

"The Class of 2020": The experience of Leaving Certificate students during COVID-19 in Ireland



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Table of Contents

	<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>ii</i>
	<i>List of Boxes</i>	<i>ii</i>
	<i>List of Tables</i>	<i>ii</i>
	<i>About the Authors</i>	<i>iii</i>
	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>iii</i>
	<i>Executive Summary</i>	<i>iv</i>
1.	<i>Introduction</i>	<i>1</i>
2.	<i>Aims and objectives</i>	<i>2</i>
3.	<i>How was the study conducted?</i>	<i>2</i>
3.1	<i>Study Design</i>	<i>2</i>
3.2	<i>Measures/data collection</i>	<i>2</i>
3.3	<i>Data analysis</i>	<i>3</i>
4.	<i>Key Findings</i>	<i>4</i>
4.1	<i>Profile of participants</i>	<i>4</i>
4.2	<i>The 2020 Leaving Certificate experience</i>	<i>4</i>
4.2.1	<i>Preferred LC options and views/feelings about the LC cancellation</i>	<i>4</i>
4.2.2	<i>Views and perceptions of calculated grades and distance learning</i>	<i>8</i>
4.2.3	<i>Perceived impact of calculated grades on access to Third Level Education</i>	<i>12</i>
4.3	<i>Health and wellbeing</i>	<i>16</i>
4.3.1	<i>COVID-19 experience and its reported impact</i>	<i>16</i>
4.3.2	<i>Self-reported health and wellbeing</i>	<i>16</i>
	<i>Overall Wellbeing (WHO-5)</i>	<i>17</i>
	<i>Mental Wellbeing (WEMWBS)</i>	<i>17</i>
	<i>Perceived Stress</i>	<i>17</i>
	<i>Coping/resilience</i>	<i>18</i>
	<i>Academic Motivation</i>	<i>18</i>
	<i>'Class of 2015' versus 'Class of 2020' - wellbeing comparison</i>	<i>19</i>
4.4	<i>General reported concerns about the pandemic</i>	<i>20</i>
5.	<i>Discussion/conclusion</i>	<i>24</i>
6.	<i>References</i>	<i>29</i>
7.	<i>Appendices</i>	<i>32</i>

List of Figures

Figure 1	Type of school	4
Figure 2	Leaving Certificate preferred option	4
Figure 3	Feelings about cancelled Leaving Certificate	4
Figure 4	Feelings about calculated grades	8
Figure 5	Perceptions of teachers' marking	8
Figure 6	Perceived effectiveness of distance teaching and learning methods during lockdown	8
Figure 7	Impact of social distancing on wellbeing	16
Figure 8	Impact of school closure on wellbeing	16
Figure 9	Impact of staying at home on wellbeing	16
Figure 10	Overall wellbeing	17
Figure 11	Mental wellbeing	17
Figure 12	Perceived stress	17
Figure 13	Resilience/coping	18
Figure 14	Academic motivation	18
Figure 15	A comparison of wellbeing between 'Class 2015' and 'Class 2020'	19
Figure 16	A word-cloud depicting the most frequently used words in participant responses to the 'current concerns about COVID-19' question	22

List of Boxes

Box 1	How do you feel about the LC being cancelled: Selection of illustrative quotes (n=806)	7
Box 2	Teachers will be fair and balanced in their marking: Selection of illustrative quotes (n=651)	11
Box 3	Perceived impact of the new grading system on your chances of securing your preferred course of study at Third Level: Selection of illustrative quotes (n=654)	15
Box 4	Greatest concerns about COVID-19: Selection of illustrative quotes (n=738)	23

List of Tables

Table 1	Summary of scale scores	18
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Executive Summary

Background

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has led to widespread school closures in the Republic of Ireland. Furthermore, due to public health concerns, the traditional-style Leaving Certificate (LC) examinations have been replaced by a system of calculated (or predicted) grades, with the option to sit the traditional examinations later in the year. This has clearly led to considerable uncertainty amongst young people, parents and teachers, but to date, we know very little about the experiences and views of LC students or how they have been faring during the pandemic in terms of their overall health and wellbeing.

Study aims

The principal aim of this study was to assess how the 'class of 2020' were experiencing certain aspects of their lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. The specific objectives of the study were to: (1) elicit the views and perceptions of LC students in relation to the first ever 'alternative Leaving Cert'; (2) investigate the extent to which the current pandemic has impacted their health and wellbeing; and (3) undertake a brief comparison with part of a previous health and wellbeing survey of secondary school students undertaken in Ireland in 2015.

Method

The study involved an anonymous online survey distributed in June 2020 and open to all LC students aged 18 or older. Students were invited to answer a range of questions on their views on the changes to, and potential impact of, the 'alternative LC' as well as completing a number of measures designed to assess aspects of their overall health and wellbeing (including their coping/resilience).

Key findings

- A total of 959 students took part in the study, most of whom were female (74%), of white ethnicity (95%) and from Secondary Schools (67%) located mainly in Leinster or Munster (86%).

Preferred LC options and views/feelings about the LC cancellation

- Almost three-quarters of participants identified calculated/predicted grades as their preferred alternative to the traditional LC.
- A similar proportion was happy, to a greater or lesser degree, with their Leaving Cert (LC) examinations being cancelled, although approximately one-in-four were 'not at all happy' (12%) or 'unsure' (12%) in this respect.
- However, students were equally divided in terms of their positive (51%) versus ambivalent (32%) or negative (17%) feelings about the new calculated grades system, thereby reflecting mixed views.

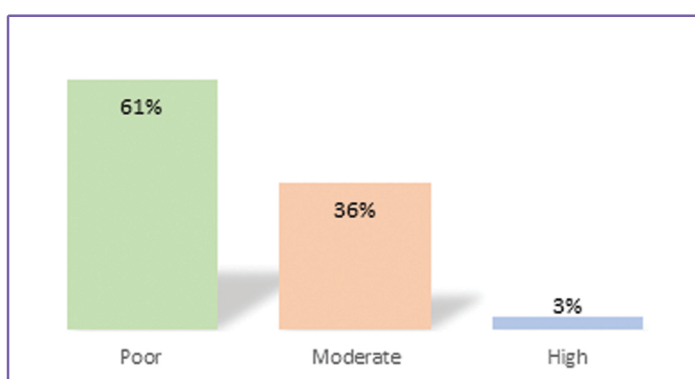
- When asked about the extent to which they believed their teachers would be fair in their marking, almost 6 in 10 responded positively, although approximately one in five believed that teachers would be biased in predicting their marks.

Perceived impact of calculated grades on access to Third Level education

- Approximately three-quarters (76%) of students felt that there would be some impact of calculated grades on securing their third-level place. When asked to elaborate on their responses, 56% of these students felt that the impact would be negative; 22% respectively were positive or unsure/ambivalent.
- With regard to a potentially negative impact, students commented on possible variations in the required number of points for their courses due to the predicted grading method, and also whether or not they would secure a place based on their performance.
- Related concerns were expressed (in about one quarter of responses) around the heavy reliance on the mock exams and in-class tests which some students felt would not accurately reflect their performance and which they believed, would also not take into account any additional study or grinds work which they had completed since schools had closed.

Health & Wellbeing

- Only 5% of students tested positive for coronavirus and approximately one in six (15%) of them reported that an immediate or extended family member had been diagnosed with COVID-19.
- Approximately 8 out of 10 students expressed general and wide-ranging concerns in relation to COVID-19, over half of which were health-related. The findings from our psychometric self-report measures support and amplify this finding; the reported scores on these measures indicate generally low levels of physical and mental wellbeing amongst the sample overall.
- Approximately six in ten (61%) students reported low/poor levels of overall wellbeing (see Figure below).



Graph showing distribution of overall wellbeing scores

- Notably, almost half of the students (46%) who completed the survey reported high levels of depression and/or anxiety. A similar proportion (44%) reported that they were not coping well in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Substantial proportions (43%-49%) indicated that their health and wellbeing had been 'significantly impacted' by school closures (49%) and having to remain at home during the lock down (43%); social distancing was also mentioned as having impacted one in four students to a significant degree.
- Further analysis showed that this cohort of students was faring worse in terms of their overall wellbeing than a similar 'pre-COVID' sample of LC students who were surveyed five years ago. For example, the 'class of 2020' reported feeling significantly less happy, experienced fewer positive emotions and had lower levels of physical health than the 2015 sample.
- Finally, despite all of the challenges associated with the pandemic, almost 7 out of 10 students (68%) remained highly academically motivated.

Conclusion

This study provides important insights into the views and attitudes of a broadly representative sample of LC students, whilst also providing a snapshot of how these students are faring during this unprecedented time. Overall, the findings presented here demonstrate that the ongoing coronavirus pandemic has impacted on all aspects of the lives of the LC students, including their overall health and wellbeing. This has important implications in terms of the support they may require going forward and especially as they enter Third Level education.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted almost 1.6 billion students worldwide (94% of the entire learner population) across almost 200 countries (UN, 2020). In some countries (e.g. Belgium, Cyprus and Australia), schools closed their doors to all students until further notice, whilst others have remained open for children of essential workers (e.g. UK, Netherlands (Hall et al., 2020)). The disruption to education caused by the pandemic is unprecedented and schools across the world have struggled to maintain teaching activities for their students.

The pandemic also resulted in widespread school closures in the Republic of Ireland (from 12th March 2020) and whilst this has undoubtedly affected many children and young people (and their parents), the cohort of students who, arguably, have been impacted the most, are those who were preparing for their Leaving Certificate exams this year. Following the coronavirus outbreak in Ireland, the traditional-style Leaving Certificate (LC) examinations due to take place in June of this year, were initially re-scheduled and planned to proceed on 29th July this year. However, due to continuing uncertainty, the Department of Education and Skills announced the postponement (May 8th, 2020) of the 2020 examinations. Consequently – and for the very first time in the Republic of Ireland – over 60,000 LC students will receive a ‘State Certificate of Calculated Grades’, with the option to sit the traditional examinations later in the year (beginning on 20th November, subject to public health advice). This has clearly led to considerable uncertainty amongst young people, parents and teachers.

Since the COVID-19 crisis began, research has been carried out with school leaders, teachers and parents (Dempsey and Burke, 2020; Devitt et al., 2020; Doyle, 2020) but to date, the students’ voice is absent and little is known, therefore, about their experiences or how they are faring in terms of their overall health and wellbeing at this time. This report outlines the key findings from an anonymous online national survey of almost 1000 Leaving Certificate (LC) students, conducted during June 2020.

Leaving Certificate 2020

How Calculated Grades work



Find out more at gov.ie/leavingcertificate



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

2. Aims and objectives

The overarching aim of this research was to assess how the 'class of 2020' are experiencing certain aspects of their lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. The specific objectives of the study were to: (1) elicit the views and perceptions of LC students in relation to the first ever 'alternative Leaving Cert'; (2) investigate the extent to which the current pandemic has impacted their health and wellbeing; and (3) undertake a brief comparison with part of a previous health and wellbeing survey of secondary school students undertaken in Ireland in 2015.

3. How was the study conducted?

3.1 Study design

This study involved a 'one-time' anonymous online survey delivered using Qualtrics, and administered with the help and support of the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) and the Irish Second-Level Students' Union (ISSU). All LC students aged 18 years of age or more at the time of survey completion (in the Republic of Ireland), were invited to complete the survey, with a view to obtaining a broadly representative sample of respondents. A total of 959 students took part.

3.2 Measures/data collection

The survey comprised a range of questions and brief easy-to-complete measures used to gather information on the experiences and views of LC students during the COVID-19 pandemic and to assess aspects of their overall health and wellbeing as well as academic motivation and resilience. These are briefly described below and all can be found in the appendices.

– Student Profile Questionnaire

This 18-item questionnaire was devised specifically for purposes of this study to elicit brief background information on each participant (e.g. school type and ethnicity). Other questions focused on COVID-19 and its impact on aspects of participants' school-based experiences in the aftermath of the national lock down, including, for example, student' views of their schools' new remote methods of teaching and their concerns about COVID-19.

– WHO-Five Wellbeing Index (WHO-5) (WHO 1998)

This psychometrically robust five-item measure was used to assess students' current wellbeing in the previous two weeks prior to completing the survey. Questions include, for example, "I have felt calm and relaxed". Each item is rated on a 6-point scale from 'At no time' to 'All of the time' and higher scores indicate higher levels of wellbeing.

– PERMA-Profiler (Butler and Kern, 2016)

A total of 12 items from the 23-item PERMA-Profiler were used to assess various aspects of wellbeing including 'positive emotion' (3 items), 'negative emotion' (3 items), 'overall health and happiness' (2 items), 'loneliness' (1 item), 'happiness' (1 item) and 'social support' (1 item). Questions include "In general, how often do you feel joyful?" and "In general, how often do you feel anxious?". This information was used to supplement the information on the WHO-Five Wellbeing Index described above.

– Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWS) (Tennant et al., 2007)

This 7-item scale was used to measure mental wellbeing and is a positively worded measure of thoughts and feelings over the past two-week period; it includes statements such as; "I've been feeling relaxed" and "I've been feeling close to other people." Participants respond on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 'none of the time' to 5 'all of the time'.

– Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) (Cohen, 1988)

This well-known 4-item scale is used to ascertain perceived levels of stress during the previous month. Participants are asked questions such as: "In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?" Responses range from 0 'never' to 4 'very often' and again, higher scores are indicative of greater levels of perceived stress.

– Brief Resilient Coping Scale (BRCS) (Sinclair and Wallston, 2004)

In order to assess levels of adaptive coping, this brief (4-item) measure was utilised. Items are rated on a 5-point scale and include questions such as: "I look for creative ways to alter difficult situations". High scorers are considered to have better levels of adaptive coping.

– Adolescent Academic Motivation Scale (AAMS) (Plunkett and Gomez, 2003)

This 5-item measure assesses overall levels of academic motivation (e.g. respondents' liking of school). Participants are asked to answer questions ranging from 1 'strongly disagree' to 4 'strongly agree' and higher scores indicate higher levels of academic motivation.

3.3 Data analysis

The anonymised questionnaire-based data were imported from the Qualtrics platform into SPSS (Version 25) for analysis using a range of descriptive and inferential statistics. This study also incorporated detailed semi-qualitative data gleaned from responses to open-ended questions. These were subjected to a summative content analysis, supported with illustrative quotations throughout. The responses to the open-ended questions help to support and amplify the quantitative findings and the two are interspersed throughout the following sections.

The study received ethical approval from the Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Sub-Committee.

4. Key findings

4.1 Profile of participants

A total of 959 LC students, aged 18 or over, agreed to participate in the survey. Most respondents were female (74%), of white ethnicity (95%), and resided in Leinster (59%), followed by Munster (27%), Connacht (10%), and Ulster (4%). Most attended a Secondary School (67%) (see Figure 1), although fee-paying, community and other types of schools (e.g. Comprehensive, Gael Colaiste, and Vocational schools) were also represented.

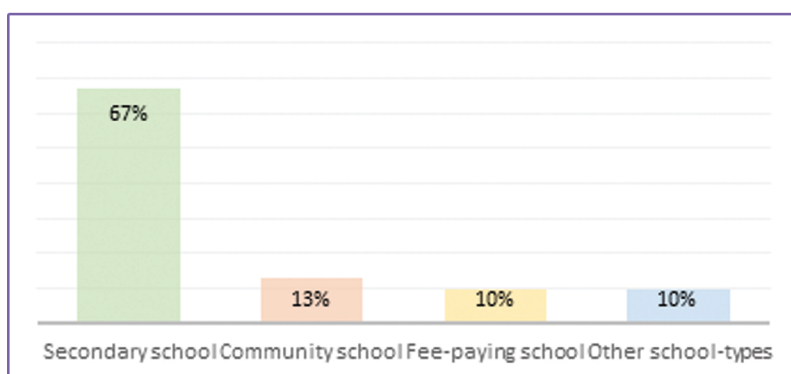


Figure 1:
Type of school

4.2 The 2020 Leaving Certificate Experience

4.2.1 Preferred LC options and views/feelings about the LC cancellation

Almost three-quarters of participants (73%) identified calculated/predicted grades as their preferred alternative to the traditional LC, with a number reporting in their open-ended responses, for example, that 'it was the fairest option at the time' and the 'best option under the current circumstances' (Figure 2). A similar proportion of students (74%) were happy, to a greater or lesser extent, with the LC examinations being cancelled, although one in four were 'not at all happy' or 'unsure' in this respect (Figure 3). Further information from the open-ended responses is provided in the following section.

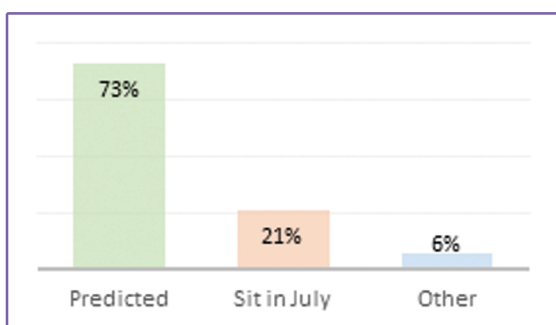


Figure 2:
Leaving Certificate preferred options

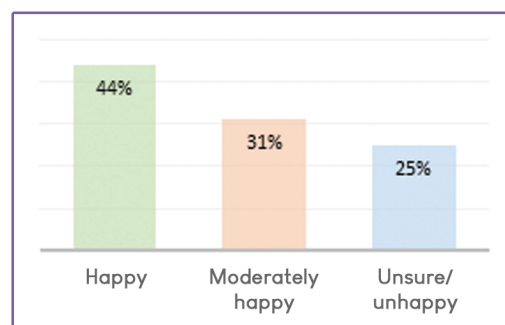


Figure 3:
Feelings about cancelled Leaving Certificate

While most students were happy with the calculated/predicted grades option, a significant minority – approximately one in five (21%, 193/908) – indicated a preference for the planned July sitting of the LC: *'like every other year'* and *'I wish COVID didn't happen and we got to sit the Leaving Certificate in June'*. These students indicated a number of reasons why they would have preferred to sit the traditional LC exams including *'self-actualisation'*, *'a sense of achievement'* and a feeling that the *'future wouldn't be so out of my hands'*. However, some students acknowledged that under the current circumstances, they would not be confident sitting the LC examinations *'in July, let alone January'*. For example, one respondent indicated that they *'wouldn't have been able to cope with the ongoing study... it would have destroyed me and I would've done very poorly.'* Likewise, another student felt that *'extending it (the LC) to August would have been mentally draining and exhausting.'* A third described the predicted/calculated grades as being *'a fantastic idea'*, but that *sitting exams at a much later stage is effectively 'forcing students to skip a year of their lives for nothing'*.

A range of LC alternatives was suggested by students, including in order of preference: university/college admissions exams/interviews/aptitude tests (either on a stand-alone basis or to be used in combination with calculated grades); online school-based assignments; a *'no detriment policy'* (i.e. whereby an attained grade may not be later downgraded); *'modified predictive grading'* whereby students can opt to sit exams for which they believe the grades are lower than expected (albeit there was a general preference for sitting the exams sooner rather than later); and automatic first choice entry to Third Level because, in the words of one student *'we all faced traumatic stress throughout this pandemic'*.

When asked to further indicate how they felt about the cancellation of the Leaving Certificate, almost 90% (806/908) provided a response here, indicating the strength of feeling in relation to the cancellation of the exams. The largest proportion (27%) of responses reflected a strong sense of relief and lower levels of reported stress and anxiety following the official cancellation of the examinations:

"It takes the stress away of not being fully prepared for the exams because we didn't finish all of our courses and had so much material left to cover."

Likewise, others felt as if a *'weight had been taken off'* their shoulders and that the decision had removed considerable stress and anxiety from their lives: *'It takes the pressure off and keeps your mental health stable, because that's what matters most'*.

"Normality would have been ideal i.e. no pandemic, sit exams as normal etc, but in the current situation, I am quite happy with the eventual cancellation of the exams."

Some of the students who were happy with the decision, felt that they will *'likely do better in a predicted system than sitting the exam'* and that the calculated grading system *'rewards'* hard work by students whilst *'the stress of exams has been relieved'*. Approximately one in ten students, whilst happy with the decision, reported still feeling a sense of anxiety around their anticipated results and were *'worried about the outcome of predicted grades'* and felt *'anxious for the results as I have no idea what I'll get'*. Smaller numbers of students specifically mentioned their relief at the continuing *'uncertainty'* having been removed; they were *'glad to have a definite answer and a clear idea of what was happening with the exams'* whilst finally *'getting clarification'* on the subject.

A small number of students also alluded here to the 'distance learning/home schooling' which they felt did not work adequately for them and/or that the home 'working' environment was not conducive to proper study. For one student, *'remote learning was one of the worst things I've had to do'*, and for another, *'online teaching was very difficult'*. Had the LC examinations not been cancelled, students would likely have had to continue with online learning methods which, in the words of one student, felt like *'Google Classroom was getting too much and I couldn't deal with it anymore with distractions and noise at home'*.

The one quarter of students who were either not happy, or who were unsure, about the cancellation of the exams, typically felt that they would be disadvantaged by the predicted grade system, or they felt that they had *'worked extremely hard throughout the lockdown'* and that their teachers were *'unaware of (this) and will never know'* and hence this will not be reflected in their calculated grades/class ranking. Some students also indicated that they had *'started grinds'* following the school closures and felt that this *'won't be taken into account'*.

"I believe I would be able to do much better in the Leaving Cert myself than with predicted grades. Your future is in the hands of the teachers not your hands."

Approximately 6% (52/806) of this group alluded to having *'missed experiences'*, as a result of the LC cancellation. Students who expressed being affected by *'missed experiences'* from the perspective of school completion, highlighted the importance to them of *'school finishing prematurely'* making it *'quite a sudden and unsatisfactory end to the school year'*. Students alluded to missing *'the sixth-year holiday'*, the *'debs/graduations'* and *'making memories with my friends'*. This is nicely summarised by one student:

"I do not mind it being cancelled ...I feel I have done enough to get the predicted grades I want. I just am annoyed I don't get to finish my year and do all the things previous years have experienced. We just didn't get a proper send-off."

Interestingly, these *'missed experiences'* varied in terms of : (1) a feeling that they did not have an opportunity to *'prove themselves academically'*; and (2) a sense of missing out on school completion and all of the normal school experiences (social and otherwise). Some students described it as being *'very anticlimactic'* or having *'no sense of closure'* whilst understanding that *'the government did the right thing to cancel the exams' but being disappointed about not getting 'a normal Leaving Cert year'*. For one student, the cancellation of this year's examinations was a very personal matter, as illustrated by the particularly poignant quote below:

"I feel a sense of failure that I do not get to showcase my hard work and endless hours of studying myself in a way that we have been preparing for since we started secondary school."



Importantly, some students (3%, 22/806) also alluded to feeling a 'loss of control' in relation to the cancellation of the LC examinations. Although the decision to opt for calculated grades did relieve anxiety for some students (to varying degrees), the uncertainty surrounding the outcome of the calculated grades and the attendant inability to control the outcome, was seen as bringing its own anxiety, with a number referring to 'control being taken away' and 'not being able to control what I get in my own Leaving Cert'. At the same time, a small group of respondents who would prefer to have sat the traditional LC exams (in June or July) were happy that 'the stress is gone':

"I wanted the exams to go ahead but now that they are cancelled I'm over it and happy I don't have to stress about them anymore."

Further illustrative quotes are provided below in *Box 1*

Box 1

How do you feel about the LC being cancelled? Selection of illustrative quotes (n=806)

"To not have to sit the most stressful and most hyped exam in Irish history is a huge relief. I am extremely happy that I will receive grades from my teachers whom I trust. What makes this situation better for those who may be worried about the current grading system is that we will have the opportunity to resit any exam that we would like to have done better in. I believe it is a win-win situation. Thank you."

"I think this was the best option considering the circumstances. It gives students the option to pick what is right for them, we can opt for predicted grades or sit exam(s) when it is safe to do so. This is the fairest solution for a situation we had no control over. I believe it is also the best solution for the well being of students as my mental health was deteriorating due to the workload, not being taught properly (my school was sending emails and to do lists) which was very stressful and the thought of having to wait until July was unbearable. This year has been endless enough without adding another month and the stress of worrying about COVID."

"I believe the exams could have gone ahead at the end of July. The virus is under control. Each student has to motivate themselves to study every year. Being out of school doesn't change that. I believe it was just an excuse. The government could have made up for lost time in school and for people who couldn't work at home by marking exams easier."

"I'm glad that we have a final solution but that there is also an option to sit the exams at a later date. The Leaving Cert hanging over my shoulders was really stressing me and weighing on my shoulders."

"The Leaving Cert was something I've dreaded for years. I always knew it was never suited to people like me who are more creative than academic. The Leaving Cert system made me feel inadequate and less than compared to my more academic peers. I was at my lowest points while preparing for the Leaving Cert and I reached a new low I didn't realise was possible once we started online classes. I hated waking up every morning because I knew I'd be bombarded with emails and more work to do. The second I found out that the exams were cancelled, I felt an extreme weight being lifted off of my shoulders."

"I initially felt relief that I wouldn't be exposed to the virus to sit the exams. However, I now feel extremely stressed that my results are completely out of my hands and I miss my daily structure that school provided. I feel like I don't get my chance to show off the work I have put in and I am worried that the fact I didn't sit the Leaving Cert will be held against me for years to come. Although I am confident I will at least get my second choice from predicted grades, I am strongly considering repeating just so that I can sit the Leaving Cert."

"I feel all my work has gone to waste. I have very little hope for my future and no faith in the system. I feel due to this I'm not going to get what I'm capable of in my points and am really disheartened. I was working extremely hard and had a really positive outlook until the exams were cancelled. My mental health rapidly declined and I've been struggling ever since."

4.2.2 Views and perceptions of calculated grades and distance learning

Approximately half of the students felt positive about the calculated grades; the remainder were either ambivalent (32%) or negative (17%) (Figure 4). When asked about the extent to which they believed their teachers would be fair in their marking, almost 6 in 10 responded positively, although almost one in five believed that teachers would be biased in predicting their marks (Figure 5). When asked to reflect on the distance-learning methods used after school closures, 70% believed that they either did not work or had been only average in their overall effectiveness, with fewer than one-third believing that they had worked well (Figure 6).

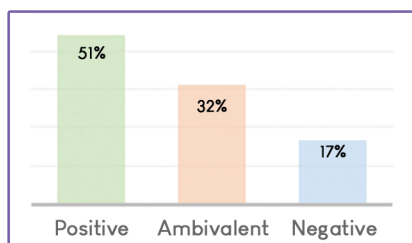


Figure 4
Feelings about calculated grades

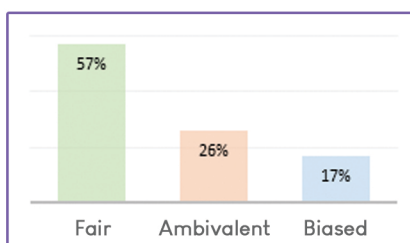


Figure 5
Perceptions of teachers' marking

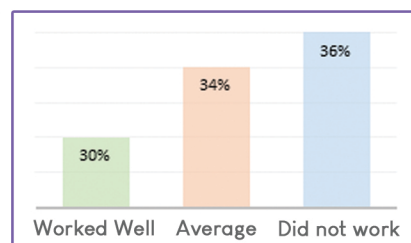


Figure 6
Perceived effectiveness of distance teaching and learning methods during lockdown

The above findings were supported and amplified by a wide range of responses provided by three-quarters of the students (651/908) who chose to explain their answers.

Positive views

Approximately half of these responses (47%, 307/651) were positive overall, with many respondents 'fully agreeing' (n=117) that their teachers would be fair and balanced in their marking as part of the calculated grading system introduced for the first time this year due to COVID-19 (see Box 2). For example, students expressed confidence that their teachers have their 'best interests' at heart and that 'they know best what we are capable of.' Teachers were also described as being ideally suited to 'grade the exams' and 'well capable of providing fair, non-biased results to all students'. The current situation was acknowledged as being difficult for the teachers (as well as students), but also one where teachers were viewed by some as 'trying their best to be as fair as possible for every student's benefit':

"We need to trust our teachers to act fairly and without bias in their marking. I think that although teachers may have favourites, they will be more than capable to remove this from their minds when deciding grades."

One in ten of the responses (n=65) referred to 'teachers as professionals' and as such 'the calculated grades will reflect that'. Overall, students appeared to 'trust their professional opinions' and felt that the teachers 'will do a good job because they are professionals' and because they know their students and their abilities very well. Students expressed trust in their teachers and a belief that all 'teachers will base their predictions on solid evidence and will keep a professional manner in the way they mark us'.

More than one in ten responses (12%) highlighted student confidence (to a greater or lesser degree) in the process (i.e. the two-phase calculated grades process) and/or in their teachers' 'fair and balanced' approach. Some students alluded to the duty of care of teachers to their students which was seen as an important factor in preventing bias and favouritism in the final allocation of grades. The emphasis on 'evidence' or 'proof' was also mentioned frequently in the responses, and this appeared to provide the students with reassurance:

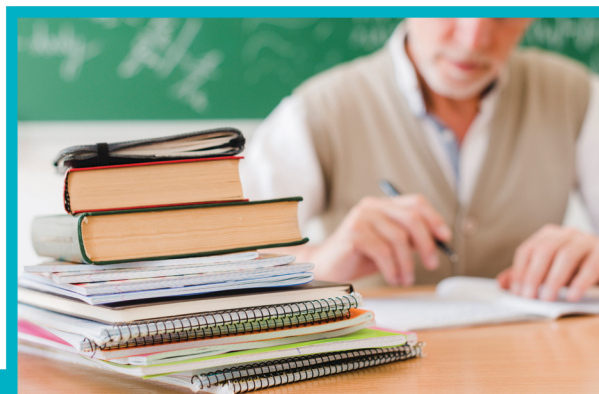
"...as teachers' predicted grades... will be checked by others, so they must have strong evidence as to why they give each student their grades."

"...the national standardisation process will ensure that results are not inconsistent with what they would usually be."

"I feel like teachers will grade them fairly ...the students who worked hard throughout the year will be happy with what they get... can't say the same for those who just don't put in the effort."

Similarly, just over 7% (n=46) of the recorded responses suggest that the concept of 'faith' and 'trust' in teachers was a key consideration for some students. These were recurring words throughout the responses recorded here, as shown by a number of comments: 'I trust teacher's judgement', 'I have faith in the vast majority of my teachers', 'my teachers are fair and honest when it comes to grading... I trust them', and 'the teachers are trained professionals... I have grown to trust them and believe they will be fair'. One student had the following thoughts in response to the fairness of teacher marking in their school:

"I trust the teachers from my school as they make sure everything is done as fair as possible. It's part of the reason why I felt comfortable with the predictive grades idea."



Negative views

By contrast, 25% of responses (n=165/651) contained more cautious or negative views (see Box 2) (3% were neutral). The largest proportion of these (42%, 69/165) reflected a perception that there would be a strong element of bias associated with the teachers' marking scheme. For example, a number of students felt that, for certain teachers, bias was *'inevitable'* and *'that it is terrifying'*. Other students felt that teachers will find it difficult to dissociate from being biased in their marking approach because essentially *'teachers are humans and as such bias is unavoidable'*:

"If a teacher doesn't like me, she will be inclined to give a person who she does like, a better percentage above me, which increases my chance of going down a grade when the bell curve is introduced."

Other students (8%) believed that while teachers may strive to be fair, *'bias may be a factor'* despite their best intentions. For example, students here expressed the view that for *'a small minority of teachers'* there could be *'the potential for bias'*, whilst at the same time acknowledging that *'most teachers will be as fair as possible but bias will probably be hard to avoid'*.

"One can only hope that the majority will act in a professional way, however in small rural communities like mine where many teachers would know students outside of school or possibly be related to them, it might mean some bias in some case."



A similar proportion (n=45) believed that there was *'favouritism in the classroom'* that would unduly influence their teachers' approach to the calculated grades. One student wrote: *'as much as we were told about teachers being fair, I do think that teachers have their pets'*, whilst other students described favouritism as being *'a big issue'* and one that will result in it *'being hard for teachers to ignore favourites and give a balanced grade'*. This favouritism, some students felt, could be manifested by teachers *'bumping up a grade'* for a student whom they know needs a *'certain grade in a certain subject'* in order to achieve their preferred Third Level course.

Box 2

Teachers will be fair and balanced in their marking: Selection of illustrative quotes (n=651)

"Most teachers have either taught students for 6 years or 2. In this time, they have been able to build their own opinion on the capabilities of each student. They will have to follow guidelines when completing the predictive grades. It's not just one teacher who makes the decision - many teachers who teach the same subject will verify grades as well and the principal."

"It's impossible to avoid bias when you're grading the very students you have taught for the last two years. The students are no longer just a number to the corrector/examiner."

"My mother is a teacher and therefore I can see first-hand that the vast majority of teachers are extremely professional and care very deeply about their students. I think that a lot of the comments being made about teachers awarding marks based on how much they personally like a student (etc) are coming from people's own fear that they have not worked hard enough, and I think it's unfair to place all teachers into the same box based on some people's bad experiences. What kind of society are we living in if we can't trust teachers to do their jobs? Besides, this type of continuous assessment must become more commonplace to create a fairer education system. The Leaving Cert is a glorified memory test that doesn't suit everyone."

"While I believe teachers will try to be fair, it is only natural that this system will lead to some amount of bias which only a completely anonymous exam like the Leaving Cert can eliminate. I do believe that there will be trade off this year, however it's worth it."

"I believe that teachers will be fair as they are being held accountable through a number of stages. Teachers will have to confer with each other in regards to the results they have given to students. Also, they will have to provide evidence of where they came to this final result by looking at student's homework, class tests etc. As well as this there is an appeal process which encourages fairness."

"I believe that we need to trust our teachers to act fairly and without bias in their marking. I think that although teachers may have favourites, they will be more than capable to remove this from their minds when deciding grades."

"Despite what people say, teachers have students they love and students they hate. And in my opinion, our principal is quite biased."

"I didn't have any problems with my teachers. I was respectful of them and they to me. Overall they were sound."

"...Also what if the school decides that this person (e.g. me) needs 500 points and another needs 540. If I get 550 points will they bring me down so they can bring the other person up???? This is really what bothers me!"

4.2.3 Perceived impact of calculated grades on access to Third Level education

Approximately three-quarters of students (76%) believed that the changes to the LC would impact, to a greater or lesser extent, on securing their Third Level place; 27% felt that this impact would be substantial. A similar proportion (72%, 654/908) provided supporting answers to this question, with the vast majority of responses (56%) reflecting negative views or concerns around access to Third Level courses (see [Box 3](#)).

Negative views

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the largest proportion of negative responses or concerns (22%) related to possible variations (when compared to previous years) in the required points for securing Third Level places this year, or obtaining a sufficient number of points required for entry to Third Level. For example, some of the comments were as follows: *'CAO points can decrease/increase'*; *'points may jump'*; *'points for courses may rise dramatically due to predicted grades'*; *'it's impossible to judge whether or not you will receive your desired amount of points'*; and *'I may miss my course by a few points due to the class rankings- my year group is very good academically'*. Students expressed feelings of uncertainty or of being in *'unknown territory'* and as such, they were *'not sure what will happen'* surrounding the eventual outcome in terms of their calculated grades and their associated points, which in turn will affect their ability to secure their Third Level course of choice.



More specifically, a further one in ten students described feeling *'anxious/doubtful'* that they would successfully secure their preferred place at Third Level, given the new grading method. For example, one student wrote: *'I am almost certain I won't get my first choice with my predicted grades'*, whilst another said: *'I will not receive the points I need as I feel this method (predicted grades) affects those seeking higher point courses more than lower point courses'*. Further concerns around *'DEIS schools and school averages'* were also raised by a smaller number of students in terms of successfully securing Third Level places from what are typically considered by some to be less well performing schools.

Fifteen per cent (n=99/654) of the responses highlighted the students' belief that they could have *'potentially performed better'* in the traditional LC examinations when compared to the current system of calculated grades, thereby potentially affecting their overall points total and their first choice CAO course. A number of reasons were indicated here. For example, some

students were *'fearful of not realising their full potential'* under the calculated grading system and that *'calculated grades will not reflect what I would be capable of achieving in my Leaving Cert exam'* as well as the opinion that predictive grading is difficult to *'accurately estimate'*. For some students, the *'pressure'* of the traditional exam system and the ability to *'cram'* along with *'the final push before the real exams and the adrenaline rush - may have led to higher grades'*.

Almost one in ten responses alluded either to *'poor class test and/or mock examination performance'* as potentially impacting upon the students' ability to secure their Third Level place (4%) or their work following school closures as counting for little or nothing in the predicted grades (4%). According to the guidelines issued by the DES (2020), the calculated grading system process incorporates students' past performance in class tests and their mock examination scores. For some students, their primary focus was the LC examination and for them, class tests were not taken seriously - *'they're just tests and don't count towards anything'*; thus, they believed that this would result in poor grades *'because of not passing class exams'*, whilst others regarded grades from class tests as not reflecting their true capabilities. Performance in the mock examinations was generally regarded as something that would be improved upon in the traditional LC exams and especially following attendance at grinds classes. Some respondents expressed concern that any improvements they might have made from extra study, would not be recognised by the teachers or *'taken into consideration'*, and hence would not be reflected in the calculated grades awarded.

"If I were to sit the Leaving Cert in normal conditions, I feel as if I would have potentially scored higher than what my teachers may have expected. I put in a lot of work after my mocks and I'm slightly worried my teachers won't see that."

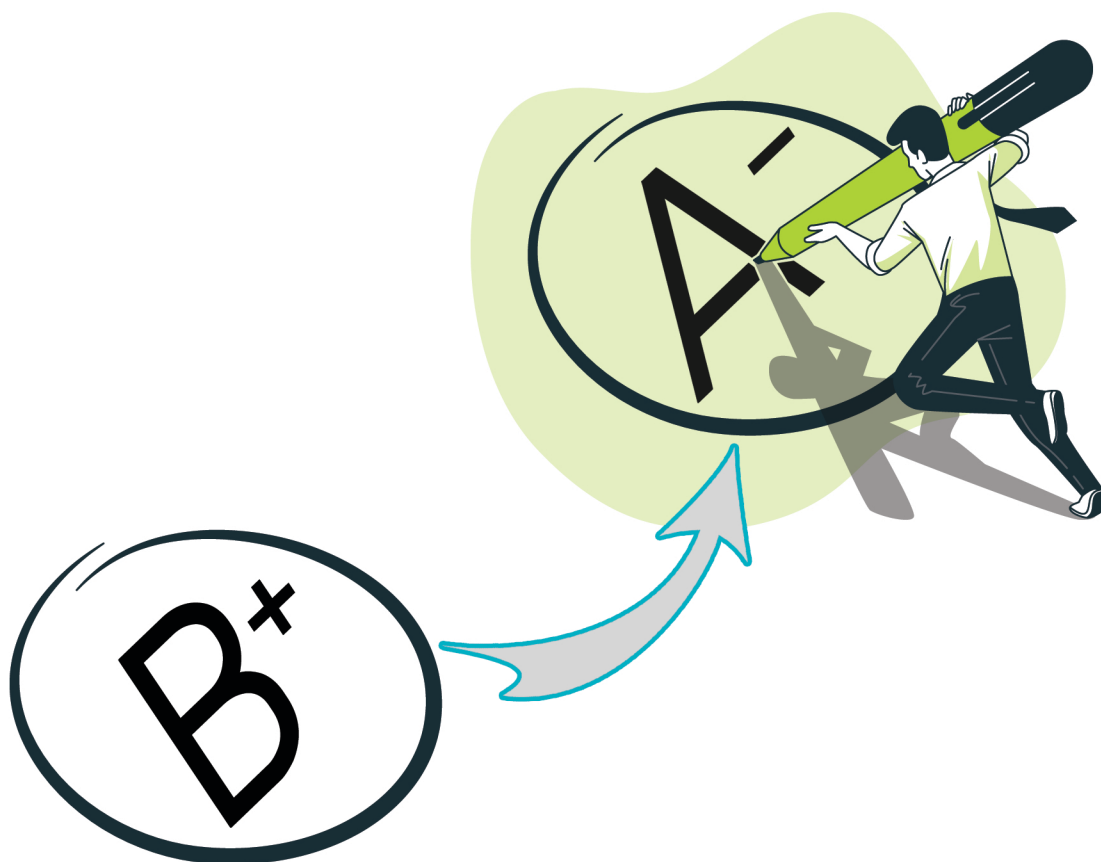


Positive views

Over 22% (n=146) of the responses indicated that the students felt confident that their access to Third Level would not be impacted by the LC changes and that they would secure their course. A number of reasons were indicated here, most of which are also reflected in the responses described elsewhere in this report. For example, some students were confident that the calculated grading would *'be done accurately and fairly'* or that their *'hard work'* over the two-year period in preparation for the LC would be reflected in the calculated grades:

"I believe the grades I have achieved in class tests and assessments throughout the past 2 years reflect accurately the grades I would have gotten if I had sat the Leaving Certificate. I trust the teachers to give fair grades based on this, and I don't think it will affect my chances of getting into college."

Only a very small proportion of students (3%) felt that the new grading system would result in higher marks for them or *'better results than the traditional exams'*. These students described having a *'better chance'* of securing their preferred Third Level course with one student feeling confident that they *'would perform better with a calculated grade model as opposed to sitting the exams - I have been working consistently over the past two years - whereas I have been struggling to work at home during the pandemic'*.



Box 3

Perceived impact of the new grading system on your chances of securing your preferred course of study at Third Level:

Selection of illustrative quotes (n=654)

"I've kept focused and have received the grades I feel like I deserve over the past two years so I don't think predicted grades will have that much of a difference compared to the grades that I may have received if I had sat the Leaving Cert."

"I have always worked more for exams than for classes, and I'm afraid that now that I am being judged on my classwork and past exams, I will not be expected to perform as well as I know I would have."

"I wish to study Medicine and the HPAT exam took place directly after my mock exams. I believe this impacted my study and may have impaired my class performance. In competition with other students who wish to study my second option Physiotherapy, I am at a disadvantage if they have not sat the HPAT."

"It's out of my control. In normal circumstances, I would have still had a lot of time to further improve my grades...while I was working hard all year, I could have greatly improved my grades in the final stretch. Hopefully my teachers will recognise that I hadn't yet achieved my full potential, but we can't be sure".

"After the mocks, I did so many crash courses and Easter intensives and I studied so much to ensure that my final result would be better than my average class tests."

"After putting so much work in during the school closures, my grades would be much higher than the teachers would have seen from me in school. I am aiming for a high points course and I know if I had sat the exams, I would have achieved what I needed. With the predicted grades, I am quite unsure whether I will get what I need or not."

"I know that my average over the 2 years is over 500 points, but I fear that the government may change my grade to a lower one and I won't get the points I deserve."

"I would like to study general nursing and I feel that people have become more aware of the work nurses carry out and would like to make a difference in the future - which could rise the points required for the course."

"My Mother was battling Pancreatic Cancer during my senior year of secondary school and that was when my grades dropped. I only let my Year Head know during the last few months of school when I was feeling bad. My mother passed away and I am very anxious of what the future will hold."

4.3 Health and wellbeing

4.3.1 COVID-19 experience and its reported impact

Most of the student respondents (95%) had no exposure to COVID-19. However, 15% of the sample indicated that they had family members who had tested positive, including grandparents (3%), parents/guardians (2%), siblings (1%) and other extended family members. Reassuringly, there was no relationship between testing positive for COVID-19 and wellbeing ($\chi^2=2.46$, $p>.05$), motivation ($\chi^2=1.82$, $p>.05$), or perceived stress ($\chi^2=.01$, $p>.05$). However, 9 out of 10 students reported that school closures, staying at home and social distancing had all impacted their wellbeing to a greater or lesser extent and, in particular, school closures and staying at home; for example, approximately half reported that school closures had had a 'significant impact' on their wellbeing (Figures 7-9). Likewise, 43% reported that their wellbeing had been impacted to a significant degree from having to remain at home during the lock down (Figure 9).

4.3.2 Self-reported health and wellbeing

In addition to the impact of COVID-19 on the students' future and daily life experiences, we measured various aspects of their general wellbeing, academic motivation and resilience. We also analysed their responses in the context of some of their COVID-19 experiences.

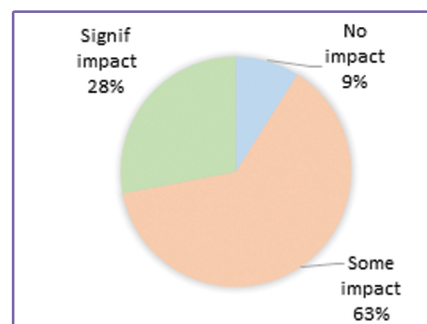
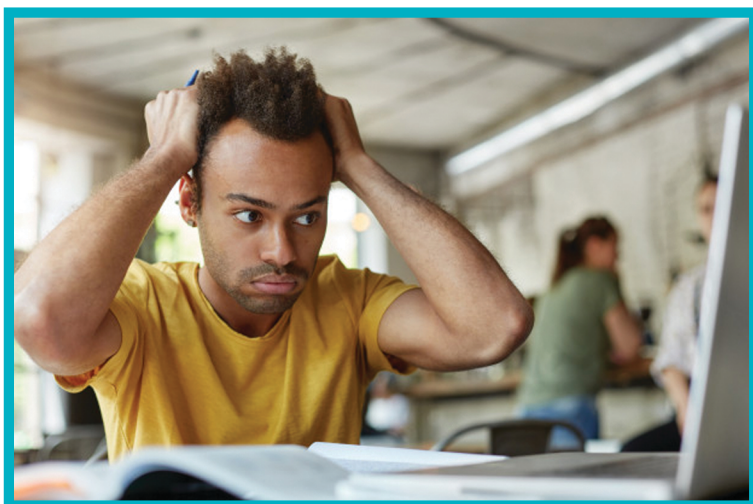


Figure 7:
Impact of social distancing on wellbeing

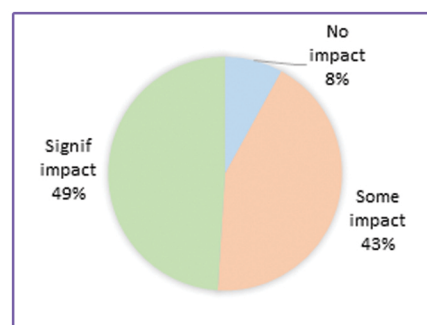


Figure 8:
Impact of school closure on wellbeing

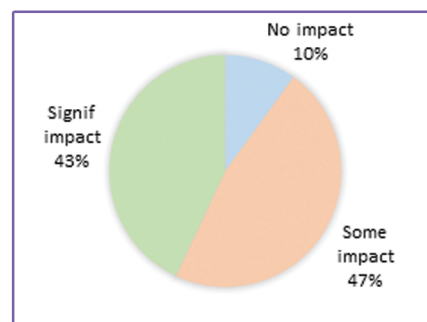


Figure 9:
Impact of staying at home on wellbeing

Overall Wellbeing (WHO-5)

Sixty-one per cent of students reported low/poor levels of overall wellbeing. Only 3% of the 'Class of 2020' reported optimal levels of wellbeing. Further Chi-squared analysis showed that those students who were unhappy or unsure about the LC exam cancellation – or who had mixed feelings – tended to have lower levels of wellbeing when compared with their more content counterparts ($\chi^2=15.04$, $p<.001$). Moreover, those students who believed in fair marking by teachers also tended to report higher levels of wellbeing ($\chi^2=7.14$, $p<.05$).

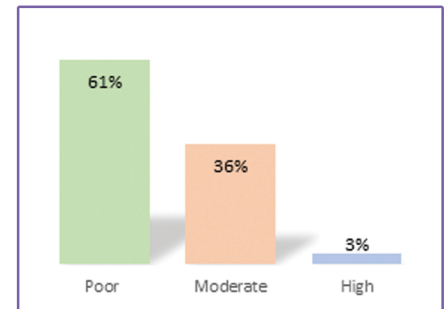


Figure 10:
Overall wellbeing

Mental Wellbeing (SWEMWBS)

Almost half of the students who completed the survey, reported high levels of depression and/or anxiety. Further analysis showed a statistically significant association between reported levels of mental wellbeing and perceptions about calculated grades. Thus, a total of 40% of students who felt negative or ambivalent about the new calculated grades, reported symptoms of depression/and or anxiety, compared to only 21% of students who were more positive about calculated grades ($\chi^2 =50.2$, $p<.001$). No relationship was found between mental wellbeing and students' opinion about the impact of COVID-19 on their access to Third Level education.

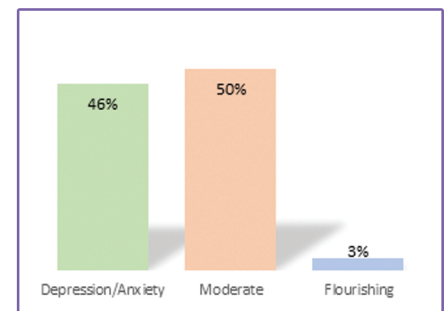


Figure 11:
Mental wellbeing

Perceived Stress

Almost 6 out of 10 students (58%) reported moderate to high levels of stress and more than one in ten had experienced high levels of stress during the previous month. Sixty per cent of those students who were unhappy or unsure about the LC exam cancellation were more likely to experience higher levels of stress, when compared to their more content counterparts ($\chi^2=30.34$, $p<.001$), suggesting that the cancellation may be associated with higher levels of stress in some students.

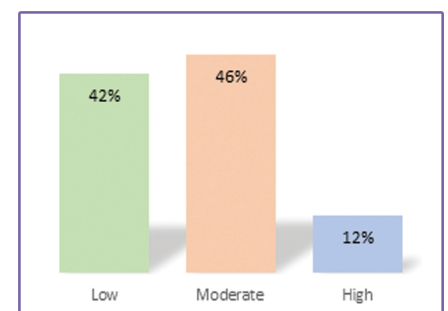


Figure 12:
Perceived stress

Coping/resilience

Despite the reported impact of the pandemic, over half of the students were coping well (either moderately or very much so), although a significant proportion was experiencing difficulties in this regard.

Academic motivation

More than two-thirds (68%) of the 'Class of 2020' were highly motivated despite the COVID-19 situation and its reported impact on their overall health and wellbeing. Reassuringly, only 3% of the participants reported feeling demotivated.

Further Chi-squared analysis showed that students who were unhappy about the LC cancellation, were more likely to be highly academically motivated than those students who were happier about this decision ($\chi^2=9.82$, $p<.001$). Furthermore, 84% of those who believed in teacher fairness tended to be more highly academically motivated, compared to 16% of those who believed that teacher marking would be biased ($\chi^2 = 5.28$, $p<.05$).

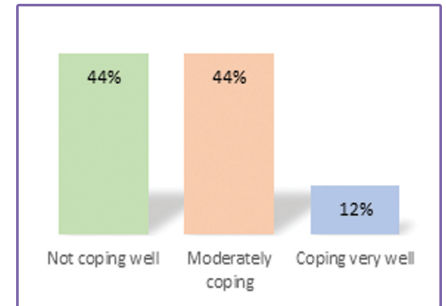


Figure 13:
Resilience/coping

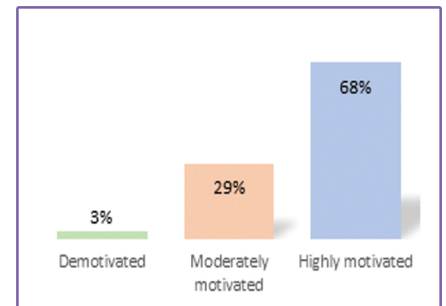


Figure 14:
Academic motivation

The table below shows the descriptive statistics for five of the six measures used in the study.

Scale ¹	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Academic Motivation Scale	958	1.25	5	4.11	0.67
Brief Resilient Coping Scale	955	4	20	13.63	2.64
Perceived Stress Scale	957	1	16	9.04	2.86
SWEMWBS	959	7	35	20.23	3.50
WHO-5 Index	956	0	25	11.09	5.11

Table 1:
Summary of scale scores

'Class of 2015' versus 'Class of 2020' – wellbeing comparison

Five years ago, a sample of 212 Leaving Certificate students aged over 18 – mainly female (69%) – completed the same PERMA measure of wellbeing as was used in the present study. This provided a useful benchmark for comparison with the present study. The findings from the statistical comparison showed that the current sample of LC students obtained generally lower scores on all measures of wellbeing when compared to their counterparts five years ago, but these were marked with regard to positive emotions, levels of happiness and their physical health, thereby indicating that they were faring worse in these respects than Leaving Certificate students who were sitting the traditional exams five years ago (*Figure 15*).

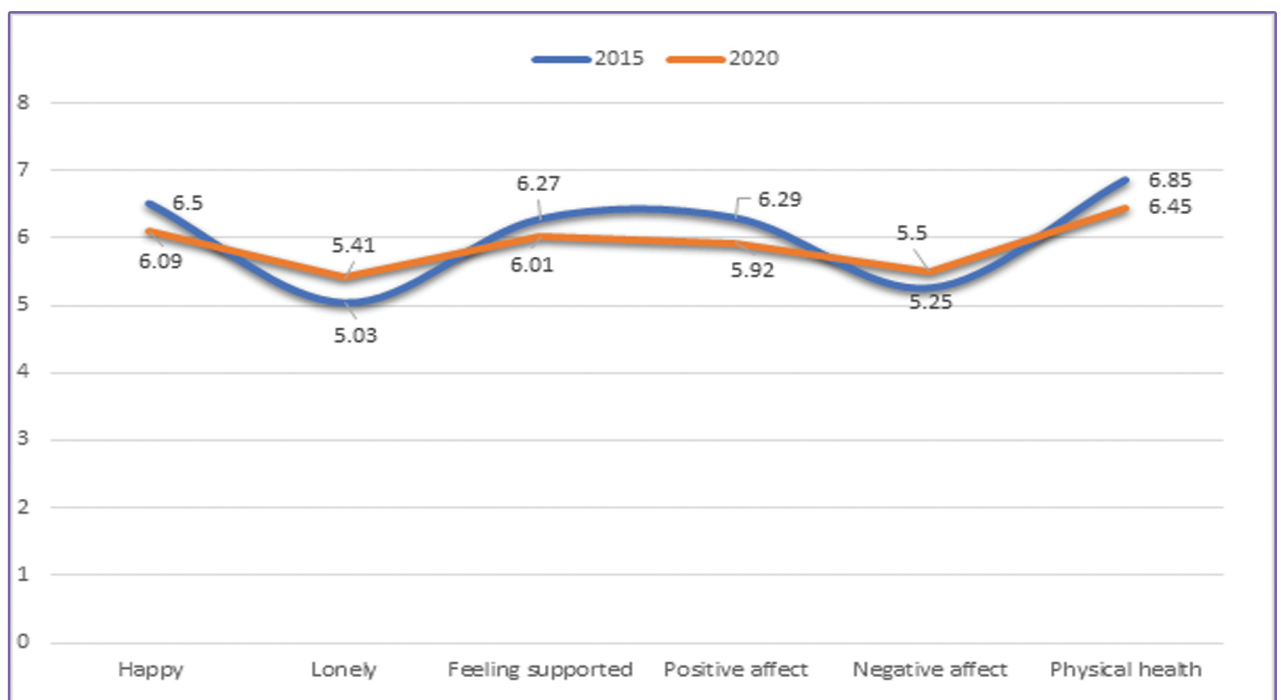


Figure 15 :
A comparison of wellbeing between 'Class 2015' and 'Class 2020'.

4.4 General reported concerns about the pandemic

Health-related concerns

Eighty-two per cent of students (738/908), when prompted, expressed general concerns in relation to COVID-19, over half of which were health-related (*Box 4*). Perhaps unsurprisingly, one third (246/738) reported health-related concerns about themselves and/or their family members contracting COVID-19, or of loved ones dying, as well as fears about the vulnerability of older people in the general population. Almost one in ten alluded to the impact of the virus on their mental health, both their own and that of their friends (5%), and/or on 'friendships and isolation' (3%). For example, the '*loss of social interaction*' and feeling '*isolated from friends*' was frequently mentioned in these responses as well as references to mental health impacts such as '*mental health being seriously compromised by all this isolation and gloom*'.



"Covid-19 and the current restrictions have definitely impacted my mental health negatively, and 'the thing that has affected my mental health the most during this period is the fact that the class of 2020 hasn't gotten closure on our school years. It feels like six years went to nothing really."

"Very tough not meeting any friends for months. Even as we are coming back to normal, there will be many friends who I will not see for a while. This is difficult and texting them is not the same."

"Feeling isolated from friends because they disregard social distancing and precautions while I try to abide by them. I am being judged for following the rules."

Concerns about the possibility of a second wave of the coronavirus were also specifically mentioned by 12% of respondents who alluded to others '*not abiding by the rules*', not being '*able to see ... friends*' and '*messing up our chances of progression in education*'.

Normality, long-term impact, economy and compliance concerns

Some students highlighted their significant concerns in relation to *'normality returning and the fear of uncertainty'* (6%), *'economic implications'* (4%) and *'fear of non-compliance with public health guidance'* amongst the general population (4%). Some examples of the responses included here are as follows: *'How long will this go on for? 'When can life begin to resume again', 'What will returning to normality look like and what will be expected of me', '...the financial recession we are about to encounter', '...people not taking the restrictions seriously...lack of social distancing and rules being broken...'*

Other respondents expressed concerns about the future and long-term impact of coronavirus in terms of how it will *'impact daily life in the remainder of the year'* and its lasting impact on society, in addition to the uncertainty around the future, or in other own words *'figuring out how to navigate everything'* and how to *'live and work with it.'* For one student, the concern about the future and long-term impact of the virus was described as follows:

"Emerging into a new world with new rules and restrictions is unnerving, scary and frustrating at times. Figuring out how to navigate everything concerns me."

Concerns in relation to both accessing and/or experiences of Third Level education were reported by almost one in five (18%) of the students in response to this question. Overall, students expressed concerns about how the pandemic will affect the transition to Third Level. As outlined earlier, concerns about successfully securing their *'preferred college course'* were highlighted, as were concerns about the availability of student accommodation this year due to the current circumstances. The following quote perhaps best demonstrates the broad range of student concerns expressed:

"I'm concerned about going to college, orientation, campus tours etc. I hope that come September all will be normal, however my thoughts lead me to other places, what if all classes will be virtual? What if we have to start in January instead of September? However, I'm sure all of my questions will be answered at some point."

Notably, many students expressed concerns about the nature of their first year experience in Third Level institutions and *'the possibility of having to do college online for first year'*, was a recurring theme. Students described wanting to enjoy *'a normal college experience'* as opposed to experiencing *'university online rather than in a natural environment'*. Examples of some of the questions asked by students here include: *'Will I be working from home for my first year?'*, *'Will I get to move out and experience college life or will I have to stay at home in the countryside'*, and *'Will first year college simply be a continuation of secondary school due to blended learning'*.



As previously mentioned, online learning was not a success for the majority of the LC cohort involved in this study with 70% of the sample overall, feeling that it worked only 'averagely' (34%) or 'not at all well' (36%). This is also reflected in some of the responses provided here; as one student commented: 'I worry about the way colleges will be doing blended learning or online learning, and that it will affect my experiences at Third Level. I had a negative experience regarding online learning when schools closed.'

In terms of the 'overall college experience', students expressed some concerns about missing out on the social aspects associated with traditional Third Level life and how this, in a sense, will not allow them to 'to settle into college in the normal way and experience a normal college lifestyle'. For example, concerns around the effects of social distancing and when will it be safe to stop this practice were raised, but more specifically, its effect on forming 'lifelong college friendships' whilst having to continue social distancing was also mentioned:

"The impact it will have on the social aspect of university life, making friends, living away from home, joining clubs..... especially for us as we will be first years in September."

Other concerns

Other types of concerns were conveyed by one in ten students. These ranged from concerns around 'the length of time before we have a vaccine', LC results and securing a college place, to a fear that the current pandemic may get worse and school-related issues such as 'the Debs going ahead' and the absence of 'proper closure from secondary school'. Missing the traditional celebrations for the LC students or 'season 2020' was also mentioned here. Only a very small proportion (1.5%) indicated that they had 'no concerns at all'.



Figure 16:
A word-cloud depicting the most frequently used words in participant responses to the 'current concerns about COVID-19' question.

Box 4

Greatest concerns about COVID-19: Selection of illustrative quotes (n=738)

“The health of the most vulnerable people, in terms of physical and mental health. I do not want people to feel isolated and unhappy. I also do not want people to continue to contract and suffer from COVID-19.”

“The impact it will have on the social aspect of university life (making friends, living away from home, joining clubs.....) especially for us as we will be First Years in September.”

“A second wave of infection hitting our nation. I think masks should be enforced on transport and in many public areas now to remain safe and we must not forget that COVID-19 is not gone.”

“The public’s health, mental and physical but I want to be selfish and say missing out on my graduation, crying tears of joy finishing the leaving cert, celebrating with my friends on a 6th year holiday and being proud of my results ,everything the graduating 2020 class will now never experience.”

“The prospect of life not really going 'back to normal', as it were, for the foreseeable future. It seems evident that the threat of a second wave of the virus will be ever-present until a vaccine is found. That threat, combined with the challenge of adjusting to the 'new normal' (social distancing, masks, etc), is what concerns me most.”

“How to live with it and work with it. Emerging into a new world with new rules and restrictions is unnerving, scary and frustrating at times. Figuring out how to navigate everything concerns me.”

“My friends with mental illnesses and difficult home life situations are struggling greatly at the moment and they can't lean on their friends or find an escape as they could before. On top of that, I can't push myself to support them like I did since the weight of their problems more easily pulls me down and manifests in my mind when I'm isolated. I've had to distance myself to maintain my mental health which is a more monolithic task in the current circumstances. So, I feel like a crap friend and I'm terrified that my friends are struggling so much.”

“The economy - both in my own private circumstance and globally/nationally.”

“The general public being idiots and breaking all the rules!!!.”

“Isolation and loneliness, even during a regular 3-month summer break triggers my anxiety every year and everything else going on at the moment also piles on top of this anxiety, I'm doing everything I can to connect with people (like phone calls and video games with my friends) but some days I can't help but feel extremely alone.”

5. Discussion/Conclusion

This study provided a unique opportunity to obtain insights into the views and attitudes of a broadly representative sample of students who, for the first time in the history of the Leaving Certificate, have not had to sit their exams for public health reasons. The findings also provide a useful snapshot of how these students are faring during these uncertain and unprecedented times. Overall, the findings presented here demonstrate significant impacts of the pandemic on many aspects of the lives of the LC students including, in particular, their overall health and wellbeing.

First, we asked students about their views, perceptions and feelings about the 'alternative LC'. Reassuringly, the vast majority were in favour of calculated grades, although a significant minority were not. Indeed, calculated grades have been described as 'novel and untested in their details' (McManus et al., 2020, p.8). According to the guidance set out by the Irish government (Department of Education and Skills, 2020), calculated grades involve two main phases - a school-based and a national standardisation phase. In a similar fashion, and arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, the UK is using a system of calculated grades to replace the A-levels. However, in contrast to Ireland, these countries have been applying a system of predictive grading in their university system (since 1964) when offering conditional offers of places.

A recent UK-based study indicates that calculated grades are likely to strongly correlate with the predicted grades currently provided by schools on the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) applications (McManus et al., 2020), although there was considerable controversy when the results were released recently due, in large part, to what was perceived as inequitable treatment. This resulted in the UK government being forced into a U-turn in relation to the A level results (Weale and Stewart, 2020).

The general positivity toward the new calculated grades was also reflected in the high proportion of students who reported feeling 'happy' (75%) that the LC examinations had been cancelled. Likewise, most students felt that their teachers would approach their marking in a fair and balanced way, although a substantial minority felt that this would not be the case. Changes brought about by the calculated grading system were also assumed by a significant majority of students to be likely to impact their chances of securing their preferred college place. This is something that should be carefully assessed following the release of the LC results.

Some interesting sub-group analyses are of note here. The sample demonstrated generally high levels of academic motivation, but the proportion of students who would have preferred to sit the traditional LC exams, tended to be more highly motivated and more stressed than those who were happy with the calculated grades alternative. The latter may be due, at least in part, to their levels of disappointment. Likewise, the proportion of students who believed that their teachers would be fair and balanced in their marking, were more likely to have higher levels of wellbeing than those who did not believe that the teachers would act fairly. This group were also more highly academically motivated and more resilient.

We also asked the students to complete a number of measures in order to provide us with information on aspects of their overall (physical and mental) health and wellbeing as well as their academic motivation and adaptive coping. Reassuringly, only a very small number (5%) of students had contracted COVID-19 at the time of survey completion, although a relatively large proportion had immediate or extended family members who had tested positive. This may have been, at least in part, a motivating factor in their completion of the survey.

Collectively, the results indicate that substantial proportions of students had been significantly impacted by school closures and having to remain at home during lock down, whilst social distancing and the shift to online/remote learning were also challenging for many. Student views on the distance-learning methods used after school closures were generally quite negative with fewer than one-third believing that they had worked well. This is consistent with recent research which suggests that schools struggled to maintain student engagement, with as many as 44% of teachers reporting that their sixth-year students were either not at all engaged or only moderately so (Devitt et al., 2020), a situation which was even worse for those whose parents had a lower educational background (Doyle, 2020). There were further issues in terms of lack of broadband and availability of computing devices, which, again, were particularly problematic amongst students from DEIS schools (Burke and Dempsey, 2020; Mohan et al., 2020).

Student responses on the health and wellbeing measures point toward low or sub-optimal levels of health and wellbeing and many referred, in particular, to mental health impacts; indeed, high self-reported levels of depression, anxiety and stress were observed in a significant proportion of the sample during the previous weeks. A substantial proportion of students also obtained scores on the resilience scale which suggested that they were generally not coping well.

It is difficult to know, in the absence of available data, to what extent Irish students in their final year of school would compare to similar cohorts from other countries. However, a comparison of the mean scores reported here, with those obtained by students in recent studies conducted elsewhere - using comparable or identical measures - suggest generally lower levels of wellbeing in the current cohort of students. For example, our sample obtained worse wellbeing scores than an equivalent sample from N. Ireland (McKay and Andretta, 2017), whilst also comparing poorly in terms of resilience levels (BRCS) reported by a Spanish sample of 18-22 year-olds (Limonero et al., 2014). Nonetheless, our sample also reported lower levels of stress when compared with a German sample of students aged 14-19 (Klein et al., 2016). It is important to note, though, that we are not comparing like-with-like given that these other European studies were conducted in 'pre-COVID' times.

Arguably, Leaving Certificate students would be expected to experience some level of stress in their final year of exam preparation. The recent My World Survey 2, (The National Study of Youth Mental Health in Ireland, 2019) found that for young adolescents (12-19 years of age), the 'top three stressors' are respectively, school (72%), exams (65%) and homework (45%) (Dooley et al., 2019). In many European countries, adolescents report a small decline in their wellbeing as they progress through their post-primary education due to growing pressures associated with their schoolwork (Cosma et al., 2020). Similar trends have been reported amongst Irish students, with females reporting lower scores than males with regard to many aspects of their wellbeing (Burke and Minton, 2019), whilst also experiencing more health problems and suicidal ideation (Leavey et al., 2020). Ordinarily, the period in the run-up to the LC exams would be a particularly stressful time for most students (Banks and

Smyth, 2015), but this was undoubtedly exacerbated this year by, amongst a number of other things, sudden school closures and having to adjust rapidly to distance learning and all that this entailed.

One of the aims of this study was to statistically compare the students in the current study with students of a similar age who had been surveyed as part of a health and wellbeing survey undertaken in Ireland in 2015 (Burke and Minton, 2019) and using the PERMA-Profiler, one of the measures employed in the current study. The wellbeing scores (based on the PERMA-Profiler) achieved by the current cohort of LC students (class of 2020) were compared to the scores of the 2015 cohort. This comparison showed that the scores for the class of 2020 were lower across all measures, but were statistically significantly so with regard to levels of happiness, experience of positive emotions and levels of physical health. Negative emotions also demonstrated borderline significance, indicating that the 2020 sample were tending toward higher levels in this regard. This is supported by many of the students' own responses in the 2020 survey.

As indicated earlier, the survey contained a number of optional open-ended questions and the vast majority of the students were happy to provide their views and opinions. This underlines their strength of feeling about the topics under investigation, whilst also providing us with a deeper understanding of the impact that the coronavirus crisis is having on aspects of their young lives. For example, a significant majority of the students (82%) told us about their main concerns in relation to COVID-19, with over half of them expressing health concerns/fears for both their own health and that of their family and friends. This suggests that, whilst there is a perception that young people in general are driving the renewed increase in cases in recent weeks due to lack of social distancing (Cullen and Clarke, 2020) this is not universally the case. Arguably, social distancing also presents an even greater challenge for teenagers whose lives tend to be characterised by high levels of socialising and multiple friendships.

Implications for student mental health and wellbeing

Fostering and promoting student wellbeing features highly on the educational agenda in Ireland, as outlined in the most recent wellbeing policy statement (DES, 2019). This policy framework document was preceded by guidelines for mental health promotion in primary and post-primary schools (DES 2013;2015) aimed at creating an awareness of the importance of children's wellbeing and also providing recommendations for the improvement of wellbeing in schools (Burke and Minton, 2018). As the current Leaving Certificate students transition to Third Level institutions – at an already challenging time in their lives (Darmody et al., 2020) – it will be important to support their psychological and emotional wellbeing needs, not to mention the needs of existing students. Our findings reinforce the words of Minister Simon Harris who was quoted recently as saying:

"The number one health issue for young people in Ireland today is concerns or worries around their mental health. These concerns have been compounded by the isolation and uncertainty brought forward by the COVID-19 pandemic."
(Department of Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2020)

In recognition of the likely increased demand for mental health supports across the Third Level sector, the Irish government recently announced a package of supports for further and Higher Education Institutions and students, with a further €3 million dedicated to supporting students'

mental health and wellbeing, bringing the total investment for the coming year to €5million. This additional funding is intended to be used to enhance the provision of counselling services through, for example, the employment of additional counsellors and psychologists, as well as supporting mental health training (and other) initiatives in Higher Education Institutions (Connolly, 2020).

This top-up funding is a welcome development, but is arguably far from sufficient in view of the historical chronic under-funding of mental health services in Higher Education Institutions and indeed, in the wider community. It will be crucial to monitor and keep under review, the extent to which this will be sufficient for support services going forward and especially in the context of already high and increasing proportions of Third Level students presenting with mental health problems both in Ireland and elsewhere. For example, a recent report by the Union of Students in Ireland (2019) showed that approximately one third or more of students were experiencing anxiety (38%) and depression (30%) (Price, Smith and Kavalidou, 2019).

There is also a strong argument here for universities to be more creative and innovative in the mental health supports which they currently provide. For example, Maynooth University's Student Central service is a unique psychology-led academic support programme for students with disabilities, designed and delivered jointly by Maynooth University Access Programme and the National Learning Network. This biopsychosocial model of focused professional support provides a positive and non-stigmatised way of supporting students by enabling them to manage the stresses of Higher Education, whilst also addressing their specific mental health and disability needs within a student-led support framework. According to Dr Rose Ryan, Director of Access at Maynooth University, *"For many students across the sector, these supports do not exist or are located within a medical model that disables students even further and stigmatises the issue of MH in ways that are very damaging for people generally"* (personal communication, 28th August, 2020). The Maynooth University Student Central service was evaluated recently with positive results (Leckey et al., 2019).

Arguably, the likely changes in Third Level teaching provision and the possible shift to 'blended' methods of teaching and learning may, in itself, cause or exacerbate wellbeing issues amongst the student population. For example, concerns have been expressed that 'the twin effects' of the COVID-19 pandemic and the alienation that could arise with primarily online college experience, may result in higher levels of stress and drop-out rates in third-level institutions (McGrath, 2020). This is something that should be monitored closely as the new academic year begins.

At the same time, however, anecdotal evidence (e.g. from mental health and disability experts in the field) suggests positive experiences, in that many students – and indeed others in the general population – with existing mental health problems have found, perhaps paradoxically, that their mental health has improved during the pandemic for a number of reasons, but mainly because they were freed up temporarily from the 'stresses and strains' of normal day-to-day living (e.g. Furlong et al., 2020). For example, students did not have to commute for long periods or live in substandard rented accommodation; they had more money because of reduced costs; they experienced more freedom from not engaging in part-time work whilst also studying; they enjoyed not having to physically interact with on-campus support services; and for some, living at home had also improved their support networks. Crucially, many also indicated a preference for online and distance learning whilst remote support also worked well for them; they could interact more easily, did not have to attend large (and impersonal) lectures and most importantly of all, they were not required to

complete in-person examinations. Arguably therefore, it is important to take a more balanced perspective when it comes to the merits and demerits of blended learning for all students and indeed, perhaps our experience during this pandemic will change, for the better, the way we teach, and learn at Third Level, for decades to come.

Strengths and limitations of the study

This study involved a national survey which was completed by a large and broadly representative sample of LC students in the Republic of Ireland. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study of its kind to focus on the health and wellbeing of the 'Class of 2020' in the context of the current pandemic. The survey was received well by students, many of whom were grateful to be given 'a voice' during what is a challenging and unprecedented period in their educational lives. The survey generated rich and informative data based on objective assessments of (self-reported) health and wellbeing as well as students' own detailed written responses.

The study was limited in a number of ways. Respondents were typically female, white and from Secondary Schools located mainly in the Leinster region. Whilst a number of respondents indicated that they were from DEIS schools, students were not asked about this specifically as it was felt inappropriate in the context of a generic survey of student wellbeing. The distribution of this online survey was restricted to the NAPD and the ISSU for ethical reasons and sent to students' school email accounts. We were unable, therefore, to use other channels of distribution (i.e. social media platforms) which is likely to have reduced the response rate. For reasons beyond the researchers' control, the timing of the survey distribution also overlapped with the end of the school year and, as such, many students may not have frequently accessed their school email accounts to which the survey link was sent (by individual schools). It is also possible that students who were most affected by the pandemic were those most likely to have taken part in the survey. Lastly, it was not possible within the time frame to conduct qualitative research, but the vast majority of students provided detailed responses to the open-ended questions which, as outlined earlier, helped to amplify and enrich the findings.

Conclusion

This study provides important insights into the views and attitudes of a broadly representative sample of LC students whilst also providing a snapshot of how these students are faring during this unprecedented time. Overall, the key findings presented here demonstrate that the ongoing coronavirus pandemic has impacted on all aspects of the lives of the LC students as assessed by this study including, in particular, their overall health and wellbeing. This has clear implications in terms of the support these young people may require going forward and especially as they enter Third Level education.

Learning from the experiences of the 'class of 2020' is important as there is currently no certainty that there will be a return to the traditional Leaving Certificate examinations for the upcoming Leaving Certificate cohort (class of 2021). Indeed the start dates for this year's postponed Leaving Certificate examinations have been set for November 20th, subject to public health advice.

Careful consideration should also be given to reviewing traditional school-based methods of learning and assessment, in order to potentially accommodate new 'hybrid' or blended

learning styles and some distance learning. Whilst these had to be (hurriedly) put in place during the national lockdown, they may have to be re-introduced in the event of any future localised lock downs, or if large numbers of cases begin to appear in schools. The views and attitudes expressed by the students involved in this study should be very helpful in this regard. More specifically, as the coronavirus crisis continues to impact traditional education practices both nationally and internationally, assessing and understanding its impact through a student lens, becomes even more relevant and important.

It will be interesting to see how this current cohort of LC students transition to Third Level education and how they subsequently fare in these continuing challenging times. We are hopeful that this research will be of benefit to all the Leaving Certificate students in Ireland, both now and in the future, but most especially for the 'class of 2020'. We conclude with the words of one student:

"It's nice to see other students and colleges looking out for our wellbeing – thank you. I hope we all get through these difficult times together in one piece!"

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7.

Appendices

Student Profile Questionnaire

1. How old are you in years?
2. Please confirm that you are a current Leaving Certificate student?
3. Please select your gender?
4. What County are you currently living in?
5. Which Ethic group do you identify with?
6. What Examination group are you in?
7. What type of school do you attend?
8. Have you tested positive for COVID-19?
9. Have any of your family members tested positive for COVID-19?
10. Please rank the following three options in order of your preference, in relation to the Leaving Certificate Exams 2020:
 - To sit the Leaving Certificate exams in July as originally planned?
 - To receive calculated grades/predictive marks
 - Other- please specify
11. How are your schools' new distant methods of Teaching and Learning working for you?
12. Do you feel the following are impacting on your general sense of wellbeing:
 - Social distancing
 - School closures
 - Staying at home
13. How do you feel about the Leaving Certificate being cancelled?
14. How positive are you feeling about the new calculated grading system?
15. Teachers will be fair and balanced in their marking?
16. To what extent do you feel the changes in the examination system will impact your chances of securing your preferred course of study at 3rd level?
17. What are you most concerned about in relation to COVID-19 on a personal level at this current time please?
18. Finally, would you like to make a comment about anything at all?

WHO-5 Index

Please indicate for each of the five statements which is closest to how you have been feeling over the last two weeks. Notice that higher numbers mean better well-being.

Example: If you have felt cheerful and in good spirits more than half of the time during the last two weeks, put a tick in the box with the number 3 in the upper right corner.

	Over the past two weeks	All of the time	Most of the time	More than half of the time	Less than half of the time	Some of the time	At no time
1	I have felt cheerful and in good spirits	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 0
2	I have felt calm and relaxed	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 0
3	I have felt active and vigorous	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 0
4	I woke up feeling fresh and rested	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 0
5	My daily life has been filled with things that interest me	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 0

Perceived Stress Scale

The questions in this scale ask you about your feelings and thoughts during THE LAST MONTH. In each case, please indicate your response by placing an "X" over the square representing HOW OFTEN you felt or thought a certain way.

1. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?
2. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?
3. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?
4. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

Brief Resilience Coping Scale

1. I actively look for ways to replace the losses I encounter in life.
2. I believe that I can grow in positive ways by dealing with difficult situations.
3. I look for creative ways to alter difficult situations.
4. Regardless of what happens to me, I believe I can control my reaction to it.

Statements are rated on a 5-point scale, where 1 means the statement does not describe you at all and 5 means it describes you very well.

Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale Short

Below are some statements about feelings and thoughts. Please circle the number that best describes your experience of each over the last 2 weeks on a scale from 1 to 5.

1= none of the time; 2= rarely; 3= some of the time; 4= often; 5= all of the time.

1. I've been feeling optimistic about the future.
2. I've been feeling useful.
3. I've been feeling relaxed.
4. I've been dealing with problems well.
5. I've been thinking clearly.
6. I've been feeling close to other people.
7. I've been able to make up my own mind about things.

Adolescent Academic Motivation Scale

- (a) I try hard in school.
- (b) Grades are very important to me.
- (c) I usually finish my homework on time.
- (d) Education is so important that it's worth it to put up with things about school that I don't like.
- (e) In general, I like school.

Note.

Participants were asked to respond to each item using a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

PERMA-Profiler

1. How lonely do you feel in your daily life?

Not at all 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Completely

2. In general, how often do you feel anxious?

Never 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Always

3. In general, how would you say your health is?

Terrible 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Excellent

4. In general, how often do you feel joyful?

Never 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Always

5. To what extent do you receive help and support from others when you need it?

Not at all 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Completely

6. In general, how often do you feel angry?

Never 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Always

7. In general, how often do you feel positive?

Never 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Always

8. How satisfied are you with your current physical health?

Not at all 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Completely

9. In general, how often do you feel sad?

Never 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Always

10. Compared to others of your same age and sex, how is your health?

Terrible 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Excellent

11. In general, to what extent do you feel contented?

Not at all 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Completely

12. Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?

Not at all 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Completely