

## Guidance Note for School Placement 2021-2022

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## 1 Introduction

The Department of Education and the Teaching Council commend higher education institutions (HEIs), school management bodies, principals, Treoraithe (formerly co-operating teachers), teacher unions, principal professional bodies, student teachers, parents and pupils for the manner in which school placement has been facilitated since the Covid-19 pandemic commenced.

It is important that such collaboration continues throughout the 2021/2022 academic year to support our schools in staying open safely in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and to also ensure an ongoing supply of qualified teachers to meet the identified needs of the system. The needs of learners in our classrooms and the professional growth and wellbeing of student teachers are central to programmes of Initial Teacher Education (ITE).

The shared goal of all partners involved is to facilitate school placement in line with Teaching Council policy on school placement and ITE and school professional cultures throughout the 2021/2022 academic year. It is expected that in person teaching and learning will occur throughout 2021/2022 particularly in light of the ongoing rollout and impact of the vaccination programme. Therefore, adherence to public health guidelines and all the infection prevention and control measures in place should help to ensure that school placements can operate as close to normal as possible during this academic year.

However, in light of the evolving situation with Covid-19, the Teaching Council and the Department of Education acknowledge that clear guidance as to how school placement can operate in a Covid-19 environment continues to be required.

These guidelines are intended to be a support should alternatives or contingencies be required.

## 2 Summary of Key Points

1. It is imperative that school placement continues safely within the context of Covid-19.
2. The health and safety of all people involved in school placement is the number one priority.
3. School placement is essential for Initial Teacher Education and for schools, as it helps to ensure a sufficient supply of teachers to meet the identified needs of the system.
4. All teachers will know from their own experience that school placement is a vital element in ensuring that future teachers are prepared for the daily reality of classroom life.
5. All schools are strongly encouraged to continue to host student teachers on school placement during 2021/2022.
6. 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.
7. All student teachers must be observed and assessed on school placement prior to achieving qualification from HEIs.

8. Adaptability and flexibility from all involved in school placement will be essential to ensure its continuity and implementation in a Covid-19 context. This guidance note provides clarity to all on how school placement, observation and assessment can continue to take place safely and successfully.

### 3 Background

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). 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.

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. Therefore, notwithstanding the challenges facing all schools and HEIs in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, 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. Partnership has always been a vital underpinning for school placement, and in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, 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 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.

The Teaching Council's professional accreditation of ITE programmes 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 during periods of 2020 and 2021, 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 these spaces, where they apply. In collaboration with partner schools, ITE providers should continue to plan for school placement in line with Teaching Council policy on school placement and ITE. However, in light of the continuing pandemic and measures that schools and HEIs may have to continue to adopt during the 2021/2022 school year, the guidance

below regarding how school placement can operate in a Covid-19 environment continues to be required.

The Council wishes to reiterate its acknowledgment of the significant contribution which Treoraithe 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.

## 4 Guidance

In the context of Covid-19, this Guidance Note sets out a clear and flexible framework for both HEIs and schools in relation to the planning and facilitation of school placement for the academic year 2021-2022. 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 it is a framework of options, not a prescription and does not recommend one option over another.

### 4.1 Sites of Practice and Learning

The Teaching Council acknowledges that school placement can be interpreted as comprising sites of practice and learning and that arising from any Covid-19 restrictions, it may be necessary for student teachers to complete school placement across a variety of sites from time to time.

Four sites of practice have emerged for teaching and learning during the current pandemic:

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 refer to section 4.2. That said, the Department and the Council both acknowledge and commend the significant advances which teachers and schools made during the previous two academic years in the use of digital platforms for live on-line synchronous classes.
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.

School placement must help student teachers prepare for the school environment as it is, and 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 Céim, the Teaching Council policy on 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 public health guidance may affect that particular school. It is expected that on-site teaching and learning will occur during the 2021/2022 school year. 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 2021/2022 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.

#### 4.2 Observations and Assessment

School placement is a core element of ITE programmes for both student teachers and their HEIs. In turn, the observation and assessment of student teachers is a key component of school placement. All student teachers must be observed and assessed on school placement prior to achieving qualification from HEIs.

In the context of Covid-19, at least one observation should be conducted in real time and in the same learning environment as the student teacher. Such observations should take place on-site where they can be done safely in line with the School Placement Visit Protocol (see below). If exceptional circumstances present where onsite visits are restricted/limited based on public health guidelines in the context of Covid-19, HEIs may prioritise student teachers for onsite observation, in line with Principle 1 below. This applies to the current school year 2021/2022 only.

It is acknowledged that flexibility in terms of modes of assessment of student teachers by HEI tutors may 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's Guidance in relation to visitors in schools), microteaching, live streaming, portfolio-based learning and reflective practice.

Given the potential significant challenges for schools due to Covid-19 and to ensure that public health guidelines are adhered to, the following principles apply for the 2021/2022 school year in relation to placement tutors visiting schools to observe and assess student teachers during their school placement:

1. The Department and the Teaching Council confirm that in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, and for the 2021/2022 school year only, HEIs may prioritise student teachers for on-site visits in schools. Such prioritisation will include student teachers who have not been observed on school placement since the commencement of their studies, particularly those in their final year of study, as well as a small number of individual cases where the HEIs determine that on-site observation is warranted.
2. A School Placement Visit Protocol (see below) has been developed to guide schools and HEIs in ensuring that where such observations happen on-site in line with the guidance above, they can happen safely and in accordance with national health guidance in place at the time and the school Covid Response Plan.
3. Student teachers may be observed and assessed by other alternative arrangements provided for in this guidance note.
4. HEIs are strongly encouraged to form regional panels of placement tutors on a collaborative basis. This would mean that one panel of tutors would conduct placement visits on behalf of some or all HEIs in a particular geographic area.
5. HEIs are also encouraged to ensure that students undertake placement in blocks of time (e.g. 3 days a week or more; 10 weeks etc.) rather than alternative arrangements (e.g. one day a week) for the 2021/2022 school year, where practicable. Placement arrangements will need to take account of national public health advice and Government guidelines. In the context of education, experience to date indicates that two key factors will have a significant impact on any decisions made:
  - a. Safeguarding the health and safety of all members of the school community and
  - b. Ensuring a sufficient supply of qualified teachers to meet the identified needs of the system, including substitution. This includes facilitating the hosting of student teachers to help meet short-term substitution needs in line with Teaching Council and Departmental protocols, as well as to ensure that the same student teachers qualify on time and with the best possible preparation for school life and the needs of learners.

#### 4.2.1 School Placement On-Site Visit Protocol

This protocol clarifies the arrangements that should be adhered to in order to ensure that on-site visits can take place safely:

- HEIs will plan school placement visits in consultation with school management.
- HEIs will ensure that all placement tutors have completed Covid-19 induction training.
- HEIs will prioritise which student teachers will be visited so as to minimise the impact on schools.
- HEIs and the Teaching Council have agreed that in light of the exceptional circumstances, student teachers may be observed by only one placement tutor while on placement, unless the HEI determines that observation by an additional tutor is warranted.
- The following guidance has been approved for placement tutors to ensure that they can visit schools safely and in accordance with public health guidelines. These protocols are based on similar protocols developed by the Department of Education Inspectorate ('Safe Return to On-Site Work: Draft Guidance for Inspectors in Early Learning and Care (ELC) Settings, Schools and Other Settings').
  - I. Placement tutors will schedule the school visit in consultation with school management in advance.
  - II. Placement tutors will request the details of the school's specific arrangements for visitors.
  - III. Placement tutors should complete a Covid-19 health declaration before each visit to a school.
  - IV. Placement tutors will visit no more than 1 school per day.
  - V. Placement tutors will comply with the school's Covid-19 Response Plan including the following:
    - a. Complete the school's Contact Tracing Log for visitors.
    - b. Maintain physical distancing requirements as set out in the Department's guidance to schools.
    - c. Use face coverings
    - d. Clean/sanitise digital and other work devices after each school visit.
  - VI. Placement tutors will conduct post-observation feedback to student teachers off-site with student teachers i.e. either in a separate venue socially distanced, over the phone or via video call.
  - VII. Placement tutors will have minimised interactions with other persons while on site.

#### 4.2.2 School Placement Virtual Supervision

The Teaching Council and the Department wish to clarify that any virtual supervision arrangements already in place at primary and post-primary level can continue to operate in adherence with this guidance. These circumstances may vary between primary and post-primary. HEIs will liaise with schools and stakeholders in this regard.

The Council advises that particular care should continue to be exercised in relation to virtual supervision arrangements, where applicable.

In the case of onsite teaching and learning, digital technology for recording classes for the purposes of assessment may continue to 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.

All due care must continue to be exercised in the live-streaming and recording of lessons. Equally, the impact of teaching on the learners is a vital part of the observation and assessment processes in school placement. Placement tutors must be in a position to assess the impact of student teachers' practice on pupils while they are being taught by student teachers.

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

- a. Safeguarding the continuity and quality of the school placement experience.
- b. Observations of teaching and learning, including pupil engagement should continue.
- c. Ensuring that all participants in the lesson are aware of and provide consent where relevant to the recording of lessons for the purposes of assessing school placement.
- d. Ensuring that recordings of lessons are managed in line with HEI policies and appropriate data protection guidance provided under GDPR.
- e. 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.

HEIs will liaise with schools in respect of protocols they have developed in relation to virtual supervision arrangements.

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 equal 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 Department of Education 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.