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FAO All School Principals

Rathgael House
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21 August 2020

Dear School Principal,

INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION (ITE) – SCHOOL PLACEMENTS FOR 2020/21

I am writing to you in relation to the impact that the COVID-19 Pandemic may have on school placements for BEd and PGCE students in the forthcoming 2020/21 academic year. At the suggestion of representatives of the four Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) here in Northern Ireland, the Department of Education has facilitated discussions between the HEIs and representatives from the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the Education Authority (EA), the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), the General Teaching Council (NI) (GTCNI) and the Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers (NI) (UCETNI).

In these discussions, the four HEIs / ITE providers outlined the plans they have in place to adjust their programmes, should school placements be affected by the Pandemic at the beginning of the 2020/21 school term. I expect many of you will already be aware of these plans through your own initial discussions / consultations with the HEIs, however I have provided, in the attached **Annex**, a summary paper outlining each of their current plans in relation to the timing of placements and also their intentions in respect of tutors' assessments within the school setting. As you will see, the HEIs intend to 'push back' placements until at least the end of October or early November 2020, and they have highlighted that these arrangements will only take place subsequent to continued consultation and agreement with the schools concerned.

In addition, I should make you aware that the Department has set up a Working Group with colleagues in the education sector (including the HEIs, CCMS, EA, ETI, GTCNI, UCETNI and practitioners) to consider the implications of these placements not being made available for an extended period beyond the initial couple of months of the first school term of 2020/21. This Working Group has already met on one occasion (28 July 2020) and will continue to meet on a regular basis over the coming months to agree a way forward, taking into account the ever evolving situation with COVID-19.

Contingency plans ('Plan Bs') are being developed by each of the HEIs in case further adjustments need to be made to ITE programmes. These will be discussed within the Working Group and a consensus will be agreed should they need to be implemented. In the event of further spikes in COVID-19 infections, consideration may also need to be given to relaxing those requirements which have underpinned ITE programmes in recent years. However, all partners agree that it is not necessary to take this step at present.

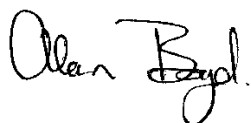
ITE providers will stay in regular communication with schools, and will adapt placements and be responsive to the changing needs and priorities of schools as and when required. Schools are seen as full partners in the design and delivery of ITE, and the Pandemic could represent an opportunity to forge even closer working relationships.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your continued efforts with regard to facilitating student placements. I know you appreciate the critical importance that teacher placements have in the BEd and PGCE programme, especially in enabling student teachers to gain the necessary skills and competences required before they are deemed suitable for entering the profession as a qualified teacher. This year's student teachers will have unique skills in terms of distance and on-line learning, which are likely to provide significant benefits to schools, in addition to the mentoring and other support they have always provided. The HEIs will, in discussion with schools, carry out robust risk assessments before sending student teachers into schools. You can be reassured that the HEIs will make every effort in working with schools to ensure that student teachers can participate safely in school life.

I trust you will therefore continue to make every effort to accommodate student teacher placements within your school (where you have been requested to do so) in line with the agreed Partnership Model for teacher education (as set out in the Teacher Education Partnership Handbook¹), whilst of course adhering to the New School Day Guidance² published by the Department.

If you have any queries or would like to discuss any issue on this matter further, please contact me at Alan.Boyd@education-ni.gov.uk.

Yours sincerely,



ALAN BOYD
Head of Teacher Education Team

Encl.

¹ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/teacher-education-partnership-handbook>

² <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-re-opening-school-guidance-new-school-day-revised>

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) Providers – Comments on Placement of Student Teachers for 2020/21 Academic Year

Timing of Placements

Queen's University Belfast

In Semester 1, our two-week September Primary placement has been cancelled, however, it is our intention to place our PGCE students in Post-Primary schools for 11 weeks of placement (School Experience 1) beginning 2nd November 2020. In Semester 2, a further 11-week placement in schools (School Experience 2) is planned to begin 1st March 2021. If Government restrictions on school opening are re-introduced the length of placements may need to be revised, in consultation with the Department of Education and General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland. We would hope, however, that our students could contribute to online teaching environments even in the event of school buildings being closed.

St Mary's University College

We would hope to place BEd students for one day in school in the first Semester to orientate themselves to the school in which they would complete their block placement later in the year. Normally, BEd placement usually begins in phases beginning shortly after the Christmas vacation and will continue through to Easter. It is our current position that we will schedule blocks of placement to begin later into the second term, with a view to providing periods of time in school as close to normal practice as the situation will allow. In some instances, this may mean taking some periods of time after Easter.

For PGCE students, the situation is obviously more complex and so we will liaise closely with the Irish Medium school community to determine mutually agreeable ways in which to support the professional learning and development of students.

Stranmillis University College

In Semester 1, BEd students would usually undertake a series of day visits with Year 3 additionally undertaking a full week in a special school setting. In Stranmillis, we will be keeping placements under review in line with government guidelines and are currently planning for limited day visits in Semester 1 for BEd students if at all possible. Semester 2 block placements for BEd may be postponed until later in the term, in consultation with schools and in response to the emerging situation and current government guidance.

As the PGCE is a one-year programme we plan to provide all placements for these students as usual through both semesters. All placements will be fully risk assessed.

Ulster University

The course team intend to offer two blocks of teaching experience (School Experience 1 and 2) perhaps, with the application of agreed discretionary flexibility, for a total of 19 weeks for primary and 21 weeks for post-primary courses across Semesters 1 and 2 of the 2020/21 academic year, punctuating the blocks of university-based teaching.

It is proposed that the first placement will take place in later October and early November subject to school partners agreeing to appropriate and University approved risk assessment.

Assessment of Placements

Queen's University Belfast

As part of the support and assessment of our students on placement, Queen's University tutors will, where possible, aim to visit student teachers in schools according to usual practice and in accordance with Government guidance regarding health and safety. We are, however, aware of the need for flexibility in the 20-21 academic year and so alternative methods of support and assessment are being explored for situations where it is not possible to conduct in-person tutor visits.

St Mary's University College

Normal practice is for College tutors to visit schools for the purposes of assessing students in the second term, during the block placements. We appreciate that schools may not wish to have additional external visitors in order to limit risk. Depending upon how the situation evolves, the College will consider alternative methods in terms of coaching and mentoring students remotely and ensuring that they meet the competence requirements of the General Teaching Council. This would mean that College staff may not necessarily need to visit schools in person.

Stranmillis University College

Assessed visits usually take place during block placements. It is our intention that such assessment will continue if at all possible but this will be subject to consultation with schools, risk assessments being carried out at the proposed period of assessment and the prevailing government guidance.

Ulster University

It is intended that, as far as is practical and subject to ongoing Public Health Agency advice, individual school preference and University protocols, Ulster members of staff will visit students in person on placement. Ulster staff will be individually risk assessed before any placement visits in person are permitted. In the event of further waves or developments in the COVID-19 pandemic, Ulster will consider alternative methods for placement visits and remote support and mentoring of students.