

## **Maynooth University Letter to All Staff – 18 March, 2020**

### **SUBJECT: COVID-19: closure for teaching – update for staff**

Dear colleague

It is now six days since the decision by the government to ask the universities to close until March 29<sup>th</sup>, so I am writing to update you on what we plan to do in terms of teaching. We know that we will be closed for face to face teaching until at least 29<sup>th</sup> March, but we will probably be closed for longer, and possibly until after the examination period.

This is a really unprecedented situation for all of us. We are being asked to switch to remote teaching within a week of a decision. This is a change that would be considered reckless in normal times, but is the prudent response to this emergency. The situation is still uncertain, and that uncertainty will test our resilience.

Nevertheless, I think this is a challenge we can meet. Our students will learn primarily by reading, supplemented by watching recorded material, and by interaction with staff and other students, which is largely what we expect in normal circumstances. Some programmes will face additional challenges, but with some creativity and flexibility, I am sure that we can provide appropriate support for students.

#### **Teaching/ lecturing:**

If you are responsible for a module you should try to provide appropriate support online through Moodle. Students will look to the Moodle page for guidance, so you should put up messages explaining what to do, and providing clear guidance on what to read. At a minimum you should put up text material for each lecture, as a word file or a PowerPoint file. You may also want to enrich these by adding a commentary to the PowerPoint, or adding video or audio files. However please remember that some of our students will not have good internet access, so please try to keep file sizes small, and when you use big files, provide an alternative that is easier to download for those with connectivity problems.

Please upload your material in advance of the scheduled lecture slot, but as close to the scheduled time as possible. This will mean that material is delivered to students in a phased manner, and will provide a structure to help them manage their study.

#### **Tutorials:**

As far as possible tutorials should continue as before, and can be held using a Moodle forum (asynchronous), or a Moodle chat (live chat), or a conference call through MS Teams (audio and video).

#### **Laboratories and practical work:**

There is no doubt that laboratories and practical work will be disrupted. The aim should be to provide the nearest viable alternative are working to provide the nearest viable alternative, to ensure that

students achieve the learning objectives of the module. In some cases, this may mean a significant change in the content of the module.

### **Assessment:**

If the exams are disrupted, we will need to use assessments that can be conducted remotely wherever possible. This will mean use of assignments in place of the written exams. Practical assessments will either be held by videoconference (using Teams), or replaced by alternative assessments. We may have to defer some examinations until later in the summer, but we should try to avoid this if possible.

As some International students are going home, we will need to provide a remote assessment for each module, to allow them to complete. Therefore, even if our exams are able to run as planned, we will still need a remote alternative assessment.

### **Placements:**

Students who are on placement may be able to continue their placement, and if they can that is likely to be good experience for them. However, many will find their placements cancelled. In that case the department responsible (whichever department “owns” the module) should create a substantial assignment which can be done remotely, and which can be used to substitute for the missing placement. This will need to be a substantial task, as it may carry a significant credit weight.

### **Maynooth students studying abroad:**

Students who are on study abroad may find their universities are closed. In some cases they may be able to continue their studies remotely. If not, the department responsible (the lead department) should create a substantial assignment which can be used to substitute for the missing modules. If a student passed 25 credits in the first semester and completes a substantial assignment in lieu of the second semester, we can allow them to pass the year abroad.

### **Approval:**

Some of these measures will require changes to our existing academic structure. The following items, among other, will need approval:

1. Changing an examination to an assignment.
2. Substantial changes to the content of a module, such as removing the practical component and replacing with an alternative.
3. Provision of an assignment in lieu of a placement.
4. Provision of an assignment in lieu of study abroad.

To speed up the approval process, we have agreed that these can be approved by the Head of Department, Dean and Registrar without the need to go to Academic Council

for each approval. So if you need something approved, please send it to your Head of Department. If the Heads of Department are supportive of the proposal, they can forward to the relevant Dean and to me.

### **What to do:**

The most important thing to do now is to look after your own health and the health of those around you, by taking care with handwashing, and social distancing.

Once you have done that, you should think about the courses for which you are responsible and ensure that the appropriate measures are in place.

- If you are responsible for a module, please ensure that the teaching materials are in place and that there is clear guidance in moodle.
- If you are responsible for a programme, please liaise with the lecturers involved, please ensure that the tutorials are in place. And please communicate with the occasional and adjunct staff – they will not receive all-staff emails, and rely on programme leaders to keep them informed.
- If you are responsible for laboratories there will be work to be done to put in place the best alternative we can develop. This may mean finding suitable online resources, or developing worksheets and written teaching materials.
- If you are responsible for administration of courses, there will be work to be done in ensuring regular a clear communication with the students, and dealing with the management of remote teaching, remote assessment, and multiple anxious students.

In all of this, there will be frustrations. You may find the internet connectivity slow as more people work remotely. You may forget to back-up your files and lose something. Or you may find you are working with new and unfamiliar software. Unfortunately, I think all of these will happen, so please try to be as patient as you can, and do the best you can despite the obstacles.

You may be one of the academics who has a light teaching load this semester, or may have a role which is quiet because of this emergency. In that case, if you have spare capacity, you might consider offering to help some of your colleagues in whatever way you can. This is a time to be as generous and collegial as you can be, as we work together through this emergency.

Many of you will be working from home, and will be more isolated than usual. Please consider having regular team chats, if only to have the equivalent of a coffee break together. This is also a good way to get familiar with the conference facility in Teams.

I will send a parallel message to all students in the next few minutes.

Can I thank you all again for all of the work done under pressure since this emergency announcement was made, and wish you all well as we work through the next stages.

With best wishes,

Aidan