

Press Release Dublin, 25/11/2021 - #NoInPersonExams

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 reconsidering the decision to hold in-person exams across Ireland for December/January 2021/22. Within 72 hours of making the [letter](#) available online [on Twitter](#), we've been joined by over 5,000 plus students and academic staff from across the higher education sector in Ireland who have co-signed the letter calling for **#NoInPersonExams**.

As we await Minister Harris's and Donnelly's decision about in-person exams across the country in the Higher Education sector, our open letter to the ministers has now passed the 5,000+ signature mark and many of the students who have signed have been calling us from around the country in a state of heightened anxiety at the prospect of having to attend in-person exams.

Meanwhile, the latest news offers little conciliation with reports that in 13 out of 26 counties there is a shortage of PCR tests. Yesterday, online self-referral appointments were not available in [23 counties, as demand for testing continues to rise](#), with only Donegal, Mayo and Roscommon offering them.

Recently, Deputy Chief Medical Officer Dr Ronan Glynn appealed to anyone with symptoms to restrict their movements while waiting for a PCR test - [and not to use an antigen test](#).

210,300 people in Ireland had a PCR test last week, out of which 15.1% tested positive, and half a million people (in the best case scenario) were symptomatic in Ireland last week, as told to [RTÉ by HSE Chief Executive Paul Reid](#). This means that 1 in 10 people in the country were symptomatic last week and about 1 in 25 had a PCR test, in essence indicating that 500,000 people needed to be tested but not all of them could get one as testing centers were at full capacity.

Extrapolate that by also including the fact that the highest proportion age group is the 18-25 years olds who are having the PCR tests and are symptomatic, so somewhere between one in eight and one in ten of our students are going to be (if things are the same in three weeks time as they are now) symptomatic every day. This means that we are going to have 160 people (10%) of those 1,600 students in each session in the RDS Simonscourt (where Trinity College Dublin plans to hold their exams) who are symptomatic, out of which only 80 should be able to have a PCR COVID-19 if things are the same as they are today.

In addition, the close contacts of each person are supposed to also restrict their movements in their house and have three antigen tests over five days. Most people's

close contacts are between three and five, (they are higher for younger people), but even putting household contacts at an average of 1 (because some students live with their own families but many of them live with other students and sometimes from other universities), gives us 320 instead of 160 potential students out of every 1600 when you factor in only 1 close contact per session on a given day.

These are really problematic figures for us, if the situation is the same in three weeks time as it is now. We do not know what the situation is going to be, but the likelihood is that it is going to be quite similar. The government is talking about the plateauing of the five day averages and they are plateauing very high, up around 4,800 cases on average a day. This is unlikely to change significantly in three weeks, so in terms of the logistics of doing antigen tests for students going to the exam halls it will be problematic. We can see why some, like Trinity College Dublin, would want to do it as it gives a level of reassurance. We know that antigen tests have a high accuracy rate, however, we also know that antigen tests that are negative are not very accurate and that will cause a problem for us, not to mention of course that current public health advice states that antigen must not be used by someone who is symptomatic.

We will have a very large proportion of these 1600 students in each sitting who are either symptomatic or are awaiting the result of a PCR test or are a close contact of somebody judging by the national figures and the age. This is a huge logistical problem. The idea of having people pulled off of queues to do an antigen test, it's an extremely difficult thing to do regarding GDPR and we cannot allow that to happen.

We believe that there will be increased restrictions between now and Christmas and it is only a question of when they're going to be put in place. The likelihood is that there will be some more restrictions put in place next Tuesday and we can see them being flagged already. They're going to be preparing us for something else the following Tuesday. The timing of these extra restrictions are very closely aligned with when our in-person exams are flagged to take place. Much of this is out of our control and stakeholders across Colleges have done a massive amount of work to put exam plans in place. College leadership claims that the Irish Universities Association (IUA) wants in-person exams to happen but when we mailed the IUA they replied that it is not within their jurisdiction to decide.

Thank you for your email below, and other emails in recent days addressed to IUA on similar topics.

Given that IUA has no role in these matters, I suggest you address your concerns to TCD.

There are too many issues attached to running in-person exams and it is inevitable that students will be sitting in a room with 10% of the students among them who are symptomatic. We don't believe that this is fair to undergraduate students who will have to attend and we don't think that this is fair to postgraduate students who are invigilating the exams day in, day out.

The fact is that we have crunched the numbers and between 150 and 300 students in any individual exam could be potentially affected either through awaiting a PCR test or being a close contact or being symptomatic if things stay the same as they are now. Similar numbers are expected to be in other Colleges too, not just Trinity College Dublin. And these students will then be taking public transport and bringing Colleges' problems into the public system. Many are trying hard to get this in-person method to function and with the short turn around between sessions, (the 1600 that come in, in the morning might not be the same 1,600 that go in in the afternoon), but there is a lot of complexity to this and we simply believe that the risk factor is too high.

Furthermore, we have young teachers (teaching students) who are helping to keep schools open for as long as possible and we're adding to our ask. We're asking now for primary schools to close early to protect our student teachers who are being called upon to fill the teaching gap. We would ask for schools to finish by the end of next week. We need contingency plans and we're calling on the government to consider our students and move exams and any other commitments online for the remainder of the year.

We would like to reiterate call upon Minister Harris and Minister Donnelly with the utmost urgency to cancel in-person exams for Semester 1 of 2021-2022 across Irish Universities, like how it was done in University College Cork (UCC) where the only in-person exams are the ones which require it due to professional accreditation reasons.

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