

Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (including Community Education issues) Working Group

Assessment Equality across Tertiary Education – *A Discussion Paper*

Draft Paper

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Mitigating Educational Disadvantage¹ (including Community Education issues) Working Groupⁱ Assessment Equality across Tertiary Education

A Discussion Paper

This paper sets out to highlight a range of recommendations that will support equality and safeguard the needs of disadvantaged students and learners. We would ask that such recommendations are considered when actions by the education institution are made in relation to the theme of the paper. No doubt after this crisis the education system as a whole will be collectively judged on how it mitigated disadvantage.

The Paper is specifically focused on the theme of assessment in relation to educational disadvantage and is focused on supporting learners who are adults living in disadvantaged rural areas, first-time mature students, low qualified migrants, low qualified adults (less than upper second level), early school leavers, long-term unemployed, asylum seekers, people with disabilities, Travellers, Lone Parents, Homeless, people in receipt of social welfare, living in poverty and low income families and other vulnerable learners.

Key Recommendations

1. Consideration that not all students/learners will engage in online assessment equality. There are broadband connectivity issues, broadband bandwidth for more technically advanced platforms, hardware and software compatibility issues, and a range of additional personal and home-related challenges and distractions. Assurances/confirmation needed that students/learners are equipped to undertake assessment.
2. A focus shift to broad learning outcomes and formative assessment practices as required so that all learner cohorts have the most appropriate assessment process.
3. A flexible approach to assessment deadlines and timelines, with no penalties for repeats for learners impacted by COVID-19 related issues (health, bereavement, lack of necessary accommodation/supports, etc)
4. Ensure learners are equipped with all tools necessary to complete assessments (devices, software programmes, accommodation supports, etc)

¹The *Education Act* (1998) defines educational disadvantage as 'the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools'. In relation to students in the formal education system educational disadvantage has been also been defined as: 'a limited ability to derive an equitable benefit from schooling compared to one's peers by age as a result of school demands, approaches, assessments and expectations which do not correspond to the student's knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours into which (s) he has been socialised (as opposed to those to which (s) he is naturally endowed)' (Boldt and Devine, 1998, p.10). In policy, the term 'non-traditional student' is used to describe a student who by their class, educational background, race, ethnicity, gender, dis (ability) are less likely to participation in higher education. Under-represented' is also used (DETE, 2002; HEA, 2015) to identify particular target groups: Entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education; First time, mature student entrants; Students with disabilities; Part-time/flexible learners; Further education award holders; and Irish Travellers (HEA, 2015, p.27)

5. Ensure educators are equipped with materials needed to meet learner needs, digital tools and WiFi capacity necessary to deliver quality assessments, and time/work allocation requirements to meet additional learners' engagement necessary to prepare learners for remote assessment
6. Development of a system to identify and accommodate learners who cannot engage in remote assessments
7. Development of an action plan for competency-based and practical assessments, along with modules requiring a work-placement
8. Assessments should be designed to be applied to students in a way that is not specifically time-bound or requiring a contemporary time period for engagement. *(This suggests home-based projects or assignments with rather flexible submission dates)*
9. Repeated opportunities to show evidence of learning outcomes should be offered between now and September without penalty (financial or academic) to the student. *(This suggests a series of equally-acceptable submission dates.)*
10. Protocols used to assess remaining learning outcomes should be as low-tech as possible *(see diagram below)*. *Drifting towards the left and lower quadrant in this diagram as distinct from the tendency to go top right for assessment protocols will increase the capacity of students to engage in these difficult circumstances. It also allows asynchronous assessments to proceed somewhat easier. It will also reduce the risk of technology collapse if large numbers of students are engaging in broadband-heavy simultaneous assessments. This could be a major challenge for HEANet and residential broadband providers.*
11. Students should be asked to self-declare that the work under these circumstances is their own work.

Introduction

The almost overnight transition from predominantly face-to-face to 100% remote learning is a huge challenge for both staff and learners in all areas of tertiary education. Inevitably some learners will not be able to re-engage in learning in the short term because of the current challenging circumstances, and this will impact to some degree, on all academic groupings. Some individuals within every student grouping will likely become overwhelmed due to the combination of home, work and learning challenges presented. Thanks to the outstanding work of a large number of academic staff, the remainder of academic programmes this year is being delivered through various remote learning platforms. However, engagement of students at this time is not, and will not be, 100%. Engagement with assessments will equally be difficult for some learners. The assessments will be different to those experienced before and offered in a different format in many cases. While staff are working to the best of their ability to complete teaching and offer some format of assessment that does not require the traditional final exam in large rooms format, this process will be extremely challenging for some learners. There are broadband connectivity issues, broadband bandwidth for more technically advanced platforms, hardware and software compatibility issues, and a range of additional personal and home-related challenges and distractions. The issues as outlined here also present themselves for a number of staff, which further compounds the challenges experienced in

providing continuity of engagement and support. These combined challenges will inevitably lead to variation in ability of students to engage with remaining assessments. Additionally, as staff work to develop alternative assessment methods to mirror traditional assessment and to reach the same criteria, the ability of some students to engage with these assessment methods has been a consideration and a concern, especially given the limited opportunities to prepare learners for alternative assessment. At the same time, as educators, we all have a duty and responsibility to maintain academic quality, and so whatever assessments are put in place, they must bring the confidence of maintaining the academic quality of the ultimate award. The contribution of the recently issued QQI guidance on Supports and Arrangements for the Tertiary Education System² and ongoing consideration of the national working group on Quality, Integrity and Reputation is acknowledged.

Potential specific recommendation relating to assessments in Higher Education to support disadvantaged learner cohorts:

- Where assessments are not yet delivered, remaining assessments should focus on broad programme learning outcomes (*as distinct from granular module learning outcomes*)
- Assessments should be designed to be applied to students in a way that is not specifically time-bound or requiring a contemporary time period for engagement. (*This suggests home-based projects or assignments with rather flexible submission dates*)
- Repeated opportunities to show evidence of learning outcomes should be offered between now and September without penalty (financial or academic) to the student. (*This suggests a series of equally-acceptable submission dates.*)
- Protocols used to assess remaining learning outcomes should be as low-tech as possible (*see diagram below*). *Drifting towards the left and lower quadrant in this diagram as distinct from the tendency to go top right for assessment protocols will increase the capacity of students to engage in these difficult circumstances. It also allows asynchronous assessments to proceed somewhat easier. It will also reduce the risk of technology collapse if large numbers of students are engaging in broadband-heavy simultaneous assessments. This could be a major challenge for HEANet and residential broadband providers.*
- Students should be asked to self-declare that the work under these circumstances is their own work.

A general recommendation along these lines as an emergency response in this exceptional year might help to support our learners and at the same time ensure adequate academic rigour. It is acknowledged that at the end of the day, the exact nature of assessments used is the prerogative of individual Academic Councils.

Even with such a more-basic approach to assessment, some students will still not be able to engage. However, this suggested approach will give time to identify these students, and

² <https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Building%20Confidence%20-%20Tertiary%20Education%20System.pdf>

focus on their needs over the summer (perhaps offering them pre-loaded laptops to complete their work and submit before the start of the next academic year). By getting as many students through appropriate assessment the first time, it allows resources to be focused on the remaining students who could not engage at this time due to a myriad of reasons, none of their own making. A delay without penalty might be ok for some students at this challenging time for learners. Such an approach would also offer learners an opportunity to de-prioritise learning in the short term if they needed to and focus on other immediate challenges, secure with the knowledge that they can resume and complete in this academic year without penalty.

One other group that we did not specifically mention are students who were on placement and that placement is essential for registration with specific professional bodies or programme recognition. This issue is also unequally affecting some learners, if that would be considered disadvantage.

Specific recommendation relating to assessments in Higher Education for Learners with a Disabilities

<p>Huge issues being raised relating to online assessments, in particular open book and other timed online exams. Accessibility of the platform, accommodations which should still be provided (e.g. extra time, scribe, assistive tech use (compatibility) etc. – lots of reports that accommodations are not being considered or that only extra time is being considered).</p>	<p>HEIs should communicate to all educators to ensure that they apply any reasonable accommodations recommended for a student by disability officer in their online assessments. This may involve for example having to alter an individual student’s settings in the LMS to allow extra time with an open book exam. Where a reasonable accommodation cannot be delivered online, the only equitable solution may be to offer the student(s) an alternative assessment mechanism. Educators in HE should engage with their Disability Support Services for advice. <u>AHEAD Tips on Accessibility in Online Assessment.</u></p>
<p>Huge mental strain placed on students by the global situation, and the huge change to how they have to learn as a result – on top of mental health/anxiety issues which often coexist with other disabilities. Many students at increased risk because of their disability are fearing for their lives so understanding and empathy needs to be displayed across the system.</p>	<p>Increased flexibility is required with regard to deadlines and completion, particularly given uncertain nature of the move to online teaching and issues that might arise from it.</p>

<p>Potential for much higher rate of sickness at exam time than usual – will alternative times to complete be provided. Students with underlying conditions more likely to be seriously ill than others. Will resits be provided for students who are ill.</p>	<p>Could there be an alternative arrangement made for those who fall ill at exam times due to Covid 19? Most providers have existing protocols to address illness or bereavement and these might be appropriate to deploy in this context.</p>
<p>For the 2020/21 cohort, many with Irish language waivers could be disadvantaged by the Department’s decision to award 100% marks for oral exams. This could cause points inflation and could result in those with waivers starting from a lower base than their peers. E.g. given by parent of 2 children on Dyslexia Association Facebook Page was that she had 2 children and that one was starting with 105 points before the exams started while her dyslexic son had 0.</p>	<p>Department to examine implications of this decision to ensure there is no disadvantage to students with an Irish language waiver.</p>

Specific recommendation relating to assessments in Further Education

Introduction

The learner settings in FET are highly varied and extremely complex. There are many diverse service spheres which need to be considered, ranging from PLC Colleges, to Training Centre, Youthreach, Community settings and Prison education. Each of these different settings have widely varying assessment techniques and these varied approaches and settings have brought many different challenges and considerations to the fore. For many of the learners, not engaged in high stakes examinations, it is possible to postpone the assessments until it is safe and practicable to reengage. However, for the 33k PLC students they need to finish their courses in time to avail of the CAO round zero.

This has created a need for staff to create methods of assessing students remotely, teaching remotely and helping students complete their summative assessments in a variety of ways, depending on the module, course and assessment type under consideration. Submission methods have been varied and diverse and learners have had to avail of whatever methods are available to them. PLC centres have reported that up to 30% of the students lack access to IT to enable them to complete their assignments. Teachers are reporting the same difficulties with access to resources at home which can further compound difficulties. Adult education, community settings and prison education are reporting many more difficulties regarding access to resources and in many cases varying levels of digital literacy which further compound challenges faced in continuing service delivery. Learners who are based in Direct Provision settings, availing of homeless services and who are in temporary

accommodation have been reported as being even more difficult to reach, and the students are feeling overwhelmed with the loss of social and face to face support which is further heightened by the shift to remote delivery and the stress of not being able to engage with teaching and learning due to their living arrangements.

Additional points to consider include having an action plan for disengagement and the boundaries of tutor/learner relationship should be considered. While teachers have a duty of care to their learners, there are limitations to their availability and ability to deal with the concerns of the learners, especially if those learners are experiencing difficulties, mental health issues and are at crisis point. Clear guidelines regarding communication are key. Difficulties around communication of sensitive information, discussions with guidance counsellors and other teachers and tutors become more difficult in the online environment. Additionally, Guidance counsellors and support staff may not be trained in providing support to learners remotely and their competence in doing so may vary.

Additionally, the requirements teachers/ tutors have to stay in contact with learners is called into question. Issues around GDPR and the availability of students' data etc when working remotely and using personal devices are being questioned also. Financial considerations come into play also e.g. access to phone, cost of postage etc.

Collaboration both within ETB's and between ETB's and QQI in communicating and discussing the needs of both learners and the various service spheres has been key to determining the most suitable way forward. Support and guidance from QQI has been integral, however each provider, no matter how small, must find a solution that is agreeable with QQI and complies with their own QA, yet in keeping with overall QQI quality. Providers' institutional QA procedures have all been informed by [QQI's Core Statutory Quality Assurance \(QA\) Guidelines](#). Additionally, decisions made have been supported and informed by the publication on [measures made to mitigate the impact of COVID 19 on Programmes leading to QQI awards](#).

Potential specific recommendations relating to assessments in Further Education and Training (focusing on PLCs)

Many terminal examinations are presenting particular issues for the sector and staff have been converting examinations into assessments, while Internally Verifying the alternative assessment to ensure it meets the specified learning outcomes and is both reliable and valid. For some areas this has not been possible and is highly dependent on the assessment type and may require deferral of the individual module.

There are many competency-based and practical assessments, for example lifeguarding, animation, beauty and complementary therapies where it will not be possible to carry our supervised practical examinations, nor is it possible to record and submit evidence of same. Alternative arrangements have had to be made and this has been done, in many cases with consultation with external awarding bodies (for example ITEC) to ensure fairness and consistency of approach, whilst keeping academic integrity and ensuring that learners will

have met the competencies required in industry. Practical elements can be assessed in many areas based on predicated scores or using pre assessment results.

However, this has not been possible in all areas and ETBs have been working closely with individual providers to identify modules, courses and individual learners who will be disadvantaged as a result of provisions around competency based and criterion referenced assessment. Alternative arrangements could include deferral, but this is a consideration and concern for learners needing these modules for CAO round zero. Further collaboration is needed with HE providers.

Many challenges have arisen as a result of the significant volume of authentic assessments embedded within both modules and major awards provided in FET. With work placements terminated and access to authentic settings restricted, learners are unable to engage with and/ or complete authentic assessments and alternative arrangements that match the overarching programmes objectives are difficult to replicate in a valid or reliable manner. ETBI have worked closely with individual ETB's on this matter and suggested alternative arrangements for work experience/ work practice have been collated. These have included guidelines when considering learners who have not commenced work experience; those who have not completed work experience/ work practice and for those students who have completed Work Experience/Work Placement but cannot have it signed off by workplace supervisors due to closures.

Reasonable Accommodations and Support for learners with additional learning needs

These are in addition to the considerations highlighted above which are common to both HE and FET

Not all centres have disability officers and support is provided and coordinated in a number of different ways and through a number of different people, so a one size fits all approach to RA's and student support in FET is extremely difficult.

As many examinations are being converted to alternative assessments, teachers working in the area of student support are working with students remotely to support them to complete assessment and to adapt to the conversion. **Learners must be made aware that if they feel disadvantaged by contingency arrangements, that they have the option of deferral. However, if these learners are also applying through CAO, this is not possible and adds additional stress, strain and a further layer of disadvantage, especially when they will not have the option of applying through DARE.**

Learners who are entitled to additional time must be facilitated in this manner if their final assessment methods are being done online. Staff must be supported in knowing how to set such an arrangement up in Moodle (if this platform is being used) and if online supervision is being used, students must be communicated to in advance to ensure they are aware that they can stay “in the exam situation” after other learners have completed their examinations.

Learners who are entitled to a reader and/ or a scribe must still be allocated these provisions, even if in an online, supervised examination situation. This will require additional personnel and resources. Learners should be given the opportunity to complete trial runs of these alternative settings and be permitted to defer if they feel that the arrangement will unfairly disadvantage them in any way.

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