

Impact of School Closures on Examination Activities

Announcement on 10th April - Postponement of the Leaving Certificate and Junior Cycle Examinations.

You may have heard about the decision to postpone this year's Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate examinations. At Leaving Certificate, all final written examinations due to take place in May and June will be rescheduled to a new timetable commencing at end July/early August. At Junior Cycle, the written examinations are postponed and will be rearranged as school based tests when schools reopen.

Below you'll find a few questions and answers to try and explain what the changes mean, who is affected by them and why this unprecedented action was taken. There is no perfect solution to the difficulties our education system is facing as a result of school closures and the impact of measures to stem the spread of Covid-19.

But these decisions are being taken with the best interests of students and their families in mind. We know that this is a time of real stress and worry for you. In making these decisions we wanted to try to provide some certainty about your examinations.

Why was this decision necessary?

The ongoing public health emergency means that at the moment we cannot be sure that it would be safe to bring students together to sit their examinations as normal in June. Students need certainty about the start of their examinations a number of weeks in advance, so acting on the best available public health information, we believe that by the end of July, it will be possible to hold the Leaving Certificate examinations under the conditions required by the public health authorities.

When will the new timetable be available?

Other than advising that the rescheduled Leaving Certificate examinations will commence in late July/August it is not possible right now set out the examinations timetable. The public health situation remains fluid and so decisions in respect of the details of running the examinations can only be made closer to the commencement date. The SEC plans to issue these detailed arrangements to schools in early June

What advice would you give to Leaving Certificate students at this time?

You should continue to prepare for your examinations by engaging in the teaching and learning arrangements that have been put in place for you by your school. We know that this is a really stressful and challenging time, so we also recommend that you stay in touch and connected with your friends,

classmates and your teachers online and with your family for support. You also need to take rest and a break from study over Easter and for at least two weeks in June.

Why are the Junior Cycle examinations postponed?

In line with public health restrictions, it is not possible to run both sets of examinations in schools simultaneously and the decision reflects the priority given to running the Leaving Certificate examinations so that students can transition to the next stage of their lives. Under normal examination arrangements, examination candidates need far more space than students under normal classroom conditions. Running the examinations typically utilises a significant amount of school accommodation both as main examination centres and as special examination centres for candidates with special educational needs. Retaining all of the examination centres but halving the number of candidates by not running the Junior Cycle means that it will be possible to safely run the Leaving Certificate examinations in line with the current public health guidelines.

Can the SEC not run the Junior Cycle examination when schools reopen?

Running these examinations centrally would create a significant level of disruption in schools at a time when it is intended that school life will be returning to normal. The intention is that schools will have flexibility over the running of these school-based examinations in the autumn.

Did you consider running the examinations on-line this year?

Running online examinations is neither a practically viable nor a desirable arrangement to make in reaction to this issue without proper planning and in an unsupported environment of over 120,000 candidates not only sitting examinations online, but doing so from their homes. We need to ensure that we can deliver examinations on a level playing pitch to all candidates and online delivery presents very real issues of equity and fairness, as not all candidates have access to ICT, to broadband and to a suitable location for taking examinations. There would also be very significant risks to the integrity of the examination process.

What measures will be taken to protect the health and welfare of candidates coming to take their examinations and the superintendents and other school staff involved in conducting the examinations in schools?

We will strictly implement public health advice for candidates and superintendents including in special examinations centres. In addition we will be working with the school stakeholders in the lead up to the examinations to put in place necessary safeguards in schools at examinations time in order to minimise the risk of infection, acting at all time on public health advice in the best interests of all involved.

We are considering how best to support examination superintendents who have a critical role in the delivery of the examinations which will include operational and procedural changes to safeguard their health and wellbeing.

Last year there were alternative examinations for Leaving Certificate candidates who suffered a bereavement at examinations time. Will there be alternative examinations this year?

It is likely that some candidates will be unable to take their examinations later in the summer due to a family bereavement. Others may be unable to attend on health grounds, as they may be ill or in quarantine or isolation. The SEC and the Department are considering appropriate alternative arrangements so that candidates in this situation are not disadvantaged compared to their peers.