

Guidance Note for School Placement 2020-2021

Summary of key points:

1. The health and safety of all people involved in school placement is the number one priority.
2. It is imperative that school placement continues safely within this context.
3. This guidance is a framework of options, not a prescription.
4. Teaching and learning may occur in a number of sites of practice and learning. The arrangements for school placement need to be adapted to each of them, in a manner that is consistent with national policy.
5. Technology affords many opportunities for innovative practice in teaching and learning, and school placement is no different. However, no option is risk free and due care must be taken in the establishment of all arrangements.
6. The process of ongoing engagement by the Teaching Council with stakeholders is as valuable as the guidance itself. This will ensure that the guidance responds in a prompt, flexible and helpful manner to new developments.

Background

In the context of Covid-19, this Guidance Note sets out a clear and flexible framework for both Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and schools in relation to the planning and facilitation of school placement for the academic year 2020-2021. It will also serve as a guide if Covid-19 impacts on school placements in the coming year.

It is important to note that this guidance offers a framework of options that are consistent with Council policy on school placement and Initial Teacher Education (ITE). It should be understood that the framework does not prescribe one option over another.

ITE programmes ensure that tomorrow's teachers are competent to meet the challenges they will face, and are prepared to be lifelong learners, continually adapting over the course of their careers to enable them to support their pupils in achieving their full potential (Teaching Council, 2017). In recent months, teachers all around Ireland have met the challenges that school closures have posed due to Covid-19 restrictions, and they have continued to support their pupils' learning and wellbeing, by adapting to virtual teaching and blended learning environments.

The term school placement refers to that part of the ITE programme which takes place in school settings. It is first and foremost a space and time where student teachers learn to become teachers. It gives them opportunities to learn about teaching and learning in a variety of teaching situations and school contexts through the processes of reflection and application of their learning (theoretical, personal and professional) on course modules. The Teaching Council and the Department wish to acknowledge and thank HEIs, schools and all stakeholders who support student teachers during this phase of their professional learning and growth.

It is acknowledged that this guidance is required as the definition of school setting has been transformed during the crisis. Please see "Sites of Practice and Learning" below.

Partnership has always been a vital underpinning for school placement, and in light of the Covid-19 crisis, the continued support of student teachers by schools is more important than ever.

Unlike many other professions, the numbers of students in this first stage of the continuum of teacher education [ITE] are such that their time for professional learning cannot be postponed into the medium and longer term. We understand from work on school placement to date that pre-Covid-19, there were already significant pressures in different parts of the organisation of school placement. Postponing any one cohort with significant blocks of time would only add to these pressures such that they would quickly become untenable.

In addition, teacher supply challenges remain. As in normal times, schools will require an ongoing supply of teachers with the required school placement experience in order to deliver the curriculum / subject specifications.

Notwithstanding the challenges facing all schools and HEIs in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, therefore, it is imperative that school placement continues to take place. It is acknowledged that adaptability and flexibility will be essential to ensure its continuity and implementation in a Covid-19 context.

Professional accreditation works on the principle that the programme prepares qualifying teachers for the professional requirements and expectations of the classroom environment as it is, not how we would like it to be.

As the school environment extended in real time into almost every home in the country, and may do so again, this means that teaching and learning can continue in any or all of these spaces. In this context school placement can and must provide opportunities to student teachers to develop and grow their practice in each of them, where they apply.

In collaboration with partner schools, ITE providers should continue to plan for school placement in line with current Teaching Council policy, ITE: Criteria and Guidelines for programme providers (2017). In light of the measures that schools and HEIs may have to adopt in the coming months, the Teaching Council and the Department of Education acknowledge that clear guidance as to how school placement can operate in a Covid-19 environment is required.

The Council wishes to reiterate its acknowledgment of the significant contribution which co-operating teachers make to the professional development and growth of student teachers during placement. Their professional commitment and generosity in the sharing of their expertise and learning are vital in this process.

Sites of Practice and Learning

To that end, the Teaching Council acknowledges that school placement can be interpreted as comprising sites of practice and learning and that arising from the Covid-19 restrictions, it may be necessary for student teachers to complete school placement in and across a variety of sites. It appears that four sites of practice have emerged for teaching and learning following the closure of schools due to Covid-19:

1. On-site teaching and learning in schools (subject to public health advice and guidance from the Department of Education for schools)

2. Synchronous classes - Live on-line teaching and learning. Given the sensitivities and complexities involved, the Council advises that particular care be exercised in establishing the methods of observation and assessment of placement in this scenario. Please note the core principles on page 3.
3. Asynchronous teaching and learning – this is where teachers and pupils prepare and interact with material at different times. Typically, the teacher uploads lesson materials / recordings etc. The pupils engage with material and complete tasks at another time without the teacher present and upload their work for review by the teacher. The teacher then provides feedback in written or recorded form.
4. Home- school collaboration – this is where access to and participation in online learning, live or asynchronous, may be very difficult or impossible. This scenario may include schools who have endeavoured to connect with parents and students by engaging with them at home.
5. As school placement must help student teachers prepare for the school environment as it is, the Council is happy to confirm that the above four sites are each recognised as valid sites of practice and learning for the process, and are in compliance with the Criteria and Guidelines for Programmes of ITE and the School Placement Guidelines. We also wish to clarify that these sites are described so as to be as inclusive as possible of the various scenarios which schools and HEIs are likely to encounter. They are not intended to be an exhaustive description of these scenarios. The Council acknowledges that different pedagogies are used across the sites of practice and confirms that each are acknowledged as valid in the teaching and learning process.

In addition to the sites of practice and learning, we need to remember the central role that reflective practice plays in school placement, as it does in all ITE. Learning from the innovation of schools and HEIs during the public health pandemic to date, the Council acknowledges that reflective practice itself can support the assessment of placement in a number of ways. This is evidenced, for example, by the quality of assignments which many student teachers submitted in fulfilment of their placement requirement in the current academic year.

The site(s) in use for any period of placement in a specific school will depend on how the guidelines for re-opening schools and any further public health guidance affect that particular school. Ideally, on-site teaching and learning will occur. However, schools and HEIs should discuss which of the sites of practice and learning apply to placement in their particular setting. The Teaching Council also acknowledges that it may be necessary to pivot from one site of practice and learning in a school to another quickly in response to potential public health advice.

HEIs should therefore map the scenarios in which their student teachers are on placement against the sites of practice identified in this document.

In this light, school placement during the 2020/2021 academic year may afford student teachers opportunities to engage in a variety of school placement activities and practices in different combinations of the environments as outlined above, and as deemed appropriate by individual HEIs for their respective programmes.

Students may also engage in various forms of teaching, learning and planning activities to include inter alia; online team-teaching, preparation of asynchronous lessons, the creation of screencasts and observations.

In order to allow schools and students time to become familiar with the implementation of the public health advice and Department of Education guidance for schools, it is advised that HEIs should plan for school placement to begin from October 2020. However, taking sectoral differences into account, the Council acknowledges that some placements may be able to commence in September and advises that these should continue provided the arrangements made are in line with the latest public health advice and Department of Education Guidance for schools.

Assessment

Flexibility in terms of modes of assessment of student teachers by HEI tutors will be necessary and a range of feasible options can be considered by HEIs. In cognisance of different settings and contexts, these options are not prescriptive but rather a suite of options for consideration by HEIs in the context of their own academic procedures and regulations.

These may include inter alia; on-site tutor visits (subject to public health advice and Department of Education Guidance in relation to visitors in schools), microteaching, live streaming, portfolio-based learning, reflective practice.

In the case of onsite teaching and learning, digital technology for recording classes for the purposes of assessment may be considered in certain contexts and assessment of recordings for asynchronous teaching may be used. Virtual formats may also be considered for live on-line teaching and learning environments.

The Council advises that particular care should be exercised in relation to this option.

Core principles which should be observed in deciding on the assessment format to be used include:

1. Safeguarding the continuity and quality of the school placement experience.
2. Observations of teaching and learning, including pupil engagement should continue.
3. Ensuring that all participants in the lesson are aware of and consent to the recording of lessons for the purposes of assessing school placement.
4. Ensuring that recordings of lessons are managed in line with HEI policies and appropriate data protection guidance provided under GDPR.
5. Choosing hardware and software that maximises the security of the streaming /recording process for all involved

Further guidance on the use of platforms for online teaching and learning is available from the PDST. Safeguarding the continuance of quality learning experiences for student teachers engaged in programmes of ITE is of paramount concern. That said, the health and safety of teachers, student teachers, pupils and HEI staff is of paramount concern and all planning should be carried out in line with public health advice and guidance from the Department of Education.

In light of the evolving context, the Teaching Council and the DE acknowledge that ongoing engagement with, and between HEIs and schools is vital. In this regard, the Council will convene stakeholders to the process from time to time to facilitate the sharing of best practices in the practical implementation of this guidance.