Friday 13th 2020

Dear xxx

The Department has no authority to direct HEIs on how they respond to course disruptions arising from the Corona virus. While ITE courses are particularly vulnerable to this disruption, they are not unique in making use of placements and it may be that other faculties, such as medicine, have already looked at this problem and come up with a response? If so, there would be obvious benefits in adopting a consistent approach within each HEI, and better yet, across all NI HEIs (if that is can be agreed quickly).

The Department would always recommend that your primary focus should be on following any guidance issued by the PHA and prioritising the health and well-being of your students and staff.

Notwithstanding this position, there are a few obvious issues which we feel HEIs would need to consider in deciding how they will react to Covid-19:

1. Current Practice – How do you currently react to a student whose placement is disrupted by illness?  If they are currently always required to make up the missed days before they can successfully complete their year’s studies, that is a valid starting point from which to consider your response to Corona virus absences.  Certainly, any inconsistency between a student missing two weeks now due to measles and one missing two weeks in April due to Corona virus is an obvious point of challenge which you would need to be able to respond to.
2. Our understanding is that each  HEI, as an accredited degree awarding body, is responsible for setting and maintaining the academic standards and quality of their qualifications. While operating within the QAA frameworks, you therefore have autonomy to make a considered determination on whether a post-primary PGCE student who ends up with 23 weeks of placement (rather than 24 as per the circular) had still obtained sufficient knowledge, skills and teaching experience to justify them still being awarded their PGCE:-  or to determine that it was essential that they made up any missed days/weeks. If you consider a small level of disruption does not compromise the quality of the course, you would then need to decide if there would be a threshold to be applied to this special dispensation.  Is one lost week of teaching experience OK but 2 or more unacceptable?  That is an issue which each HEI would need to consider based on its knowledge of its own course and teaching methodology.

DE will not be looking to issue any blanket exemptions to the current requirements of the circular, equally however, particularly if the impact of the pandemic is severe and/or prolonged,  we will not be wishing to place artificial barriers in the way of the Universities/Colleges which would prevent large numbers of students from graduating or moving into their next year of study. In this context, it may be worth noting that the exact wording of DE circular 2010/03 is:

**R2.8 (page 6)** “Students are expected to teach in at least two schools and normally spend the following amounts of time in schools:

– 32 weeks for all four year undergraduate programmes

– 24 weeks for all post-primary postgraduate programmes

– 18 weeks for all primary postgraduate programmes”

I believe that the “and normally spend” wording already gives you the ability to determine that in abnormal circumstances, such as these, you are able to set aside these recommended periods of classroom experience, subject to an assessment of any reduction on the quality and comprehensiveness of the course.

I trust this is helpful. I am , of course, happy to discuss.

Alan Boyd

Teacher Education Team

Department of Education

Rathgael House

Bangor

BT19 7PR

Tel: 028 9127 9926