on webinars expanding on the existing resources. NEPS has also developed guidance on relaxation techniques. This is accompanied by a podcast.

NEPS is updating resources and reviewing its approach to supporting schools that experience critical incidents. In addition NEPS is encouraging all schools to update their own critical incident management plans.

NEPS psychologists continue to be available to provide advice and support to school principals, teachers and school communities. NEPS is proactively exploring a number of innovative ways to continue to provide educational psychological services to school communities at this time.

NEPS is developing a series of supports (podcasts/other resources) for exam year students to support them as they prepare for their examinations during the unprecedented Covid-19 situation. These will include information on managing their wellbeing, and coping with stress and anxiety.

In the context of wellbeing generally the NEPS has included a reference in its advice for young people and for parents of young children for the need for physical activity as part of everyone's daily routine while schools are closed. For information, the relevant text can be found at the following links:

From the Advice for Young People:

<https://www.education.ie/en/The-Department/Announcements/advice-to-young-people-while-schools-are-closed.pdf>

From the Advice for Parents:

<https://www.education.ie/en/The-Department/Announcements/guide-for-parents-supporting-children.pdf>

There is a wide range of materials available on the ScoilNet website to enable teachers to support students to continue learning with regard to Physical Education, particularly in the context of Leaving Certificate Physical Education.

7. Students with Special Educational Needs

7.1. Home Tuition

Approximately 1,500 families are currently in receipt of funding for the provision of Home Tuition under the Departments Home Tuition Grant Schemes. Under the schemes parents use the grant to engage tutors / private providers to deliver tuition. Funding for the provision of Home Tuition will continue to be provided for the duration of the pandemic emergency where tuition is delivered by distance learning. The Department is making information and training available to all tutors and private providers to assist them in providing tuition through distance learning.

Where Home Tuition cannot continue via distance learning or where a parent wishes to cease Home Tuition for the duration of the pandemic emergency, s/he must inform the Department by email to special_education@education.gov.ie. Parents can apply to the Department to use the hours sanctioned for this period to provide tuition later in the year. In such circumstances, the Department will accept that some of the hours may be delivered outside of the normal school day and/or on a Saturday if necessary. To provide for the Tutors involved, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection have a range of measures to provide income support to people affected by COVID-19 (Coronavirus). Full information on Home Tuition situation available on www.education.ie/covid19,

7.2. NCSE Supports

The National Council for Special Education has developed resources for parents of children with additional needs who may benefit from specific advice during the period of school closure. Other resources are being developed including online supports for teachers of children with special educational needs. All resources will be on the NCSE website and publicised through education partners and Twitter. The NCSE visiting teacher service continues to provide direct telephone/skype support to families and students.

The NCSE resources can be accessed at: <https://ncse.ie/online-resources> and include resources for parents and teachers such as class\age level activities; practical advice on how to take care of Assistive Technology in the Home and a suite of Occupational Therapy and Speech and Language Therapy resources (including a social story animation on attending a Covid-19 test Centre prepared by the HSE).

7.3. New SNA Allocation Model – Deferred rollout

The roll out of the new SNA allocation model planned for September 2020, as approved by Government in December 2019, required clear communication for school leaders and staff to help them in their in-school planning and engagement with parents. The Department committed to rolling out a programme of regional information and briefing sessions before the end of this school year. However, given the current public health considerations in relation to Covid-19 it is now not possible to provide such support to schools.

Consequently, the Minister on Thursday 2 April announced that the planned new allocation model for SNAs has been deferred for one year. The frontloading model for primary and post-primary schools is now planned to be in place for September 2021.

The Minister also confirmed that no school will receive a lower allocation of SNA support for September 2020 than it currently has. That means that SNAs who are currently employed will have jobs in the next school year.

If schools identify that additional SNA support is needed for children in mainstream classes which cannot be met from their existing allocation, they will be able to apply by email for their allocation to be reviewed. A diagnosis of a disability, or a psychological or other professional report, will not be necessary for this process. Rather, other forms of evidence, information or documentation will be used to support such applications.

It is now too late to run the traditional applications-based process for the allocation of the SNAs for 2020/21 school year. Special arrangements are being put in place that will facilitate continuity and certainty for schools, SNAs and parents.

The following arrangements will apply for the school year 2020/2021:

- All mainstream class SNA allocations that apply currently to schools will be frozen and will automatically rollover into the 2020/21 school year.
- No school will receive an allocation less than what they have currently and existing SNAs currently in mainstream settings can continue in post for the next school year in the normal way.
- Applications for additional SNA support submitted to the NCSE prior to 3 April 2020 will be processed, and determinations made, under the current scheme. However, no further applications for this school year can be accepted.

New Circular to be published week commencing 20 April:

A new circular covering the allocation of SNAs for 2020/21 will issue to schools during the week beginning 20 April 2020. The circular will outline:

- the detail of the rollover of SNA mainstream allocations,
- the procedures for dealing with new/additional care needs presenting in schools, and appeals.

SNA allocations for special classes and special schools are not affected by this arrangement.

The new circular will also outline the next steps for the full implementation of the Frontloading Model from September 2021.

Further information on the School Inclusion Model can be found here:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2019-press-releases/PR19-03-27-1.html>

8. Students at risk of educational disadvantage

Please also see sections 4, 5 and 6 above and particularly the information concerning the continuity of education for all students with a focus on those at risk of educational disadvantage.

8.1 School Meals and Breakfast Clubs

The Government has issued schools with updated guidance to help them operate the School Meals Programme amid the extended Covid-19 restrictions. In addition, schools are allowed to maintain the service during the Easter holidays should they wish to do so. Tusla Education Support Service staff are liaising with Principals to ensure that children/families in need of the School Meals Programme are identified and supported.

Schools have been asked to arrange a weekly pack of provisions which can be delivered to pupils. Schools have been provided with details of how to link into local community support networks and An Post have agreed to facilitate delivery of non-perishable food packets.

The Government's decision on school meals was announced on Thursday March 26th and detailed guidelines are available on the DES website.

The School Meals Programme is under the remit of DEASP and provides funding towards provision of food services for disadvantaged school children through two schemes. In general, schools are funded to provide school meals and the sourcing of a provider for these meals is arranged by the schools. There are a variety of school meals providers throughout the country. There are a small number of main suppliers who supply significant numbers of schools, and also some smaller locally based providers.

The type and range of meals provided, as well as the method and logistics of supplying the meals, are decided by the individual local groups and schools that operate the projects.

The current initiative is school led. Schools have been asked to identify those most in need and to contact parents to ask if they wished to avail of the service during the school closure period.

8.2. Higher Education – Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Working Group

As part of the Covid response structures in the higher education sector, a mitigating educational disadvantage (including community education) working group has been established. This group held its first meeting on 26 March and is meeting every Monday and Thursday. It is chaired by Aontas and has representation from the ETBI, USI, the HEA, the Department, NALA, SOLAS, TU Dublin and THEA. Additional members representing various stakeholders will be invited to join and/or contribute to the work of the group.

The overall feedback from institutions in the tertiary education sector is that online learning is working well, and is being engaged with well by both learners and teachers. However, there are a range of challenges surfacing for disadvantaged students.

The key purpose of the Group is in the first instance to scope out main issues impacting on learning by disadvantaged students across all aspects of Tertiary Education. There is a focus on targeting the most hard to reach cohorts, including the travelling community, learners in direct provision centres, etc. Some of the issues being monitored by the working group include assisting learners with no access to teaching / learning online due to issues with broadband and / or lack of ICT equipment.

8.3. SUSI grants

Financial supports in the tertiary education sector are provided through SUSI grants and training allowances. SUSI grants will continue to be paid as normal. The duration or value of the grant will not change.

Where a PLC college or HEI institution has closed as a consequence of Covid-19, students will continue to receive their SUSI maintenance grants as normal. The duration or value of the grant will not change.

The payment of fees will continue to be paid as normal. Courses are progressing through online facilities and students have been advised of how continuity of teaching and learning is being ensured.

The Department will continue to work closely to ensure quality and continuity of service for students.

Students studying in HEIs outside of the State and in receipt of a maintenance grant, will continue to receive their grant payments as normal. The duration or value of the grant will not change.

Learners participating in further education and training programmes who are in receipt of a training allowance will continue to receive their training allowance. The payment of additional learner supports in e.g. travel, accommodation and meal allowances should be dealt with under normal arrangements for authorised absences.

8.4. Social innovation Fund Collaboration Proposal

The Department received correspondence on March 31, 2020 from the Social Innovation Fund proposing that a coalition of groups (including Trinity Access, Foróige, iScoil, An Cosán and Camara Education Ireland) work with the Department to meet certain educational challenges arising from the Covid-19 crisis that have a particular detrimental impact on students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The proposal is focused on access to technology, training for teachers and rollout of online content. This proposal is one of a number of offerings that have been made to the Department. Some are already being implemented (e.g. rollout of WebEx to schools with the support of Cisco) while others, such as this, are being actively considered.

9. Staff Relations matters

The general principles to apply to the management of COVID-19 in the education sector includes the safety and welfare of employees, the minimisation of the impact on teaching and learning and making employees who are not required in providing educational services available to be assigned on a temporary basis to support delivery of other essential public services.

Therefore employers were advised by way of circular letter that they may grant special leave with pay to an employee where appropriate HSE or medical confirmation of COVID-19 diagnosis or recommendation to self-isolate or to restrict his/her movements is provided, in accordance with the HSE Guidelines.

Any special leave with pay granted for the purpose of diagnosis of COVID-19, self-isolation or restricted movements will not be counted as part of the employee's Sick Leave record. The special leave with pay entitlement will apply for the number of days advised by the HSE/doctor.

Employers were also advised that the primary focus of employees in the education sector, who are not on leave, is on continuing to deliver tuition to all pupils during the current school closures. All schools and teachers are required to continue to plan lessons and where possible, provide online resources for pupils or online lessons where schools are equipped to do so. Schools should also take into consideration pupils that may not have access to online facilities. Employers were asked to consider how best to utilise employees to facilitate the delivery of educational services. Any employee who is not required to be retained in providing or supporting the delivery of education and research services will therefore be available to be assigned on a temporary basis to support delivery of other essential public services. This temporary assignment will be managed on a structured, centralised basis through this Department and the Public Appointments Service.

9.1. Ancillary Staff salary payments

The Department has committed to continuing the payment of grant funding as normal for the current period of school closure up to 19 April. A school's normal arrangements with regard to ancillary staff should accordingly apply until that date. Through the continuation of grant funding, DES has enabled schools to continue the normal arrangements for staff whose salary comes from Department grants, in the same way as if the school was open.

9.2. Substitute Teacher Salary Payments

Where a substitute teacher has been contracted either in written form or verbally to cover an absence during the school closure period, they will be paid for the period for which they are contracted - for example to cover maternity leave or parental leave.

Where an individual does not have a specific contract with a school but would usually have expected to pick up work as a substitute during the weeks when schools are closed, they can apply for Jobseekers Allowance or Jobseekers Benefit in the normal way. The teacher unions have raised the issue of entitlement to the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment for such individuals. Eligibility for that payment is a matter for DEASP.

9.3. Sectoral Staff Temporary Reassignments

The Minister announced on April 1 a contingency plan for all Special Needs Assistants to be available for a new temporary assignment scheme as part of the Government's response to Covid-19. However, it should be noted that the reassignment of other staff is also the subject of the circulars which have issued (see below links).

Two circulars detailing the main points of the possible temporary assignment arrangements are available on the Department's website as follows:

- 1) To Managerial Authorities of Recognised Primary, Secondary, Community and Comprehensive Schools and the Chief Executives of Education and Training Boards (ETBs)

Circular 0027/2020: Temporary assignment arrangements for certain staff in the education and training sector:

https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0027_2020.pdf

- 2) To The Higher Education Authority for dissemination to all Institutes of Technology, Technological University Dublin, the National University of Ireland, the Royal Irish Academy, Mary Immaculate College of Education, the National College of Art and Design and St. Angela's College

Circular 0028/2020: Temporary assignment arrangements for certain staff:

https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0028_2020.pdf

The Department has been made aware of concerns raised in relation to the assignment process. The Department has previously confirmed that we have agreed with the HSE that the arrangements are designed to facilitate the assignment of SNAs where required into community services for children with a disability and we have also indicated that SNAs may be asked to provide remote supports to families of children they are familiar with. This position is clearly set out in all documentation that has issued from this Department. The Department and the HSE are continuing to work with Forasa to provide further clarity on the roles to which SNAs will be assigned in order to address these concerns.

In relation to Garda vetting - while SNAs are vetted in relation to their current SNA post, the requirements of the legislation mean that a new Garda vetting has to be carried out in respect of the role to which the SNA is being temporarily assigned. It is standard practice that fresh Garda vetting is needed when moving between organisations.

The position is that all public servants who are not medically advised to self-isolate must be available to carry out work either to deliver services in their current post (as a priority) or for temporary assignment within the wider public sector. Where an SNA is in an At-Risk Group, the current advice is that employees in an At Risk Group should not leave their homes to travel to work with the exception of essential workers, until the 12th of April. In respect of that group, and of SNAs with caring responsibilities, there may be potential for flexible hours and remote working, depending on the requirements of the role in question, and the availability of technical resources. The HSE will discuss this with the SNA in advance of their assignment.

If an SNA is already working with a family, they are still available for temporary assignment. This is to ensure an integrated approach to working with children with disabilities and their families, through the HSE.

9.4. Parental Leave Cancellation

Three recently-issued circulars (see below) address inter alia, the issue of cancellation of leave. All three circulars specify the following:

“The rules regarding cancellation of leave (e.g. Parental Leave) must be in accordance with the terms and conditions of the relevant Department publications.”

The provisions of the parental leave scheme are set out in Chapter 5, Section 12 of Circular 54/2019 (see below). The section sets out the conditions for suspension/postponement of parental leave by the teacher. Suspension/postponement is permitted due to illness. No other reason for suspension/postponement is given.

The conditions in which an employer can postpone parental leave are set out in Chapter 5, Section 13. Ordinarily, this relates to where the granting of leave would have an adverse effect on the operation of the school. Parental leave may be terminated by the employer if there are grounds to believe that the leave is being used for a purpose other than the care of the child.

Relevant circulars

Covid-19 Delay Phase: The cancellation of leave is addressed in the above circulars in sections 9, 11 and 11, respectively:

- 24/2020 – Arrangements for teachers and SNAs employed in recognised primary and post-primary schools: https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0024_2020.pdf
- 25/2020 – Arrangements for staff other than teachers/SNAs employed by ETBs: https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0025_2020.pdf
- 26/2020 – Arrangements for all public service employees: https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0026_2020.pdf

Leave schemes:

- 54/2019 – Leave schemes for registered teachers employed in recognised primary and post-primary schools: https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0054_2019.pdf

10. Tertiary Sector Issues

Continuity of provision

The tertiary sector has responded quickly and comprehensively in the face of unprecedented challenge as a result of the current health crisis, implementing a number of swift and positive actions in order to ensure the continuity of provision of education and to ensure that adequate supports are in place for their student and staff bodies.

Working closely with the Department and the relevant representative bodies, one of the primary objectives of the tertiary sector has been to minimise disruption to students and staff to the greatest extent possible. This has been achieved through provision of online programme delivery, putting in place alternative arrangements to facilitate student assessments and facilitating remote working for staff.

Engagement with the sector is ongoing and as the public health crisis evolves, the arrangements and measures currently in place will be monitored. The collective efforts of the sector in responding to this public health crisis will ensure public confidence in the integrity and quality of the Irish tertiary education system.

Building on initial contact by the HEA with institutions, the Department is proposing to collate specific information from the higher education institutions with a view to establishing the measures on the ground that institutions have put in place to ensure continuity of education provision and to ensure adequate supports/contingency plans are in place for learners and lecturers alike.

ETBI and ETBs are currently focused on providing resources and supporting learners. The achievements by the sector to date are good, and significant work has been done to provide resources and supports online. However, they are not a substitute to teaching and learning nor are they applicable to all learners or for all programme content. It must be recognised that there is a proportion of further education and training learners with no access to teaching / learning online due to issues with broadband and lack of ICT equipment. Work is on-going with regard to agreeing alternative approaches to assessment that maintain the quality and integrity of learning whilst continuing to work towards QQI dates for assessment.

ETBs, including PLC colleges, are designing a range of alternative assessment methods to enable students complete their programmes on schedule. This is being done in line with recently published QQI guidance: <https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Guiding%20Principles%20for%20Alternative%20Assessment%20%28COVID-19%29.pdf>. In doing so, ETBs and PLC colleges are very conscious of the support needs of students and in particular disadvantaged learners. Colleges are contacting their learners about the new assessment arrangements.

SOLAS has made its eCollege online service available free of charge as a support to learners who have been impacted by the current containment measures. eCollege provides online courses, including computer programming, data science, office productivity and web and graphic design. eCollege is online 24/7 so people can study at any time that suits them.

Access to tertiary education (implications regarding State Exams)

The current position is that the State Exams will go ahead and consequently, it is also anticipated that access to tertiary including applications to be processed late summer/autumn

for further education and training opportunities, and for places in higher education will proceed as normal also.

Apprenticeship issues

Craft apprentices on off-the-job training are being released to their employers as their period of off-the-job training is scheduled to end pending a solution for completion of training and assessment for this cohort of apprentices. There are no further intakes of craft apprentices to off-the-job training at the current time.

Those craft apprentices who remain on an off-the-job phase of training (although suspended at the current time) will continue to be paid the appropriate training allowance. Accommodation allowances also remain payable to eligible craft apprentices.

Work is underway to identify ways in which engagement with formalised training and assessment can be recommenced pending the reopening of training centres. Apprentices on a number of programmes which would have traditionally been supported by online learning modules are progressing as planned.

A full assessment of the current position across the programmes is under way.

Pandemic Payments

The issue of the level of pandemic payment compared to apprentice wages was raised in the Dáil during the debate on the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Bill 2020. Deputies raised the question as to whether there is a requirement to repay the difference between the pandemic payment and the apprentice allowance.

DEASP have confirmed that the payment is available to apprentices who meet the terms of the scheme. In common with other employees, there is no requirement to repay any difference between the pandemic payment and apprentice wages.

Assessment in tertiary education

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

The alternative arrangements have been put in place in a manner that ensures quality standards will be upheld giving confidence that qualifications achieved this year will be valued and regarded exactly as in any other year.

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

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

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

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

This QQI guidance document is available at:

<https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Guiding%20Principles%20for%20Alternative%20Assessment%20%28COVID-19%29.pdf>

Impact of the crisis on financial sustainability

The Department is fully engaged in an effort to identify and respond to exchequer and National Training Fund (NTF) funding implications in higher and further education and training as a result of COVID-19.

It is expected that there will be a significant impact on other funding sources for providers, including through reductions in International student numbers. As part of this initiative my Department has established a multi-agency working group and are liaising closely with key representatives of the tertiary sector to provide a comprehensive approach to identifying, tracking and monitoring the financial implications of the emergency measures and the potential impact for the future.

While the impacts of COVID19 are a priority focus of the Department the future funding needs will continue to be considered. The Department, through the European Commission DG Reform Programme (formally SRSP), is undertaking a comprehensive economic evaluation of the funding options presented in the Report of the Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education. The comprehensive and detailed analysis of funding options for higher education and the assessment of the appropriate balance between provision across the tertiary

education system is expected to play a very important role in informing and advising Government decision-making.

Student welfare issues in the tertiary sector

The majority of students in Purpose Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) have now vacated their accommodation. A limited number of students have opted to stay due to circumstances such as vulnerable family members in the family home, difficulties to return to their home countries, or ongoing medical placements. The universities have confirmed that these students will be able to remain in their accommodation.

As of March 31st, 6 of the 7 universities (TCD, DCU, UCD, NUIG, UCC and MU) who own student accommodation have confirmed that students who have vacated their accommodation will receive pro-rata refunds of their accommodation fees. UL has informed students that they can claim back their deposit, but that their accommodation fees will not be refunded. The Department has engaged with UL on this issue to ask that it reconsiders its approach.

A number of reports have been received of private owners of PBSA refusing to refund accommodation fees in cases where students have vacated their accommodation. The Minister has indicated that he would like to see private providers of student accommodation provide pro-rata refunds on a similar basis as university-owned PBSA, when students choose to vacate student accommodation in advance of their contracted end date.

At the moment, private PBSA also remains open for students, and therefore refund and cancellation policies are governed by the licences or contracts signed by the students. In the first instance students should engage with their accommodation provider to see if an arrangement can be reached in regard to a refund. If this is not possible, under the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2019 students have access to the Dispute Resolution Services of the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB).

PCHEI, the representative body for Psychological Counsellors in Higher Education in Ireland has confirmed that student counselling services remain open to students on a remote basis. Student support services in each HEI also remain available.

11. Other supports for the national effort

Clinical Research Support (HE/FET Sector)

Research and Innovation, in health, academia and industry, has a significant role to play in the national and global response to COVID-19. On 26th March the Irish Research Council and its partnership with the Health Research Board, Science Foundation Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, and IDA Ireland issued a coordinated Rapid Response Research and Innovation programme to help mitigate and manage the COVID-19 pandemic by unlocking the potential of Ireland-based researchers and innovators to join the global efforts. For the IRC/HRB projects, funding available is typically up to €200,000 per project, including overheads contribution. Projects are expected to commence from 11th May 2020.

The higher education sector is involved extensively in tackling multiple aspects of the pandemic. At institutional level, all possible steps are being taken to maximise the contribution and impact of the research community

As the crisis began, the institutions and their researchers have been inundated with requests for expert advice, supply of PPE/research equipment/research infrastructure and other research resources. Now, with a massive increase in scale, this is happening in a more coordinated manner, for example, with a designated official in each university the primary contact point for the HSE and moving towards a more institutionally-managed engagement, and critically liaising with the HSE so that all gaps that can be filled by the HE research community (and infrastructure) are being addressed.

Clusters are being formed to bring together researchers in Ireland with a broad spectrum of expertise that can apply their efforts to combating the present pandemic. Also, these researchers are part of large international research collaborations working directly or indirectly on Covid-19.

Use of Buildings

The Office of Government Procurement has established a portal to broker offers of support with State bodies which require support (HSE, Garda etc.).

The tertiary sector has offered a range of facilities for use in these efforts. Some schools have also been approached regarding the use of their buildings or other facilities to contribute towards efforts to combat the spread of the virus. School Management Bodies have been advised that any positive contribution that can be made by the sector to help in the current crisis is very welcome. However where schools have been approached they must first consider the length of the time the school will be required and any impact on the reopening of the school to staff and pupils should also be considered in responding to such requests. The Department is currently finalising guidelines on the use of school facilities by State bodies (e.g. HSE, Gardaí) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

12. Capital Programme Impact

12.1. Capital programme impacts

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

As part of this assessment, DES will be engaging with School Patrons and relevant schools in relation to necessary school accommodation provision for the 2020/21 school year in light of any impact of COVID-19 on project delivery timescales and develop and implement contingency arrangements as required. This engagement will also relate to the 14 new schools opening in 2020 with regard to getting them established and management of their enrolment process.

12.2. Tendering for projects

In relation to projects at the stage of tendering for Contractors.

1. Tender competitions for projects already well advanced will continue. Where tenders already received these are being assessed and processed towards completion. Advice from OGP awaited with regard to tender award while construction sites are being shut down.
2. Tender competitions in early stages (e.g. at prequalification/shortlisting of contractors) will continue. Some early requests for extensions of time being received. Short (2-3 week) extensions of time being granted where thought necessary to allow contractors time to adjust and deal with head office and communication difficulties.
3. Tender competitions yet to commence. The intention would be to commence tender competitions as normal but that tender periods may need to be extended to allow maximum participation. Contractors are experiencing difficulties in obtaining prices from sub-contractors and supply chains as many have closed down and this may prevent completion of tenders until Covid-19 restrictions are lifted.
4. Tendering for Design Team consultants is proceeding with the proviso that sites cannot be visited as part of the tendering process.
5. Temporary accommodations for new schools starting in Sept 2020. Tender competitions are underway for temporary accommodations required for these schools for September 2020.

12.3. Higher Education Sector

In the higher education sector, the largest project to be impacted is the Grangegorman PPP project, the construction of which is well advanced and which is scheduled to facilitate the move of 10,000 TU Dublin students and 700 staff to the new campus for the new academic year in September 2020. At this point, the full impacts of Covid-19 on the completion of construction programme are difficult to determine; however, active contingency planning is underway for different scenarios

12.4. On-going monitoring

The Department continues to monitor the rollout of projects for delivery under the National Development Plan (NDP). It is too early at this stage to be specific but we are carefully monitoring the situation across the Capital Programme.

13. Other Issues

English language education sector

The Department has established a working group to address issues arising for those students from overseas who have travelled to Ireland to study English and who may be particularly vulnerable during the Covid-19 outbreak.

As activity in the English language education (ELE) sector depends almost exclusively on attracting international students to Ireland, the Working Group will also examine the implications for the sector of any pause in international activities arising from the Covid-19 outbreak. The Working Group will seek to determine and coordinate policies and actions that can be taken in preparation for the resumption of this sector's activities and to facilitate international students studying in Ireland. These steps will be taken to ensure that Ireland remains internationally competitive in this area having regard to actions being taken by other States

The Working Group is comprised of key sectoral stakeholders including the Department of Education and Skills, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, the Department of Justice and Equality, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Enterprise Ireland, Marketing English in Ireland (MEI), Progressive College Network and the Irish Council for International Students (ICOS).

In its engagements to date, the Working Group has identified 3 key issues of immediate importance for students in this sector:

- Health Advice

As English is not the first language of students in this sector and as a number would not consume the same media as domestic students, ensuring that information and messaging around the latest health advice reaches these students is considered key. This is especially the case as many of these students are reported to live in small, confined accommodation and in close proximity which provides challenges for social distancing and self-isolating measures.

- Immigration Information

As a substantial number of students in this sector require immigration permissions to live, work and study in the State, it is important that the students have clarity surrounding the changes in immigration policy introduced in response to Covid-19.

The Department of Justice and Equality has taken measures in this respect to automatically renew all immigration permissions including those of students due to expire between 20 March 2020 and 20 May 2020 for a period of two months.

In addition, where a student's immigration permission is dependent on their attendance at language school, they are now considered to have met this requirement while that school is closed on the basis of Government advice.

Further to this, during the period where English language schools are closed, the Department of Justice and Equality is now permitting students with stamp 2 immigration permissions to work up to 40 hours per week as an interim measure. This increases the previous upward limit of 20 hours per week while a student is attending an English language programme.

- Information for Employees and the Self Employed

Many of the students in this sector take up employment to support themselves during their time living in Ireland. The Department understands that this work is frequently in sectors such as the service industry which has been heavily impacted by the restrictions introduced to combat Covid-19. As a consequence, many of these students have lost jobs and their source of income at this time.

Through engagement with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, students have been informed that where they have lost their job as a result of the current pandemic, they are eligible to apply for the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment. They have also been informed that their employers can avail of the Temporary COVID-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme which enables employees, whose employers are affected by the pandemic, to receive significant supports directly from their employer through their payroll system.

The Department has also become aware of reports of cases where international students have recently arrived in the State but have yet to receive a Personal Public Service Number (PPSN) and have been unable to find work due to the Covid-19 outbreak. Should these students find themselves in a position of financial difficulty, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection has confirmed that it can offer support to these students on a case by case basis under the Exceptional Needs Payments scheme which is administered under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme.

The Department has published guidance for students in this sector on these matters in multiple languages and which has been distributed through the English language providers to their students using relevant channels.

The Working Group will continue to meet to further assess the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on the sector.

Covid 19 Sectoral Financial Impacts

The Department's Covid-19 engagements to-date with the education and skills sectors and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform has included a focus on the financial impacts. As an initial financial reaction to the Covid-19 crisis the Department has taken measures

- (i) to address potential cash flow issues by paying out over €100 million in March that was originally profiled for payment in April, and
- (ii) to put procedures in place to allow for the tracking of Covid-19 related costs arising.

While currently too early to provide overall estimates, it is clear that there will be financial pressures arising within the Department's 2020 allocation and beyond due to the current crisis. These pressures include additional costs as a direct result of managing the health crisis such as those arising from assisting the health sector (e.g. facilities and staff being made available) along with losses of income from other funding sources (e.g. reductions in non-EU student enrolling and loss of rent for third level facilities over the Summer resulting in a loss of third level income).

There is also likely to be pressures on other expenditure areas if there are long term economic effects from the crisis e.g. increased student support costs as a result of increased unemployment.

There is also an expectation that certain savings (e.g. reduced teacher substitution costs while schools are closed to pupils) will arise as a result of the health crisis to offset these additional spending pressures. However, these are likely to be small relative to the corresponding financial pressures also arising.

Payment of Remote Area Grants

The remote area grant is paid to families towards the cost of school transport arrangements where they are eligible for transport but where there is no service. Payment is made on receipt of a statement of attendance form signed by the school confirming the number of days attended in the relevant school year. In light of the fact that schools are currently closed and families are not currently incurring a cost, and in line with normal practice, grant aid is not paid for the current closure period.

Initial teacher education – Gaeltacht placements

The Department's and Teaching Council's position on this issue is set out here: <https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/News-Events/Latest-News/Statement-regarding-Initial-Teacher-Education-Gaeltacht-Learning-Period-from-Department-of-Education-and-Skills-and-Teaching-Council.html>

Deep-clean of schools

The decision to effect a deep clean of a school is a matter for the Board of Management of a school. It would be expected that a school would have regard to public health advice in taking a decision to have a school deep cleaned.

Public health guidance that the Covid-19 virus is not expected to survive for periods beyond 72 hours on surfaces, and shorter periods depending on the surface type (see below for a link to the Health Protection Surveillance Centre FAQs).

Health Protection Surveillance Centre FAQs here: https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/frequentlyaskedquestions/FAQs_COVID19_v12.8.pdf

Given the length of time schools have been closed the need for a deep clean can be considered in this context and the circumstances pertaining to a given school community.