

Reaction for Education Initiative: *My Experience*

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Abstract

Covid-19 caused the temporary closure of educational institutions all around the world in 2020 by governments desperate to contain the spread of the virus. According to Unesco, these closures directly affected over 60% of the global student population (Unesco, 2020). Makesense, in collaboration with the Laidlaw Foundation, created the Reaction for Education Initiative. This initiative brings together Laidlaw scholars from universities around the world in an attempt to create new resources, raise awareness for existing resources and to help mitigate the direct and urgent impacts of school closures. This report details my personal experiences as a participant of this initiative and reflects upon my learnings and development.

The Research Phase

The first primary task of this six week initiative was to assess the needs of local communities. The first day was spent contacting friends, family and neighbours to better understand the variety of consequences caused by the global pandemic on the education of students. It was crucial to gain personal perspectives from students, as well as parents and teachers who have all been affected. It was quickly noted that there were too many

variations and divergences between peoples experiences to accurately perceive the extent of the situation and that a more structured and focused way of investigating these perspectives was required. Three Google surveys were created; one for parents, one for teachers and one for students. At the time of writing this report, there were 121 responses in total from parents, teachers and students of the Irish education system.

In the 2019/2020 academic year, there were 51 private, fee-paying secondary schools in Ireland with 25,881 students, out of 723 secondary schools with 371,450 students in total in the Republic of Ireland (education.ie, 2019/2020). Therefore, approximately 7% of Irish secondary school students attend a fee-paying school. 6.7% of responders to the google surveys published stated that they attended private schools. The 95% confidence interval for this figure is as follows:

$$1.96 \times \sqrt{\frac{0.067(1-0.067)}{121}} = 0.0445.$$

Therefore, we can be 95% confident that this figure is representative of the ratio of students in private schools versus public schools in the country +/- 4.45%. Consequently, it must be acknowledged that the perspectives presented in the google surveys are not wholly representative.

81% of responses stated that they had access to excellent wifi connection with 89.5% of participants having regular access

to tablets or computer devices in the home. In contrast, researchers in Ireland have reported that 48% of schools highlighted an evident 'digital divide' between many of their pupils with 57.6% of DEIS schools reporting broadband and device access being a definite hinderance in the delivery of remote education to their students. (Mohan G, 2020). There is a high probability that the stark differences in answers recorded in the google surveys is due to lack of representation outside of Dublin and outside of a certain socio-economic group.

43% of participants stated that they are entering a state examination year, or a parent/guardian to a child entering a state examination year, with 75% of these participants reporting elevated stress levels in regards to catching up on missed curriculum in September. However, delays in the delivery of core curriculum were not the only concerns expressed with one teacher commenting that "the value of peer

collaboration has been lost” and another highlighting the importance of play time for primary school children.

Interestingly, 64.9% of parents who took part felt it will not be feasible to social distance in classrooms and 68.4% would not expect students and staff to wear face masks in school.

Do you think it is feasible to social distance in classrooms?
77 responses

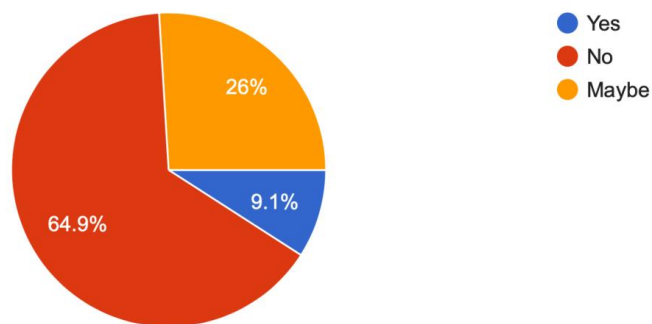


Fig1. Result from google survey “Effects of COVID-19 on Education: Parents”

Would you expect students and staff to wear masks upon the return to school?
76 responses

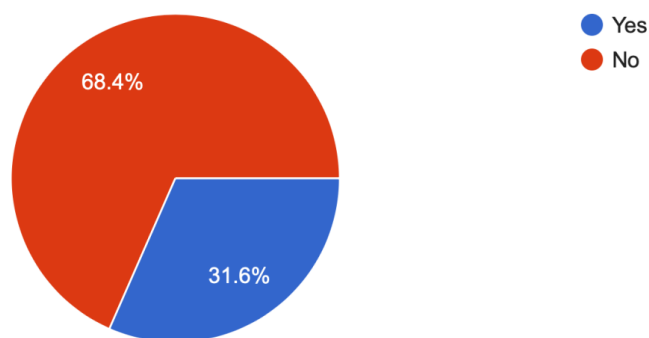


Fig2. Result from google survey “Effects of COVID-19 on Education: Parents”

Some of the individual, independently listed concerns of parents are detailed below:

I have concerns regarding the added stress of extra classes to try and catch up on all of the school time that has been missed.

Missed a lot of the required course. No clarity about next years exams. Too much pressure and insecurity.

I think it will be a very challenging time as they have been off for a long time. We have no idea or information from the school about how it will look, and we have no idea how to prepare our own work/childcare arrangements in advance. It is very stressful to be honest.

I feel if they are expected to socially distance it will be almost as hard as not seeing their friends daily. Personally, I struggle with facemasks as I tend to lip-read and read facial expressions. I worry

that the younger generation will be expected to read situations and respond empathetically without seeing full faces. That's a huge restriction.

The Intervention Phase

The second phase of this initiative encouraged participants to prioritise a key issue identified in the first week and to formulate a tangible resource to address this issue. After careful examination of the conclusions drawn from the google surveys, it was agreed amongst the Irish scholars participating in this initiative that students entering their Leaving Certificate year were indicating the highest levels of stress and anxiety.

The emphasis placed on private tuition in the senior cycle in Ireland, colloquially known as grinds, is an ever growing burden on students from disadvantaged backgrounds who can't afford the same head start in the points race. As one article in the Independent highlights, the

“pervasive grinds culture raises questions about equality of access to third level education” (Bielenberg, 2019). In research conducted by the ESRI, it was reported that students generally felt that grinds teachers were more accurate at predicting examination content than classroom teachers and also provided better study notes (McCoy S, 2019). This highlights an interesting point that, as a matter of priority, we need to reassess our educational values and to prevent the alignment of our nation’s second-level pedagogical practices with that of a production line, churning out Leaving Certificate students. Have we essentially found a legal way to buy our way into third level institutions? We are perpetuating a culture where social status and income are no longer just correlated with academic success, but clear causative components. We can no longer pretend that the perpetuation of this culture is subconscious either, when it is in fact a measured and deliberate attempt to exploit the system to the detriment of others.

Although many students enjoy learning and can choose to do extra work in their own time, it is imperative we acknowledge that the design and implementation of a ‘free’ school system that solely uses performative measurements to allocate university places, performative measurements that you can pay to improve if you have the means, is an absolute systemic failure that only deepens the existing educational schism between socio-economic groups.

Taking these factors into consideration, it was decided that a website for Leaving Certificate students providing free study notes would be a useful resource. The creation of free resources to engage Leaving Certificate students, remind them of their love for learning and allow them to take their education into their own hands was identified as a key priority. Providing help to examination year students to bridge the gap in their curriculum knowledge caused by Covid-19 will be crucial in the coming months. It is also imperative that

resources are readily available for students in the event of further school closures.

Taking this into account, the four main goals of this website were defined as;

1. Accessibility

Facilitating continuous 24/7 access to online resources that can be downloaded and printed to allow flexibility for studying.

2. Inclusivity

The provision of resources to all Leaving Certificate students so that everyone has the opportunity to feel more comfortable in the completion of their curriculum.

3. Unique

New and unique study notes and tips to help students make the most of their time.

4. Free

No fees or charges. Ever.

At the time of writing this report, the website www.studentonlinesupport.com was still under construction.

Mobilising Volunteers

The first step in mobilising volunteers is to have a strong communication approach that

is catchy and efficient, informing potential volunteers about the goals and aims of the programme. As the target audience for this one-week volunteering programme was university students, it was decided that an Instagram page was a necessity. This then expanded to Facebook and Twitter pages with the same content being shared across all three platforms. It was important to create content and visuals that were informative but also, shareable. As such, smart structuring and infographics were crucial to attract the target audience. Most of the volunteer recruits found the page through a friend or acquaintance who had liked or shared our social media. Attached is a sample post that was created for the social media pages.

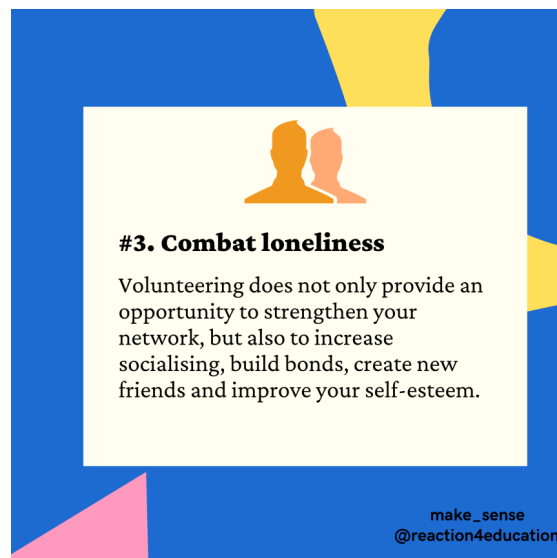


Fig3. Content created using free website *Canva* for the Instagram page @reaction4education



In total, 101 volunteers were recruited from 12 countries around the world for the one-week volunteering programme. These 101 volunteers were able to directly contact and collect feedback from 112 teachers, 118 parents, 117 students and 16 technology companies. This group of volunteers successfully shared 122 resources with

people who needed help accessing the support they required to successfully continue their move, or their child's move, to remote learning.

The responsibility of mobilising the volunteers from Ireland was a challenge. According to the Central Statistics Office, 28.4% of adults in Ireland indicated in the Quarterly National Household survey that they volunteered. This is over a quarter of the adult population, which sounds substantial. However, upon further examination it appears that 65% of those who volunteered were above the age of 45 with only 7% falling into the age range of 15-24. Half of the volunteer work that was carried out in Ireland in 2013, was done so in an informal and individual capacity and not for organisations such as Makesense (CSO, 2015). In contrast, 36% of the UK population formally volunteered within a group, club or organisation in 2018/19 (NCVO, 2019). This is approximately 19.4 million formal volunteers in the UK in

2018/2019 versus 663,840 formal volunteers in Ireland in 2013. Despite a surge in the popularity of volunteering in Ireland in recent years, particularly amongst students engaging with political and social activism, it is not yet as engrained in our society as it is abroad. This makes the recruitment of volunteers more difficult, yet arguably more rewarding.

A small group of 6 Irish volunteers was mobilised for the one-week programme. The role of the mobilisers was to support the volunteers, to encourage their work and to facilitate constructive and creative conversations within the group in order to maximise their outputs for the week. A key problem identified by this group was a general feeling of technological illiteracy among parents who had to navigate through new websites and learning tools they had never seen before. The volunteers decided to compile and create step by step user guides for the most commonly used online learning tools. These included Zoom,

Google classroom, Moodle and Edmodo. An image of the website is provided. It is important to recognise that the Irish volunteers completed this website from idea to finished product in just three days.

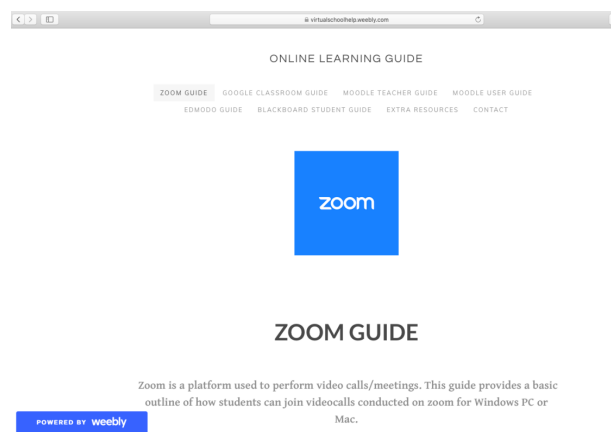


Fig4. Image of homepage of website *virtualschoolhelp.weebly.com*

Partnership Development

A crucial element of the creation of our website www.studentonlinesupport.com is the ability to follow through on the promise to provide good quality, concise, user friendly study notes. In order to deliver on this objective, it is a necessity to have guidance from a more knowledgeable organisation who has previous and significant competence in the area. The Voluntary Tuition Programme (VTP), at Trinity College Dublin, is almost 35 years

old. It is a partnership between Trinity students, St. Andrew's Resource Centre and the surrounding local communities that promotes education among school pupils. A lot of the work completed by the VTP is in the form of one-to-one homework tutoring or completion of other educational activities. As such, the VTP is an organisation that has been struck by the adverse effects of Covid-19 on our education system. In concurrence with the establishment of the student online support website, the VTP were examining their structures and policies in preparation of the event of a second school closure.

Consequently, a partnership with the VTP was established to aid in the recruitment of students to volunteer and fact check Leaving Certificate notes for the website. When the website is fit for purpose in the coming weeks, this recruitment process will begin and the drafting of website policies on practicing online safety, producing notes of a specific standard, and a disclaimer of

liability for the contents of the notes will all be completed with the help of the VTP.

A further partnership made is with a DEIS school in Co.Meath, where the website will be piloted and all constructive criticism taken on board and improvements implemented, where possible, before a national roll-out of the website occurs. There are many prospects for further national partnerships as the website continues to grow and improve.

Assessing the Programme

To ‘get with the programme’ is defined as the ability to “accept new ideas and give more attention to what is happening now” (Dictionary, 2020). The highlight of this programme was having the opportunity to dedicate time and effort to ‘getting with the programme’. The ability to find time in today’s fast-paced society is rare. When instant gratification is the goal of society, the purest of intentions such as to engage with new communities, to explore passions,

to educate yourself on new topics or to find new interests are often pushed aside. The Reaction for Education Initiative provided a unique chance to do all of the above in an efficient, productive and rewarding manner.

The overarching structure of the programme was clear. Identify a key problem in education caused by, or exacerbated by, Covid-19, design a resource to help mitigate this issue and distribute the resource to those it could help. However, the day to day actions and expectations were much more ambiguous. The attempt to maintain a daily structure, although well-intentioned, left some participants feeling overwhelmed and like they were underperforming. The required completion of some of the small, inconsequential daily tasks reduced the amount of time available to scholars to focus on the more extensive and far-reaching work to be done. The framework used, that allows participants to be trained

and then to utilise this training within their localities to initiate real change around them, is a striking and effective method of creating real-time impacts. However, it is important to ensure participants are given the autonomy and freedom to receive this training and then choose their own preferred course of action. This ensures that passion and creativity are the driving forces behind each participants ideas and contributions.

At the beginning of the initiative, the content was very concentrated on the education system in the United Kingdom. As an initiative attracting scholars and students from all over the globe, the most prominent development to be considered for implementation is to broaden the initial scope of the programme to include information about different education systems in different countries. This will foster a sense of inclusivity and reception from the beginning of the programme. This could also be easily implemented with

immediate effect, as such a diverse group of scholars have participated, many of whom would happily contribute their knowledge of their education systems.

The facilitation of daily zoom calls was effective and influential. Listening to the accomplishments and impacts of the other scholars, as well as being held accountable to follow through on research and ideas brought forward, was conducive to the successful completion of the programme by each individual participant. This accountability is imperative in any programme that strives to give participants the freedom that Makesense promotes and prides itself on. The team from Makesense were attentive, receptive and supportive and helped to foster a sense of community and the realisation that all participants were working towards a common goal. The encouragement and dedication of the team behind this initiative was unparalleled, with exceptional mention going to Lauren Miller

for her time and work with all of the participants.

Conclusion

Participating in the Reaction for Education Initiative allowed for examination of challenges in the locality, as well as provision of the opportunity to create an open and constructive dialogue regarding areas for improvement in our education system and how to be better equipped in the event of continued school closures. The opportunity to develop a project from the research phase right through to finished product has provided a new and challenging experience that has further developed

personal skills, such as project management, teamwork and organisation skills as well as fostering creativity and individuality. Makesense and the Laidlaw Foundation brilliantly catered for a diverse and conscientious group of scholars. The speed with which the Laidlaw Foundation responded to the limitations caused by Covid-19 on scholar's research to offer the delivery of this initiative instead is greatly appreciated. This initiative has strong potential to utilise the creativity and knowledge of students to continue to create real impacts on education systems globally.

Figures present in this report

Fig1.

Do you think it is feasible to social distance in classrooms?

77 responses

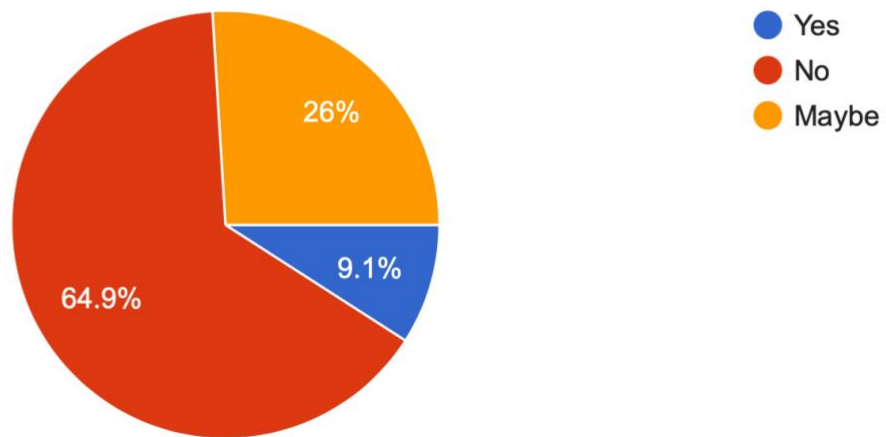


Fig2.

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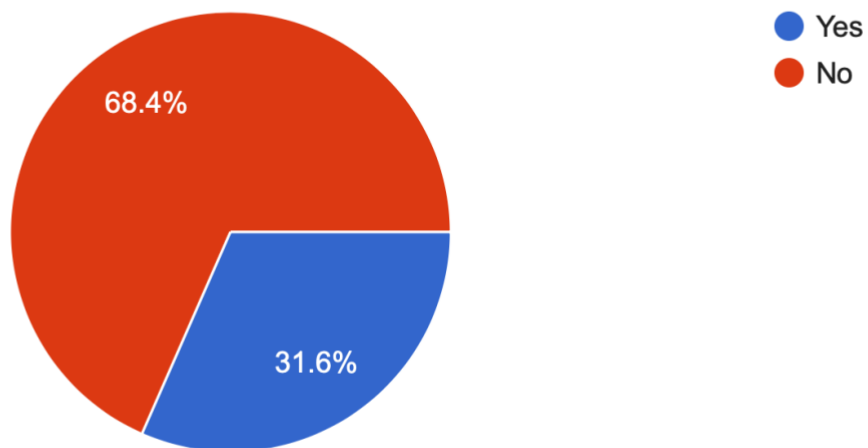


Fig3.





#2. Improve your job prospects

Team work is crucial to us here at make_sense. Volunteering with us provides a unique opportunity to meet new people and to develop and improve your communication, leadership and organisational skills - key requirements for many jobs.

make_sense
@reaction4education



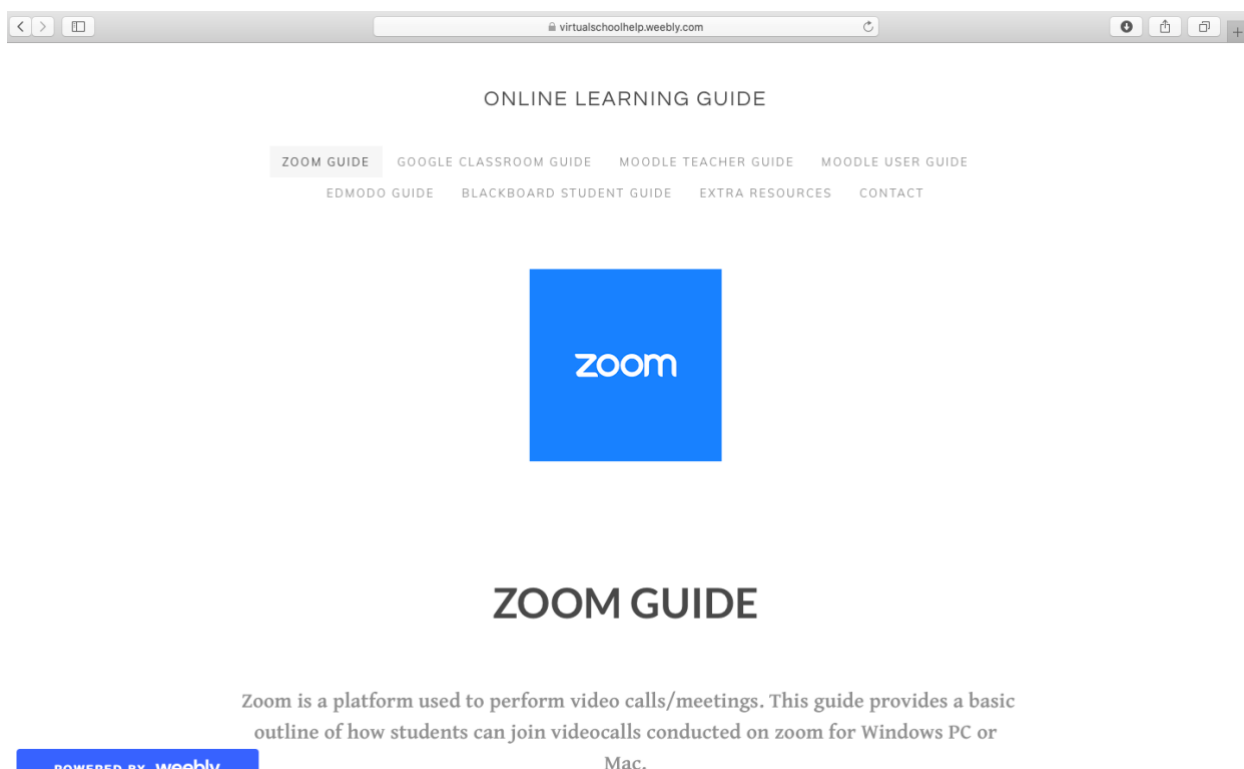
#3. Combat loneliness

Volunteering does not only provide an opportunity to strengthen your network, but also to increase socialising, build bonds, create new friends and improve your self-esteem.

make_sense
@reaction4education



Fig4.



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