Bord Oideachais agus Oiliúna
Laoise agus Uíbh Fhailí

*Laois and Offaly
Education and Training Board*

The Response to the COVID-19 Crisis by Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board

Interim Report

loetb

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CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S FOREWORD

Since March 2020 COVID-19 has had a significant impact on Irish society, impacting every facet of our lives. The associated changes brought to bear on the education sector have been both disruptive and challenging. The closure of education and training facilities led to major changes in teaching and learning as well as our support services. I am extremely proud of the tremendous response by the management and staff at LOETB to ensure continuity of our services in the face of these difficulties. Different challenges have been faced across the organisation but the dedication and commitment of staff has remained steadfast and true to our values. Indeed, the professionalism, innovation, and creativity of staff in ensuring the best possible experience and outcome for our students and services in the face of the adversity and uncertainty of COVID-19 has been inspiring. I also want to thank the three Directors for the leadership shown during this challenging time. On behalf of both myself and the Board I thank you all sincerely.

This report examines the challenges and responses across all aspects of our provision; post-primary schools, Further Education and Training programmes and services, music education services, youth services, and organisation support and development. It then draws a number of conclusions and associated recommendations on how the organisation can deal with the new challenges in the aftermath of the lockdown period as well as how we can incorporate the positive developments and practices into the new normal for our programmes and services.

I would like to thank David Treacy (former Director at City of Dublin ETB) for his time and insights in compiling this report.
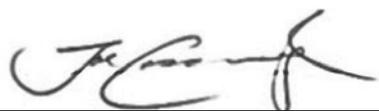
Joe Cunningham
Chief Executive

SECTION 1:
THE EVER-CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF GOVERNMENT DECISIONS

Introduction

On 12 March the Taoiseach Leo Varadkar TD announced the closure of schools, pre-schools, further education, and higher education settings for students for a period until 29 March 2020. While LOETB management had been monitoring the national response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government decision to close schools was not signalled to any great extent beforehand. The Department of Education and Skills had indicated on 10 March that *"any decision to close schools will be made on public health advice. There is no such advice at this point. It is essential that any decisions regarding responses to COVID-19 are proportionate, necessary and based on specific public health advice. No other response is appropriate".*[1]

In this context LOETB management had gone ahead with a two-day in-service for the management staff of all three divisions of LOETB, namely Organisational Support Development, Further Education and Training, and Schools. The timelines for Government decisions is set out below. What is important to note is the evolving and changing landscape of decision making. There was no clear pathway as to what was going to happen and at different times it seemed that schools and centres were going to reopen and the State Exams, while likely to be delayed, were going to happen. This made it very difficult for the management of LOETB and the school/centre management teams to effectively develop and implement a contingency plan for the continuation of teaching and learning with the closure of schools.

The initial Government decision was to close schools for two weeks to 29 March. The Senior Management Team (SMT) expected that this would be extended for a further week, which would bring the school closure to Easter holidays. In effect, schools would be closed until 21 April, resulting in three weeks of school activity to be planned for on return. In those first two weeks, the priority for teachers was to provide work to students, get the completed work back and corrected. It was suggested that, where possible, teachers should attempt to move teaching online at this point for State Exam classes but there was no pressure placed on school management to move to online teaching for all classes at this point.

On 24 March, the Department stated that schools would remain closed until 19 April. This placed additional pressure on school staff teams to maintain contact with students and to move to online teaching for all classes. On 10 April, the Minister announced the postponement of the State Exams and indicated that schools would remain closed until further notice. This was interpreted by the SMT as indicating that schools would not reopen before the end of the school year. The decision was made in consultation with school management to complete

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1   Department of Education and Skills Press Release 10th March 2020

the end of year assessments for all school years and to prioritise the support of students who were expected to undertake State Examinations later that year.

On 29 April, the Department announced that the Junior Certificate exams were cancelled and would be replaced by school assessments. All third year Junior Cycle students were to be awarded certificates for completion of Junior Cycle by the Department of Education and Skills. Schools were given autonomy to assess students and all students to receive a school report on achievements. This had the immediate impact of a significant drop-off in engagement by Junior Certificate students.

On 8 May, the Government announced the postponement of the Leaving Certificate Examinations and that all students were to be offered the option of receiving Calculated Grades for the subjects they are studying and the alternative of sitting the 2020 Leaving Certification examinations at a date in the future when it is considered safe to do so." Thus, commenced the significant task of introducing the new Calculated Grades process across the schools in LOETB. The details of the response of the management and staff at LOETB second level provision is set out in Section 3 below.

It is a significant achievement that most students in LOETB schools were successfully engaged in learning during the period of the school closure and that all the Calculated Grades process was completed successfully for all Leaving Certificate students on time.

In the Further Education and Training Services (see Section 4) priority was given to completing the certification process for all learners completing full programmes at Levels 4, 5 and 6. This was a significant task for the management and staff teams. As in the Second Level provision, management and staff were responding to the ever-changing situation, maintaining teaching online to support learners, completing assignments and modules. Staff were also required to change assignments from exams to assessments and a detailed process was introduced to ensure consistency in assessments and to meet the quality assurance requirements.

It is a testimony to the flexibility and creativity of the staff that the majority of learners completing certificate programmes were enabled to complete the necessary assessments required to go forward for QQI certification.

The timelines involved in decision making of the Department of Education and Skills in respect of COVID-19

Date	Developments
10 March	The Department issued a press release stating that "any decision to close schools will be made on public health advice. There is no such advice at this point. It is essential that any decisions regarding responses to Covid-19 are proportionate, necessary and based on specific public health advice. No other response is appropriate".
12 March	The Taoiseach Leo Varadkar TD announced the closure of schools, preschools and further education and higher education setting for students for a period until 29 March.
13 March	Letter from the Secretary General of the Department of Education and Skills to Principals and Staff.
24 March	Press release from the Department that the decision has been made to stay closed until 19 April.
1 April	The Department issued Circular Letter 0027/2020 on the temporary assignment arrangements for certain staff in education and training sector. The circular states that any public service staff who is not required to be retained in providing or supporting educational services and has not been medically advised to self-isolate will be available for assignment on a temporary basis to support delivery of other essential public services.
3 April - 20 April	Easter Break
10 April	Minister announces the postponement of state exams. The details included that Leaving Certificate written exams postponed until July/August and that Junior Cycle exams will be replaced with school-based exams and assessments early in the new school year. It is also reported that schools will be closed until further notice.
17 April	Statement on stakeholder engagement in relations to State Exams. The statement states that "a series of further meetings will be held over the coming weeks as part of consideration and planning for the revised arrangements for examinations taking account of public health advice"

Date	Developments
22 April	Statement on the second meeting of stakeholders in relations to State Exams. "Among the items discussed was the package of supports being put in place for students for continuity of learning including; an additional €10m fund for IT equipment for schools; Guidance for schools on continuity of teaching and learning for students with special educational needs and those who are at risk of disadvantage; The practical arrangements for project work, course work and practical exams for Leaving Certificate.
22 April	The Department published two guidance documents: "Guidance on Continuity of Schooling: Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs" Guidance on Continuity of Schooling: Supporting Students with at risk of educational disadvantage"
29 April	Minister announces revised arrangements for Junior Cycle 2020. All third year Junior Cycle students to be awarded certificates for completion of Junior Cycle by the Department of Education and Skills; Schools are given autonomy to assess students and all students to receive a report on achievements; Adult learners to be given the opportunity to take final Junior Cycle examinations in the autumn
1 May	Submission to QQI of the LOETB QA Contingency Planning Report
8 May	Minister announces postponement of 2020 Leaving Certificate examinations. "Following a decision at Cabinet, all students are to be offered the option of receiving Calculated Grades for the subjects they are studying and the alternative of sitting the 2020 Leaving Certification examinations at a date in the future when it is considered safe to do so." The decision being made will allow a young person to progress to the next stage of their life in a timely fashion. " The Press Release set out the eight key points for how the calculated grades will work.
13 May	The Department issued a press release reporting on the seventh meeting of stakeholders.

Date	Developments
21 May	The Minister announces the publication of guidance for schools on Calculated Grades. The Minister stated that "the guidance is a result of intensive work and engagement by the Department, teachers, and school management in recent days. The guidance is designed to give teachers and principals clear and precise guidance on how to provide the Department with an estimated mark and class ranking for each Leaving Certificate student.
22 May	The Director of Schools presents and issues a briefing document to Principals at 11am and Principals in turn use it to brief staff on requirements that afternoon.
12 June	Government announces new Summer Provision for children with special needs.

SECTION 2:
THE RESPONSE OF THE ORGANISATION SUPPORT AND DEVELOPMENT SECTION

Introduction

The Organisation, Support and Development (OSD) function is one of leadership of the administration functions across the ETB. The Director of OSD is responsible for the governance and management of the ETBs administration and oversees the management of the ETB's resources across the Human Resources, Corporate Services, Finance, Procurement and ICT functions.

2.1. OSD Management Team

LOETB was directed to close all schools and Further Education and Training (FET) centres and offices on 12 March following the Government decision.

The response of the OSD team was to plan for the transfer of work from office based to off-site remote working on 13 March. The team identified key staff in all function areas that needed to be resourced immediately to be able to work remotely. The organisation is using Office 365 and Sharepoint and this gave the organisation a base for moving to remote working. The IT Manager provided staff with a log on system which enabled staff to work remotely by accessing their work PC, as if they were in the office, thereby allowing for access to their files and records.

Heads of functions meetings moved to Microsoft and because the administration tasks are divided over two offices in Portlaoise and Tullamore, it is now envisaged that meetings will continue on Microsoft Teams in order to reduce the travel involved for staff.

2.2. Human Resources

The Human Resources department provides a comprehensive service to support all schools, centres and staff. The HR department was already working with an online application and shortlisting system. The department had then to adapt to remote interviewing. The Webex application was introduced for online interviewing for all posts. All the paperwork associated with the interviews is completed online and this provides an audit trail of all the paperwork. Training was provided to interview panels to ensure that that this new practice worked effectively. The HR Department prepared a guide for both Interviewers and Interviewees. Assistance was provided to any applicant who needed further guidance. Interviews were successfully conducted for Principals for three schools, over twenty teacher appointments, clerical staff and caretakers.

The timeline for this level of significant change was very short and this put staff who were now working remotely under significant pressure. However, it was a very successful change. Because of the success of the processes introduced it is now envisaged that online interviewing may continue to be used in future.

It is interesting to note that the only task that the HR Department had to undertake that required them to be present in their office was to make the returns to the Department of Employment

and Social Protection. Staff rotated their weekly attendance to make the necessary paper returns to the Department.

2.3.   Finance

The Finance function is to support the Board and management in the achievement within budget of the objectives as set out in the Letter of Determination from the Department of Education and Skills and the funding allocation from SOLAS. Strict accountability applies to the ETB including the requirements to prepare annual accounts in the format prescribed by the Department of Education and Skills and the audit of those accounts by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

The immediate priority for Finance was to ensure continuity in the payments to Creditors, trainees and learners. All finance staff were given the necessary security controls in order to allow them remote access to their work PC. Authorisation and access to the necessary systems were put in place immediately to enable staff to access systems such as online banking, SOLAS Portal, Way2 pay, and Revenue.

A second priority was to complete the 2019 annual accounts by the end of March deadline and have the accounts adopted by the Finance Committee and the Board of LOETB. Both these priorities were successfully achieved.

2.4.   ICT

The ICT section is responsible for the management of the LOETB systems infrastructure across the offices, schools, and centres. The ICT staff provided all the logistics required for the transfer of administrative work to online. In addition, significant work was undertaken to ensure learners in all the schools and FET centres had an LOETB email address to enable engagement with the learners and commence online teaching. Ongoing support was provided to ensure that all administration functions at head office and centre level was functioning effectively. Support was provided to individual staff who needed assistance in managing the IT platforms. The IT staff made a major contribution to the success of the speedy move to remote working and online teaching.

2.5.   Procurement

New procedures, including the introduction of Adobe signature for panel members, were put in place to enable the assessment of Tender documents to be undertaken remotely. Evaluation of tenders were carried out via Teams. Three major procurement projects, for supplies for schools were completed using the new procedures (Books, Metalwork and Woodwork materials).

2.6.   Buildings

Because of the level of administration involved and the nature of the procedures required in managing building projects the staff had to attend the office on a rota basis to continue the work. This was managed with social distancing and hygiene rules applying.

2.7.   Board and Sub-Committee Meetings

Board meetings and committee meetings were conducted by teleconference. This enabled the Board to fulfil their governance functions including the signing off on the 2019 Annual Financial Accounts by the March 31 deadline. This was a significant challenge for the administration and management staff but was successfully completed.

2.8.   Conclusions

It is very clear that there were significant challenges for the OSD management team to move all administrative activities to remote working in a very short timeframe. It is an important achievement that this level of change was achieved without disruption to the core administrative functions of the organisation. It is an indication of the commitment of staff and the flexibility they have shown that all the key administrative areas of work were successfully maintained with little or no disruption.

This has been a living experience of implementing a Business Continuity Plan and will have given staff and management confidence in their abilities to cope with any business interruption in the future.

SECTION 3:
THE IMPACT ON SECOND LEVEL EDUCATION AND YOUTH WORK PROVISION

Introduction

LOETB provides second level education services in nine schools across the two counties. Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Applied, Leaving Certificate Vocational, and Transition Year programmes are provided.

On 12 March the Government announced the closure of schools in response to the unprecedented global health challenge posed by COVID-19.

This section describes the response within LOETB second level provision. For this review, interviews across key themes were held with the Director of Schools, a Principal, a Deputy Principal and two teachers. While it is a limited review it does provide a picture of the challenges facing senior school management and staff and how they responded to the ever-changing environment.

3.1.   The challenges of decision-making and communications

Section 1 above sets out the evolving situation arising from Government announcements in respect of education and training over the fourteen-week period to the end of June. This meant that LOETB SMT and school management had to make decisions responding on each occasion to the Government decisions. This was a significant challenge to keep on top of the changes, make decisions on the appropriate actions to be taken, and keep staff informed in a timely manner on the decisions made and actions required. The key to their approach was clear and speedy decisions and precise communication of information updates and decisions taken in real time across the organisation.

The Department of Education and Skills had indicated on 10 March in a press release *"that no decision had been made on the closure of schools and that no action was to be taken."*[2] LOETB senior management team went ahead and held its annual in-service development seminar for all management staff in Tullamore on 11 and 12 March. At 11.40am on 12 March the Government announced the closure of schools. Immediately, all staff were notified by email and text that school management were returning to their schools in the early afternoon to manage the closure and manage the communication with staff, students and parents. Staff were asked to prepare for closure and to stay on for a final staff meeting in each school and centre.

That afternoon all school management held assemblies for each class year and briefed them on how the school would stay in touch and how the staff would provide work and support to them. School management then met their staff and briefed them on what was required. The priority for the senior management of was to prioritise

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2   Press Release from Department of Education and Skills 10th March 2020

the health and wellbeing of their students and staff working through the advice of Government and to maintain a level of teaching and learning for all their students.

The key message to staff delivered by school management was followed up in the letter from the Director of Schools[3] which stated *"keep engagement with students small and regular, allow time for their understanding and a chance for you to breathe between assignments/evaluations… pace yourself- we are all human and we all need to recharge our batteries"*.

This also reflected the emphasis placed in the Secretary General[4] of the Department of Education and Skills letter to Principals and Teachers. He states *"this is an unprecedented situation and we are all conscious that in difficult times schools communities come together to find solutions and always work in the best interests of their students. The Department is aware that schools have been actively engaging in contingency planning"*.

In the previous week, the IT section at LOETB had worked with schools and centres to ensure that all students in the system had an LOETB/school email address. This was an important contingency which subsequently facilitated a speedy response to establishing direct contact with all students and adult learners and enabled a smoother transition to online support directly after the closure of schools and centres. In addition, the IT section had been testing Microsoft Teams as a tool for communications across the organisation and within schools and centres. In reality, individual schools were using different tools in their teaching and learning such as Google classroom and Zoom so the shift to Teams was a challenge initially.

3.2. The challenges for teaching and learning

The Secretary General's letter set out the challenge facing schools *"in order to minimise the impact on teaching and learning all schools are asked to continue to plan lessons, and where possible, provide online resources for students where schools are equipped to do so. Schools are asked to be conscious of students that may not have access to online facilities and to consider this actively in their response."*

It is clear from the interviews conducted for this report that every effort was made by management and staff to address this challenge. This was an unprecedented situation and it was a considerable challenge for management, staff and students. One Principal described the situation as akin to being "thrown into the deep end with no clear playbook in an ever-changing situation."

Principals and staff recognised that in moving to remote learning, not all students were going to have the same opportunity to fully engage. There was a variety of reasons for this including access to broadband, limited access to IT devices in the home, and space to study. Vulnerable learners with special needs and students from disadvantaged background where also recognised as being most at risk.

In the Department of Education and Skills Guidance documents for the continuity of schooling issued on 22

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3   Letter from LOETB Director of Schools to all school staff

4   Letter from the Secretary General to Principals and Teachers 13th March 2020 available on Department Website

April, it stated that students at risk of educational disadvantage or students with special educational needs should have regular, ongoing schooling and that keeping students connected to learning and to the school through engagement with their teachers is critical.[5]

The Department guidance also stated that *"in all schools subject teachers continue to have overall responsibility of the education of students, including those with SEN. During the closure period, subject teachers should continue to differentiate tasks appropriately to match learning needs of students with SEN. They should gauge the success of this differentiated approach through assessment of student's effort, where possible, and they should provide regular feedback to parents and guardians and students."* (p3)

This was a very significant challenge for teachers in the circumstances of remote teaching and was a lot easier said than done.

3.3.   The reality from the Teacher's perspective

Schools closed on 14 March and after the initial lag arising from the St. Patricks Day break it was back to work for teachers from 19 March. The key message from school management was that school would continue and that staff should work to their usual timetable and most importantly engage with every student. School management actively supported teachers to engage with their students. Teachers contacted their classes, setting work and deadlines and correcting the work as it was returned. At the beginning the expectation was that schools would be open after Easter so the focus was on homework and revision. Contact was primarily through emails and phone calls. As time went on, if students were not engaging, teachers reported this to the relevant Year Head who followed up with the students and parents.

Teachers reported that moving to remote learning had significant challenges, including the fact that they too were in lockdown and had family commitments including childcare and home schooling for those with children of school going age. Staff worked at hours that suited their own family commitments. Many reported that setting work, preparing notes or demonstrations for online delivery required considerable additional work, to that required for face to face teaching. It also required considerable effort to maintain contact with students, distribute work, get work returned, correct the work and give feedback. Several strategies were used to maintain contact with students with emails and phone calls the norm. For students who couldn't engage digitally, work and materials were posted to their homes. Some teachers established class WhatsApp groups and used this medium to maintain contact and encourage groups of learners to work together.

On 24 March the Department issued a press release stating that the decision has been made keep schools closed until 29 April. School management and staff realised that it was now unlikely that schools would re-open again before the summer recess. Real effort was made to increase the level of teaching remotely with many teachers increasing class content delivered online. This was another significant challenge for many teachers preparing

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5   Department of Education and Skills "Guidance on Continuity of Schooling: Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs 22 April 2020

content and teaching new concepts via Zoom or Microsoft Teams was a new skill to be developed. In the main, a sizable proportion of teachers actively engaged with students through providing online classes. Teachers assisted each other in the technical details of managing the platforms and school management were continuously offering any assistance required. This peer support was very strong in schools with everyone pulling together. LOETB Teaching and Learning Centre provided weekly lists of useful websites and resources to the Principals for distribution to teachers as appropriate. The staff interviewed reported that this was very helpful because it assured them that they were not on their own.

A great variety of teaching resources were used in online teaching. Teachers were innovative and creative in developing materials, such as making videos on how to do an exercise and uploading them to the schools platform to support students. Detailed notes with integrated online resources were often provided and this enabled students to review materials in their own time. Teachers reported that they would receive emails queries, or assignments late at night as the students undertook the work at times that suited them. This required teachers to be flexible in their management of work.

A challenge for LOETB was the fact that several different platforms were being used within the schools.

It was also difficult to maintain teaching of some subjects for example, in the sciences and music where practical demonstrations and experiments were an essential part of the learning process. These subjects were particularly challenging for teachers.

Teachers reported that despite the perception that students were IT literate many students struggled with Word, Excel and Powerpoint and this wasn't obvious when working in school but became an impediment when working online.

After Easter, a greater emphasis was placed by teachers on those students undertaking State Examinations. Teachers had to continue to motivate and support students in a time of uncertainty when there was no decision as to whether the State Examinations s would be conducted.

On 10 April, the Minister announced the postponement of State Examinations. The details included that Leaving Certificate written exams were postponed until July/ August and that Junior Certificate exams would be replaced with school-based exams and assessments early in the new school year. It was also reported that schools would be closed until further notice.

This again placed additional burdens on teachers to keep students motivated and participating. After Easter the Director of Schools stated in a letter to school management and staff that *"as we are approaching the end of the academic year, there is a requirement that end-of- school assessment and school reports are completed for the relevant year groups."*

Despite the challenges, including the significant number of students that were disengaging at this time, all schools in LOETB successfully held exams for all class years except Leaving Certificate. This was a remarkable achievement given the logistics involved.

The ESRI produced a report[6] on the impact of the closure of schools on students recognised that *"the innovation shown by teachers and learners in this challenging time also illustrates the significant potential of digital technology to improve how students learn, and to broaden the range of students who can get access to Education in the future."* Teachers and school management reported in this review that they now hold a stronger conviction that there is a place for increasing and improving the use of digital technology to enhance teaching and learning in the future.

3.4.   Junior Certificate State Exams

When the decision was made not to hold the Junior Cycle Exams teachers reported a significant drop off in the engagement of 3rd years. The decision was that schools would conduct end of year assessments for Junior Cycle students and it was a struggle to maintain contact with 3rd year students and get engagement in school exams. For many Junior Cycle students the cancelation of the State Exams meant the end of the school year. The challenge was again to reengage them to complete exams.

At the Principals Network meeting it was agreed that each school would decide how to access junior certificate students. In the main, most schools decided on a format that reflected previous test results, and end of year test and a percentage figure for participation in the home-based provision. Principals and teachers reported that this worked well and provided some recognition for students who worked in school and for those who participated in the online delivery. All school management and staff made a big effort to reconnect with students who had opted out to ensure a maximum participation in end of year school exams.

3.5.   Leaving Certificate Applied

School management and teachers reported that many of the students on the LCA programme opted out of online provision after Easter. Many of the key assignments required were not completed. This was problematic when it came to managing the predictive grades process. In the end, for many, the predictive grade awarded was based on work completed before the closure. In addition, it was difficult to get the 5th year LCA 1 to register on the Leaving Certificate Portal as the students didn't consider that it was necessary. Great effort was made by teachers to ensure that all students registered eventually.

3.6.   Leaving Certificate

The situation was particularly challenging for students completing Leaving Certificate as their preparation for exams in June were suddenly disrupted. The practical exams including oral exams were cancelled shortly after the closure of the schools. The Government decisions in respect of the other aspects of the State Exams was slow and it created a lot of anxiety and uncertainty for this cohort of students. For the remainder of April, teachers and management focused on trying to maintain teaching and learning for Leaving Certificate students. This was made more difficult when it was announced on 10 April that the exams would be postponed until the end of July or early August. This announcement happened during the Easter Holidays. Teachers and school

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6   ESRI Survey and Statistical Report Series 92, June 2020

management reported that the postponement of the exams had a negative impact on students, many of whom disengaged when school contact returned on 20 April after the Easter holidays. School management and teachers expressed concern about the impact on student wellbeing and motivation. One Principal reported that there was approximately a 50% drop off amongst six years after Easter.

School management and teachers had to address the questions and anxieties of parents and students about the uncertainty of the Leaving Certificate exams and their postponement and possible cancellation. Every effort was made to keep students focused and working.

On 8 May the Minister announced the postponement of 2020 Leaving Certificate examinations. *"Following a decision at Cabinet, all students are to be offered the option of receiving Calculated Grades for the subjects they are studying and the alternative of sitting the 2020 Leaving Certification examinations at a date in the future when it is considered safe to do so. The decision being made will allow a young person to progress to the next stage of their life in a timely fashion."*

The press release set out the eight key points for how the calculated grades would work. It was a further week before the full details were published by the Department. It was a very significant Government decision and it posed a major challenge for the SMT, school management, and teaching staff.

3.7.   Managing the Predictive/ Calculated Grades Process

On 22 May, the Minister announced the publication of guidance for schools on Calculated Grades. The Minister stated that *"the guidance is a result of intensive work and engagement by the Department, teachers, and school management in recent days. The guidance is designed to give teachers and principals clear and precise guidance on how to provide the Department with an estimated mark and class ranking for each Leaving Certificate student."*

The Director of Schools received the Department Circular Letter on Thursday afternoon (22 April) and reviewed and prepared a detailed PowerPoint presentation for Principals for a meeting scheduled for 11am on the Friday morning. This was intentional to enable the Principals brief staff that afternoon and avoid staff entering the weekend with uncertainty about the detail. This was a further example of the quick action of LOETB management to ensure the circulation of important information in real time.

The process published by the Department involved the following stages:
- Students asked to confirm their subject level choice at which they initially entered for the examination or to change to a lower level. This was done through an online portal.
- The portal was delayed in closing because several students did not register. School management contacted all students to ensure that they did register.
- DES then confirms level of entry for each student to the school. There was a delay in getting the final information back to the schools.
- Principal then informs teachers of the chosen grade for individual students.

- Teachers were then asked to grade each student with an estimated mark on Form A.
- Teachers were then asked to rank order all students in the class on Form B.
- The school management reviewed and signed off on the estimated results.

The process has been reported by principals and teachers as straight forward once the information on the selection of levels by students was available. Teachers also noted that the records of tests for students in some cases were limited, something not noted previously.

In conclusion, the challenges for teachers in managing the unique family circumstances of a lock down and providing work and support to the students is testament to their professionalism, commitment to their students and their flexibility in working and supporting their students. This was continuously recognised in communication from school management and from the SMT. In a letter to staff the Director of Schools stated *"the work you are undertaking at this point in time is of huge benefits to our students, especially in maintaining some level of normality for their wellbeing…in these extraordinary circumstances, you have done an amazing job."* [7]

3.8.   The Principals Perspective

The Director of Schools and the Principals normally held a scheduled meeting every six weeks rotating the location between Portlaoise and Tullamore. In this crisis, the Director introduced meetings on Microsoft Teams on a weekly basis. A WhatsApp group was formed about eighteen months earlier but was used extensively during this period to enable the Director to circulate articles and Department information in a speedy manner. The purpose was to ensure that all relevant information was available as soon as possible and that the Principals were working together on planning the way forward.

The approach adopted by the Director was to ensure that all Principals were part of the discussion and part of finding the solutions. This enabled ownership of the outcomes by the Principals and provided real opportunity for peer support and collaboration in an unprecedented crisis. The fact that there were nine Principals ensured that real and active participation could occur in real time despite meeting through Microsoft Teams. It also ensured that all Principals received the same information when it was available in a speedy manner.

A number of Principals continued to work from the school premises. One such Principal stated that this was important because it set the tone for staff that management were in the school and available to support them.

Microsoft Teams was also used by school management to maintain contact with all Heads of Departments and Year Heads and they, in turn, used this platform to maintain contact with teachers and provide support and information as quickly as possible.

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7 Letter from LOETB Director of Schools to all school staff

Principals recognised that the move to online teaching was a significant challenge for teachers. One Principal described it as a "game changer as the circumstance was immediate and necessary and forced students and teachers to embrace digital learning". A teacher reported that the changeover required them to develop a new set of skills for teaching and engaging learners online. Digital competency was addressed by support from the IT section and from help from colleagues.

This was recognised in the ESRI report on the "Second-level students impacted by a lack of access to technology during COVID-19 school closures"[8] which stated that *"Teachers and students were challenged to improve their digital competencies, often "learning by doing" and drawing on supports from within the school communities, and in the case of teachers, from professional development services.*

One Principal suggested that the circumstances enabled teachers to be more adventurous and experimental in their work and in setting assignments. Principals reported that the response to the challenges posed by the closure was reliant on the professionalism of the staff, their commitment to their students, and their ability to work creatively and collaboratively.

The support of LOETB management was recognised by school management and staff in this review. LOETB management ensured that school management had all the relevant information in real time and had the opportunity to contribute to the decisions that needed to be made.

3.9. The impact on the learning outcomes for students

The challenge for school management and staff to move from classroom-based teaching to online engagement with students with little notice or preparation was significant. In this context to have maintained contact with the students, ensure that the majority undertook work, delivered some classes online and ensure that all classes in 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 5th years completed end of year exams, was no small feat. The successful completion of the Calculated Grades for all Leaving Certificate and Leaving Certificate Applied students was also significant achievement for the staff and school management.

However, despite the best efforts of both management and staff, the impact of the closure was significant on all students in all years. School management and staff reported that for all students the loss of the normal supports, of a structured school day, direct contact with their teachers, social contact with the peers, and the sporting and recreational opportunities that are part of school life was a significant loss. For some students participation was hampered by lack of IT equipment, the limitations of broadband and family circumstances, being unable to have a quiet space for study. For other students, who were normally motivated in school were not able to cope with the changes and gradually opted out. The anxiety and uncertainty for the students undertaking State Exams had an impact on their motivation and ability to maintain engagement with their teachers throughout this period.

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8   ESRI Survey and Statistical Report Series 92, June 2020

The ESRI published a report on the <u>"Second-level students impacted by a lack of access to technology during COVID-19 school closures"</u>[9] states that *"School closures appear to have particularly affected learning, wellbeing, motivation and engagement of Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate students, with more severe impacts being reported among DEIS schools. Other key impact groups were found to include students with special educational needs (SEN), students from low-income backgrounds and students studying English as a foreign language. Risks of learning regression among disadvantaged groups of students are of concern."* (p11)

The impact was significant for those students with special educational needs or from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. The drop-off in engagement was considerable. Teachers worked hard to stay connected and began to see that their role in some cases was to support the mental health of the student as distinct from pressing for work to be completed. One teacher described deciding to maintain contact and support and not to add to the stress of the family by putting on pressure for all work to be completed and returned.

The Department guidelines stated that *"the school closure requires schools and teachers to use new means of ensuring continuity of learning for students with SEN. These means will be informed by the same steps that underpin teacher's practices in school settings; planning, implementing monitoring and reviewing."* (p5) The implications of this statement were that the school should be able to mitigate against any disadvantage of the closure for disadvantaged and vulnerable learners. This was easier said than done. It is quite clear from teachers that it was very difficult to differentiate the work for different levels of ability within the same class group. It is not possible to successfully manage multiple ability levels within the same class group while providing online classes and provide the same level of support that would have been available in the classroom. The fact that the normal support provided by a teacher in one to one interaction in class was now limited had a disproportional impact on vulnerable students. The loss of the normal school supports further resulted in lower disengagement. Teachers and Principals reported concern that the potential educational loss from lower engagement would widen the gap of educational disadvantage for this cohort of students.

It is noted that school management reported that they were planning for how to ensure vulnerable students were able to return to school and how they needed to be supported to catch up on the educational loss.

3.10. Conclusions Second Level Education

In conclusion, it is very clear that the challenges for students were significant. All second level students were provided with work to be undertaken at home and had to submit their assignments online. Corrections and feedback were provided by the teachers. It was a challenge for many students to create a suitable workspace at home and to have the facilities necessary to work effectively. Some students did not have adequate broadband or a suitable computer or device available or were having to share with siblings. Others struggled with the necessary discipline for online learning and self-directed learning. It was noted by teachers that even the most motivated students struggled to maintain participation. It was also clearly reported by both Principals and

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9   ESRI Survey and Statistical Report Series 92, June 2020

Teachers that the drop-out rate in student participation was significant as time went on with vulnerable learners most impacted upon.

It must be recognised that, for a considerable number of students, being out of school for a six-month period will have had a significant impact on their educational and social development. This is acknowledged by the ESRI report which stated that *"students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special educational needs have been deeply affected by the shift to distance learning. The role of parents in their children's education and the impact of students' home situations on their ability to engage with learning have both been intensified by the lockdown. School leaders thus fear that one outcome of the lockdown will be a widening of the gap as pre-existing advantage and disadvantage are compounded."*

School management will look for creative ways to take this into consideration in their planning for the new school year. It will be difficult for many students to return to business as usual when they have not had the structure of school in six months. This will need to be considered by school management in planning the re-opening of school. In addition, teachers will need to be aware that students entering a new class year will not have the work from the previous year completed and the foundation of their learning in the subject will have been weakened. Consideration will need to be given to having study workshops and recap lessons for the first month to set a shared basis for the commencement of the curriculum for the new school year. Otherwise, many students will commence at a disadvantage which will be compounded as the year continues. Again, this will have a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable students. This is well-recognised by Principals and is the focus of planning for the return to schools in September.

3.11. Youth Services Response

The role of LOETB in respect of youth work is defined under Section 10 (j) of the Education and Training Boards Act 2013 is *"to support the provision, coordination, administration and assessment of youth work services in its functional areas and provide such information as may be requested by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in relation to such support".*

LOETB fulfils it remit through supporting voluntary youth clubs and groups and community-based youth work services provided by regional voluntary youth organisations. In addition, LOETB acts as the funding conduit for the funding of youth work services and clubs provided by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

3.12. Funding Youth Work Provision

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs issued a letter (3 April[10]) to all ETBs and Youth Work Services stating that *"In the main, youth work services are not considered as essential services for the purposes of these measures (i.e. for the purposes of essential travel by essential workers in the current period)".* The letter went on to name several very limited circumstances where youth workers maybe requested for assistance by a listed essential service.

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10 Letter from Laura McGarrigle Asst. General Secretary, Department of Children and Youth Affairs 3rd April 2020

3.12.1. New programme roll-out

The Department instructed the ETBs to maintain funding to youth work as normal. In the case of LOETB this involved three funded projects. In addition, ETBs were asked to note and record any innovative practices that emerged from youth work providers and to maintain contact with young people throughout the lockdown. The Youth Officer maintained contact with youth organisations during the closure to offer any necessary support and advice.

The administrative functions in respect of funding youth work provision remained in place during the lockdown. Firstly, DCYA had introduced a new Grant Scheme entitled UBU *Your Place Your Space* for implementation on 1 July. This was to replace existing grant schemes that were funding Youth Work Projects and services. These projects and services had to make their application by 28 February. In the lead up to the initial application the Youth Officer conducted individual clinics with each project on a number of occasions so that the group would have a full understanding of the requirements of the new Scheme and how to complete the necessary application successfully. The Youth Officer had to complete a review of the applications and give feedback to the applicant organisations and the organisations had to finalise their application by mid-March.

The application procedure for the new scheme required that the ETB to establish a high-level Coordination Group chaired at Director level to review all applications and to rate them on a Green Amber or Red status. The Group had to make a recommendation on each application and the recommendations were then considered by the Chief Executive. This task was successfully completed by the ETB and the submission was made to the Department on time on 17 April.

3.12.2. Existing programmes

The Local Youth Club Grant Scheme, the LGBTI grant scheme, and the youth capital funding scheme were managed successfully through online procedures and the necessary evaluations and appraisals were carried out online by the LOETB Coordination Group.

3.13. Laois Offaly - Local Creative Youth Partnership Project

The Youth Officer has responsibility for Laois Offaly Local Creative Youth Partnership project. This is an interagency project managed by LOETB. The purpose of the project is to enrich the creative lives of young people across the two counties by increasing participation and engagement in creative opportunities.

Following the establishment of a Steering Committee to lead and direct the initiative, a comprehensive piece of research was conducted with 53 providers of youth service and the voice of 609 young people from diverse backgrounds, to help identify the creative needs of young people aged 10-24 living in Laois and Offaly.

The research identified barriers to participation such as transport, cost, lack of facilities and poor availability of creative programmes. Addressing those needs led to the development of 5 specific programme areas that focused on rural, urban, targeted, post-primary schools and theatre. This research informed Laois Offaly Local

Creative Youth Partnership what young people wanted, and subsequently, 720 young people were fully engaged in the design, delivery and evaluation of 23 diverse and exciting creative programmes such as; photography, Music, Dance Film making; Coding; Radio production; Podcasting; Creative Writing; Ceramic Mural; Youth Theatre.

Within this period, there were many challenges arising from COVID-19 restrictions. Working remotely along with the familiarisation of using Zoom/Teams to communicate took a certain amount of adjustment. One of the main challenges was the revision of the work plan. The original work plan reflected the combined evaluation findings of 2019 and could measure last years' programmes which helped to establish what had worked well and to ascertain what types of programmes should be continued into 2020. The creative programmes were planned to be delivered in a physical space. A contingency plan referred to as *Work Plan B* was developed and approved by the steering group to include the delivery of creative activities across social media platforms. Given the circumstances and the increase in the utilisation of digital platforms, the partnership was very aware that not all young people had access to digital hardware and a suitable environment to take part in the delivery of online activities. As a result, the aim was not to solely focus on digital platforms for the delivery of creative programmes.

A social media plan was developed to a professional level, so that the partnership could further engage with all stakeholders to share and circulate relevant information. These social media channels will be invaluable in strengthening existing and establishing new partnerships with other providers. Specifically, in response to the easing of Covid-19 guidelines, funding of €11,700 was be made available to promote and encourage the engagement of young people 12-15 and 16-18 years in creative activities as identified by young people.

3.14. Strategic Approach to the Development of Youth Work

The Youth Officer representing LOETB, maintained links (via Teams and Zoom) on key local decision-making forums and advisory committees working collaboratively with ETBI, LCDC, LAG, CYPSC, local Garda Youth Diversion Projects, and Comhairle na nÓg among others.

The Youth Officer is also conducting comprehensive research across Laois and Offaly to identify priority targeted youth work responses in green field sites for new projects and will accordingly make recommendation/submission to the DCYA based on the findings.

3.15. Conclusions on Youth Services

The Youth Service in LOETB successfully completed the introduction of the new grant scheme and managed the other grant schemes online during the lockdown. While there was significant concerns among the youth projects about the new scheme, the process followed by the Youth Officer and the support provided meant that the process was successfully completed and all three projects were successful in their application to the new grant scheme.

3.16. Music Generation Laois

Music Generation Laois is a performance music education programme for children and young people in County Laois. Music Generation Laois is a partnership project led by LOETB and is part of Music Generation – Ireland's National Music Education Programme, initiated by Music Network and co-funded by U2, The Ireland Funds together with, The Department of Education and Skills and Local Music Education Partnerships.

Music Generation Laois is based at Laois Music Centre in Portlaoise and delivers engaging music programmes in schools and centres, across 6 programme strands: Choral, Traditional, Orchestral, Stampede (World) Drumming, The Music Box (a programme for children and young people with special needs), and a School of Rock. Young people have access to weekly tuition and instruments at subsidised costs, augmented by once- off workshops, masterclasses, concert attendance and performances. The Project is expected to income generate a considerable proportion of their annual budget and this is achieved by charging the schools or the students a fee.

The challenge was to move all their tuition programmes from being centre-based to online. The Project immediately developed an Internet Teaching Policy that was agreed with all parents and staff. All classes were delivered on Zoom and recorded and stored for safety and security purposes. This was a very successful change over with over 80% of students moving to online tuition. The Schools Programme, which was being delivered to several primary schools in the region was ended with the closure of the schools. However, tutors delivered tuition on Youtube videos to the schools for distribution to their students and the take up was very good.

The Traditional Programme, the Choral Programme and the Orchestral Programme continued online with students and did several performances which were published on Facebook and Youtube. In addition, Music Generation Laois held an Online Open Mic Night. These were a creative music platform for young people aged 12-18 living on the island of Ireland. This project invited young musicians from across Ireland, to submit a video of their original music songs/tunes/compositions/raps/electronic music. Videos were reviewed by Music Generation Laois, and a selection of videos were then live-streamed at the Online Open Mic Mike and the Youtube channel.

Music Generation Laois also expanded their Traditional Orchestra by moving the group online and opening auditions to young people from across Ireland, moving from a membership of 23 to 72 young musicians as a result. This group rehearsed weekly on zoom.

It is a concern for the future of the Schools Programme that with the opening of schools in September the project may not have the same access to using classrooms in the schools involved and that alternative ways of delivery will need to be agreed with the partner schools. As schools pay for the service, a drop in this income will put the project under financial pressure. Alternative income sources may need to be considered to make up the deficit.

It was an indication of the commitment of the part time tutors that most lessons were successfully transferred to online teaching which is a very different medium from their normal practice. Additional in-service training and support will need be provided to tutors as it is likely that this form of delivery will continue for a considerable period of the coming school year.

Given the success of the project in moving online some provision it should be considered that some provision should be maintained online which may draw in a larger number of young people and give some flexibility to the students as to when to access the lessons. Additional music software may be needed to support such an initiative.

3.17. Laois School of Music

Laois School of Music (LSM) was established in 2001 in a partnership approach between the Arts Office of Laois County Council and the then Co. Laois VEC with the sole aim of delivering high quality, life-long music tuition in a variety of instruments, accessible to all sectors of the community. The school which is based at Laois Music Centre is now approaching its 20th year and has since established itself as the leading centre of music excellence across the midlands and continues to provide a creative and nurturing environment which supports social inclusion and allows young people to learn, grow, develop their skills for further education, or simply discover a love of music that will positively impact their lives.

LSM has a dedicated staff of 15 professional music tutors and practitioners and offers expert tuition from age four to adult in a range of instrumental programmes such as piano, woodwind, strings, percussion as well as Kindermusic & Pre-Instrumental classes, vocal training, and Music Theory which includes Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate Music. It also has a dedicated Orchestral Department which includes the Laois Youth Orchestra who have performed at various high-profile venues both at home and abroad. The school is also the recognised local exam centre in the midlands for RIAM and ABRSM exam bodies, hosting hundreds of exam students each year. With continued support from its funding partners and its highly competitive tuition fees the long-term sustainability of LSM would ensure a rich musical fabric is embedded in county Laois for the future.

The onset of Covid-19 and the closure of schools under government guidelines presented LSM with a difficult task - to continue to deliver lessons remotely in a safe and secure manner without compromising the quality. A targeted approach was adopted quickly by LSM and their partners Music Generation Laois to move lessons online and Internet Teaching Procedures which included parental and tutor consent was developed after seeking guidance from various professional music bodies. Having tested several live video platforms aimed at live music performance we elected to use Zoom as this provided the most stability and decreased latency. All recorded lessons, if applicable, were stored on a secure OneDrive and shared with the LSM Coordinator. This changeover was successful in that approximately 50% of individual lessons moved online within a week of lockdown and the feedback received from parents and students was extremely positive. An instrument drop-off service was introduced at Laois Music Centre to allow instruments to be tuned and serviced during lockdown which took place in a safe & sanitised manner.

For group activities such as Kindermusic, Music Theory, and Junior and Leaving Certificate Music, LSM adopted a distance-learning approach. Pre-recorded tutorial videos were filmed and delivered to Kindermusic pupils as well as Music Theory lessons. The Junior and Leaving Certificate tutor engaged with his students via parent email addresses and exercises and classroom-based work was delivered on a weekly basis during lockdown. The Youth Orchestra was suspended with a view to coming together remotely in August/September, but consideration may be given to downsizing to smaller chamber groups and quartets to allow physical rehearsals to continue under social distancing measures. Some members of the Youth Orchestra were lucky enough to perform alongside tutors in an outdoor setting at Laois Music Centre in June as part of a Nationwide initiative #OdeToJoy to celebrate the bravery of our frontline workers. A series of virtual student concerts were also held and made available on a private Youtube channel for tutors, parents, and students.

All instruments are not conducive to an online environment and while the virtual medium can never wholly replace a physical lesson it must be accepted that the landscape of musical tuition may be changed forever and that music schools must adapt to these changes and offer a blended learning experience with the option of delivering both. LSM and Music Generation Laois tutors should be commended for adapting so quickly to this new normal and both programmes welcome a provision to explore this platform further both from a CPD and technology perspective. This would indeed allow these programmes to cast their nets further afield and to explore potential revenue streams to help alleviate the deficit incurred by COVID-19.

SECTION 4:
THE IMPACT ON FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING SERVICES

Introduction

LOETB has a strong and varied range of FET services across the two counties delivered by nine centres, two training facilities, an Education Service in two prisons, an Adult Guidance Service, a Literacy Service and a Community Education Service.

The aim of the service is to *"encourage, enable and support adults who wish to return to education and to avail of educational opportunities that best suits their needs."*[11] LOETB delivers a range of part-time and full-time programmes across its FET centres from Level 1 to 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications. LOETB also delivers an extensive range of training to a diverse range of clients including those entering the labour market for the first time, those changing careers, persons with a disability, and early school leavers. The Training division also provides Phase 2 training in Electrical Apprenticeship.

In the FET sector there are two external statutory bodies that impact on the decision making of the FET Management Team. SOLAS is the Further Education and Training Authority in Ireland and is responsible for funding, planning, and co-ordinating training and further educational programmes. An annual plan of programmes, performance outcomes and a budget will have been agreed with SOLAS for 2020. LOETB will be accountable to SOLAS for its performance.

In addition, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is the statutory body that has validated LOETB FET programmes and its quality assurance procedures.

The FET Management Team, in making decisions on the appropriate response to COVID-19, needed to take account of the requirements and guidance of SOLAS and QQI. This section looks at the actions taken by the management and staff to respond to the closure of centres as part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The challenges facing the FET sector overlapped with those facing the management and staff at second level; the move to remote teaching and learning, and maintaining contact and engagement with their learners, particularly those with educational disadvantages. The response to moving to online teaching and the challenges faced by teachers and learners will be described below.

The majority of certified programmes provided by the FET service are QQI-certified. The assessments methodologies are locally devised and set out in the QQI validated programmes. Many of the programmes included end of year exams, and the early closure required many of the exams to be redeveloped as alternative

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11 Quote from section on Further Education and Training on LOETB website

assessment instruments in line with QQI approved learning outcomes of the relevant programmes. The additional challenge for the FET Management Team was to ensure the Quality Assurance procedures were adhered to successfully. Therefore, the FET Management Team had to submit a detailed contingency plan[12] to QQI. The content of that report will not be duplicated here but will use some its content to summarise the actions taken. The interviews conducted provided some additional detail to the implementation of the contingency plans.

4.1.   Response of FET Management Team

On 12 March, the FET Management Team notified all learners and teachers of the decision to close centres and to move tuition to on-line systems. The aim was to ensure the continued provision of essential FET services and certification as far as was practicable. These two objectives posed considerable challenges for both management and staff. Unlike the second level provision, the pathway forward was clear from the beginning and this enabled the FET Management Team to put a contingency plan in place for the maintenance of programmes and the completion and certification of programmes at Levels 5 and 6. In doing so, it was decided early on that, while every effort would be made to maintain all programmes, it was essential to support learners who were completing certification at full award Levels 5 and 6.

4.2.   Governance of QA policies and procedures

The QA Governance Structure (see appendix 2) approved by QQI places the decision making on QA policy and procedural issues with the FET Management Team reporting to the LOETB Senior Management Team. In the addressing the implications of the closures for QA procedures, teaching and assessment and putting new arrangements in place, the FET Management Team was the final decision maker. This is in line with QQI requirements to maintain academic oversight and governance. *"Alternative arrangements that necessitate change to assessment strategies are endorsed by the approval of the institutions academic governance system."* (P7)[13]

The governance for the management of the quality assurance procedures and the temporary changes that needed to be put in place was as follows:

- Regular FET Management Team meetings via Microsoft Teams to discuss proposals for alternative assessments and contingency arrangements regarding the Certification process.
- Where changes in procedures are proposed these are approved by the FET Management Team and forwarded to the LOETB Senior Management Team for final approval.
- Any areas for concern will be reported immediately to management on identification for follow up or action.
- Records of all decisions and changes required to existing Quality Assurance processes will be maintained and reviewed by Governance Structures and noted in all meeting minutes.

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12 LOETB QQI Contingency Planning Report May 2020
13 QQI COVID-19 Update April 2020

The FET Management Team identified as a priority cohort the Post Leaving Certificate courses and other courses where learners were aiming for a major award with a view to applying to third level institutions through the CAO system. Every effort was made to ensure that these groups were processed for certification on time for the June certification round. All other courses would be supported to be completed for the August assessment period, or the extra July assessment round provided by QQI. This affected over 500 learners in four centres, with over 80 teachers involved.

The Quality Assurance Support Service team undertook a survey of teaching staff involved in teaching and assessing that priority cohort to determine for each module the following information; what assessments had already been completed, whether all Learning Outcomes had been taught already, and what had already been corrected.

From the survey results the FET Management Team was able to determine that, *"most of the class content for programmes that operate according to the academic calendar had already been delivered to learners so most modules were almost at the stage of assessment. However, much of the assessments that were to take place were now not possible as they would require learners to attend at centres to complete Written Examinations and Skills Demonstrations."* (p1)[14]

4.3. Changes to QA Procedures

4.3.1. Alternative Assessments

The results of these surveys provided the QA Support Service with a snapshot of what assessments remained, and of those, what needed to be changed in order to facilitate completion on time for the June round of certification, and for subsequent certification rounds.

In relation to the administering of alternative assessments, it was LOETB's priority to ensure the following:
- *"Learners have the opportunity to provide evidence of their achievement of all learning outcomes specified*
- *Information relating to alternative assessments will be communicated to learners in a timely and understandable manner allowing sufficient time to prepare. Assessment deadlines must consider that learners may struggle with access to or ability to use technology, learners may have childcare or other care commitments or may be unwell themselves (due to COVID-19 or other illness)*
- *The integrity of the assessments will be maintained; learners will be informed and reminded of rules in relation to assessment malpractice*
- *Proctoring arrangements will be in place to protect integrity of online exams.*
- *All learners will be encouraged to undertake alternative assessment arrangements where this course of action is deemed appropriate and feasible. Where a learner does not engage or requests to defer or postpone assessment this will be addressed on a case-by-case basis.*
- *Learners will not be disadvantaged by changes to assessment formats and timeframes.*
- *Learners will continue to be supported during this time when completing assessments in any different format."* (p2)[15]

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14 LOETB QQI Contingency Planning Report May 2020
15 LOETB QQI Contingency Planning Report May 2020

This is in line with the principles QQI set to guide the approach of institutions in developing alternative arrangements for programmes and the achievement of qualifications. The guidelines proposed that providers' *decisions should be made in a timely fashion; communicate with students and stakeholders keeping them fully informed; care for groups of learners; maintain standards; maintain academic oversight; and stay connected to national supports.* (p7)[16]

In addition, the contingency plans for assessment were discussed with the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) and agreement reached on how to progress three main areas.

4.3.2. Theory Examinations

The first step was the replacement of the traditional written Theory Examinations, particularly for the CAO priority cohort. The process was described as follows: *"Each teacher/tutor that was teaching a module where a Theory Examination was left to be completed, was required to complete a Template form which proposed an alternative method of assessment. For the priority cohort alone, this involved 64 different modules being delivered to 116 class groups, with 38 different teachers involved. There were some modules that were taught by more than one teacher/tutor – in these cases, it was important to ensure a level of consistency and fairness.*

Each proposal received was recorded on a template document, which was presented to the FET Management Team on a regular basis. Proposals were either approved, or returned to teacher/tutor for further consideration or with a query, or were not approved (some of the reasons for proposals not being approved included if the assessment was not deemed appropriate, or if learners did not have access to relevant technology, IT packages, etc.), and in some cases, proposals by teachers/tutors to postpone assessment until the learner could access the centre was deemed the most appropriate approach." (p2)[17]

By 25 April, all the 38 teachers involved had received approval for their alternative assessments and were being supported by their managers and the QA Support Service to enable their learners to complete assessments in their respective areas. A Record of Approved Alternative Assessments was maintained to track actions taken and decisions made.

The most common alternative assessments that were approved were Assignments in lieu of Examinations, or online Examinations. The QA Support Service worked closely with the relevant staff to familiarise staff and learners with the Moodle system used to conduct online exams. The QA Support Service assumed responsibility for monitoring/invigilating the Online Examinations in order to protect the integrity of the assessments and over 70 online exams were completed. This was recognised by the teachers as an important support for them and their students and this further established the credibility of the QA Support Service.

The successful completion of this process was a considerable achievement for the staff of the QA Support Service.

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16 QQI – Approaches to alternative arrangements for programmes and achievement of qualifications p7
17 LOETB QQI Contingency Planning Report May 2020

4.3.3. Skills Demonstrations and Projects

A decision was made by the FET Management Team to defer assessments which required specialist equipment and facilities until learners could access the centres to complete them. Those learner groups whose course assessment require specialist software or equipment were to be prioritised in the first instance. It was hoped that the assessments would be completed on time for the June round of certification, however, if restrictions remained in place, the extra Certification round facilitated by QQI in July would be used.

4.3.4. Work Experience

The QA Support Service surveyed centres again to determine how many learners that were aiming for a major award in June and August certification rounds were not meeting the full requirements for the module and for the major award that they were completing. The responses to the survey were quite positive in that most learners had meet the requirements. However, there was approximately 30% of learners that did not meet full requirements to varying extents.

The FET Management Team approved a proposal for Alternative Arrangements for Learners not meeting full Work Experience Requirements from the QA Support Service. The proposal is set out below:

On analysis of the situation, four different cohorts of learners have been identified.
1. *Learners who have completed the required number of hours but do not have a Supervisor's Report (SR) or the SR has not been verified*
2. *Learners who have completed 75% or more of the required hours*
3. *Learners who have completed 50%-74% of the required hours*
4. *Learners who have completed less than 50% of the required hours, or no hours at all* (p7)[18]

An alternative arrangement for each of the above groups was approved by the FET Management Team to assist learners complete the requirements for certification. These actions were then implemented by the centres with the support of the QA Support Service.

4.4   Changes to Certificate Procedures

4.4.1. Internal Verification (IV)

LOETB put in place a Contingency Plan for Learner Evidence which was in the possession of teachers to be collected from their homes. This enabled the Internal Verification (IV) and External Authentication (EA) processes to continue, with limited number of critical staff conducting IV under strict social distancing conditions. The changes were communicated to staff in an email on 24 April. The IV and EA process was managed and undertaken centrally by the QA Support Service for all FET programmes delivered across the organisation.

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18 LOETB QQI Contingency Planning Report May 2020

A Guidance Document was prepared and approved by the FET Management Team regarding how folders should be prepared for the certification process and some forms were amended to consider the various ways that evidence needed to be presented. There was flexibility given in how the folders were presented – in their usual paper format, in digital format or in a combination of paper and digital. All information was made available for staff on the QQI Resources Section of the LOETB website.

The QA Support Service collected all the necessary folders and conducted the IV process on time. This was a mammoth task and required flexibility from the staff involved. The key message to teachers was that, when they had the materials ready, arrangements would be made to collect them. This allowed the team to conduct the IV process on a rolling and continuous basis which enabled them to complete the process in a more efficient way.

Because of the unique circumstances it was decided that Internal Verifiers would check the marks of 100% of the folders this year to eliminate calculation errors. This turned out to be an important decision as some totting or transcription errors were identified and addressed, thus reducing the number of subsequent appeals. To make the process more efficient, the teacher had to provide their marking schemes, the marking sheets from the module descriptors, and the Summary Results sheets were printed for each module.

4.4.2. External Authentication (EA)
The restrictions of COVID-19 contingency arrangements for the EA process were approved by the FET Management Team as outlined below.

Arrangements were made whereby modules taught by new teachers were externally authenticated. In addition, Authenticators were employed to work across centres in areas such as Communications and Work Experience. Arrangements were made for the Authenticators to visit or, if that was not possible, arrangements were made for either the evidence to be made available digitally to the Authenticator or for the learner evidence to be delivered by courier to and from the Authenticator's home, with their agreement. The EA process was successfully completed, and all reports were presented to the Results Approval Panel meetings.

4.4.3. Results Approval Panel (RAP) meetings
Results Approval Panel meetings took place face-to-face or through Microsoft Teams as planned in time for the June, July, and August submission deadlines.

Emphasis was placed on the following:
- A comprehensive comparison of this year's results compared to previous years' results in order to ensure that there is a level of consistency with the results awarded, taking various factors into consideration.
- Ensuring that the Record of Approved Alternative Assessments forms part of the records for certification processing.

The target set to enable all learners who were seeking to submit results to the CAO process certification processes were completed on time for those learners who were seeking to move on to third level courses.

4.5.   Impact of closure of specific Services

4.5.1. Literacy Services

In the report to QQI LOETB stated that "provision at lower levels (Levels 1-3, and sometimes 4 depending on the learner cohort) was more difficult to maintain online so the most common approach by tutors was to have learning materials delivered to learners by post and maintain contact by phone and email. This was effective in maintaining learner engagement prior to the Easter break, learner engagement was at approximately 80% (according to a survey of centres)." [19]

As with second level provision the opt-out rate from learning engagement significantly increased after the Easter break. The reasons for reduced engagement included a lack of childcare, limited access to IT/internet, lack of IT skills, illness or lack of availability due to employment (temporary or otherwise) in front line services. Tutors also recognised that for vulnerable adult learners the supportive relationship with the tutor and direct face-to-face teaching is a key motivator. Tutors made continuous efforts to stay in contact with these learners in the hope of the learners returning to direct provision in the Autumn. The Literacy Services also launched two initiatives to support those who may have been struggling with learning at home during the closure. The first was the Learner Support Initiative which offered help to anyone who experienced problems with distance learning such as uploading assignments, accessing coursework, maths/literacy and so on. The second initiative launched was Support to Parents who were helping children with schoolwork at home such as Irish for Parents, Maths for Parents and help for Parents whose first language is not English.

4.5.2. Community Education

Many of the Community Education programmes that had been scheduled to start in 2020 were impacted negatively by the crisis. The Community Education Facilitators continued to engage with those who are most disadvantaged in the community through social media. This was achieved through a series of video tutorials, by LOETB tutors, that were made available on the LOETB Community Education Facebook page.

> There were 52 videos shared which were watched for 650 hours reaching a total of 142,124 Facebook users (at least once).

The videos received 620 comments and 2,282 likes while each Community Education post is currently seen by an average of 1,114 people having grown from 4 on the first day of lockdown. The Community Education page now has 932 followers, and it is hoped that this will have provided a positive introduction to further education and training, encouraging participation on programmes scheduled to start in September. It was also imperative that the relationship with learners and community groups was maintained during lockdown and this was achieved through many interventions such as the online photography programmes that were developed and introduced.

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4.5.3. Training Services

The level of training provision in LOETB is quite significant with direct provision of two Electrical Phase 2 Apprenticeship programmes, two training facilities (Midlands Skills Centre in Tullamore and the National Construction Centre in Mount Lucas), a Community Training Centre, and a range of programmes delivered through contracted training with Second Providers.

Two electrical phase 2 course had just commenced, and it was not possible to maintain the course online because of the practical nature of the programme.

The Skills to Advance programme for employees was postponed because the employees involved were no longer in employment.

Several courses provided by Contracted Training were completed as they were coming to an end at the time of the closure. However, other programmes provided could not be completed because of the practical assessments. As all trainees were receiving a payment on the course, SOLAS required the ETB to justify the payment during the closure. Thus, trainees had to maintain a level of engagement to maintain their payment. The theory modules were provided online, and other modules were offered to trainees in soft and transferable skills. Participation in these modules was voluntary as the modules were not core to their programme.

The Contacted Training Provider continued to provide modules and maintain a level of support to their trainees. The arrangement put in place with the contractors was that a payment of 50% of the fee was paid on an ongoing basis. The contractor could claim for additional work undertaken. The Healthcare programme had to switch the practical assessment to online video skills demonstrations.

4.5.4. Local Training Initiatives and Specialist Training Providers

There are four Local Training Initiatives (LTIs – community-based training programmes). Three of the LTIs successfully continued to provide training through online programmes and one Local Training Initiative could not continue during the closure as the start date was post-shutdown. The ETB required the staff to change to research and development during this phase. This led to the development of online Retail Sales Techniques programmes which were started during the shutdown, in partnership with Second Providers and the Dept. of Employment Affairs and Social Protection as a response to those who are long-term unemployed.

The National Learning Networks continued to engage with learners during lockdown. Though there was a small number of learners who were slow to submit work, the two centres reported 100% engagement up to Easter. This did reduce somewhat thereafter due to issues such as limited digital access and ill health/anxiety, however, the centres continued to support learners through contact with other services/agencies to ensure that learners had food and access to supports as required.

4.5.5. Youthreach and Community Training Centre (CTC)

Youthreach and the CTC provide programmes to young people who have left second level education prior to completion of the Leaving Certificate. Again, the challenge for staff was to maintain contact with the learners and to provide support to them during the lockdown. There was limited educational engagement. It was noted that, because the learners at the CTC were already using online platforms (Google Suite), the level of continuing engagement by their learners was stronger than that in Youthreach (at 93% prior to Easter). The CTC has successfully submitted remote assessments for VTCT Barbering and Hair and Beauty, receiving praise for the work from both IQA and EQA and based on predicted grades, including VTCT Diplomas, 17 learners will receive their Major Awards/Diplomas in October (100% of learners will complete this year).

4.5.6. Post Leaving Certificate Programmes

The Post Leaving Certificate Programmes are based in three locations: Portlaoise Institute, Tullamore FET Centre, and Abbeyleix FET Centre. They offer a range of courses at Levels 5 and 6 with a mix of "hands on" practical work, academic work, and work experience designed as a step towards skilled employment or progression to third level.

The challenge for these centres was to continue to ensure that learners were supported to complete their course work and assessments and put forward their work for certification. Communication with learners occurred on a regular basis by online conferencing, phone calls, emails, and texts. The priority focus was on those completing Level 5 and 6 programmes to ensure that they could progress through the CAO process at the end of the academic year.

Teaching staff used a range of IT platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Screencast-o-matic, and Skype to deliver content to learners online where possible. Alternative assessments were introduced for exams and all the necessary quality assurance procedures were successfully completed.

An analysis of the results and certification levels for the programmes was conducted and was results were found to be like previous years. Factors which led to changes in the spread of grades were discussed at Results Approval Panel meetings and included weaker or stronger groups from previous years, change in levels of engagement from learners and interestingly, learners whose performance improved significantly due to the more flexible nature of delivery – for example where attendance at classes was low but learners engaged better with online learning and performed better in the last two months of their course.

4.5.7. Education Centres in Portlaoise and Midlands Prisons

The decision made by the Department of Justice was to protect the prison population by reducing the engagement of outside bodies. It was decided that the teachers would not be able to be present in the buildings. The teachers continued to link with the IPS Education Officers and, as a result, 124 QQI folders were submitted for certification during shutdown as well as continuing to support 24 students with their Leaving Certificate subjects. The teaching staff also developed and provided video tutorials, access to webinars, workbooks, materials for art, mindfulness, yoga packs, literacy packs, music resource packs, books during this period.

4.6   Responding to urgent Labour Market Needs with Online Provision

LOETB designed two programmes to respond to training needs that had become urgent due to the COVID-19 crisis. The programmes are as follows:

4.6.1. Infection Prevention and Control Programme

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, the HSE made an urgent request for people in Ireland to register to be on call to help care for the people affected by the virus during this emergency. LOETB committed to attempting to respond to this urgent need, particularly in the Midlands region, by providing online training in Infection Prevention and Control to current QQI Level 5 (minimum) major award holders, and learners that are currently on QQI Level 5 Healthcare Support/Health Service Skills/Nursing Studies programmes.

Staff of LOETB engaged collaboratively with contract training companies to devise an appropriate online programme which effectively facilitated the learners to achieve the specific learning outcomes associated with the award, with a particular emphasis on COVID19 related information as it was becoming available. Significant efforts were made to ensure that assessments could be completed by learners in their home while also protecting the integrity of assessment. LOETB liaised with QQI to ensure that they were aware of, and satisfied with, the proposed programme and delivery method.

The programme was delivered online, with a minimum duration of five days of course delivery. Learners received access to online lectures, notes and workshops, on a flexible basis, and were supported on an ongoing basis by experienced, qualified tutors. Assessment were conducted during and on completion of the course content.

This programme was made available to attempt to respond to the HSE's need for staff. Course places will only be allocated for the duration of the COVID-19 crisis. Completion of this course did not guarantee that the learner would receive a position, in either a paid or voluntary capacity, with the HSE or any other employer in the healthcare industry. There was significant demand for the programme for a range of reasons – most applicants wanted to gain employment, while others wanted to be in a position to work on a voluntary basis during the pandemic, and others had an increased interest in infection control because of the pandemic.

LOETB has provided seven different courses to date, with 130 participants in total.

Several other ETBs subsequently started to offer the programme to meet the demand nationally. Up to the July round of certification, 82 LOETB learners have completed assessments and have been submitted for certification, with some learners still completing assessments.

A survey was sent to participants on the programmes and 75% of respondents stated that they were currently in employment.

4.6.2. Remote Working Programme

LOETB, in collaboration with IDA Ireland, SOLAS, and Grow Remote developed two new online national training programmes that aim to develop the capability and capacity of those wishing to become remote workers and those wishing to lead remote teams. Remote Work Ready is aimed at employees and unemployed people hoping to transition to a remote working role and is fully funded and Leading Remote Teams is aimed at line managers leading a team that includes remote workers. It consists of *Leadplaceless* certification and a QQI Level 6 minor award in Project Management.

Both programmes are delivered online, available nationally and are of seven weeks' duration (with additional time allocated to facilitate completion of ECDL in Remote Work Ready and for submission of assessment material in Leading Remote Teams).

4.7.   Teachers perspective

The QA Support Service undertook a survey with teachers across the Level 5 and 6 provision to get feedback on their experience of the whole process. This section is based on the responses to that survey completed by 27 teaching staff in four FET centres. Teachers were asked a wide range of questions about their experience and the results of the survey will be recorded by the QA Support Service. I am including here a short summary of the key findings.

Teachers indicated that the main obstacles they encountered since centre closed included the increased workload; knowledge of remote teaching and learning; poor online connection with some students; lack of resources at home, communication with students, and levels of overall engagement.

Teachers recognised that the challenges for learners were significant and noted that the learners were concerned about isolation, missing the support of teachers and peers, working at home with limited supports, pressure to get work done, limited access to resources, poor wifi, and a lack of confidence in using IT systems generating stress and demotivation.

An important question asked of the teachers was if they thought that learner performance was impacted upon by the modified assessments. The majority stated that the results were consistent with learners' pervious performance and that the results at the end of the year were consistent with the pattern of results in 2019.

It was clear from the survey results that there was no consistent approach to the combating of plagiarism. The FET Management Team should consider the introduction of a suitable plagiarism package for all FET centres. This would be a considerable help to teachers and tutors and would further encourage the use of IT systems for the online submission and assessment of assignments.

In answering what elements of the modified arrangements might be useful to use after the crisis teachers identified the following:

- The use of Microsoft Teams and Zoom.
- The use of the virtual classroom for students that must stay at home for some reason outside of their control.
- Online exams, the collection and correcting of assignments and the online storage of information.
- Identifying some aspects of the modules that can be assessed remotely.
- Recording demonstrations to enable students' access at a time that suits for revision.
- Getting students to work together through Teams.

This is consistent with the view of school management that the move to online teaching and learning was significantly developed through the crisis and that this should be built upon in the coming academic year.

4.8. Learners perspective

The QA Support Service undertook a survey of learners across the Level 5 and 6 provision to get feedback on their experience of the whole response. This section is based on the responses to that survey completed by 156 learners across four FET centres. Learners were asked a wide range of questions about their experience and the results of the survey will be recorded by the QA Support Service. I am recording here a short summary of the key findings.

Learners identified what they missed most by the closure; this included the loss of the social and community aspect of attending the FET centres, the relationship with tutors and peers in supporting their learning, the ability to ask questions and get answers in real time, the lack of preparation for exams, and the ability to do the practical in centres.

The main challenges identified included a lack of routine, difficulty in motivation and attention to study; not having the physical space to study, learning to use IT platforms, a lack of broadband and suitable devices, home-schooling and trying to find time to study, the inability to complete practicals, having to sit exams online, a difficulty in following instructions and addressing queries through email or texts, uploading to moodle and logging into exams. Some described that the time pressure to complete assignments was their biggest challenges.

Learners acknowledged the support they received to overcome the challenges, the effort made by tutors to keep in contact, providing materials, addressing questions promptly, and in the help provided with assignments.

4.9.   Conclusions

It is important to acknowledge the dedication and commitment of all FET Centre management and staff (teaching and administrative), and the Quality Assurance Support Team who have worked in less than ideal circumstances to ensure continuity of FET service delivery and assessment.

The situation was constantly evolving, and contingency plans were being developed and adjusted in response to HSE and Government advice on an ongoing basis. The FET Management Team fulfilled their commitment to maintaining a record of plans as they evolved and maintaining contact with their learners, staff, and stakeholders such as QQI, SOLAS, and other relevant bodies on an ongoing basis.

The challenge for FET Centre managers and their staff in the approach required to provide education and training services in September. It is important to note that, as in the second level provision, the loss of education opportunity and the personal impact on learners most affected those learners on programmes at the early stages of delivery.

In addition, it is important to note that the closure had a significant impact on the most vulnerable learners. In this crisis the effort to reduce the educational loss to those at Level 5 and 6 seems to have been successful. The priority will now have to be to re-engage the vulnerable learners in the autumn, recognising that online teaching and learning on its own will not be successful with this group. A blended learning model with considerable support for learners will have to be developed if public health guidelines reduce the capacity to return to face-to-face classes on a full-time basis.

SECTION 5:
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section will summarise the key achievements and learning from the response to COVID-19 and provide some recommendations for consideration by the Senior Management Team. It is clear that the management and staff across the organisation had to respond to an unprecedented health crisis as well as consequential Government decisions. The management and staff showed flexibility and creativity in maintaining education and training provision and supporting the students and adult learners to manage their learning at home.

5.1.   Communications

Conclusions

It is clear from the introduction to this report that management and staff at all levels in the organisation were dealing with an unprecedented situation that was fluid and evolving. This required management to access information in a speedy manner, make decisions and communicate with all stakeholders in a clear, concise manner and deliver the information in real time. It was been reported by staff and management in schools and FET services that communications from LOETB senior management was very effective in providing information, giving clear directions, and supporting school management to make the necessary plans at centre level and, in turn, support their ability to assure and assist their staff locally.

The use of Microsoft Teams at all levels of the organisation was a major contributor to the successful communication strategy.

Recommendations

It is recommended that LOETB management build on the use of Microsoft Teams at centre and school level to support communications between head office and schools/centres and within schools. Teachers reported that it worked well for subject department meetings and Principals reported that they would use Teams for short meetings with staff groups as it didn't require the staff to be physically in the building.

5.2.   IT Systems

Conclusions

The role of IT in maintaining teaching and learning was significant in the success of the response of LOETB. The efficient and effective response of the IT section should be noted and the role they played in enabling all students to have an email address enabled teachers and tutors to be able to communicate with students and adult learners from the start.

It addition, the need to move to online teaching was a described by teachers and principals as a "game changer"

in that it provided a platform for teachers who had been reluctant to integrate IT systems into their day to day teaching. Many teachers reported that, despite the initial difficulties in moving to online teaching, the benefits to students and teachers were apparent. This positive impact should be built upon by LOETB management.

Recommendations

It is recommended that LOETB Senior Management consider the following:

1. Purchasing/using one IT platform for all schools and centres. This will build on the success to-date but will allow the organisation to introduce a strategic plan for the development of the facilities and skills of staff in the effective use of IT in teaching and learning. The selection of the platform will be a critical decision.

2. Introduce one anti-plagiarism software package for all FET centres. This will enable staff to check the content of assignments submitted online. It will make a major contribution to meeting the QA obligation to have fair and consistent assessments. In addition, such a move will encourage teachers to embrace the benefits of IT.

3. Seek additional funding to support schools and centres provide devices for students where needed.

4. Seek the funding to allocate some staff time in each centre to provide the technical support to staff and students to actively engage in online teaching and learning.

5.3.   Teaching and Learning

The challenges for teachers and learners was significant with the closure of the schools and FET centres with less than 24-hour notice and are described in Sections 3 and 4 of this report. There are several areas that LOETB Senior Management should consider in preparing for the opening of schools and centres in September. The areas are as follows:

5.3.1. Blended Learning

Conclusions

At the time of writing the guidelines for reopening schools and centres have not been published by the Department of Education and Skills. The FET Management Team will have to finalise the plans for the coming academic year. It is noted that consideration is being given to splitting teaching into delivering 40% online and 60% in class. This will be an important decision and will have significant implications for both teachers and learners.

It is important that teachers recognise that the teaching methodologies for the classroom are not always appropriate for online or blended learning. QQI states that *"learners will not generally have a good experience if what they receive are essentially learning resources, lectures and other resources designed that have been designed for face-to-face learners and made available online."* (p8)[20]

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20 Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Blended Learning Programmes QQI 2018

New methodologies are required for the online modules and support will need to be given to teachers to develop and adopt their teaching methodologies.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Quality Assurance Support Team issue clear guidelines to centre management and staff to ensure that the online teaching practices evolving in the FET service take account of the QQI QA Guidelines for Blended Learning. New guidelines should be issued on the appropriate teaching methodologies to be adopted for online teaching.

5.3.2. Digital Literacy Support for teachers

Conclusions

> The teachers interviewed and those who completed the survey highlight the level of support that they received from their management in their centres. They report that there was support available at any point that they needed it and that colleagues were also a great source of emotional and peer support.

While most staff made significant effort to move teaching to online provision it was clear from the feedback from management and staff that there were staff "who cannot" and "would not" use the technology. Management will need to engage with staff who are not prepared to work with technology as part of their teaching methodologies. Support will need to be provided to those teachers who are prepared to engage with the technology in their normal practice but who have a need for additional supports and training.

Recommendations

- A programme of support including in-service training opportunities should be provided to teachers and tutors.
- Case studies of innovations in curriculum delivery should be undertaken and widely circulated to all teaching and tutor staff to raise awareness of the strengths of blended learning but be aware of its limitations with many learners.
- Digital support in the form of training and access to devices should be considered for adult learners particularly those most affected by the original closure of centres.

5.4.   Impact on Learners

Conclusions

In all the interviews conducted with teaching staff, concern was expressed about the numbers of students that did not engage or opted out of the process after Easter. Without a full survey it is hard to quantify the actual numbers. However, all staff were able to indicate that there were several variables that impacted on the continued participation of students and adult learners. Some students were struggling with lack or the limitations of their devices, in some cases sharing with other siblings as well as the limitations of rural

broadband. Others struggled with the requirements of self-directed learning without the regular supports provided in schools and FET centres.

It was also recognised by teachers and school management that the impact of the closure affected all students but had a disproportionate effect on disadvantaged students and students with special educational needs.

Even though this analysis in Sections 3 and 4 is based on anecdotal evidence, it is consistent with the findings of the ESRI report[21] that *"the move to distance learning impacted on student engagement and participation."* (p83). This means that, for a considerable number of students, being out of school will have had a significant impact on their educational and social development. School management are now seeking to take this into consideration in planning for the new school year.

It will be difficult for many students to return to business as usual when they have not had the structure and routine of school for six months. This will need to be considered by school management in planning the re-opening of school. In addition, teachers will need to be aware that students entering a new class year will not have the work from the previous year completed and the foundation of their learning in the subject will be weakened.

In the FET provision, the impact on vulnerable learners was significant and it will be a challenge for the service to actively re-engage these learners when the service opens again. The strategy to maintain contact with these groups during the closure was important and will support their return to learning.

Recommendations
- Consideration will need to be given to having study workshops and recap lessons for the first month to set a shared basis for the commencement of the new academic year's curriculum. Otherwise many students will commence at a disadvantage which will be compounded as the year continues. Again, this will have a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable students. This is well recognised by Principals and is the focus of planning for the return to schools in September.
- Consideration needs to be given to strategies to reconnect with vulnerable students in course such as LCA, LCV, and Youthreach to encourage them to return to class in September. Again, teachers and tutors need to recap the lost work for the six months closure before commencing new work.
- Consideration needs to be given to strategies to re-engage with adult learners at levels 2-4 who were significantly impacted with the sudden end of their programmes.

5.5.   Innovation and Development

Conclusions
Despite the challenges facing FET provision with the closure of the FET centres set out in Section 4 LOETB developed a new online programme in Infection Prevention and Control in response to the HSE's call for

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21 Learning for All? Second Level education during the COVID-19 in Ireland ESRI July 22nd 2020

additional staff. This was a significant development and was a collaboration between the ETB staff and a contracted training provider. The programme med the learning outcomes of a Level 5 module but was also specifically targeting information required to work in a COVID-19 environment.

There was significant demand for the programme for a range of reasons – most applicants wanted to gain employment, while others wanted to be in a position to work on a voluntary basis during the pandemic, and others had an increased interest in infection control because of the pandemic. LOETB has provided seven different courses to date, with 130 participants in total. LOETB made the programme available to several other ETBs who offered the programme to meet the demand nationally. Up to the July round of certification, 82 LOETB learners have completed IPC assessments and have been submitted for certification, with some learners still completing assessments. A survey was sent to participants on the programmes – 75% of respondents are currently in employment.

A second innovation was the collaboration with IDA Ireland, SOLAS and Grow Remote, to develop two new online national training programmes that aimed to develop the capability and capacity of those wishing to become Remote Workers, current Remote Workers and Line Managers nationally.

Recommendations

These two online programmes were significant developments and should be built upon by LOETB to
1. create a new Level 5 Specific Purpose programme for submission to QQI for validation.
2. Expand the delivery of the Remote Workers programme across the country through the network of ETBs

5.6. COVID-19 Management and Support

The challenge for LOETB senior management and school and FET centre management now is how to open the schools and centres in a way that will ensure that health and safety of the staff and students. The current public health guidelines are being reviewed by the Department of Education and Skills at the time of writing (July) and more detailed guidelines are expected. The plan for each centre will be different as the space available will impact on the number of students/ adult learners that can be safely catered for. For some schools and centres this will be a bigger challenge that for others. In addition, additional staff will be required to teach smaller class sizes and to cover for staff unable to return to work. Additional cleaning staff will be required to meet the health and safety standards.

Recommendation

It is recommended that LOETB Senior Management review all school and centre premises and determine the implications for class and group sizes of the new guidelines to be issued shortly by the Department of Education and Skills. A detailed plan for each centre will be required if there is a significant gap between the numbers that can be catered for and the number of students that should be returning. Alternative arrangements for teaching and learning in each school and centre will need to be developed in such cases.

APPENDIX 1:
TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR THE REVIEW OF THE APPROACH OF LAOIS OFFALY ETB TO THE COVID-19

Terms of Reference

The purpose of this review is to undertake a systematic examination of the response of Laois Offaly Education and Training Board (LOETB) to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 and the decision of Government to shut down direct services.

The review will:
- Identify the challenges posed to the organisation by the sudden changes arising from the Government directive
- Identify the actions taken by senior management to address these challenges
- Identify the challenges and actions taken by senior management and staff to move the teaching and learning from direct delivery to online teaching and remote study
- Examine the challenges poised for the management and staff and the actions taken in moving the administration systems to remote working
- Identify the positive developments arising from the implementation of the crisis management plan put in place
- Identify the lessons learned from this experience and what if any of these lessons will be brought forward into normal practices
- Examine the challenges and actions taken in providing learner support for this new way of teaching and learning
- Examine the outcomes for learners in FET and compare the patterns of retention and certification this year with 2019.
- Examine the profile of the learners that succeeded in completing their courses and those that did not complete their courses to determine if there were any common factors or patterns that contributed to their withdrawal for their courses and what lessons if any can be identified.

Methodology

- Desk top research reviewing all relevant documentation
- Individual interviews with a list of relevant persons in the SMT and across the three pillars of the organisation, OSD, FET and Second Level.
- Examine the learning outcome data and learner survey results to determine what worked for learners and what didn't. Provide some analysis of the profile of learners who completed programmes and assessments and those that dropped out of the process because of the changes to online processes.
- It may be necessary to undertake a short survey with other staff and learners.

Outcome

A report for the senior management setting out the challenges, achievements and lessons learned by the senior management and staff its response and identify the actions that can be applied in the future.

Timeframe

Proposed to deliver draft report in six weeks period from commencement.

Proposal for one-to-one interviews

One-to-one interviews will be over Teams and will commence with the practitioners and move on to management in each of the respective sectors. The Chief Executive will be the last in the process to enable the discussion focus on the decisions, achievements and the lessons and their implications.

SMT Chief Executive
OSD Director
School Provision: Director, 2 Principal and two teachers
FET Provision:
FET Director, 2 Centre managers, one from a Further Education College and one from a Further Education Centre
QA Manager
Two practitioners one tutor and one teacher
Learners Perspective: Review recent learners survey and consider if there is a need to engage further with learners.

APPENDIX 2:
LOETB GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE

A project is currently underway to develop new structures, policies and procedures to manage the governance of quality assurance in line with the requirements of QQI's new Core and Sectoral QA Guidelines. As new structures are developed and approved, they will be published here.

Current Structures for the Governance and Management of Quality Assurance

Current governance structures in LOETB operate both at ETB level, and at centre level. LOETB is governed by a Board comprising of 21 members, and the Chief Executive (CE) of LOETB is ultimately responsible for the oversight of FET and its quality assurance policies and procedures.

The Director of FET reports to the CE and has operational responsibility for the coordination and management of FET Services and activity, and is responsible for the planning and delivery of high quality and responsive FET provision and the governance and management of FET, as well as coordinating a FET Management Team and having responsibility for workforce planning and performance management.
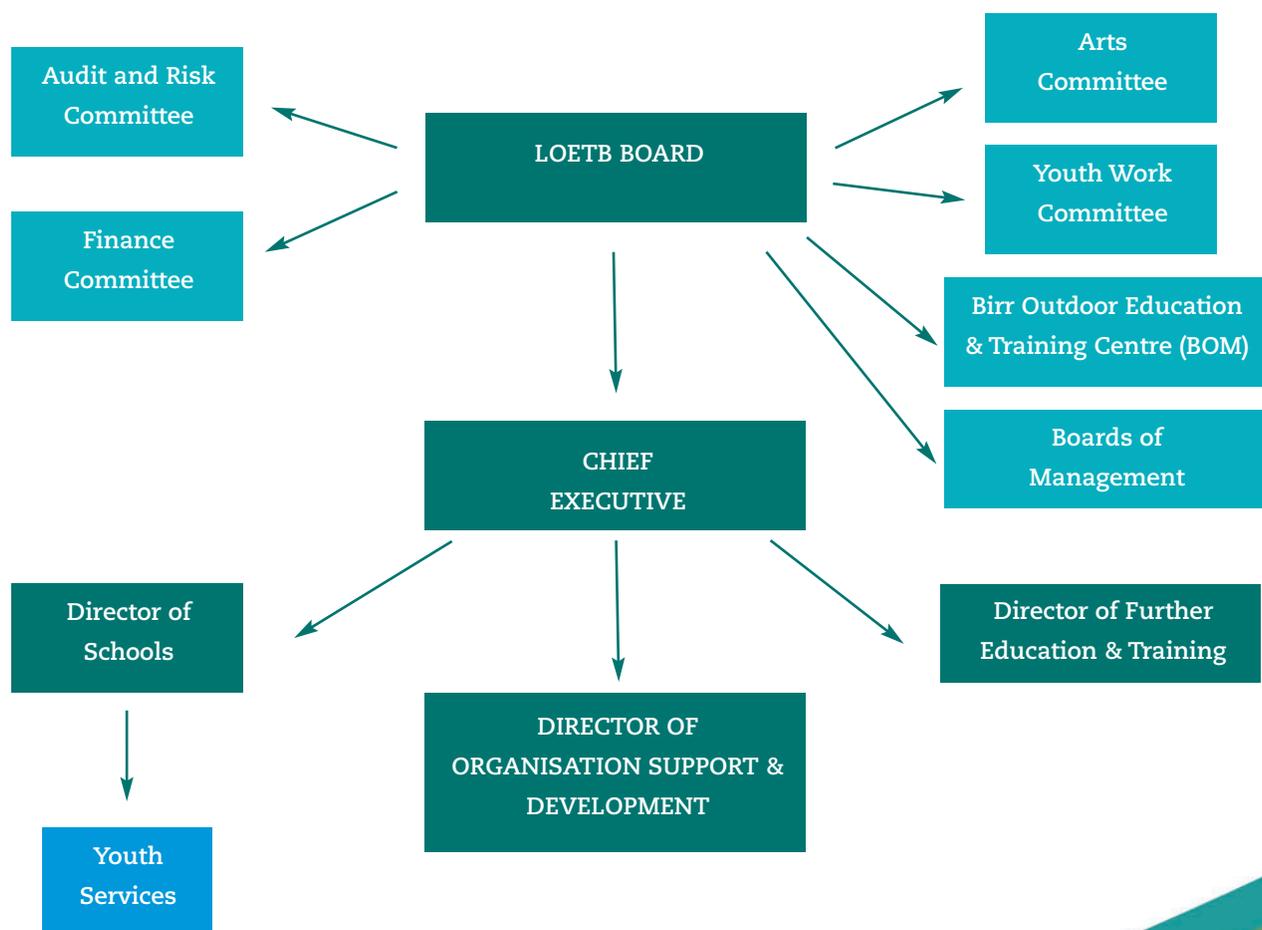
The FET Management Team is made up of the Director of FET and managers with distinct responsibilities in relation to the FET Service. The managers' report directly to the Director of FET.

The diagram below outlines the current line management / reporting structure in LOETB FET Services.

Further Education and Training quality assurance Governance Structures

The FET Governance Structure is set out below.

loetb

European Union
Investing in your future
European Social Fund

Aontas Eorpach
Ag infheistiú i do dhán
Ciste Sóisialta na hEorpa
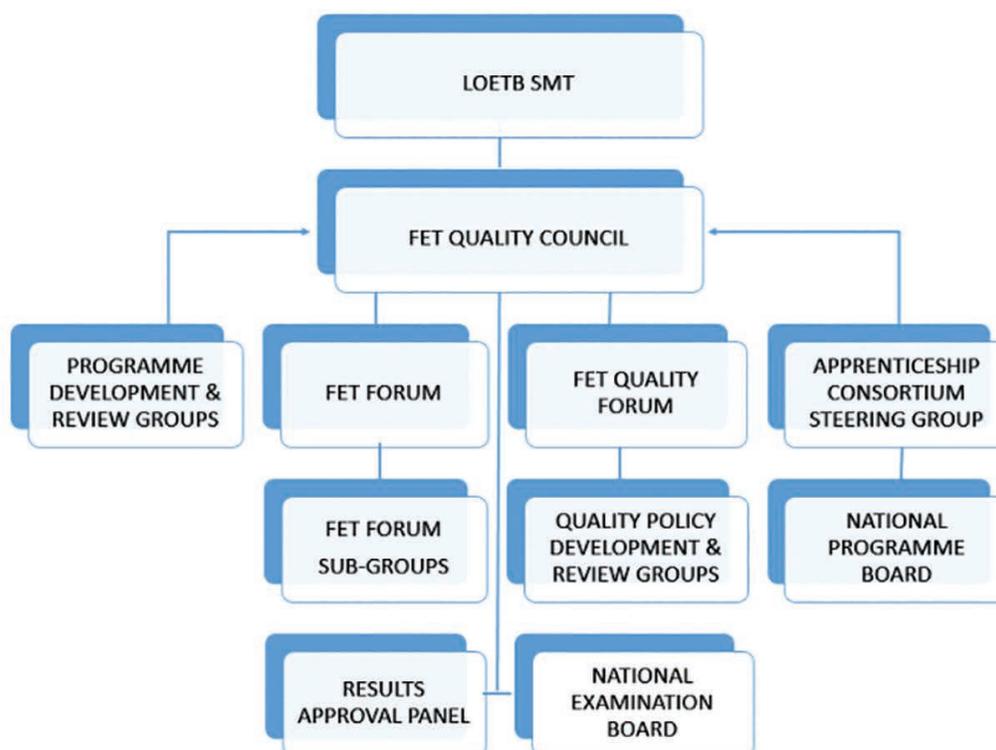
Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

COVID REPORT 2020