Frequently Asked Questions about the MSc in Computer Science programme under COVID-19

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About this FAQ: This addendum to our Course FAQ on the MSc in Computer Science programme attempts to answer some common questions asked by candidates about studies under COVID-19 in the upcoming academic year.

The college is working hard to make preparations for a safe and successful start in the next academic year in line with government health and safety advice and in response to the evolving nature of the pandemic. As in all walks of life, we need to be prepared to be adaptive and flexible to changes that might be necessitated to combat COVID-19. Therefore, please note that any of the points below may need to be revised, if the situation develops differently than expected.

A more general FAQ (on course issues not specifically relating to COVID-19) is available at: https://www.scss.tcd.ie/postgraduate/msc-cs/faq.php

Please also refer to the general COVID-19 FAQ for the college, available at: https://www.tcd.ie/about/coronavirus/

What format of delivery will be taken in the course in the 2021-22 academic year?

Students on the MSc in Computer Science take a varied mix of classes from a pool of over 25 modules, that are shared between different courses and other schools. The specific mode of delivery varies from module to module and is dependent on the health and safety advice from college and government, which is still evolving with the pandemic. With vaccinations swiftly rolling out in Ireland, we are expecting increased face-to-face teaching and physical access to campus compared to last year.

However, as there is still significant uncertainty due to new COVID-19 variants and the effect of re-opening large sectors of society, most lectures in the MSc in Computer Science are expected to be conducted online in the first half of Semester 1 (Week 6, 22nd October). Thereafter, it is expected that normal in-person teaching will ramp up unless there is worsening of the covid-19 situation. Large classes of 150 or above are expected to remain online for the whole year. For, other modules, teaching may be delivered in a combination of online and live classes. However, students will always have ongoing live opportunities for interaction with lecturers and other teaching staff.

Regardless of delivery format, the content and learning outcomes of the course will remain the same. The college has invested significant resources and human effort on measures to ensure students receive the degree of attention and duty of care required to successfully complete their course of learning, if elements of the course need to be delivered online. Essentially, we aim to provide as many opportunities for in-person engagement as is safe to do, but where safety restrictions and limits necessitate online delivery, we will deliver all elements of the course without compromising the quality of learning.
What would online teaching look like?

There will be some variances across the 25+ modules offered in the course, however most online lectures and course materials will be delivered through the Blackboard Learning Management System, accessible to all registered TCD students and Staff. In most cases, these will be streamed live at a scheduled time according to course timetables, with ongoing opportunities for live interaction provided with the lecturer. Lectures may alternatively be recorded and, along with other course materials, made available for offline viewing.

However, it is important to note that the MSc in Computer Science is a very hands-on course, and lectures are only a small part of the learning process. About two-thirds of the course is assessed through practical work and not merely by theoretical exams. These typically comprise independent work conducted by students with the oversight of academics and teaching assistants; feedback and direction are provided through a combination of labs, tutorials, group meetings and individual supervision.

Some labs/tutorials will be provided live through the same system used for lectures. Other forms of communication may be used, including online bulletin-boards, instant messaging, software development logs and collaboration tools, video presentation of projects by students etc. However, students will have regular opportunities to engage with staff and it will not be a case of them merely being left alone to watch recorded lectures and examined at the end of the year as might be expected from typical on-line courses. Furthermore, students will have access to physical facilities of the college, under any prevailing safety guidelines, for independent and small group learning activities.

Can I attend the course wholly online or remotely from my own country?

Although the course will be combined with some online elements, students would normally be required to be in Dublin to attend any in-person teaching or to engage with colleagues and staff on practical elements of the MSc. There is always a possibility that this may change in the event of unexpected developments with the COVID-19 situation but, as things stand, we cannot authorize nor advise students to attend the course fully remotely.

However, in order to mitigate consequences of travel delays or quarantine, we will provide support for students to access teaching and online materials in the early weeks of term.

Can I register online or would I have to be on campus for registration?

Registration is done online via the my.tcd.ie portal. Students who have accepted a place should receive an invitation to register by email from the academic registry at some stage in August. More details here: https://www.tcd.ie/academicregistry/student-registration/
Will the university give me an extension to arrive late?

In the event of difficulties in visa and travel arrangements or quarantine restrictions, we can normally permit students to delay their arrival at TCD by a few weeks after the start of term. However, students should inform the course office (email postgraduate@scss.tcd.ie) and must take responsibility for keeping up with materials or assignments issued during any days missed.

It is a requirement that you attend (online) and keep up with classes from the start of teaching term on 13th September, 2021 onwards. In order to do so you will have to complete the online registration process to confirm elective modules and receive access to online materials. Note that there will also be orientation activities in the two weeks before this that would be beneficial for students to attend (most of these should be available online, live or recorded for later access).

What impact will online/blended teaching have on teaching standards and on student learning?

From the teaching perspective, we will deliver the same content and quality of the course that we have delivered before COVID-19, regardless of mode of delivery. The learning outcomes of the course and each module remain almost entirely the same and delivered by the same members of staff, who are qualified international experts in their respective areas. Your professors will deliver the same commitment of time on a week-to-week basis as they have done in any normal year (in fact, online delivery typically means increased time commitment for teaching staff). Class sizes and personal attention per student should remain in the same levels that we had in previous years.

While reduced in-person interaction certainly impacts how we do things (for instance it may mean we need to be more digital communications through teleconferencing, email and instant messaging systems), there are measures that have been put in place due to COVID-19 that in some cases present enhancements for students over previous years of the course. These measures range from improved availability of online resources and live recorded lectures to increased flexibility and care for students who run into difficulties related to the pandemic.

What impact will the current situation have on study facilities and services?

While it is likely there will be some restrictions, we believe that access to physical facilities such as computer labs can be provided safely under controlled measures, such as by allocating specific individual days/times in rotation to the labs and facilities dedicated for the MSc. Outside of the course resources specifically, the college also provides generalized access to student facilities for study on campus, which students may optionally avail of under prevailing safety guidelines (typically by pre-booking). For instance, see: https://www.tcd.ie/students/supports-services/student-space-bookings.php

Since last year, measures have already been put in place to ensure students have remote access to any essential facilities for completing their course of learning in addition to anything that might be provided in person. For instance, remote access is provided to digital library and research papers; course notes; assessment materials; cloud storage, software and computing resources etc. Furthermore, general student support facilities of the college such as Counselling, Health Services and Student Advisory Services continue to provide assistance remotely.
What impact will hybrid/online teaching have on job prospects?

We don’t foresee that the mode of delivery would have an impact on job prospects. The course is not by its nature an online/blended course, and the degree will bear no indication of any difference from the qualifications awarded in other years.
What impact will the current situation have on our overall TCD experience?

Regardless of mode of teaching, students are welcome and encouraged to participate in all aspects of college life, as far as is possible under prevailing health and safety guidelines. The college is committed to providing spaces for students to both study and socialise on campus. Much of the Trinity experience, the traditions and identity of the college, are driven by the students themselves, and we encourage you to get involved with the Graduate Student’s Union, student societies or other groups within the school and course.