



Dear undergraduates, dear postgraduates, dear students,

As we approach exams, Students4Change (S4C) and the Graduate Students' Union (GSU) would like to share their utmost concern relating to the sudden return to in-person exams in the RDS for some students, and the overall plan for assessment in Semester 1.

Our position has been consistent since September. We have always advocated for a proper return to in-person classes, with strong hybrid learning supports in place for those who, due to Covid-19 or otherwise, are anxious about returning to College campus. In addition, we've taken onboard students' worries about a sudden return to in-person exams in the RDS and advocated for holistic, open-book alternatives to traditional exams, [which worked so well last year](#). Finally, central to our requests was that if the student experience is compromised, refunds should be given.

Chairperson of Students4Change László Molnárfi says, "there is an opportunity to build back better as a community, but College is squandering it with its short-term thinking and preoccupation with revenues. Instead of investing in re-timetabling software, [proper ventilation](#) and hybrid learning systems, they are trying to save face by refusing to acknowledge the deep-rooted governance problem that originates from the Provosts' Office. There is a lack of democracy, transparency and accountability."

This means that instead of progressing as an academic community, initiative is stifled by bureaucratic means, and decisions which are detrimental to students and staff are pushed through, with little to no consideration of their effects.

Students4Change and the GSU are calling on the IUA (Irish Universities Association) to reconsider the decision for Universities to hold in-person exams in light of current high COVID-19 numbers."

We would like to express through this press release our concerns about College's current lack of mitigation measures and contingency plans for in-person RDS and online exams in Semester 1 of 2021-2022. Last year, the counselling services at peak time - build-up to exams - averaged '100 on the waitlist and several weeks to see a 1-1 counsellor'. It is with this figure in mind that the exam season should be considered, as if it is done in an unthoughtful way, it will have catastrophic consequences for students' wellbeing.

In general, our requests have been the following, which Students4Change has communicated to the Provosts' Office via an email on the 30th of September 2021, and which the GSU has raised at College committees:

- We asked for College to consider the possibility of using the same exam format as last year, both for standard assessment in Semester 1 and for Schols, since open-book exams are a holistic way of assessment and should be encouraged all-around.
- We asked College to make sure that, in all cases, assessments are the least stressful possible. For example, put a permanent end to the use of the invasive Proctorio monitoring software, which can encourage unconscious bias, does not work for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and has serious data privacy issues.

However, with the upcoming in-person RDS exams and online exams, our requests need to be more specific, in the form of proposals. As such, we would like to ask for mitigation measures, and a contingency plan, which should include the following, and keep in mind the following:

- According to the TCDSU's Mid Semester Review of 2020-2021, 28.9% of surveyed AHSS and HS students said that their primary working environment is not a private bedroom or study space. As such, we would like to ask that real-time online exams be extended to give flexibility to people with home environments that are not suitable for writing exams within a very short timeframe.
- As per statistics, 11% of homes in the North of Ireland (Ofcom Connect Nations Report 2019) and 20% of homes in the Republic of Ireland (Eir.ie National Broadband Plan website) do not have access to high quality broadband and so could be severely impacted by real-time online exams which have a strict time limit. This is another argument for extending these exams to be 24hr/48hr/72hr exams, like last year.
- Wherever possible, compensate for the language barrier. Currently, there is a serious language barrier issue relating to in-person exams. Imagine, for example, a second-year international student who has never written a handwritten exam and always wrote open-book exams on the computer, with the dictionary and spell checker. If English is not their first language, they will be very disadvantaged. As such, dictionaries provided by the College should be allowed (at least for those who need it as a special accommodation due to language difficulties), but also, in the ideal scenario, exams in the RDS should be written on the computer to ensure a level playing field, with accessibility accommodations.
 - While our College has entry requirements for language, language tests like CAE and our College's perception of what is considered adequate is terribly mismatched with what lecturers expect. A C1 (180+) on Cambridge Advanced English (CAE) is much easier to accomplish than to write a good exam in second-year.
 - Computers for exams could be brought by students, and funded by College and the laptop loan scheme or by utilizing the computer labs.
 - Keyboard-mediated exams are more flexible, can be corrected better and produce overall better quality for students and correctors.

- Extra time (15-20 minutes) could be given to students on request from the tutor, and allowances could be made for graders to not take into consideration grammar and spelling as much.
- The ideal solution is, of course, to simply move exams to be open-book assessments, with giving students ample time to submit by having long deadlines, based on last year' model.
- Students from the countryside are disadvantaged, as they will have to travel up from their homes in crowded public transport, and spend hours in cramped exam halls. There is a serious Covid-19 danger, and College should as a whole reconsider in-person RDS exams, or at least, fund buses from cities to take students up to their exams. Just like how the government guidelines are being revised at the moment, College should also take a step back and consider the possibility of building back better with holistic assessment and hybrid learning technology for the long-term.
- In an email sent to all undergraduate and postgraduate students, College talks about how important personal responsibility is during Covid-19 and how "it would be a pity to miss assessments and defer to the summer". In reality, [College has allowed 78,000 tourists to visit campus between May and October of 2021](#), and should reconsider in-person RDS exams. [There is a serious danger that students could get Covid-19, and long-Covid before and during exams](#), and as such students should be able to choose to repeat in April.
 - Allow students to resit modules even if they have passed them, or to retrospectively defer assessments if they feel their performance has been affected.
 - Try to offer possibilities for students to take their exams in smaller venues wherever possible to reduce the risk of catching Covid-19.
- Places to pray for religious students should be established within exam centers.
- Students should not have exams during their study period, even during contingency dates, especially since there are already loads of assignments due that week.
- The GSU President Gisèle Scanlon is deeply concerned that the postgraduate community will have to sit in-person exams in a few weeks time.

"I have engaged with classes and there are many practical issues which surround in-person exams which we are deeply concerned about at the Graduate Students' Union. As a quality and equality issue, handwritten scripts are much poorer in general and disadvantage certain members of our community (students can't return to write a sentence without messing up a handwritten exam for example) and therefore we are calling for keyboard mediated exams with the assurance that there will be enough postgraduate research students as invigilators set up to take the anxiety out of exams this year."

- In consultation with research postgraduates who have to teach and mark exam scripts - the GSU President Gisèle Scanlon feels that:

"Having typed text to mark is the number one thing that will help the postgraduate community as it will improve quality for both students and teaching staff. A student can have an essay/answer and may wish to return to make improvements after handwriting pages, but handwritten scripts are too rigid and make improvement by

addition and correction impossible and messy. Typed text creates a higher quality piece of work overall which is nicer to produce for our postgraduate taught students and less problematic to mark for our postgraduate research students.”

- If at all possible we would like to ask for College premises to be made available for students who will be taking off-books exams as cramped living conditions will prevent students from concentrating.
- The GSU has learnt from its doctoral cohort that “the one thing which is very stressful for students and teaching staff is last minute changes. An academic was teaching last week and ten minutes into a lecture was told that it also needed to be done on Blackboard because half a class had COVID or was awaiting results and if our T.A.s are preparing lectures/tutorials for in-person teaching there are animations behind the teacher on the screen and it helps to point things out. On Blackboard the animations don’t work, you can’t stand in front of the screen and those students who are learning from home just see a pixelated funny blob moving around. The teacher has to stand in front of the camera, so this is in a very controlled teaching environment so in terms of exams, I anticipate challenges with the rising number of cases. I’m worried that now we are lambs to the slaughter in an in-person exam scenario which will affect grades.”
- Also according to the GSU, there’s a second layer of complexity which is going to feature as a big problem if Trinity College goes ahead with in-person exams at the RDS. What do we do with students who are feeling unwell? A student being facilitated online whilst the rest of the class is sitting the exam in person... that’s an obvious inequity. The student who has to travel to the physical exam is disadvantaged having to use public transport and then to sit in a hall full of students which would mean possible exposure to the virus at a time when there are but a few weeks to Christmas and students will be travelling home.

The GSU President explained that “I tried to get an ambulance for a student last week onto the Trinity College campus and I was told there was a six hour wait by the ambulance services. Although there are nurses present in the RDS, what if a student needs an ambulance with the HSE being so stretched at the moment it’s a valid concern? I had to book a taxi to take the student to St. James’s Hospital. What if a student runs into difficulty in the RDS? I have worked at the RDS helping the postgraduate community during their exams, there are many variables and unknowns which we deal with as a Union and it’s a valid concern.”

- The GSU president is “calling on the IUA (Irish Universities Association) to discuss a deferral of in-person exams for postgraduates in light of the current national COVID numbers. We are concerned for students who are sick or might have COVID, or will be awaiting test results that through no fault of their own they will have to choose an alternative option other than in person. There’s an equality issue if some students sit exams in different circumstances and we need to negotiate a good option for all of our students. Whether that is to repeat or defer free of charge to February, we’re asking for a solution so that postgraduates don’t feel that they have lost something, like so many students last year.”

These mitigation measures are necessary to ensure the wellbeing of students and staff alike.

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