

Press Release 22/11/2021 - #NoInPersonExams

Dublin, November 22st, 2021 - We, László Molnárfi and Gisèle Scanlon, two Trinity College Dublin students, have composed an open letter to Minister Harris and Minister Donnelly, in the hope that the current administration, will swiftly act to protect the lives of those in College communities by advising institutions to reconsider the decision to hold in-person exams across Ireland for December/January 2021/22. Within six hours of making the [letter](#) available online [on Twitter](#), we've been joined by over 1,400 students and academic staff from across the higher education sector in Ireland who have co-signed the letter calling for **#NoInPersonExams**.

We'd like to thank the signatories of the open letter who span the country and hail from various higher education institutions. We believe that over the recent weeks, we are witnessing a sharp increase in cases of confirmed COVID-19 across the country and on the eve before its launch, on the 20th of November 2021, there were 5,959 new cases, nearly six thousand - a figure that has been rapidly rising putting our hospital services, critical emergency care units and healthcare staff under growing pressure over the past week and causing anxiety.

Our fellow students right across Ireland won't have a booster jab by exam time. Community transmission is extremely high and it is critical that we continue to put safety first and do all that we can do to protect our loved ones coming up to the holidays while the vaccine roll out continues.

"We started thinking about this letter to the Ministers and a **#NoInPersonExams** campaign after the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation protest on November 2nd outside the Dáil. We've spearheaded this campaign because we realize, as an undergraduate and postgraduate, that although we were different cohorts with different needs, we both had friends and classmates suffering the same anxieties regarding the upcoming exams," says Molnárfi and Scanlon. "We want other students to sign it and contribute so that it can be presented to both ministers to consider students' collective fears from the undergraduate and postgraduate community."

An email received by Trinity College Dublin students on Friday November 19th stated that:

- *The Semester 1 2021/22 Examination Session is currently scheduled to be a hybrid session with both online and in-person assessments. The venues for the in-person examinations are RDS Simmonscourt and campus venues for small groups and individuals.*
- *The Semester 1 assessment period is set to run from 8th December 2021 – 17th December 2021 (this includes three contingency days) and for Junior Fresh Exams from 10th January 2022- 14th January 2022.*
- *At present, the assessment session has 25,959 exam sittings in December 2021 and 4,180 exam sittings scheduled in January 2022. Of these exam sittings 17,443 are online exam sittings and 12,696 are in-person exam sittings.*
- *At present the RDS Simmonscourt is timetabled at approx. 60% capacity with a maximum of 1,600 students per session for two (2) sessions per day.*
- *Your exam timetable was released to you on Friday, 12th November 2021.*

“Students across the country agree with the open letter and that there is an opportunity here to re-imagine the way we approach assessments, to make well-being not just a byproduct of, but a learning outcome of education. This forward-looking, long-term and sustainable perspective is what the government and colleges should aim for. If we have learned anything from COVID it’s how flexible and innovative we can all become.

Traditional exams are by definition stressful, and they teach students how to write exams, not to prepare them for life. With open-book exams, students can go in-depth and share their thoughts, which lecturers appreciate. There is a clear appetite to ‘build back better’ and move towards a more holistic approach to assessment post-COVID,” says Molnárfi.

Both Molnárfi and Scanlon believe that colleges need to consider students’ and staffs’ mental health, which has worsened during the pandemic. “Having started my College experience under Covid-19, I saw first-hand how devastating its effects were on the wellbeing of our communities. Support structures could not, and to this day, cannot keep up with the demand that is the ongoing mental health crisis,” Molnárfi said.

“I’ve recently conducted an inclusivity survey in my College, which showed that the education sector comprises diverse people with diverse needs. In order for everyone’s needs to be accommodated, robust support systems are needed. Especially with exams, the structures we have are simply not enough and thus forcing students in-person becomes an unacceptable and unnecessary risk. In this scenario, no matter the too-little too-late mitigation measures that Colleges are trying to apply, we are at grave risk.

The situation is untenable, especially with rapidly rising Covid-19 numbers. After 1.5 years of online learning, which has continued to this date, students and staff who invigilate are suddenly told to proceed with traditional examinations as if nothing has happened. If Minister Harris and Donnelly act swiftly, there is still time to avert the impending catastrophe that in-person exams would be, “ finishes Molnárfi.

Scanlon agrees, “having worked for the Disability Service in Trinity College Dublin as a scribe for the deaf community in lectures and an exam invigilator for the differently-abled for several years, I understand the pressures and challenges as we faced them in pre-COVID times. Providing support, and quiet, safe space through appropriate rooms on campus with good Wi-Fi and Hepa filters/CO2 monitors which are accessible for the differently-abled during the pandemic is already bringing a new set of challenges with numbers currently so high,” she says.

“The third-level education sector comprises a very diverse community of students, academics and professionals. Some of us may need disability support, are family care-givers or are packed into cramped student accommodation. We’d hope that Ministers Harris and Donnelly would ease the current anxiety by giving students and academics the choice of open-book exams which could be taken over time and typed instead of handwritten. This would give students and academics a more rewarding learning and exam assessment experience. The alternative is hours-long mandatory exams in-person where everyone has to travel from all over the country putting themselves, friends and relatives at risk two weeks before the holidays, ” she finishes.

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Copy of Letter here:

Minister Simon Harris
Minister Stephen Donnelly

House of the Oireachtas,
Leinster House,
Kildare street,
Dublin 2,
D02 XR20.

Dear Minister Harris, dear Minister Donnelly,

We, the undersigned, are writing to you based on our grave concerns around the treatment of undergraduate and postgraduate students, academic, professional and support staff in the sudden return to in-person exams across the third level college sector in Ireland for semester 1 of 2021, perpetuated by the national guidelines, or lack of, by the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the Irish government.

A report carried out in September 2019 by the Union of Students Ireland (USI) shone a light on the mental health issues being experienced by 3,340 students who live in Ireland, and the lack of support which persists as a result of the current pandemic. The research found that there is a mental health crisis amongst students. One of the most alarming findings in this research was the fact that 38.4% per cent of the student population reported that they experience extremely severe levels of anxiety, with a further 29.9% depression and 17.3% stress.

We consider the way assessments are being currently planned to be held in Irish Universities a health and wellbeing crisis of the utmost urgency which requires immediate action. This is an emergency situation which will have severely detrimental effects on the wellbeing of all members of our College communities.

After 1.5 years of online learning, a sudden return to in-person exams would be catastrophic for the mental health of students. In Trinity College Dublin, for example, counselling services averaged over 100 on the waiting list and waiting times of 40+ days during the build-up to exams last year (2020). This will become even worse this year. Our international students, who rely on this service more than any other cohort, will be left to fend for themselves with no weekend or overnight crisis support currently available, and so will many others. With 33.9% of students saying that their mental health worsened due to Covid-19 according to a Union of Students Ireland (USI) poll in their pre-budget submission for 2022, mental health must be a key consideration in any decision-making.

Furthermore, since many Colleges continued with online education for a big portion of Semester 1, students are wholly unprepared. This will further worsen the impending mental health crisis, if a decision is not made by the Government to immediately cancel in-person exams and replace them with their online counterparts. To this day, online classes are being

held in universities, barring the obvious example of Trinity College Dublin, such as in NUI Galway.

This is not to mention that 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 with a lot of different people. Packing hundreds of people in examination centers poses a serious Covid-19 danger, both for students and student staff and academic and professional staff who invigilate, considering the rapidly rising cases. Yesterday, on the 20th of November 2021, there were 5,959 new cases.

This raises another question. 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 is 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 left until Christmas and students will be travelling home to families across the country and abroad, there are serious worries by the student and staff community alike that a student might catch Covid-19 or develop long-Covid. Exam plans currently in-place could inadvertently facilitate a “super-spreader” event, since many participants will be in contact with each other outside of their restricted class sizes which have been in place until now. Trinity College Dublin, plans to facilitate 12,696 in-person examinations in the RDS Simonscourt examination center which will operate at 60% capacity, accommodating 1,600 students, including those from University College Dublin (UCD), per session for two sessions a day.

Similarly, serious illness and even death could befall physically-vulnerable people of our communities, such as those with autoimmune diseases, who in many cases were not even able to attend physical lectures until now, if people are essentially forced into the examination halls come assessment time. According to the USI’s mental health report from September 2019, 28.1% of those surveyed for mental health across Ireland’s study body had at least one type of disability. In Trinity College Dublin, 10% of the total student population is registered with the disability service, and as per the Higher Education Authority’s (HEA) statistics, in the academic year of 2018-2019 students registered with disability support services represented 6.2% of the total student population in higher education.

Finally, unions are worried that if someone falls sick in the exam hall, the wait times at the hospitals will make it difficult to get them help. In a recent case, a student had to get an ambulance on-campus of Trinity College Dublin and was told of a 6 hour waiting time.

Considering all this, is it not better then, to err on the side of caution?

Attempting to solve these problems by hiding behind mitigating measures is a lost cause. Trying to hold in-person exams but with some mitigation measures (which some Colleges have not yet implemented) is ignoring our lived experience.

Many of our fellow students and academic and professional staff are working hard but the pandemic has created a mental health crisis and the government needs to step up and take

responsibility, or face a worsening mental health crisis and further strain on mental health services nationally. As per a recent report by the Royal College of Surgeons (RCSI), 1 in 4 of Irish people say that their mental health deteriorated during the pandemic.

We the undersigned are asking you to consider our lived experience to date with the pandemic. Some of us are differently abled and we have faced challenges even in pre-COVID times. Providing exam support through appropriate rooms on campus for us during the pandemic will bring a new set of capacity challenges with numbers currently so high on public transport etc. We would hope that colleges could cater to students in their own environments with open book exams instead of students and invigilators having to travel outside of their homes.

For us to thrive academically in exams during the pandemic, we need the right environment. We are an extremely diverse community of students, academics and professionals; some of us may need disability support or are care-givers to family members or kids or are packed in cramped student accommodation and we'd like to request well ventilated spaces with good wi-fi and CO2 monitors on our college campuses to study and prepare if our home environments are crowded during the day.

We have endured so much uncertainty throughout the pandemic as students, academics and education support professionals, we would like a clear decision which would allow us to plan and stay safe and contribute to protecting our family and friends safety as national numbers rise and we approach Christmas.

We thank you for your time and consideration, and hope that you will swiftly act to protect the lives of those in our College communities by reconsidering the decision to hold in-person exams for Semester 1 of 2021-2022.

Signed:

László Molnárfi
Gisèle Scanlon

Other signatures will be added here from the Google Form once we send it. [Sign here.](#)