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-Specific FAQ on the MSc in Computer Science programme attempts to answer (with as much certainty as possible under evolving conditions) some common questions asked by candidates about studies under COVID-19 next year.

We are working hard to adapt the course to the challenges arising due to COVID-19. This has included first ensuring that our current students complete their remaining term and examinations successfully, with minimal negative impact to their studies. We are now devoting efforts to preparations for a safe and successful start in the next academic year. Some details cannot fully be confirmed yet as they are dependent on changing college and government restrictions and, indeed, on the evolving nature of the pandemic.

This document will be continually updated as the situation develops. 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/

Are any supports being offered for students arriving from overseas (e.g. with regard to quarantine arrangements)?

Yes, the university is providing help such as meet and greet at the airport and temporary accommodation during the quarantine period.

For details, please see this University page for students arriving from overseas: https://www.tcd.ie/students/orientation/add-int/pre-orientation.php

Will Semester 1 be delivered fully online?

While the college is committed to providing the maximal possible amount of face-to-face teaching and physical access to campus, safety guidelines necessitate that online and hybrid teaching be used for larger groups. Furthermore, in order to minimise circulation, each school and course has access to a very limited subset of teaching venues, each of which is severely limited in capacity due to social distancing. Due to the popularity of the subject and resulting
class sizes in the MSc in Computer Science programme, almost all of our classes currently fall in the “larger group” category. Therefore, most of Semester 1 delivery will need to be facilitated through online/hybrid means.

Even in cases where we do conduct in-person classes, we will need to account for the possibility that there may be some at-risk individuals, or that some students will be delayed in arriving due to travel/visa regulations, or the need to quarantine or self-isolate. Therefore, we are planning to make course materials and assessments available through online channels regardless, even if this is in addition to traditional delivery.

This also means that students may, if they wish, exercise the option to delay arrival till start of Semester 2 in January, which may provide flexibility for making travel arrangements and. However, students should get in touch with the course office (postgraduate@scss.tcd.ie) if they believe that they will be arriving significantly late to join the course. It is recommended that you arrive some time in advance so that any formalities and quarantine conditions can be sorted out before the second semester begins.

Can I choose to attend wholly online?

It is now known that at least for Semester 1, a significant proportion of the course will have to be taught online due to covid-19. As a result students are permitted to attend all the course online in Semester 1. Any face-to-face elements will be made dually online e.g. through recorded lectures.

However students seeking to attend online MUST note that the “live” activities will take place during normal College hours [between 8:00am – 6:00pm Irish Time] and no allowances can be made for students studying in different time zones. They must have appropriate resources at their disposal to enable remote attendance (computer, good internet connection, suitable working space) and must take responsibility for their active engagement in their programme.

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

Registration is done online via the my.tcd.ie portal. 
More details here: https://www.tcd.ie/academicregistry/student-registration/

Will the university give me an extension to arrive late?

The Dean of Graduate Studies has authorised individual courses to provide an extension and we are happy to do so. But you must inform the course office (postgraduate@scss.tcd.ie) of your arrival date when it is known so that we can account for numbers/durations of students attending online.
It is a requirement that you register (online) by 28th September and start attending online classes.

**What does ‘hybrid’ mean?**

Classes that were traditionally taught in person in a lecture/seminar room will need to be wholly or partially delivered remotely. That is, a live stream and/or pre-recorded lecture will be viewed through teleconferencing systems.

In some cases, it may be possible to combine this with some element of in-person delivery, for instance every second class in person with a subset of the class (if they can be accommodated safely in a lecture venue).

In all cases there will be opportunities for engagement on a week-to-week basis with lecturing staff, though this may be through remote means.

**What impact will the hybrid/online approach have on the teaching standards and on student learning?**

There is no denying that online delivery, forced upon us by COVID-19, will impose some restrictions to our normal practices. Attending classes virtually will have consequences to both staff and students. It may be that we will need to adjust to communicating more effectively over chat, email, voice telecommunications or other digital means. Lab classes and tutorials may need to be streamlined, and we will need to account for potential technical problems such as in network quality for some students.

However, from the teaching perspective, we intend to deliver the same course that we have delivered before COVID-19. The intended learning outcomes of the course and each module remain essentially 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 previously (in fact, switching to online delivery will mean increased time commitment for staff). Class sizes and personal attention per student should remain in the same levels that we had in previous years, and as should be expected of a top international university.

**What will a hybrid/online semester look like?**

There will be differences from module to module, with specifics currently being developed. However, the below description provides some idea of what we expect typical online delivery to look like:

Online lectures will be delivered mainly through the Blackboard Learning Management System, accessible to all registered TCD students and Staff. In many cases, these will be streamed live at
a scheduled time according to course timetables, with the opportunity for live interaction provided with the lecturer. Lectures will be recorded and, along with other course materials, will be made available for offline viewing, in order to accommodate students who may have connectivity issues.

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. About two-thirds of the course is assessed through practical work and not merely by theoretical exams. These typically comprise independent work conducted with the oversight of academics and teaching assistants, and 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 the opportunity to engage with staff and it will not be a case of merely being left alone to watch recorded lectures and examined at the end of the year.

**What kind of impact will the hybrid model have on study facilities and services?**

In normal times, our students have benefitted from access to campus facilities, such as the dedicated MSc labs and meeting rooms, and unfortunately it is somewhat certain that this will be restricted in some way next year. Work is currently underway to try to address this in the most optimal way (under continually evolving college and government guidelines), but we believe that some access to labs may be provided under certain conditions. For instance, it may be that specific individual days/times will be allocated for a specific subset of students in rotation.

It should be noted that we have already put some of this in place under COVID-19 in the current academic year, when, on short notice, we adapted quickly to continue to provide remote access to important facilities, such as 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 continued to provide assistance remotely. With the benefit of this experience and additional time that we have to prepare, these supports should be robustly in place for next year’s students.

**Will the hybrid/online model also apply in the 2nd semester and Summer Research Period?**

We are all hoping for return to some degree of normalcy well before this, and efforts are dedicated at the moment to the start of term in September. We plan to deliver 2nd semester (January-April) with significantly more face-to-face elements, subject to prevailing restrictions
at the time. But, due to the unpredictability of the situation, it would be advisable for candidates to be prepared for the possibility of some restrictions continuing.

The Summer period (May – August) is almost entirely dedicated to individual research in the MSc. There are no lectures, and delivery is mainly in the form of one-to-one interactions between students and their supervisor. Not only does this increase the possibility of safe in-person engagement but we believe that this is one of the elements that can be maintained quite effectively in a virtual manner. Many have done this successfully through tele-conference meetings even in pre-COVID-19 times.

Can I defer my place, and am I guaranteed a place if I defer to 2021-22?

Deferral is permitted in limited cases however we have exceeded the quota of permitted deferrals for the year. If you have accepted a place, we advise you to apply to academic registry for a refund of your deposit and apply again next year. Early application is advised.

What impact will the hybrid/online teaching model have on job prospects?

We don’t foresee that the mode of delivery would have an impact on job prospects. The course is neither an online/blended course per se, and the degree will bear no external indication of mode of delivery nor any difference from the qualifications awarded in other years.

What kind of impact will the current situation have on our overall TCD experience?

Regardless of mode of teaching delivery, students are entitled and welcome to travel to Dublin and 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, and we trust that our college community as a whole will rise to the challenge and come up with innovative measures to maintain the traditions and identity of Trinity, even in these unusual times. Much of the Trinity experience is driven by the students themselves, and we encourage you to get involved with the graduate students union, student societies or other groups within the school and course.

How can I prepare for the commencement of the course?

Some guidance, including on academic preparations, is provided in a “Before You Come” page on our course website linked below [note this may be updated with additional info over the next couple of months]:  https://www.scss.tcd.ie/postgraduate/msc-cs/Local/before-you-come.php

This year, in particular, we strongly advise students to ensure they have a good spec of laptop (decent RAM, CPU, webcam) due to the likelihood of increased time spent on remote work.
If you are a student on the Augmented and Virtual Reality (AVR) strand of the MSc, it may be beneficial to have a machine with an MS Windows OS and reasonable GPU (some commonly used tools in the AVR strand include MS Visual C++, OpenGL and Unity 3D amongst others), although a dualboot system may also suffice.

Otherwise, the exact spec or make of laptop is really up to your personal choice.