

COVID-19

THE STUDENT RESPONSE

REPORT ON SURVEY RESULTS

APRIL 2020



ISSU
IRISH SECOND-LEVEL
STUDENTS' UNION

IRISH SECOND-LEVEL STUDENTS' UNION

THE STUDENT RESPONSE ON STATE EXAMINATION
CONTINGENCY PLANS AS A RESULT OF COVID-19



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ABOUT

Founded in 2008, the Irish Second-Level Students' Union (hereafter referred to as ISSU) is the national representative body for second-level students in the Republic of Ireland. The ISSU represents, uplifts and defends student voice.

The main aims of the ISSU are:

- To provide support, training and assistance to second-level student councils.
- To develop policies on issues affecting Irish second-level students and bring the needs and rights of students to the attention of the relevant authorities.
- To provide a transparent, democratic and reliable organisation.
- To work in collaboration with other educational institutions and bodies both in Ireland, and Europe. To work closely with educational partners to continually develop a transparent, fair and modern education system.
- To give students a structured platform through which the voices of the Irish Second-level students will be heard.



FOREWORD

The ISSU strives for students to be seen and respected as stakeholders in their own education, and to work towards an education system that suits the needs of the students within it. The current crisis is having a huge impact on students, with the lack of clarity around their future, leading to incredible stress and confusion.

Students are not only worried about the COVID-19 pandemic and the health and wellbeing of both themselves and their family and friends, but they don't know what this crisis means for their education, and for those in Leaving Certificate, for their progression to third level or the workplace.

Student wellbeing, both physical and mental, must be prioritised in this challenging time and the situations of all students, must be taken into account. With such an exceptional circumstance, decisions will have to be made that would usually not be feasible, and there are certainly positives, negatives and complications involved with each option.

Yours Faithfully,



Ciara Fanning,
ISSU President

BACKGROUND

Due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, the ISSU sought for clarification, from the Department of Education and Skills, for all second-level examination students on the position of their state examinations during this crisis.

Following this, the ISSU Campaign for Clarity #ClarificationNow was launched. The ISSU developed a survey seeking the voice of second-level examination students. The survey contained two quantitative and two qualitative questions to ensure the collection of sufficient figures and detailed feedback. The survey opened at 5:30pm on Thursday 26th March 2020 and concluded at 12pm on Wednesday April 1st 2020. 48,907 engaged with the survey and after verification 46,493 were deemed valid responses from examination year groups.

The responses **not included** in the below results include those from students in other years in school (1st, 2nd, TY and 5th), parents and teachers. We take on board the viewpoints of all stakeholders however for the purpose of this report felt it appropriate to focus on the current examination years.

It is clear this issue and the underlying uncertainty is causing great concern and stress within families, the school community and amongst others in the education sector, and echoing the ISSU's "Campaign for Clarity", clarity needs to be provided as soon as possible. In conjunction with the #ClarificationNow campaign survey, the ISSU has also taken into careful consideration the numerous emails and online correspondence received from students during this campaign.

The ISSU is aware and acknowledges that other campaigns have been carried out by students in relation to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The recommendations provided at the end of this report have been given as a reflection of the submissions received and are in no way deemed to be the opinions of those who did not fill out the survey or submit their views.

SURVEY RESULTS

Q1: *What year are you in?*

18,150

**JUNIOR
CERTIFICATE**

28,343

**LEAVING
CERTIFICATE**

18,150 students in Junior Certificate and 28,343 students in Leaving Certificate responded to the survey.

A total of **65,190** students are due to sit the Junior Certificate Examinations in 2020. Those surveyed represent **28%** of registered examination students.

A total of **61,053** students are due to sit the Leaving Certificate Established, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and Leaving Certificate Applied in 2020. Those surveyed represent **46%** of registered examination students.

Q2: *Out of the following options, can you rank from 1st to 4th which option would be most suitable for the 2020 State Examinations?*

Option 1: Proceed With the Written Examinations in June 2020, adhering to Social Distancing Guidelines

Option 2: Cancel Exams and Follow a Predicted Grading Model

Option 3: Reschedule Exams to a Later Date (July / August)

Option 4: Other

The responses to this question are shown on the following pages

SURVEY RESULTS

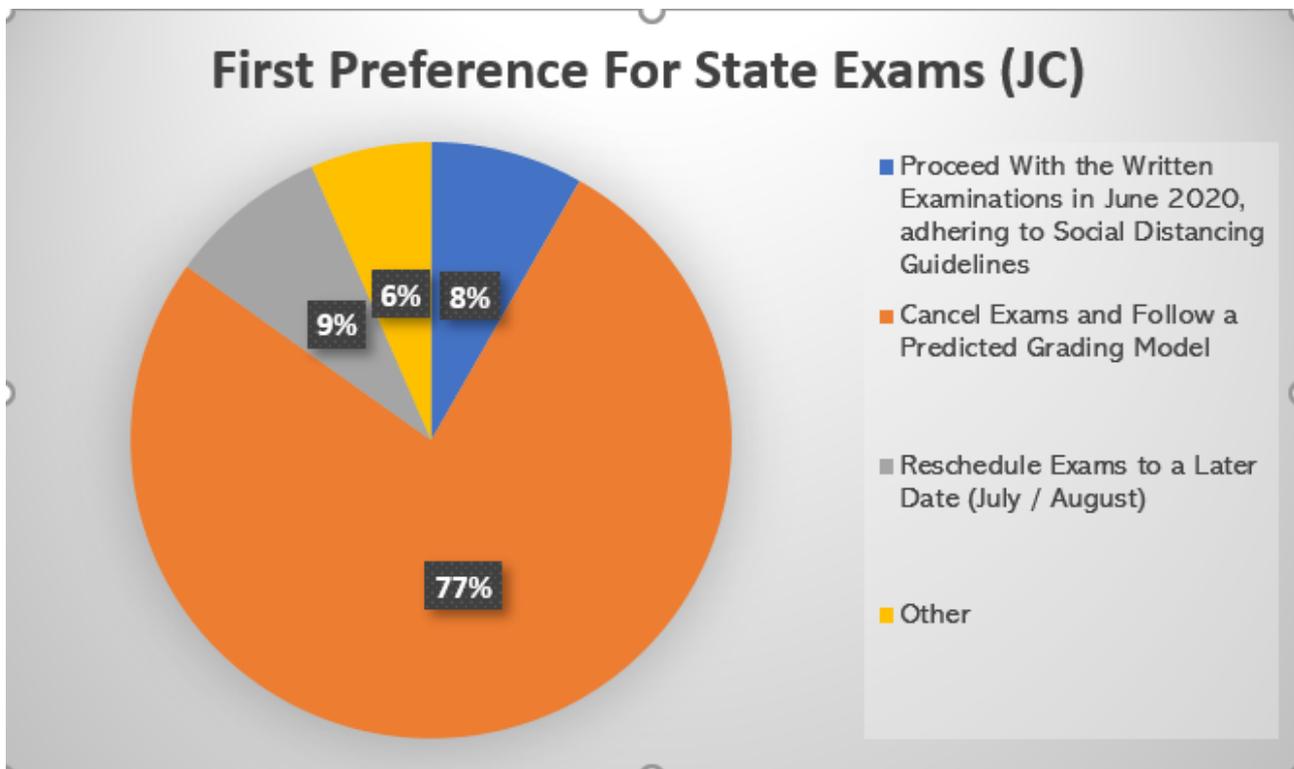
JUNIOR CERTIFICATE

Students surveyed in Junior Certificate were heavily in favour of cancelling the June exams and using grades already attained along with predicted grades to determine their final result. Almost 77% voted for this.

All other options received less than 10%.

More analysis can be seen on the following pages.

First Preference		
Option	Number	Percentage
Proceed With the Written Examinations in June 2020, adhering to Social Distancing Guidelines	1495	8.24%
Cancel Exams and Follow a Predicted Grading Model	13912	76.65%
Reschedule Exams to a Later Date (July / August)	1562	8.6%
Other	1181	6.5%

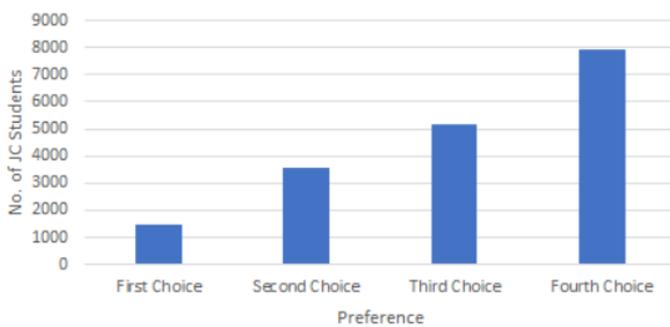


SURVEY RESULTS

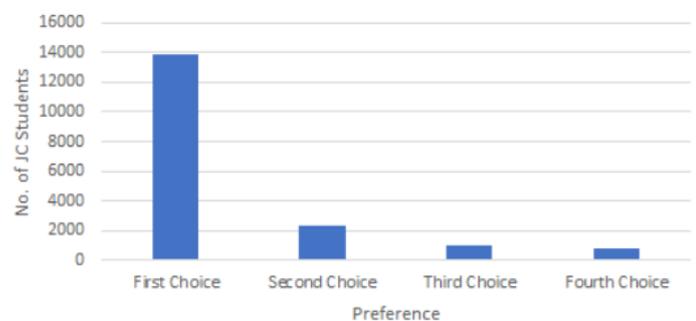
JUNIOR CERTIFICATE

Looking at where students placed their preferences, it is clear that Option 2 (Cancel) is by far the most popular.

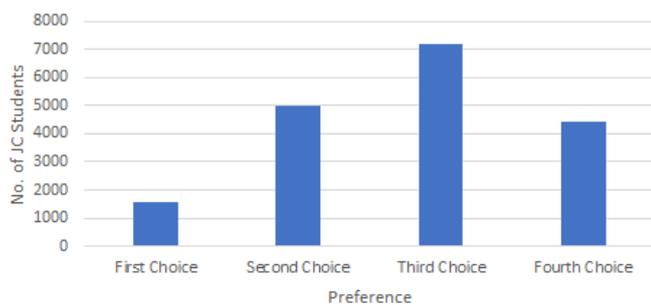
Option 1: Proceed With the Written Examinations in June 2020, adhering to Social Distancing Guidelines



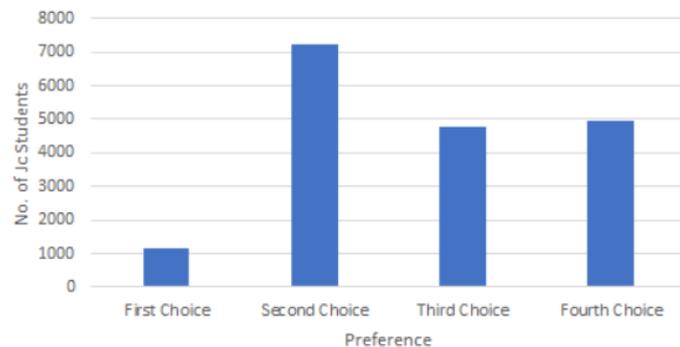
Option 2: Cancel Exams and Follow a Predicted Grading Model



Option 3: Reschedule Exams to a Later Date (July / August)

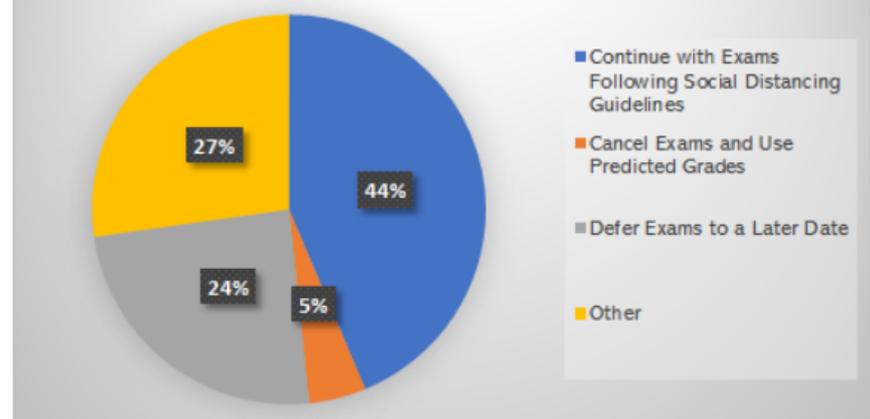


Option 4: Other



Option 1 (Proceed with exams) is most unpopular with students surveyed, as shown by the above distribution of its preferences, and it being the most popular fourth preference.

Fourth Preference for State Exams (JC)



SURVEY RESULTS

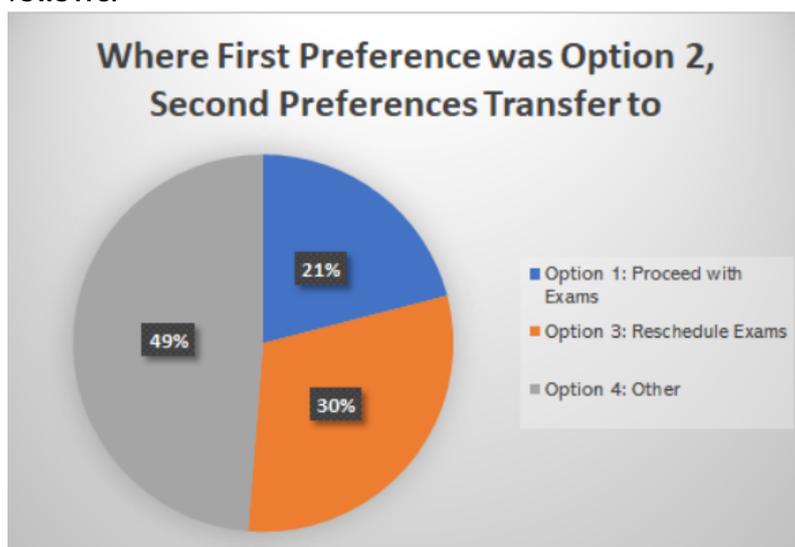
JUNIOR CERTIFICATE

Observations from Junior Cert Students

There is a clear consensus among students in Junior Certificate towards cancelling the exams and using a predictive grade model (Option 2) . This is also the least unpopular option selected by participants in the survey.

As there was a large majority of first preferences for Option 2, we have analysed its data and trends in the case that it is not feasible. We note below the second preferences of these students.

Of the 77% who voted for this as their first preference, their second preferences were divided as follows.



Forty nine percent of the original Option 2 First Preference Choice (equal to 37% of the total poll) answers transfer to Option 4 (Other), showing that students still feel very strongly against sitting the exams, either in June or at a later stage.

As Option 4 included a wide variety of suggestions, this cannot be seen as a feasible option to suggest for the ISSU, however the sheer weight of it's numbers does strengthen the case that students feel they cannot sit exams in the current crisis.

Where First Preference Was Option 2			
Second Preferences Transfer to:	Option 1: Proceed with Exams	Option 3: Reschedule Exams	Option 4: Other
Number	2913	4219	6780

Also of note is that 30% of the Option 2 First Preference votes transferred to Option 3 (Postpone Exams) , equal to 23% of the total poll. A clear transfer pattern can be seen from all options towards Option 3 "Postpone", when faced up against Option 1 "Proceed".

If exams do need to take place, the majority of students in Junior Certificate favour a deferring of exams instead of June exams.

SURVEY RESULTS

LEAVING CERTIFICATE

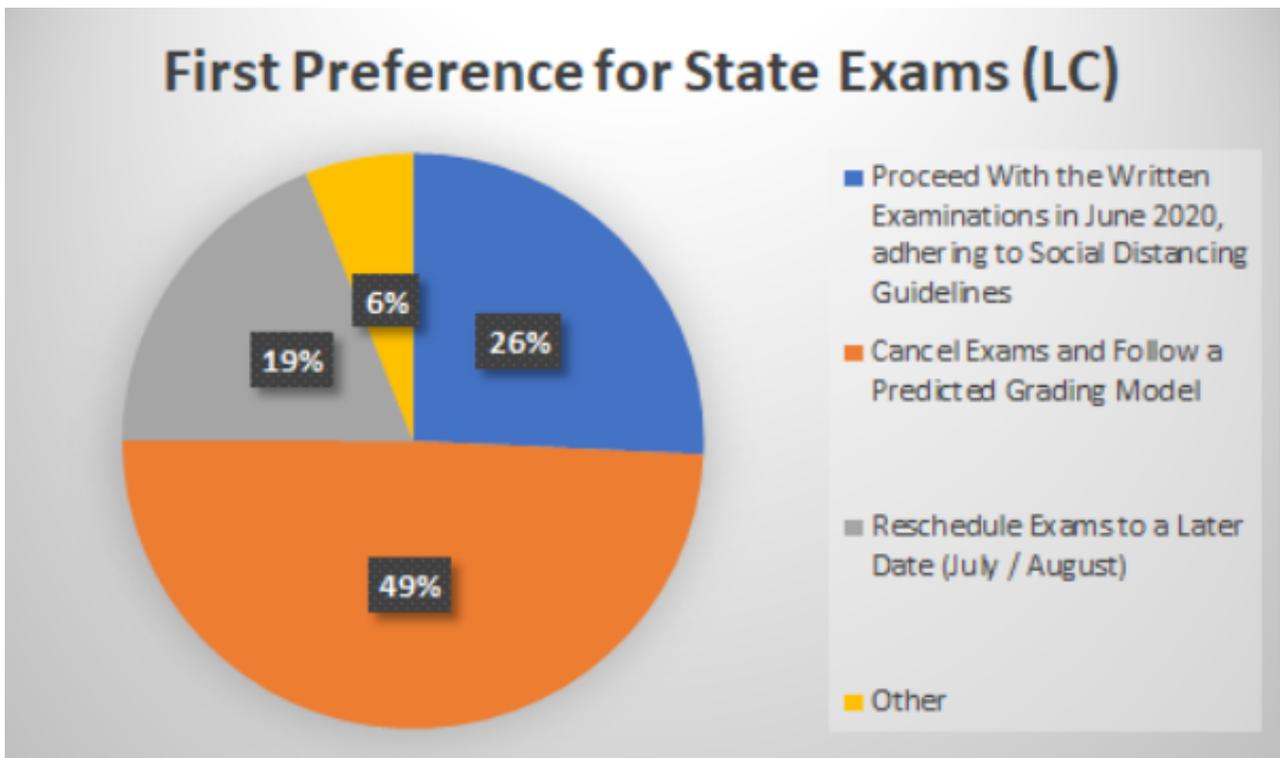
Almost half of Leaving Certificate students surveyed (49%) are in favour of cancelling the upcoming exams and using a predicted grade model.

This is significantly less than Junior Certificate students, with a much stronger tally of 26% for Option 1 (Proceed with Exams) and 19% for Option 3 (Reschedule Exams).

Just 6% of students opted for Option 4 (Other).

More analysis is shown on the following pages

First Preference		
Option	Number	Percentage
Proceed With the Written Examinations in June 2020, adhering to Social Distancing Guidelines	7295	25.74%
Cancel Exams and Follow a Predicted Grading Model	13974	49.3%
Reschedule Exams to a Later Date (July / August)	5374	18.96%
Other	1700	6%

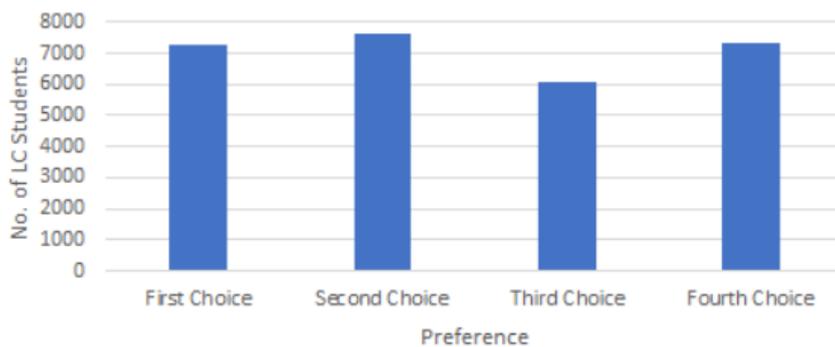


SURVEY RESULTS

LEAVING CERTIFICATE

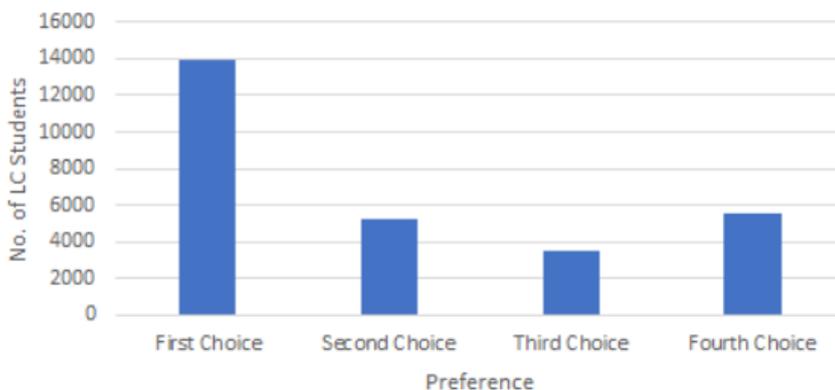
The key observation from analysing the preferences given by participants in the survey is one of polarising ideas. Some students are in favour of Option 2 and strongly against sitting exams, , while a smaller but significant minority of students are strongly against Option 2 and a predicted model.

Option 1: Proceed With the Written Examinations in June 2020, adhering to Social Distancing Guidelines



The response to Option 1 shows the polarisation among students, with an almost even spread across all preferences for sitting the exams in June.

Option 2: Cancel Exams and Follow a Predicted Grading Model

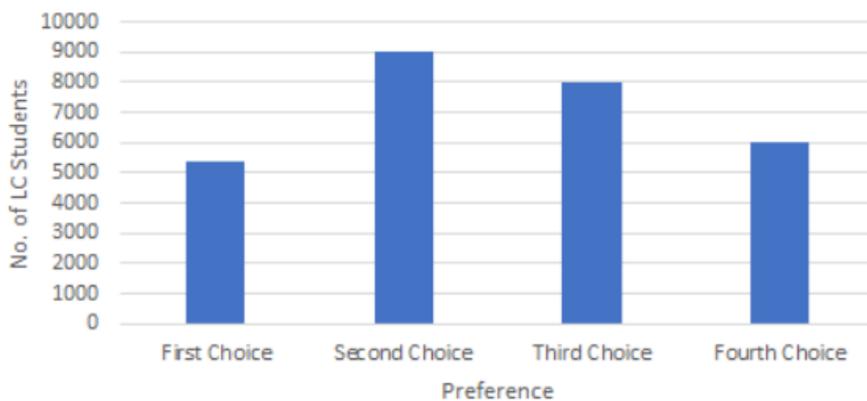


Option 2 received almost two-thirds support when including first and second preferences towards it. Of note is the rejection of this proposal by a significant minority of students, of which their concerns are noted below.

SURVEY RESULTS

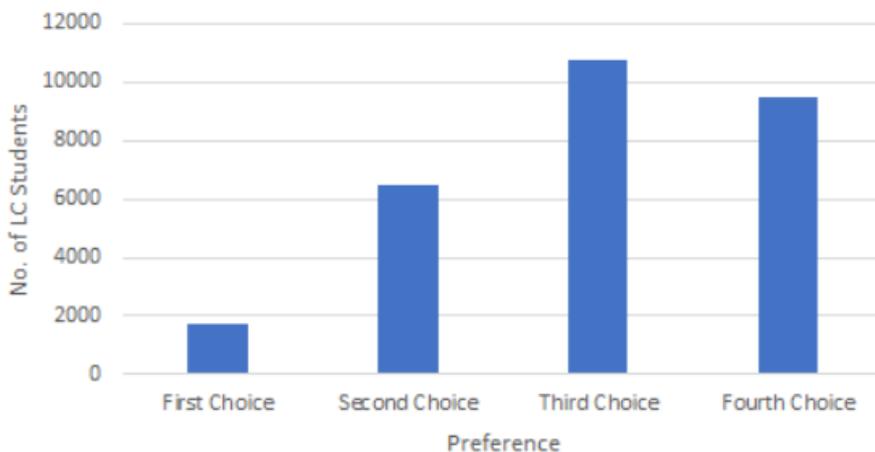
LEAVING CERTIFICATE

Option 3: Reschedule Exams to a Later Date (July / August)



Option 3 is also split between voters in the ranking of their preferences.

Option 4: Other



Option 4 encompasses many different suggestions by students, which were mostly outlined by the 6% who suggested it as their first preference. For this reason it is difficult to gauge what students might suggest as an "Other" option.

Of note however is the much lower preferences attributed to this option, particularly compared to Junior Cert students. It is clear that Leaving Certificate students have stronger views on the other options, and do not want an unknown "Other", but clarity in the near future.

SURVEY RESULTS

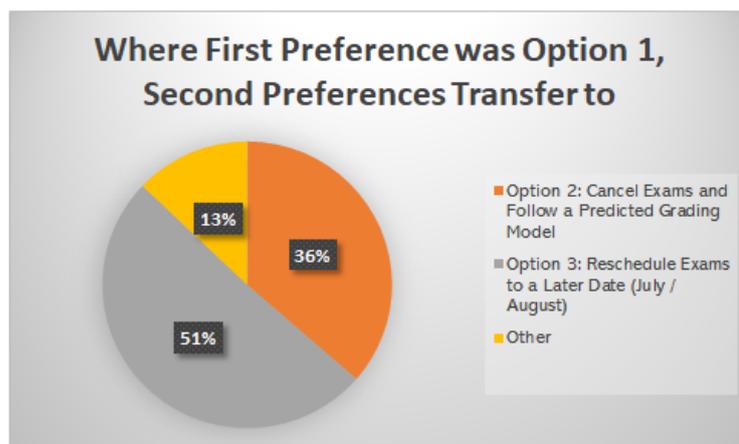
LEAVING CERTIFICATE

Observations from Leaving Cert Students

49% of Leaving Cert students surveyed are in favour of cancelling the Leaving Certificate exams and using predicted grades. While this does constitute the largest single preference, there is a significant polarisation in the survey among students both in favour and against this option.

Looking at second and subsequent preferences, we can identify patterns of what students might prefer, and what they want to avoid.

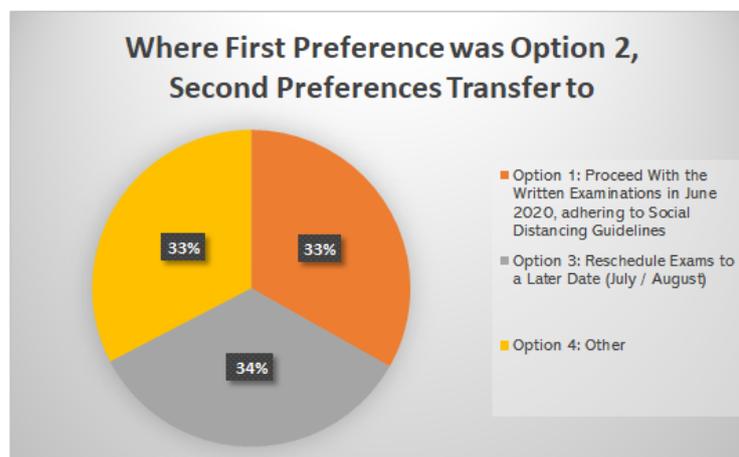
Option 1 Transfers



Where Option 1 is First Preference			
Second Preference was given to:	Cancel Exams	Reschedule Exams	Other
Number	2656	3700	939

These students number 7,295 in total, the majority of whom would prefer to defer exams. Over one third of students would also opt for Option 2, cancelling exams if Option 1 was not possible.

Option 2 Transfers



Where Option 2 is First Preference			
Second Preference was given to:	Continue Exams	Reschedule Exams	Other
Number	4640	4772	4562

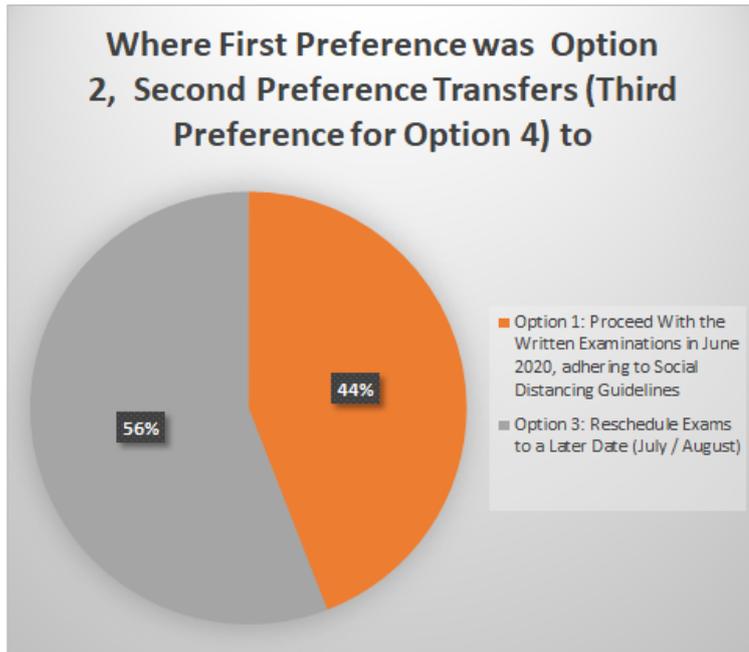
It is clear there is an even split among these students about what would be the next best option for them.

As "Other" includes a wide variety of suggestions, we have further explored the third preferences of this group to give a clearer view.

SURVEY RESULTS

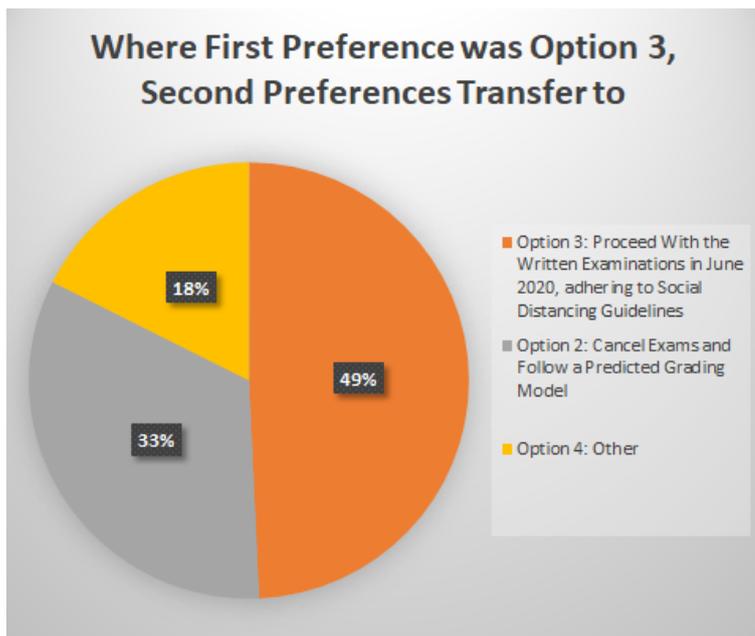
LEAVING CERTIFICATE

Option 2 Transfers (Further Explored)



This pie chart shows there is a slight preference of those who wish to cancel exams to opt for deferring, if cancellation is not possible.

Option 3 Transfers



Where Option 3 is First Preference			
Second Preference was given to:	Continue Exams	Cancel Exams	Other
Number	2647	1784	943

Almost half of these students would like to continue exams as planned if it is not possible to defer.

A further one-third are in favour of cancelling exams and using predicted grades if this is not possible.

While not as "even" as other results, it is clear there is a considerable split among students as to what the best outcomes might be.

SURVEY RESULTS

Q3: Can you explain why you have chosen the particular option as your preferred first choice? If you chose "Other", can you please specify your proposal?

40,405 written responses were submitted for this question. The answers presented below are representative of the thousands of responses received, and include both students in Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate.

1. Answered "Option 1" as First Preference

A total of 8790 students, equating to 21.75% surveyed, would prefer to continue with the exams as scheduled for June 2020. Among the 8,262 associated written responses the consensus among these students was that they felt they were prepared after two years of hard work and wanted to be judged on their own merit not by predictions.

The following consists of sample responses randomly selected from the ISSU State Examinations 2020 survey:

"It seems like the easiest option for us regardless of our unfinished courses. The exams could be marked out of the work we have completed before the school cancellations."

"All exam students are continuing to finish revision and the course of all subjects and i think we would be ready to sit exams at the dates scheduled"

"I chose to do the leaving cert in June as I think it's the most suitable, its what we have all been working toward obviously grades will be compromised because of the circumstances but I think it's the most fair way to do it, lots of people improve drastically from their mock results to the real thing I don't think it would be fair to use past results."

"By sanitising tables between exams and following guidelines, the exams would go successfully. It would be less stressful on students as well as the government as they won't have to worry and stress about when exams may be. The sooner they are finished is possibly for the better in the long term"

SURVEY RESULTS

"I chose to proceed with the written exams in June 2020 and follow social distancing guidelines as a student. I feel like I have worked very hard in school over the last three years and I would not like to see it go to waste and I would also like to know that my hard work paid off. I also do not think it is fair to expect students to wait until July/August to sit the exams as you would have to study most of Summer and not have any break which I feel is needed especially after an exam year."

"I would be disappointed if the exams did not take place as the two years (+) of work I have completed would effectively have been for naught. Allowing them to take place would present an opportunity for all LC students to fulfill their potential at a secondary level."

"Complete in June. If we follow the guidelines and ensure that not too many people are in a room then it can work. At this point I just want to get it done and apply for college as I would imagine a lot of other people also want to do. Pushing it back a few months could possibly mess up the whole next year next year. There may not be teachers to correct them if they are postponed and they may rush for the teachers that do help. Also what's to say that this crisis would be over in July or August and how do we know that situation then would be better. It's better to get them out of the way. In regards to the cancellation like I'd take it but there would forever be an asterisk over the results in my mind i.e. I didn't earn it."

"To proceed with the exams as I feel like this is the only way that can truly justify what we get and what we have been working towards for the last 2 years"

"House exams/class tests were always viewed as existing for students to make mistakes and acknowledge them for the real examinations, making it unfair for a final grade to be judged from them. We've always been assured the only exams that matter are the actual Leaving Certificate exams."

"Junior Cert/Cycle students such as myself have been studying for this exam for the past 3 years. We have already completed parts of this exam throughout those three years in the form of CBAs and Projects. Not only would those 3 years studying be wasted, but the time and effort put into those Projects and CBAs and the grades already acquired through them would also be wasted."

SURVEY RESULTS

2. Answered "Option 2" as First Preference

A total of 27,886 respondents, equating to 59.97% of all surveyed, chose the cancellation of exams and use of a predicted grading model as their first preference. 24,182, of students expanded on this choice concluding that they felt due to the serious nature of the current global crisis this was the most appropriate proposal to follow. The huge increase of stress caused by this international pandemic and the loss of invaluable time in school had tremendously influenced their decision-making.

Notably, the consensus of respondents choosing this option as first choice in Junior Certificate, felt that the Leaving Certificate should take precedence and therefore the Junior Certificate examinations should be cancelled indefinitely to accommodate the Leaving Certificate contingency plan as a priority.

The following consists of sample responses randomly selected from the ISSU State Examinations 2020 survey :

"Would serve students best interests and wellbeing. With the upheaval going on right now leaving cert students have the added stress of uncertainty during a period where they would be understandably anxious already, pandemic or not. Going ahead with exams would not only put their health at risk but also would not be fair to students having missed out on a whole semester of learning in school."

"I think that the exams should follow a predictive grading model because I think now that we are missing time in school the past few weeks it is harder to learn new materials for our exams in June. If the exams were to follow a predictive grading model it would definitely take a lot more stress off of students because in my personal experience of the past two weeks although I am doing all my work, I still find it difficult to try to understand new information. If the exams were changed it would also show work from people over the last 3 years rather than somebody who only put effort into their exams."

"I chose to cancel the exams and to follow a predictive grading system as I feel it would be too much stress going into an exam after being absent from a school environment for so many weeks/months. Although remote learning is proving to be working, nothing is as effective as a topic being fully explained to you as a teacher in a classroom environment. A student's results and effort from past exams should be beneficial to provide a grade to students."

SURVEY RESULTS

"I have chosen predicting results because it is more suitable for the situation the students of this year's leaving certs are going through. For example not being in school has affected our learning. I haven't even finished my biology business or English courses and learning it over computer instead of learning in class is not the same"

"I feel that Junior cert should be cancelled as although people may disagree, it is only a state exam put in place to help students transition into a more serious working environment. I feel that all priorities should be put onto leaving very students and final college year students. I truly believe that extra hassle can be diverted by ignoring the junior cert. you can bring bias opinions into view as well. Of course I would like to not sit an exam and this may seem like a one sided argument but I do think that focus should not be distributed between all years and it should all be directed towards leaving cert students"

"Under the current circumstances I feel as though predicted grades are the only option which is fair on students. I don't see that it will be safe to hold the exams in June due to the current pandemic. I also know that so many of us have been working non stop for the past 2 years and are physically and mentally exhausted. To drag the whole process past June until as late as August or September would be absolutely heartbreaking. I also know that if the exams are postponed until the autumn, I won't be in the financial position to start college this year. Due to the competitive points system I wouldn't be able to work over the summer as I'd have to study and therefore I'd have no savings to be able to afford to go to college. This would force me to take a year out and I'm sure there are many other students in the same position as me. By giving us predicted grades we would be rewarded for our hard work to date and we would be able to take up our college places in September just like any other year."

"Currently not in a learning environment that is fair and equal for all. Not being in a school setting is detrimental to leaving cert studies and hence results. The lockdown for all along with the sickness and deaths of friends and family members is widespread and affects almost all students' motivation , work ethic and general wellbeing. Holding the exams later in the year would never work in my opinion as schools will not be running during the summer and being out of school for that length of time and expected to arrive at school to do your Leaving Cert is in my opinion wrong. A weighted balanced and fair system of judging students based on junior cert, fifth year and sixth year results along with DATS results and teachers comments would be most appropriate in my opinion"

SURVEY RESULTS

"The corona virus is not going to stop suddenly for our exams it will take a while it would be better to get predicted marks as we have already done out mocks"

"because junior cert is not a very important exam compared to leaving cert.they should focus on the leaving cert this year"

"There is a huge risk of further spread of the virus if we go ahead with these exams.Teachers should have a fair idea of what their students will be getting on the LC based on class tests and mocks. Students are also going through a lot of stress and this would be very relieving."

3. Answered "Option 3" as First Preference

A total of 6,936, or 17.17% of students chose the option of deferring examinations to a later date as their first preference. Out of the 6,671 written responses given, students felt that they wanted to proceed with examinations later in the year to accommodate for lost time due to the COVID-19 guidelines. These responses focused on the need to allow hard working students the opportunity to be fairly tested on their own merit but at a delayed date to accommodate the impact of the current national crisis.The following consists of sample responses randomly selected from the ISSU State Examinations 2020 survey :

"Rescheduling the exams, in my opinion, is the fairest way to go. Non-deserving students have already been handed full marks in orals and practicals which is very upsetting to hard working students. By allowing the exams to go ahead these hard working students will still be given the opportunity to feel that the work that they have done over the last two years will not end in a teacher saying "I think you would've gotten this grade. Personally I think students should sit the exams to know that the grades they get are the grades they are capable of and not just a prediction. Perhaps, to increase fairness further, options to sit another exam may be introduced, for example the option to resit maths could be extended to all subjects where students feel there was not enough time to finish courses."

"I have chosen to reschedule as I really dont think it's fair if they are cancelled completely. Orals have already been cancelled, and i dont think it's fair to cancel them and grade with a predictive grading model as we haven't been doing proper continuous assessment therefore it's unfair to grade me by this as we hadn't done the full course , those grades aren't my best they don't show my capability and that's why i think it's unfair to cancel them completely."

SURVEY RESULTS

"The leaving cert should definitely go ahead as we have been studying for it, I don't think it will be safe for it to proceed in June but i would be disappointed if it was cancelled altogether so rescheduling would be the best option."

"Postponing would be the fairest option as it would give students the chance to catch up but still allow the fairness which is completely missing from predicted grading, something that will work for the minority and realistically will cause absolute uproar as tests are different levels of difficulty etc."

"Rescheduling the examinations will give me the extra time I need to prepare for all my written exams and gives me a chance to ensure I'm aware of all aspects of the course. While always being safe and protected from the current pandemic"

"I chose the third option to reschedule written exams to a later date as my first choice because I feel I need the jc to achieve my goals for my future. Everyone in the years above took part in the jc and I believe it is an important part of the secondary school journey for students to reach they're full potential, as I personally feel the need and want to proceed with the jc at a later date." "I think the exams should still go on because many of us have spent the whole year putting in so much work towards these exams so it would be a shame to put all that work to waste."

"It would not be fair if we have to do the leaving cert in June. Because a student could be going through a hard time in their families with Covid-19 and may not be able to do any work or study at the time. It is also very difficult for all students to finish the course themselves as we need teachers to explain all the material. This way if the leaving cert is rescheduled it will allow each student to study equally and fairly once this crisis passes."

"As we are missing valuable time in school in this very important year I feel it would be most beneficial to reschedule the leaving cert for when it is safe for us all to be back in school and try to catch up on the time we missed"

"I prefer the exams to reschedule to a later date because I believe it could make the exam fair to most people compared to other options, as everyone would be in a proper exam situation safely and would have enough class time to finish all the course."

"I definitely don't want to follow the predicted grading model. because each school had different ways of assessing students' level and each school had done different exams across the years, all those different elements made the final predictions unfair and impossible to compare."

SURVEY RESULTS

4. Answered "Option 4" as First Preference

A total of 2,881 or 7.13% of students selected 'Other' as their first option. 1,512 responses outlined these alternative suggestions. A variety of options were provided with most centering on students being awarded their first choice in the C.A.O, the adjustment and reduction of the state examination papers and the changing of the marking for examination. The following consists of sample responses randomly selected from the ISSU State Examinations 2020 survey :

"Allow the students to be granted their desired points for their first choice course, in my own opinion I believe they will have chosen an achievable points total"

"It should be done online with each section timed to stop someone having time to pull out a book and cheat. This would adhere to social distancing and be a fair assessment unlike predicted grades."

"Students need to be awarded first choice on their CAO as a predictive grading scheme will prove unfair to so many students .Some have fallen on hard times or changed methods to study and it proves so unfair to follow the predictive grading scheme. Students should be ideally awarded or to the best availability, their first choice from the CAO application"

"Predictive grades do not work, the effort displayed in class tests is a mere fraction of a students potential in a real exam situation, class tests are also not marked by a set marking scheme, and most importantly students were not made aware of potential continuous assessment. If exams were to be canceled there is no way around unfairness and the colleges need to start on time next year if this whole thing clears up by then. I don't believe there is a fix all solution, potentially the exams should go ahead with a point deduction on college courses, as students haven't completed all their courses yet. Maybe college admissions should be decided on a case by case basis with interviews or personal letters, these would be an easy fix to the issue of social distancing and good students wouldn't lose out because they did not apply themselves fully for all class exams. No way is perfect but then again we as a society are not in a perfect position."

"Other; proceed with the examinations as normal but give students an extra 25-50 points due to the lost time as people have put hard work into their studies and want to do it in June but we are unable to fully comprehend some subjects without being present in a classroom as only so much can be done online and at home. The 25-50 points would allow for the lower grades we may now get in certain subjects like higher maths and higher Irish which I personally need school to be able to learn properly in these."

SURVEY RESULTS

"I chose others because I think we should still be able to sit out exams next June but to cut out some questions in certain subjects. For example, cut out the poetry question in English, or only ask students to complete 3 long questions in home economics instead of four. Small adjustments like this could take a lot of stress off the leaving cert years and still let them complete their exams on track (all going well that COVID-19 has been controlled) of what they usually are. The department of education needs to take into consideration that a lot of students will need to work this summer to save for college and if the leaving cert is taking place in July or August that will become almost impossible between studying and the actual exams."

"I would like to propose that all junior cert students be graded 15% higher than their mock results with a basic minimum of pass for all and not to be having students stressing and worrying to a further date."

"Teachers should submit to the department of education the areas not covered on the leaving cert course. Students should be offered more choice on the papers and they should not be tested on areas that were not covered. This would be difficult as it will be different for each teacher but it is not impossible. Exams should be as soon as possible so it does not affect the CAO and first years in college."

SURVEY RESULTS

Q4: Have you any other comments you wish to make?

31,049 respondents chose not to submit any additional comments. 9,356 students provided further comments regarding the 2020 State Examinations. The majority of responses reiterated why students picked their first preference option. However, a number of responses highlighted the stress and anxiety caused by a lack of clarification on the current contingency plan.

The following consists of sample responses randomly selected from the ISSU State Examinations 2020 survey :

"Clarification is needed. Students want to know where possible please!"

"Please give students a clear path forward asap because it is adding to our stress levels which is very unhelpful in an already stressful situation."

"Many students perform much better in oral and practical exams than in written and they have focused on this part of the exam for the most part, putting them at a disadvantage to the student whose oral skills in a language are weak yet they can rote learn pages without understanding it. Cancelling these exams didn't benefit students re exams as even though the grade is individual to a student, we cannot help but notice that every year a bell curve must be followed. If anything, this may point out flaws in our education system re diverse ranges of learning and skills that need to be addressed in the future."

"the department of education should seriously consider the effect that the pandemic is having on us students. We already have enough pressure because of our outdated exam system. We have also missed weeks of school which has had a detrimental effect on our education and coursework. The pandemic has put on enormous amounts of pressure on us which is far too much for us teenagers to deal with. This pressure we are facing is like no other exam year and the department should seriously put themselves in the students' shoes. we need to have faith in them in this very uneasy time where nothing is certain."

"Health being our main priority we must have other priorities such as education and not ignore them and tackle them with the same force as we've been using for other matters"

"A decision needs to be made it too stressful"

"Think we need to be told what's actually happening instead of being left hanging for nearly a week before anything is announced regarding exams"

" I just don't see a way that we would be able to adhere to the guidelines.I understand this is a difficult situation and us the students are daunted by not knowing what is going to happen. We are studying and trying to learn to the best of our abilities and we would all like to be rewarded for our hard work."

"I would like to be fully clarified on when the leaving certificate will take place as the not knowing is stressing me out."

THEMES

Three prevalent themes emerged from the survey which were of most concern for the impacted examination year students.

**1. Health &
Safety**

2. Clarity

**3. Quality
Assurance**



THEMES

1. Health of Students, Both Physical and Mental

These are unprecedented times. The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted the nation of Ireland and the health and safety of all is paramount during this time. In normal times, preparation for the state examinations is stressful enough. This year it is now combining with the additional stress associated with the COVID-19 global crisis. Students report feeling anxious and uneasy about this crisis, and uncertainty and disruption to exams is exacerbating this.

There is also grave concern regarding the risk of students with underlying health conditions, who may be placed in an environment that could cause harm to them. This may also contribute to the spread of the virus.

2. Clarity on the Contingency Plan

Students are now just two months away from the planned date for the State Exams, and have already missed a significant amount of class time. Many schools have not been immediately prepared to implement teaching online, while some students do not have reliable access to online resources. These students have been left in limbo, unsure of what to prepare for, while also having parts of courses in various subjects still to complete.

Home environment and health circumstances between student cohorts have also had an impact on revision time for students which has increased anxiety. Students are requesting immediate clarity on whether the examinations will be carried out, and if so how they will be carried out. Weeks of uncertainty have led to countless rumours and media speculation about the issue, leading to further uncertainty not just among students but the whole school community. Students want a clear message and final decision from the Department of Education & Skills so that they can prepare accordingly.



THEMES

3. Quality Assurance

Students need reassurance that a fair and equitable system is put in place to remove bias and reward their diligence and preparation over many years in preparation for state examinations.

It has been noted that there are inequalities and discrepancies with course completion amongst students in this year's examination cohort. In particular, the quality and consistency of online learning and revision has varied between schools. This has been reported in the form of incomplete curriculums' and emerging divisions based resources available to students. Moreover, students have missed valuable contact time in school with teachers.

It is essential that all learners' needs are considered equally. In particular, those with learning difficulties (mental and physical) being solely assessed on written exams may put them at a disadvantage compared to their peers.

Disparities were noted amongst all subject areas, such as in the time frame to complete projects and practical elements in other subjects - which is now considerably shortened. If schools continue to be closed past the 19th of April students who have yet to complete projects, practical and field work will be hugely disadvantaged.



RECOMMENDATIONS

General Recommendations

Based on the comprehensive data, from over 40,000 examination students across Ireland, the ISSU believes the following recommendations should be considered to ensure the effective implementation of a 2020 State Examination Contingency Plan.

From the data provided it is evident that there is differing opinion between the Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate year groups. Due to this we have split the recommendations into three sections.

To finalise and publicise the contingency plan

To ensure that the stress imposed on examination students and all education stakeholders is alleviated, a deadline with a finalised contingency plan needs to be announced as soon as possible. Transparency and clarity must remain a top priority in easing the unparalleled stresses of all students.

Ensure that all students needs are taken into consideration in decision making

The finalised contingency plan must be accessible and as fair as possible to all students across the country. All decisions made must be inclusive of the variety of needs current examination students have. This is inclusive of those who have learning difficulties, those who have not easily accessible online resources, those who have not completed subject course curriculums, those who are repeating, those who are sitting individual exams, those with assignment based subjects and those who have deferred a year.



RECOMMENDATIONS

General Recommendations

Incorporate a 'No detriment' policy

All grading whether predicted or as a result from marking exams should not go below what their overall grade would have been previous to sitting a final exam. This would ensure fairness in all possible contingency plans taking into consideration the impact and disruption of the Covid-19 crisis when awarding/allocating grades.

Ensure special examination requirements are taken into account

Procedures for those sitting individual exams, repeats or currently on a deferral year must be included to ensure the transition to Third-Level is feasible and fair. Students with additional learning needs should also not be put at a disadvantage during this time.

All subjects that include practical, project and field work must be reviewed and treated with fairness

Should schools continue to remain closed, students will lose valuable time to complete project work, portfolios and field studies. The practical / project work involved in all examination subjects across the curriculum should be given the same credit and importance as orals/practicals which have already been announced. A decision on this should be taken with student and teacher input, as subjects have different deadlines and some may be more affected by the current crisis than others.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Leaving Certificate

First preference contingency plan based on Leaving Certificate student feedback

1. *Cancel all examinations and follow a detailed predicted grading model.*

Continuously noted throughout the survey respondents, focused on the prioritisation of the health and safety of all students during the COVID-19 pandemic. In such an unprecedented time of uncertainty, students felt strongly that the fairest and safest contingency plan to follow would be to cancel all state examinations. Students felt this proposal was the most fitting in keeping to the current Health Services Executive guidelines on the Coronavirus pandemic.

In order for this recommendation to be successful a clearly outlined procedure for predictive grading needs to be established for students, teachers and the State Examinations Commission. In achieving this the procedures for how a predicted grade is awarded must be clearly outlined.

Students commented that a predicted grade solely based on their mock results would not be sufficient and representative of their ability. A predicted grade needs to be a culmination of the work and assessments they have completed over the course of the examination curriculum, not an individual exam. As the Department of Education and Skills announced the awarding of full marks for all language orals and music practicals clarification is required as to whether this is to be added to a predicted grade for the written elements of those subjects. If so, considerations and review for awarding of marks needs to be considered for ALL subjects that contain practical, project or field work to ensure consistency throughout grading.

Second Preference contingency plan based on Leaving Certificate student feedback

2. *Proceed with the written examinations in June 2020, adhering to social distancing guidelines in main examination halls and ancillary examination venues.*

Provide for additional examination venues and invigilators to support HSE recommendations to protect the health and safety of the school and local community.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Junior Certificate

First preference contingency plan based on Junior Certificate student feedback

1. **Cancel all examinations and follow a detailed predicted grading model.**

The reformed Junior Certificate continuous assessment models allows for a structured framework to cancel all examinations and follow a predicted grade model. Junior Certificate Students surveyed noted that priority should be given to the Leaving Certificate Examinations.

Second preference contingency plan based on Junior Certificate student feedback

2. **Defer exams to a later sitting (July/August).**

Again, students empathised priority focus should be given to facilitate the Leaving Certificate Examinations results over the Junior Certificate. Respondents noted that social distancing guidelines could be easier facilitated if the Junior Certificate was detached from the Leaving Certificate examination timeline.



CONCLUSION

Students are entitled to clarification on how the Class of 2020 will proceed with all elements of State Examinations. This period of uncertainty has brought about unprecedented levels of anxiety and stress during vital revision weeks in the midst of a National Emergency and a Global Pandemic.

Students recognise that the State Examinations should not proceed as they always have, and flexibility should be given to allow the system to adapt to this situation. Additionally, students surveyed recognise the nuances and weighting differences between the State Examinations - Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the contingency plans should reflect this.

The Junior Certificate lends itself to a predictive results model and should this not be available, the Junior Certificate should take place at a later date this Summer to give priority to Leaving Certificate and Leaving Certificate Applied students. In the case of the Leaving Certificate and Leaving Certificate Applied; two main proposals are put forward - a similar predictive results model or accommodating the examinations following strict social distancing guidelines outlined by the HSE, while also taking into account the immense stress and lack of school time students are facing in these times. .

The Irish Second-Level Students' Union thanks all member schools and students' who responded to this survey and contacted us over the past number of weeks. Crucially, we also thank the Department of Education & Skills and the State Examinations Commission for the inclusion of the voice of the students during Departmental briefings on this and other matters.

APPENDIX

1. ISSU State Examinations Survey

ISSU State Examinations 2020 Survey

The ISSU is seeking the views and opinions of all current exam students on the 2020 State Examinations.

* Required

Email address *

Your email _____

Please note your email address is required to validate your submission and prevent duplication. All email address will be discarded on closure of the survey.

What year are you in ?

Leaving Certificate

Junior Certificate

Other: _____

APPENDIX

1. ISSU State Examinations Survey continued..

Out of the following options can you rank from 1st to 4th which option would be most suitable for the 2020 State Examinations? *

	First choice	Second Choice	Third Choice	Fourth Choice
Proceed with the written examinations in June 2020, adhering to social distancing guidelines.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Cancel all exams and follow a predicted grading model	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reschedule exams to a later date (July/August)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Can you explain why you have chosen the particular option as your preferred first choice? If you chose "Other", can you please specify your proposal?

Your answer

Have you any other comments you wish to make?

Your answer

***"Uplifting, Defending and Representing Student
Voice"***

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