

# The efficacy of iScoil's home-based provision

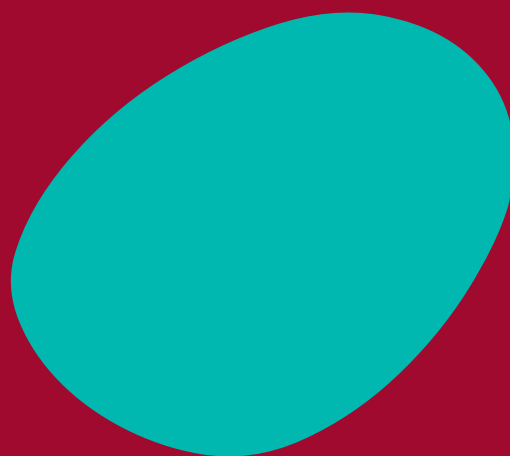
**Emer Eivers**

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# About the Author

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While working in the Educational Research Centre, she led Ireland's involvement in some of the largest educational studies in the world, including PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study), TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment).

Eemer has also worked in Northern Ireland, and was a member of both the Literacy and Numeracy Taskforce and the Common Funding Scheme Review Panel. Recommendations from the latter have guided the distribution of Northern Ireland's education budget since 2014 to date, and include measures to target disadvantage.

Other recent clients include the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), the European Commission's Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support, the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) and the UK's National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER).

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

This report examines the efficacy of services provided by iScoil to a cohort of students funded under the Department of Education (DE) Home Tuition Scheme. It examines a mixture of academic and non-academic outcomes. It does not examine the *curriculum* content or quality of pedagogical support offered as part of the iScoil model. This introductory chapter provides a brief overview of the Home Tuition Scheme, iScoil, and the research aims. More detail on each is provided in subsequent chapters.

## What is the Home Tuition Scheme?

The Home Tuition Scheme is designed to address the needs of a small pool of learners who need home-based support for relatively short periods of time (Department of Education and Skills [DES], Circular 0044/2020). The DE website indicates that one of three criteria must be met to be eligible for home tuition supports:

- **Special educational needs (SEN) and medical grounds:** This encompasses early intervention for autism, those with SEN seeking an educational placement in a recognised school, and those with a significant medical condition (which can include school phobia and/or anxiety such that it causes significant disruption to school attendance).
- **Reasons other than special educational needs and medical grounds:** This targets young people temporarily without a school place or the offer of a school place. It includes those in care who are without a school place due to emergency placement or placement disruption.
- **Students on maternity-related absences:** This targets those enrolled in a recognised post-primary level school whose education may be disrupted due to pregnancy.

Typically, the DE provides funding to families<sup>1</sup> to enable them to access home tuition. Families find, vet and employ a qualified teacher, or teachers, to provide tuition to their child within their own home. The number of tuition hours paid for by the DE varies, depending on eligibility criteria.

## What is iScoil?

iScoil provides an online learning service for disengaged young people, offering an alternative pathway back to education, learning and qualifications. It offers a tailored programme and deals with a relatively small number of students at any given time. The service can be provided in students' homes or in a Blended Learning Centre (BLC), where iScoil partners with local agencies to provide a safe and supported physical location from which students can access iScoil's services.

iScoil was set up in 2009. In its first 10 years, it has supported over 400 students, of whom 82% achieved some form of accreditation (iScoil, 2020a). In the past few years, the number of students being supported

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<sup>1</sup> The term *families* is used throughout this report. It is intended to encompass all those with primary responsibility for the young person, including parents and legal guardians.



has increased, as has demand for the service. For example, in December 2020, well over 100 students were engaging with iScoil, considerably more than were supported in earlier years.

Student support is delivered on a virtual learning environment (Moodle) that facilitates both synchronous and asynchronous communication. It is an integrated environment in which students receive tasks, communicate with their tutors and mentors, complete and submit tasks, and subsequently receive feedback on tasks completed. Online supports are complemented by phone and video conversations.

Since 2015 the Special Education Section of the DE has grant-aided iScoil to deliver educational support to a small group of approximately 40 students aged between 13 to 16. These students fall under the first criterion for home tuition (SEN/medical grounds). They have medical conditions that preclude school attendance or make attendance extremely difficult. Most have mental health issues, with anxiety and school phobia being the most common issues. As is the case with students benefitting from the Home Tuition Scheme, iScoil home-based students receive tailored one-to-one educational provision within their own home. However, the support is provided remotely and coordinated by iScoil rather than by the student's family.

## What is the aim of this report?

For the 2020/21 academic year, the DE grant-aided iScoil to support an additional, second cohort of students, under broadly similar selection criteria to those in place since 2015. The additional funds were granted with the proviso that iScoil's work with the second cohort of students was independently evaluated.

This report describes the methodology and outcomes of that evaluation. It examines the efficacy of the iScoil approach, with a subsidiary consideration of its cost relative to the more typical delivery of home-based tuition. To do so, the report describes administrative data on student progression and accreditation and outlines the results of student surveys administered in September 2020 and again in late spring 2021. The use of a "pre- and post-intervention" design allows examination of the effects that attending iScoil had on students. In assessing iScoil efficacy, five key areas are examined to see what effects (if any) iScoil had on participating students:

1. Student attitudes to education.
2. Student sense of self (including academic self-confidence and aspirations, self-esteem, sense of belonging).
3. Student participation in education.
4. Likelihood of students attaining a qualification.
5. Likelihood of students re-engaging with mainstream schooling.

The remainder of this report is divided into six main chapters:

- Descriptions of iScoil, the Home Tuition Scheme, and a cost comparison.
- Non-attendance at school and early school leaving.
- Description of the methodology used in this evaluation.
- Characteristics of the target group of students, pre- and post-intervention.

- Summary of interviews with a small group of parents.
- Conclusions about the efficacy of iScoil as a home-based intervention, and some related recommendations.

Information about questionnaires administered and consent procedures used are included as appendices.



# Chapter 2:

# iScoil and the Home Tuition Scheme

This chapter is divided into seven sections, the first of which provides background information about iScoil. Section two describes the Home Tuition Scheme, section three describes the referral process for iScoil and section four the various roles necessary to support students in their iScoil experience. Section five outlines course content and overall structure, while section six describes iScoil from the perspective of the student. Section seven summarises some information about the unit cost of iScoil compared to the Home Tuition Scheme as normally administered.

## iScoil background

iScoil is a registered charity, established in 2009 by the Presentation Sisters after the Irish trial of a UK online programme called **NotSchool.net** (Heppell, 1998). NotSchool.net was aimed at young people who had disengaged from the formal education system. The trial confirmed that the NotSchool.net approach was broadly suitable for use in Ireland, subject to some modifications. These included adaptation to an Irish context (including accreditation and curriculum content) and the addition of centre-based provision in parallel with home-based provision. For a comprehensive description of the origins of iScoil and its adaptation to an Irish context, see Checkley (2015).

iScoil targets those young enough to be legally required to attend school, but not yet old enough to avail of supports for those who have left compulsory schooling without adequate qualifications. Only those aged between 13 and 16, and who have not engaged with mainstream education for at least six months are considered for iScoil. iScoil addresses a gap identified in a review of Youthreach services, whereby their centres were unable to support provision for the small number of very young students in need of an alternative model of education provision to mainstream schools (DES, 2010).

iScoil was recognised in 2010 as a Further Education Training and Awards Council (FETAC) provider at Level 3. As FETAC has since been subsumed into Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), iScoil's provision was subsequently tagged at QQI Level 3. The Junior Certificate is also tagged at QQI Level 3, which is equivalent to Level 2 of the European Qualifications Framework. It broadly corresponds to completion of lower secondary education. Students who attain awards at QQI Level 3 are expected to be able to demonstrate some basic factual knowledge of a field of work or study.

Although originally targeting QQI Level 3 only, iScoil is now validated to also provide QQI Level 4 courses in General Learning. This may address an issue for a small group of students who have successfully completed Level 3 with iScoil, but for whom existing Level 4 providers are either inappropriate or inaccessible. For example, some students may feel unable to re-engage with mainstream schools, but are too young for Youthreach's services, while others require a more holistic and one-to-one approach than that which could be provided by other providers.

iScoil delivers material on a virtual learning environment (VLE) called Moodle, chosen due to its good communication tools, capacity for customisation, and “for its grounding in a social constructionist approach that enables a learning community focus on the experiences that would be best for learning from the learner’s point of view” (Checkley, 2015, p. 29). Moodle allows synchronous and asynchronous communication from within the VLE. It provides a secure and integrated environment within which students can receive tasks, engage with their tutors and mentors, work on and submit tasks.

When accepted into iScoil, students are given a technology-enabled personalised learning programme that they access either from their home or in a BLC. The Centres are organised with the assistance of partner agencies (e.g., local youth services or School Completion Programmes under the aegis of Tusla’s Education Support Service [TESS]), who provide physical space and staff to support on-site access to iScoil.

Although originally set up by the Presentation Sisters, iScoil is now funded by a mixture of public and private funding sources (the Presentation Sisters, DE, Rethink Ireland, TESS, and philanthropic sources). The DE has a service level agreement with iScoil since 2015, whereby 40 student places – mainly for home-based learning – are funded annually. Places are available only to those referred by TESS Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs). It is the statutory remit of the Educational Welfare Service to ensure that a young person is in receipt of education. Demand for places has always exceeded the number of places funded, but the number of unsuccessful applications has increased five-fold over the period 2015/16 to 2019/20 (iScoil, 2020b). In 2020, the (then) DES agreed to fund up to 40 additional places for students that meet the criteria for the Department’s Home Tuition Scheme. A condition of the additional funding is that an evaluation of provision is carried out. This report addresses that condition.

## Home Tuition Scheme

The aim of the Scheme, generally, is to provide a small number of home-based learners with an alternative to school attendance, usually for a short period of time. The DES Circular 0044/2020 defines the purpose of the Scheme as follows:

*“... to provide funding towards the provision of a compensatory educational service for children who, for a number of specific reasons, are unable to attend school ... the Home Tuition Grant Scheme is not an alternative to a school placement and is provided in very limited and specific circumstances.” (p.3)*

The Circular makes clear that school-based learning is considered preferable to home-based learning as it provides access to multiple sources of supports and the opportunity to engage with peers.

Until recently, the Scheme was relatively unknown. Other than a cursory mention in the DE Annual Report (first appearing in the 2003 report [DES, 2004]), it rarely featured in public documents. In 2003, approximately 1,000 children were supported by the scheme over the course of the school year, at a cost of just over €6m. The numbers of grants issued have since risen to almost 1,700 in 2019 at a cost of just over €17m (DES, 2020). However, the Annual Reports provide no detail on the extent of support provided (e.g., average amount of time for which a young person typically avails of support) or under which criterion most cases fall. Thus, for example, information is not publicly available on the number of grants made under the SEN/Medical grounds criterion (or any of the other specific criteria).

As noted in the introduction, families may avail of the Home Tuition Scheme in the case of lack of a school place or pregnancy. However, specific to the Special Education Section of the DE, home tuition is funded only for three groups of children or young people, which are those:

- aged between 2.5 and 3 years with a diagnosis of autism or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).
- without a special class or special school placement.
- with a significant medical condition, or school phobia and/or associated depression/anxiety, which has caused, and is likely to continue to cause major disruption to school attendance.

Funding to iScoil is made in respect of the third category (medical) only. Across the Home Tuition Scheme as a whole (i.e., under all criteria, as disaggregated data are not available), almost 1,700 home tuition grants were issued in 2019. Thus, iScoil only deal with a small proportion of families who were entitled to home tuition supports. For the majority, funds are allocated to families to directly secure tuition from qualified providers.

Under the Home Tuition Scheme, the number of tuition hours granted varies by qualification criterion, ranging from maxima of two to 20 hours per week. Specific to those who qualify on medical/mental health grounds, students may avail of a maximum of five hours of weekly tuition at primary level and 10 hours at post primary level. Tuition hours are expected to reflect the school day and be provided between 9 am – 6 pm on weekdays only. The DE does not assist or advise families in locating suitable tutors: that is the responsibility of the family. Tutors must be registered with the Teaching Council and must be vetted by the Teaching Council before they begin work as a tutor.

The various circulars covering the Home Tuition Scheme advise that the Department acts only as a payroll agent on behalf of the family, to facilitate compliance with statutory deduction provisions including taxation and associated provisions. Under the Scheme, families are considered as employers, entering a private relationship with the tutor(s). In a related vein, and in contrast to students enrolled with iScoil, students in receipt of home tuition are *not* registered under Section 14 of the Education (Welfare) Act as being in receipt of a certain minimum education, and their educational progression is not monitored or assessed.

Families must only employ a tutor who is qualified in the sector in which the tuition is required, must confirm that the tutor has completed the Teaching Council's vetting process, and must request vetting disclosure when they first hire a tutor. They must also consider whether updated vetting is required and must confirm that the tutor's Teaching Council registration does not expire before the final tuition payment will be made. Tutors' hourly pay depends on the level of qualification. The rate for those with primary qualifications is €39, compared to €47 for post-primary qualifications.

The DE advises families that they should consider any additional risks that may arise from engaging tutors in a private arrangement, and that it is the responsibility of the families to ensure that child protection and welfare safeguards are in place. If families are unable to find a tutor who is qualified to teach in a specific subject, they may employ a tutor who is registered with the Teaching Council and has a primary degree in a relevant area.

Payments are not backdated, and families are advised that tuition cannot commence until written approval from the DE has been provided for both the application and the tutor(s). As families must first find a suitable tutor (or tutors), then check qualifications, and possibly await the outcomes of a vetting process before submitting documentation to the DE for approval, it can take some time from first seeking

support to the initial tuition session. Yet, although it can take some time to access support under the Home Tuition Scheme, it is intended as a mainly short-term solution.

As should be apparent, the process of finding a suitable tutor is not straightforward. Anecdotal reports suggest that many families struggle to find tutors, especially at post-primary level. Even with considerable help from their EWO, the processes of checking credentials, confirming that vetting has taken place, and facilitating invoicing and payment can be extremely difficult and stressful for families who are typically already under stress at the point they need to access the Home Tuition Scheme.

Two recent reviews of iScoil provision have noted how accessing the Home Tuition Scheme requires skills that families may not have, including a high level of literacy and the confidence and capacity to advocate for their child in a system that might be seen as adversarial (Kovačič, Forkan, Dolan, & Rodriguez, 2021; Timmons, 2019). Further, the design of the scheme itself makes it difficult for families to operate:

*We had home schooling here for 1st year, home tuition it is called, but again those teachers are hard to find and the department guidelines are very strict. So that the day ends at 6:00 and most home tuition teachers, all of them in fact, really are still in the school system. So, a teacher was finishing at 4:00, having to travel then to a pupil's house, which could take to 5:00 and then cut off at 6:00. So, while we did have that for half of the 1st year it just wasn't enough to get stuck in, to get back. (Parent, as quoted in Kovačič et al, p. 100)*

In sum, the process of applying for and managing home tuition under the Home Tuition Scheme is complex, and it places significant demands on families. Thus, a model whereby iScoil can provide coordinated access to a pool of qualified tutors is intuitively appealing.

## iScoil referral model

All referrals to iScoil are from EWOs, working in the Education Welfare Service (EWS). The EWS is one of three strands of TESS, the other strands being the School Completion Programme and the Home School Community Liaison Scheme. EWOs work with families to support their children's participation in education. Their work may include seeking temporary or alternative provision to school in cases where a young person is unable to attend school.

As is the case with all iScoil referrals, students referred for home-based tuition must be aged between 13 - 16 years and typically not have engaged with mainstream education for a prolonged period. In practice, some students may nominally have attended school, but on an extremely reduced timetable. For example, a student might have spent an hour or so in school on a few days, but in the office of a staff member rather than with their class group.

In addition, to be eligible for DE-funded support from iScoil students must either have a stated specific mental health condition and have attended or be waiting to attend Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Eligibility usually requires a medical or allied professional (e.g., psychologist) report. Other factors may also be considered, but non-attendance and a report or diagnosis remain the two factors on which applications for home-based tuition are judged.

TESS guidelines for referrals to iScoil note that the standard model of Home Tuition delivery should be considered as the first option where a young person is unable to attend school due to anxiety/mental health issues. However, students who meet the criteria for the Home Tuition Scheme can be referred to iScoil in circumstances where:

- The EWO indicates that reintegration via home tuition is not viable.
- A young person has been in receipt of Special Education Home Tuition and will not progress to take State exams.
- Home Tuition had been sanctioned but was not effective.
- For specific reasons, Home Tuition is not considered an appropriate option.

There is no centralised mediation or prioritisation of referrals from within TESS at the initial stages. Instead, each EWO has the autonomy to refer as many students as they choose. Some refer none, while others refer multiple students. All referrals are considered by the iScoil Referral Panel which meets three times a year (March, August and December). The panel is comprised of iScoil's CEO and Programme Manager, a representative from TESS, and an iScoil Board representative. As an indication of the volume of work, communication with iScoil staff indicate that the December 2020 Panel meeting reviewed over 40 referrals for home-based tuition, for whom 18 funded places were available. Each case is reviewed for suitability based on the following criteria, and the number of available places:

- Reason for referral.
- Level of need.
- Availability of other educational options.
- Information on previous efforts to engage the young person in education.
- The home and community supports available.
- Other background information and the argument for suitability provided by the referrer.
- Practical considerations such as access to a suitable device (i.e., a laptop or desktop, not a tablet or mobile phone) and reliable internet access.

## Roles within the iScoil home-based model

Students receiving support from iScoil will encounter mentors, tutors, and the iScoil central team.

Young people referred to iScoil under the home-based model will typically engage with a wide variety of support agencies. For example, as well as their school and their EWO, they may be in contact with the National Educational Psychological Service, CAMHS, etc. However, as the focus of this report is on iScoil, only iScoil roles are described here.



## Mentor

Each student is allocated an individual mentor, and each mentor engages with a limited number of students. While not all the eight (as of April 2021) iScoil mentors are qualified second level teachers, all have considerable experience working with young people and may have allied professional qualifications (e.g., youth work or psychology). They work remotely but have regular contact with their assigned students.

Mentors develop a rounded view of each student, keeping track of their ability, interests, home situation and/or additional educational needs. They work with tutors and with the iScoil central team to support student engagement, learning and accreditation. They have overall responsibility for guiding and supporting student learning. Mentors develop strategies to support student learning, based on Individual Educational Plans (IEPs), which include term goals, weekly plans, and daily learning targets.

Before a student begins their iScoil experience, their assigned mentor reviews their information to ensure they are aware of the student's needs and have considered how best to support them. Mentors provide one to one support, including online messaging, phone calls, audio messages and face-to-face video calls. Contact includes a weekly video or phone call to the student's home. Parents may be part of the call to the student, and may also communicate separately with the mentor if there are specific issues that arise. Video calls are encouraged, but some students are (at least initially) reluctant to engage in a video call as they find it more stressful than a voice call or a text-based message.

Mentors act as a central point for the student, liaising with subject tutors, iScoil central team, the student and their family, and with partner agencies as necessary. They monitor a student's overall engagement with iScoil activities, ensuring that students engage with all modules. As Checkley noted, mentors "get to know their students' academic level and what interests and motivates them to learn to support personalization of learning plans" (2015, p. 34).

At the end of each week during term time, they create a report within the VLE, which is automatically emailed to the student's family (or support worker, in the case of centre-based provision) outlining progress, engagement and task completion. The report is based on the student's online activity and his or her communication with the mentor and/or tutors during the previous week. A typical report might state something like the following:

*John engaged well this week. He was online four days, for nearly 2 hours a day. He completed both assigned maths tasks, but he has not started his assigned Digital Media project. Good work John. Next week we will encourage him to start the project.*

In the case of support workers, the email will include some additional details about the student's term goals, and their week plan for the coming week. These details are not included in the email to family.

## Tutor

In contrast to mentors, a tutor is a subject specialist. They develop suitable instructional materials and related assignments for students so that they can meet the requirements of the specific learning objectives associated with the subject. Tutors are almost always qualified teachers, registered with the Teaching Council, whose subject qualifications broadly align with the subject for which they develop materials. At the time of writing (April 2021), iScoil employed 11 tutors.

As well as developing materials, tutors monitor, assess and review student activities. They verify that a student has met the necessary accreditation standards for successful completion of a module. This requires collating a digital portfolio of student work that can subsequently be submitted for external review for accreditation. Tutors usually communicate with students using messaging within the VLE (text / audio), but occasionally supplement this with video or voice calls.

Tutors also work with mentors to maximise student engagement and progression through materials and tasks. Tutors develop materials, these are delivered to each student via the iScoil VLE, and the tutor subsequently reviews the student work within the VLE. Although the outcomes assessed in each module are standard, tutors can adapt tasks based on student interests, and choose from an existing “theme” for a module. For example, the module of Communications has materials that draw on themes related to either music or to cars and mechanics.

## Central team

Members of the central team relevant to student activities include the CEO, General Manager, Head of Learning, Head of Experience and Development, Student Support Coordinator, and a Programme Manager. The central team design and co-ordinate the delivery of the entire iScoil programme and are the central contact points for all external agencies, including TESS, students and their families. They oversee the work done by mentors and tutors, and offer advice and technical support, where needed. See Appendix A for details of roles and organisational structure.

The Head of Learning oversees the development and delivery of learning content, oversees the team of tutors, and ensures that the overall programme satisfies validation requirement criteria. She also quality assures the content of the student’s digital portfolio, ensuring that QQI standards are met and that student certification is accurate.

The central team liaise with support workers, set up students, mentors, and tutors within the system, and organise induction information and training for key roles, including support workers. They also monitor weekly reports from mentors, and maintain contact with students online, via phone calls and (in normal circumstances) visits to BLCs.

## Course content and structure

Students must complete four core modules and two additional optional modules to obtain the Certificate in General Learning at QQI Level 3 (Table 2.1). The core modules for Level 3 (Communications, Mathematics, Personal and Interpersonal Skills, Computer Literacy) do not change, but the optional modules offered may vary from time to time.

For the Certificate in General Learning at QQI Level 4, students must complete work across eight core modules (Communications, IT Skills, Personal and Interpersonal Development, Personal Effectiveness, Functional Mathematics, Work Experience, Digital Skills, and Animation). Provision to Level 4 has only recently been approved, and is currently being piloted with a very small cohort of students. Unlike Level 3, Level 4 does not currently make provision for optional modules.

Table 2.1: Summary characteristics of iScoil's QQI Levels 3 and 4		
	QQI Level 3	QQI Level 4
Core modules	Communications Computer literacy Personal and interpersonal skills Mathematics	Communications Computer Applications Personal and interpersonal development Personal effectiveness Functional mathematics Work experience Digital skills Animation
Optional modules	Career preparation Challenging discrimination Digital media Hairdressing Health and fitness Personal effectiveness	
Method of assessment	Continuous Multiple SLOs per module Complete 80% SLO for pass grade Pass or fail only	Continuous Multiple SLOs per module Research and project work, skills demonstration, some examinations Fail, pass, merit or distinction

Each core module has several Specific Learning Outcomes (SLOs). To achieve SLOs, students must complete tasks such as reading an online article or attachment, or looking at a video. Learning is assessed in a variety of ways, including quizzes, written tasks, videos, and images. To demonstrate mastery of a SLO, students must usually complete several tasks assigned by the tutor.

Once the tutor is satisfied that the student has mastered the SLO, they are assigned a *formal* assessment task. However, from the student perspective the formal assessment looks much the same as the preceding tasks. The outcomes of the formal assessment task are saved to the student's learning portfolio, thus providing evidence for the external certification procedure.

The method of assessing SLOs varies slightly by QQI Level. While evaluation at each Level is largely based on continuous assessment rather than a terminal examination, Level 4 requires students to engage in some more complex tasks, including some basic project work and/or skills demonstration. Some Level 4 subjects have examination requirements, which iScoil have designed to fit into the iScoil style of content delivery and assessment. For example, rather than being told they will be taking an examination, students are assigned section "Wrap ups" once the tutor judges that the student has mastered the relevant content.

Also, Level 3 requires students to successfully complete at least 80% of the SLOs in a module to achieve accreditation in that module. Level 3 success judged on a dichotomous (pass/fail) basis. In contrast, student outcomes at Level 4 are rated as either not achieved, pass, merit, or distinction. Within a module, grades

below 50% are *Not achieved*, grades in the range 50-64% are *Pass*, 65-79% are *Merit* and grades of 80% or higher are *Distinction*.

The number of SLOs vary across modules. At Level 3 the core module with the largest number of SLOs is Mathematics (22) while Personal and Interpersonal Skills is the core module with the smallest number (only eight) (Table 2.2). There is not a direct mapping between the number of SLOs in a module and the amount of work required to complete the module. For example, some Mathematics SLOs measure quite discrete skills.

Checkley's (2015) analyses of the outcomes of 52 iScoil attendees from September 2012 to June 2013 indicated that Personal and Interpersonal Skills was the module most likely to be successfully completed by students, followed by Communications, while Mathematics was the core module least likely to be successfully completed. Eivers' (2021) more recent review (of 35 students enrolled in 2018) found that most students completed all or nearly all the SLOs in each module. Although Personal and Interpersonal Skills was, by a small margin, still the module with the largest proportion of completed SLOs, the more noticeable gap was between home- and centre-based students – the former completing a higher proportion of modules.

**Table 2.2: Number of SLOs in each module (QQI Level 3)**

Core Module	SLOs	Optional Module	SLOs
Mathematics	22	Careers	9
Personal & Interpersonal Skills	8	Personal Effectiveness	7
Communications	14	Health & Fitness	13
Computer Literacy	9	Challenging Discrimination	9
		Hairdressing	18
		Digital Media	10

## How a student experiences iScoil

Once a student is accepted to iScoil, the student is assigned an individual mentor and subject tutors. Following an induction meeting and some assessment of skills and interests, an individual education plan (IEP) is developed by the iScoil teaching team.

### Initial induction and assessment

All new students have an induction meeting, during which they learn about iScoil, procedures for accessing the VLE, and information about the type of content in the core and optional modules. In the case of home-based provision, the Programme Manager or Student Support Coordinator hosts a video call with the student and their assigned mentor. At least one family member joins the video call.

In advance of the induction meeting, students are apprised of their obligations and asked to sign a student agreement form, outlining general terms such as acceptable use policy, safeguarding, and so on. Parents also sign the student agreement form, and sign a Tusla R1 form, which indicates that they are formally enrolled in a recognised form of alternative educational provision. The induction meeting takes

up to 30 minutes, during which the participants discuss the modules and themes. The student and their family may ask any questions they wish during the meeting. With the permission of parents and families, EWOs are invited to attend.

After induction, they are set up on the iScoil system and given access to the VLE. They receive their login details and iScoil ID, login to see an introductory video that explains about iScoil, and then take a short quiz to check comprehension. As part of the current research, students then completed a short online survey, to establish some of their opinions, attitudes and behaviour prior to starting iScoil.

Once a student selects their optional modules, tutors assign them tasks. The first activities assigned are designed to assess interests and abilities, with some assessment of basic competencies. Assessment is via a set of iScoil-developed tasks rather than a standardised achievement test, and not all students will complete all tasks. For example, the Mathematics module has four initial assessment tasks of different difficulty levels. A tutor might assign an initial task, then supplementary ones to get a better understanding of the student's skills. Conversely the tutor may assign one task only as it is apparent that the remaining tasks would be too difficult for the student to complete at that point.

This model has the advantage that assessment can be somewhat tailored to student ability, but the disadvantage that norm-referenced data on ability is not available. However, tutors and mentors are given general information about the student's abilities that arise as part of the referral process. For example, if the student has been diagnosed with a Mild General Learning Disability or is academically very capable, that will be noted on their IEP. The IEP is accessible to tutors and mentors and is considered when assigning tasks.

## Ongoing engagement with iScoil

Using the initial assessments and any supplementary information, the course tutor will decide the difficulty level of the tasks assigned to the student for a module. Student who had difficulty with the initial assessment tasks in one or more modules might be initially assigned "lite" tasks. These are tasks that are easier versions of the tasks that form the core part of the module. Lite tasks can be supplemented with external material (e.g., Khan Academy content for the Mathematics module) and in-house developed material such as the Numeracy Programme and the Skills Booster Programme (targeting literacy). In contrast, students who found the initial assessments very easy might be assigned additional tasks to maintain interest and provide additional challenge.

The initial assignments address the core modules only, and are based on modules of most interest to the student. For example, a student who expressed interest in ICT might start with an assignment related to the Computer Literacy module. Tasks are completed at the student's own pace, and tutors provide feedback to students through the iScoil VLE, assessing progress against agreed learning, communication, and development goals for the module they deliver. The tutors also provide feedback to the student's mentor and to central office staff.

Irrespective of differences in ability, all students must complete the same core assessment tasks to demonstrate mastery of each of the SLOs in a module. However, tutors can assign additional, more difficult tasks to higher-performing students, and additional, simplified tasks to lower-performing students. The extent to which additional tasks are assigned is guided by input from the mentor, as well as the student-tutor interaction.

The tutor has discretion over the type of additional tasks assigned, but for lower-achieving students, can draw from two existing sets of resources: the Numeracy Resources and the Skills Boosters. These are materials designed by iScoil staff, intended to integrate with the QQ Level 3 maths course or to boost basic literacy skills required to engage across all QQI Level 3 courses. In addition to these in-house supports, students can access a small number of optional courses (e.g., the National Youth Council of Ireland's *Skills Summary*, Google's *CS First* and Accenture's *Skills to Succeed* and *Digital Skills*) and resources (e.g., Khan Academy). Typically, optional courses are accessed by students that are making relatively fast progress through the iScoil modules. iScoil also offers some interest-led projects to support student engagement and to challenge students. However, these projects are not accredited.

Students can access iScoil only on weekdays from 9am to 5pm, during which time there is always an adult presence online. Access to the iScoil portal is monitored to ensure child safeguarding measures are in place. Technical support is available to all students and staff during normal office hours. Students can also see which other students are online at the same time and can engage in real time messaging contact with them. Traditionally, this was little used, possibly because students know that all their messages can be monitored by iScoil staff, and because they typically have never met other iScoil students.

However, the importance of interacting with peers is recognised. In early 2020, iScoil recruited a Student Support Coordinator, tasked with developing student-led forums to encourage collaboration and teamwork. A pilot student forum was added to the VLE in September 2020, and activities such as a book club (in partnership with Eason's), and clubs related to gaming, coding, photography, and cars been introduced. Interaction with peers may form a more prominent feature of iScoil for future student cohorts. However, as of early 2021, parents and staff were still finding it difficult to get students to engage in a meaningful way with others. Some progress has been made in encouraging written comments, but students have generally been reluctant to "attend" a class or group if it involved face-to-face interaction (even virtually).

In contrast to communication with peers, there is regular communication between the student and his or her mentor and tutors, using a mixture of messaging within the VLE, audio files (for students who find written feedback difficult) and weekly phone or video calls between student and mentor. However, a good deal of communication is asynchronous, meaning it does not take place in "real time".

Instead, tutors message the student using the iScoil VLE. They give feedback (in written or audio format) on previously completed work, and provide new work, with linked quizzes or assessments. When students log on, they read the feedback on previous work and see newly assigned work. They complete tasks and submit them, but the tutor may not be online while this happens. This means that learning is based on delayed, mainly written, feedback rather than a more interactive or inquiry-type learning approach. That said, anecdotal reports from some support workers in BLCs suggest that feedback from tutors has become more prompt as the numbers of students has increased. In most cases, student queries are dealt with on the same day.

Students attending BLCs must do so on specific days and hours, as they need access to a premises and to adult supervision. In contrast, there is more flexibility over home access hours. Nonetheless, part of the induction process is to encourage students to log in daily, and to agree a regular access time. The time must be between 9.00 am and 5.00 pm, and is typically agreed with the mentor, taking BLC resources and student schedules into account.

As each assigned task and SLO is successfully completed, it is added to the student's progress chart - a bar chart that each student sees every time they log on to the system. It provides a simple overview of progression by showing the percentage of tasks that have been completed for each module. Every fortnight, a series of reports and certificates are generated for students who achieve certain milestones. For example, if a student has completed 25% or 50% of the SLOs in a module, a Certificate of Achievement is produced for that module. Students are posted copies of their certificates, sent from iScoil central office. Partial completion certificates are signed by the Programme Manager, whereas course completion certificates are signed by the CEO.

The student's individual mentor tracks overall engagement and progress in meeting targets and keeps the central office team apprised of progress by means of a weekly report for each student. Because learning is directed by the student to a certain extent, some may try to avoid modules they dislike. Mentors therefore play an important role in managing student work and encouraging them to complete a mixture of module content.

As well as individual monitoring, iScoil's central team hold weekly meetings in which student engagement and progress is discussed, drawing on the weekly reports from mentors. If a student is flagged because of the meeting, the Programme Manager may follow up with the student's mentor. Discussion of student interests and progression is a regular feature of the student-mentor communication. In addition, for students nearing completion of iScoil the Student Support Coordinator will liaise with the family to establish that an appropriate pathway has been established for that student.

As noted earlier, to obtain a Certificate of General Learning at Level 3, students must complete at least 80% of SLOs in each of the six modules. In practice, mentors and tutors encourage students to aim for completion of 100% of SLOs. Students also have the option to complete additional modules if they are on schedule to complete the six required modules ahead of their anticipated schedule.

The length of time for which students engage with iScoil varies, based on factors such as student ability, motivation, and wider supports available. Most engage for at least 12 months, but some may engage for up to two years. During their time with iScoil, most complete at least some modules, almost all complete several SLOs, and many obtain a Certificate in General Learning.

Reviews of iScoil student outcomes by both Checkley (2015) and Eivers (2021) suggest that participation and accreditation rates were higher for home-based than for centre-based learners. However, this is confounded by gender differences. Males had lower rates of accreditation than females, and males until very recently comprised a large majority of centre-based students. Thus, the effects of gender and type of support provided have been very difficult to disentangle, especially given the small numbers of students involved.

## Costs of home-based provision

In this section, we look at the costs (to the DE) of iScoil home-based provision versus provision under the Home Tuition Scheme. The simplest way to compare their relative costs is to compare the *unit cost* - the total expenditure by the total number of students. This is relatively simple to do for iScoil provision, as there are no significant associated overheads or administration costs to the DE. Rather, the DE pays iScoil a flat fee, as outlined in a Service Level Agreement (SLA). In contrast, information on the costs of the Home Tuition Scheme is only available for the total number of grants issued. While this probably includes most



costs incurred, it does not include overheads, administration and staffing costs incurred *within* the DE as part of the management of the Home Tuition Scheme.

## Cost of iScoil home-based support

iScoil's SLA with the DE for 2020/21 is for 80 students at a total cost of €385,000. This is equivalent to a unit cost of approximately €4,800 if each place is taken and the full funding is drawn down. In fact, iScoil supported 90 home-based students for varying lengths of time during the 2020/21 school year. However, to simplify the unit cost comparison, the rolling nature of supports and numbers receiving supports will be ignored. Instead, we use the SLA as the basis for identifying the official unit cost, while recognising that the actual unit cost was slightly lower than €4,800.

## Cost of Home Tuition Scheme support

While the DE annual reports provide information about the total cost of grants under the Home Tuition Scheme, converting that information to a unit cost is not straightforward. The total amount granted under the Home Tuition Scheme covers a variety of eligibility criteria, with different associated hourly costs, amount of support hours and duration of support offered. Also, as noted, the total grants allocated is not the total cost of the scheme as it does not include administration and staffing costs.

The DES Annual Reports for 2019 and 2018 contain the following information about the costs of the Home Tuition Scheme, and number of sanctioned grants:

*In 2019, €17.3m in grant funding issued to parents towards the provision of home tuition. 1,692 home tuition grants were sanctioned during the 2018/19 school year. (DES, 2020, p. 18)*

*A total of 1,760 pupils availed of home tuition under the above Scheme during the 2017/18 school year, amounting to €16.6m. (DES, 2019a, p. 18)*

Unfortunately, the phrasing in the most recent report makes it unclear if the €17.3m refers to the school year or calendar year. However, the phrasing in the previous report suggests that the total grant amount refers to the costs of grants sanctioned that *school* year, so on balance of probabilities, the 2019 report is also referring to the school year. As the Annual Reports for the most recent preceding years do not indicate the total cost of grants, only data from the two most recent reports can be used.

Thus, over the school years 2017/18 and 2018/19, a total of €33.9m was spent on grants under the Home Tuition Scheme. As 3,452 students availed of grants in these two years, this equates to an average unit cost of almost €10K a head (€9,820). However, this is likely to underestimate the current costs of providing a service equivalent to that provided by iScoil for several reasons:

- The cost of post-primary level support is roughly 20% more expensive per hour than primary level support (€39 vs €47 per hour for tutors).
- The maximum number of support hours granted to post-primary students under the mental health criterion is double that granted to primary students (10 versus 5 hours).



- The Home Tuition Scheme is generally intended as a short-term solution, and will therefore be typically of shorter duration than the support offered by iScoil.
- The hourly rate for post-primary tutors in 2017/18 was €42.16, rising to €44.84 in 2018/19, both lower than the €47.01 hourly rate that applied in 2020/21.

Given an approximate 11% rise in payment rates from the 2017/18 to now, and 5% from 2018/19 to now, this suggests roughly 8% “inflation costs” need to be added to any summed costs from the last two years for which information is available. Thus, with inflation alone, the *average* unit cost of Home Tuition Scheme grants is approximately €10,600, but will be considerably higher if only post-primary grants under the mental health criterion are considered.

Another way to estimate costs is to generate a notional equivalent grant. Assume a student is granted access to a tutor, paid at the current hourly rate of €47.01 for post-primary level. iScoil home-based students are typically online for two hours a day, on four or five days a week (not including more general contact with mentors and tutors). If support is provided for the school year (167 days), a tutor or tutors employed by families and paid for from Home Tuition Scheme funds would cost between €12,561 and €15,700.<sup>2</sup> This is 2.6 to 3.2 times what the DE pay iScoil under the current SLA, and does not include costs incurred within the DE to administer the scheme.

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<sup>2</sup> Calculated as follows: €47.01 X 133.6 days (4-day week) X 2 hours = €12,561, or €47.01 X 167 days X 2 hours = €15,700.



## Summary

iScoil offers an alternative pathway to learning for a small group of young people aged 13 to 16 who have disengaged from the education system, and for whom alternative options have failed. Students are referred by Educational Welfare Officers. Support is provided via an online learning environment accessed either at home or in a Blended Learning Centre (BLC), where face-to-face support complements the remote support and teaching. iScoil provides QQI Level 3 and Level 4 training and qualifications. Currently, most students engage with Level 3 and aspire to obtain a Certificate in General Learning. Level 3 students complete assigned tasks in four core modules (maths, communication, personal and interpersonal communication skills, computer literacy) and two additional modules (from a choice of six).

Subject-specific tutors monitor student progression using continuous assessment, while mentors encourage general student engagement. Once a tutor is satisfied that a student has mastered a learning objective, he or she is assigned a formal assessment task. The task outcomes are saved to the student's learning portfolio, which provides evidence for the external certification procedure.

Since 2015, iScoil has been funded by the DE to provide home-based educational support to a small number of students. This provision differs from provision under the DE's Home Tuition Scheme in some important ways. First, the Home Tuition Scheme aims to provide an alternative to school attendance for a short time only (where young people cannot attend school), whereas iScoil's provision is typically to completion of QQI Level 3. Second, iScoil provision for the cohort funded under the DE SLA is directed only at those falling under the *special educational needs on medical grounds* criterion. Third, under the Home Tuition Scheme families must find suitably qualified teachers to provide home-based tuition for a limited period, whereas iScoil provides the teachers, the ancillary supports, and monitors student progress at an overall level.

iScoil currently has an SLA with the DE that provides support for up to 80 students at a cost of approximately €4,800 per student. Direct comparison with costs from the Home Tuition Scheme is difficult as limited information is publicly available. However, to provide a level of support broadly similar to that provided by iScoil would require 8 to 10 hours of tutor support each week for the duration of the school year. As the hourly rate in 2020/21 was just over €47, it would cost roughly €12,500 to €15,700 per student, not inclusive of DE in-house costs incurred in administering the Home Tuition Scheme. Thus, support provided through iScoil is roughly one-third the cost incurred for similar levels of support organised by individual families.



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**Chapter 3:**  
**Non-attendance**  
**at school: Causes and**  
**consequences**

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## Chapter 3:

# Non-attendance at school: Causes and consequences

On an average school day in Ireland, approximately 60,000 children and young people do not attend school. While there are a variety of reasons for non-attendance, there is a popular perception that *school refusal* is an increasingly common reason (e.g., Quinlan, 2018; Wayman, 2019).

Problematic school attendance has almost as many names as it has causes. While terms such as “truancy,” “school phobia,” “school refusal,” “anxiety-based school refusal,” “school withdrawal,” “parent withholding,” and “drop-out” are often interchangeably used, it is important to note that they refer to related but not identical issues. Any type of prolonged non-attendance at school can result in the young person leaving school without attaining qualification or certification (i.e., becoming an early school leaver (ESL)).<sup>3</sup> ESL can have short- and long-term negative consequences for the individual – irrespective of reasons for non-attendance. However, the causes matter too, as they have implications for effective intervention and prevention.

As part of iScoil’s broader activities, they deal with students who disengage from school attendance for a variety of reasons. However, iScoil supports provided to home-based students are mainly directed at young people who are unable to attend a mainstream school due to mental health issues, of which anxiety-related school refusal is the most common issue. Thus, the remainder of this chapter is divided into two main sections. The first focuses on school refusal, including rates, reasons, and how it differs from other forms of non-attendance. The second examines the effects of ESL, a potential consequence of all forms of prolonged non-attendance.

### School refusal and truancy

Kearney (2004) suggests that two key distinctions in student non-attendance are 1) whether parents are aware of the absences, and 2) if the absences might be considered *excusable*. Examples of excusable absences include medical illness or absence due to an unforeseen event (e.g., COVID-related school closures), whereas a child refusing to attend school or deliberate school withdrawal by a parent are examples of inexcusable absences. It is of note that Kearney includes physical illness under excusable, and mental issues under inexcusable reasons. Regarding parental awareness, the term **truancy** is often used to describe non-attendance problems *without* parental knowledge or consent (sometimes linked to wider achievement difficulties), whereas the term **school refusal** usually describes non-attendance *with*

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<sup>3</sup> The acronym ESL is used throughout the remainder of this report to refer to both the person (early school leaver) and the process (early school leaving).

parental knowledge. The latter is often linked to anxiety and related mental health issues, but it is worth noting that disorder-level anxiety occurs only in a minority of cases of school refusal.

In the academic literature, some authors use terms such as truancy as an umbrella term covering all non-attendance problems (e.g., Bimler & Kirkland, 2001). In contrast, others (e.g., Egger, Costello & Angold, 2003) have used school refusal as an umbrella term for both anxiety-based and truancy-related non-attendance. Neither approach is ideal. As Heyne, Gren-Landell, Melvin, and Gentle-Genitty (2019) note, when consistent definitions are used, we gain better understanding of what works for which types of non-attenders. Their review of the research literature indicates that students whose absence is due to school refusal differ in many ways from those whose absence is due to truancy, although both share a high incidence of sleep disorders and of depressive symptoms.

Heyne et al.'s review proposed that the key features of school refusal are as follows:

- a young person 1) is reluctant or refuses to attend school, in conjunction with emotional distress, 2) does not try to hide absence from their parents, and 3) does not display severe antisocial behaviour.
- parents have made reasonable efforts to get them to attend school.

While school refusal may not result in eventual ESL, it can lead to significant problems for the student's social, emotional and educational development. School refusal is not, in itself, a psychiatric syndrome or diagnosis. Nonetheless, it is frequently a flag for comorbid mental health problems, particularly anxiety and/or depression (e.g., separation anxiety disorder) and various somatic complaints (Ingul, Havik & Heyne, 2019). Left untreated, it can result not only in disengagement from the education system but with psychosocial problems that persist into adulthood.

## Rates of school refusal

As noted at the start of this chapter, there is a popular perception that anxiety problems and rates of school refusal are increasing. However, there is limited evidence of this in the research literature – at least prior to the COVID pandemic. Part of the issue relates to definition, and part to a lack of high-quality prevalence studies. Put simply, case studies and clinical populations are not a good source of information about the prevalence within the wider population.

Ingul et al.'s (2019) review suggested that rates of school refusal varied between 0.4% to 5.4% of young people, with the variation attributable to differing definitions, not to changes in prevalence. In stark contrast, Kearney's 2001 review of school refusal behaviour estimated prevalence rates between 5% and 28%. Kearney's range is not only extremely wide, but barely overlaps with Ingul et al.'s range. The reason for these wildly divergent rates is that Kearney included very occasional refusal, as opposed to persistent and problematic behaviour. Another factor that makes it difficult to accurately estimate population prevalence is that it can vary by education system. While much of the research on school refusal comes from the United States and Australia, rates are believed to be higher in countries with high-stakes examination systems (Jenni, 1997). A probable extension of this logic is that rates in Ireland (a country with a high-stakes examination system) are higher than average.

Another way to examine non-attendance due to school refusal is by the length of the problem. Kearney (2001) argues that a three-tier description of school refusal is useful as it can shed light on the likelihood of linked, or comorbid, conditions, and on long-term outcomes. Commonly, school refusal is "self-corrective",

meaning that the young person has transient issues that are resolved as they habituate to a (usually new) school environment. Less frequently, school refusal is “acute” and extends several weeks or months. More rarely, it becomes a “chronic” issue, meaning that it persists for more than an academic year.

While Kearney and Beasley’s (1994) research is widely cited as indicating that school refusal peaks between the ages of 7 and 9, this was based on clinical referrals and does not reflect community incidence. Research from various countries suggests that the transition to second level schooling is associated with spikes in rates of school refusal, perhaps as it requires young people to be more flexible and adaptive in their response to their environment (Egger et al, 2003; Ingul et al., 2019).

## Reasons for school refusal

There is an interesting contrast between the research on the causes and effects of ESL, generally, and of school refusal, specifically. In terms of causality, the consensus for many years is that ESL is usually a gradual process of disengagement, during which individual and/or familial risk factors can be exacerbated or mitigated by school- and system-level factors. Thus, for example, countries that have reduced the number of young people who become ESL have typically done so by adopting holistic approaches to ESL, including system-wide and school-wide changes.

In contrast, research on school refusal has traditionally focussed on the individual young person and their family, and paid scant attention to school- or system-level factors. While the importance of school was acknowledged, relatively little attention was paid to identifying aspects of school culture that might contribute to school refusal. Even less attention was paid to how school culture might be modified to reduce incidence of school refusal or to its long-term *educational* (not psychological) effects (e.g., Elliott & Place, 2019). Unusually for an issue that manifests specifically in relation to educational settings, longer-term educational outcomes were rarely examined.

Looking at some of the reasons for school refusal, many are in fact grounded in the school culture. For example, Mauro and Machell (2019) describe how school refusal derives from a desire to avoid the three *Ps* – *places* (such as the classroom or the playground), *people* (teachers, bullies) and *performance* (being asked questions in class, taking tests). Those studies that did examine **school characteristics** have typically found aspects of *organisation* and *climate* that are associated with higher levels of school refusal. For example, the transition to post-primary school is associated with increased refusal rates. While this might relate to anxiety from being in an unfamiliar setting, it is also true that the change in how the school day is organised can prove very unsettling for some young people, as it typically requires multiple changes in rooms, teachers, classmates, and timetable (Munkhaugen, Gjevik, Pripp, Sponheim & Diseth, 2017).

Regarding *climate*, the quality of peer and teacher-student relationships are especially important. Looking at ESL generally, **school-level** factors that can minimise ESL include adopting differentiated and engaging classroom practice, a positive disciplinary environment, low levels of bullying, positive relations between students and teachers, and parental engagement (e.g., Cornell, Gregory, Huang, & Fan, 2013; Emerson, Fear, Fox & Sanders, 2012; European Commission ET2020 Working Group, 2015). Specific to school refusal, positive student-teacher relationships act as a protective factor, whereas student-teacher conflict and perceptions of unpredictable or unsafe school environments, including bullying, act as risk factors (Demir & Akman Karabeyoglu, 2015; Ingul et al., 2019; Karlberg et al., 2020). Also, schools that have authoritarian management styles tend to have higher school refusal rates (King, Ollendick & Tonge, 1995), perhaps as students may feel they are in a less safe environment.

**System-level factors** that can contribute to higher risk of disengagement (either school refusal or truancy) include the use of grade retention, poor transition supports between primary and second level, early “tracking”, and lack of vocational and educational training, or of alternative provision (e.g., Cebolla-Boado, Radl & Salazar, 2017; Hanuschek & Wößmann, 2006; Nevala et al., 2011; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). In contrast, systems that emphasise social and emotional education, both positive (wellbeing) and negative (mental health issues), can directly and indirectly reduce risk of ESL and school refusal (Cefai, Bartolo, Cavioni, & Downes, 2018).

**Individual characteristics** that might contribute to school refusal include sociodemographic factors, comorbid conditions, academic factors, and family factors. Looking first at sociodemographic factors, gender, ethnicity, family social class (and related characteristics such as parental engagement) all have well-established links with truancy-type non-attendance and subsequent ESL (Byrne & Smyth, 2010; Chung & Lee, 2019; Downes, 2013; Eivers, Ryan & Brinkley, 2000; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Cedefop, 2014). However, their relationship with school refusal behaviour is far less clear (Egger et al., 2003; Inglés, González-Maciá, García-Fernández, Vicent, & Martínez-Monteagudo, 2015).

In terms of comorbid conditions, anxiety disorders, autism spectrum disorders, depression, somatic complaints, and subjective health complaints (e.g., headache, stomach ache) are all common features of school refusal (Inglés et al., 2015; Munkhaugen et al., 2017; Totsika et al., 2020). Comparing school refusal and truancy, Heyne et al. (2019) found that school refusal was associated with internalizing behaviour (e.g., anxiety disorders) and with being bullied, whereas truants are more likely to exhibit externalising behaviour problems, including conduct disorder.

Esch et al.’s (2014) systematic review examined how eventual ESL was related to adolescent externalising disorders (e.g., acting out, aggressive or disruptive behaviour) and internalising disorders (e.g., anxiety and depression). Amongst internalising disorders, social phobia was a strong predictor of ESL, but anxiety was not a consistently strong predictor once academic achievement was considered. In contrast, externalising disorders such as poor impulse control or conduct disorders were linked to elevated risk of ESL, even after controlling for academic achievement.

Regarding academic factors, below average academic achievement, poor attendance, and special educational needs are both linked with elevated risk of truancy and of subsequent ESL (Byrne & Smyth, 2010; Eivers et al., 2000; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Cedefop, 2014). However, they are not consistently linked with school refusal (Havik, Bru & Ertesvåg, 2015).

Finally, regarding **family**, predictors of ESL include low familial income or education, negative attitudes towards schooling, lacking “social capital”, migrant status (e.g., Byrne & Smyth, 2010; Eivers et al., 2000; European Commission, 2011; Jugović & Doolan, 2013; Nevala et al., 2011). However, specific to school refusal, family relationship dynamics seem to matter more than family socioeconomic characteristics. Kearney and Silverman (1995) identified certain relationship dynamics related to school refusal behaviour, including families with a high level of conflict, or where the parent is detached and withdrawn. Esch et al. (2014) found that while anxiety – a significant correlate of school refusal – increased the likelihood of subsequent ESL, its effects were mediated by family supports and socioeconomic status.

## Covid and possible effects on school refusal

While there is limited evidence of a longer-term increase in rates of school refusal, it is possible that the COVID pandemic will lead to an increase in rates. For example, Parentline experienced a large spike in calls from parents whose children were either refusing to attend school or were anxious about attending, with much of the increase attributable directly or indirectly to COVID (Michael, 2020).

However, we currently do not know if increased parental concerns have translated into increased rates of school refusal as no recent and reliable attendance data are available in Ireland. The Educational Research Centre analyses national-level attendance data on behalf of Tusla, but the data are annual only, and there is a *considerable* time lag between collection and reporting. For example, the 2017/18 report was only released in July 2020. If a similar release schedule applies to 2019/20 and 2020/21 attendance data, it will be a few years before we have reliable national data on how COVID has affected school attendance.

In contrast, detailed and up-to-date weekly attendance data are available for the UK. These figures show that there has been an increase in absences since COVID. However, detailed analyses of Scottish and Northern Ireland data show that most of the increases can be attributed to reasons *directly* related to COVID (e.g., temporarily self-isolating, receiving home-based support due to being in a very high-risk category) (Department of Education [Northern Ireland], 2020; Sosu & Klein, 2021). There has *not* been a noticeable increase in absences for other reasons. Thus, if young people in this jurisdiction show a similar pattern of attendance, it suggests that COVID's effect on school refusal rates will be quite limited.

## Consequences of non-attendance at school

Whatever the causes of non-attendance, continued non-attendance that eventually leads to ESL has significant negative consequences for the individual as well as for wider society and the national economy (e.g., Nevala et al., 2011). Thus, it is unsurprising that ESL is part of the United Nation's *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDG), was one of the key *Europe 2020* targets, and that tackling ESL features in various government policies in Ireland.

Set in 2010, *Europe 2020* was the EU's 10-year plan for sustainable development and growth. A key target was to reduce the numbers of students leaving school without *adequate* qualifications. The EU considers that completing upper secondary education (i.e., the Leaving Certificate examination or equivalent) is the minimum desirable educational attainment level. Thus, the *Europe 2020* target was to reduce to below 10% the share of the EU population aged 18 to 24 with at most, lower secondary education, and who were not involved in further education or training. Those who fail to meet this standard are considered ESL, or ELET (Early Leavers from Education and Training).

In an Irish context, various government policies over the past number of years have targeted a reduction in ESL rates. For example, the previous *Programme for a Partnership Government* promised a renewed focus on the School Completion Programme and additional supports for groups working to



reduce ESL (Government of Ireland, 2016). The Department of Education and Skills' *Statement of Strategy for 2019-2021* repeatedly emphasised the importance of supporting all students (including those at risk of educational disadvantage, in need of additional support or at risk of exclusion) in maximising their potential (DES, 2019b). More generally, *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures* underscores the importance of inter-departmental efforts to increase student engagement and reduce ESL, of social inclusion measures to improve educational outcomes and attainment among at-risk students, and of alternative opportunities and supports for ESLs (Department of Children and Youth Affairs [DCYA], 2014).

## Rates of ESL

In Ireland, Early School Leaving is *legally* defined as dropping out of school "...before reaching the age of 16 years or before completing 3 years post-primary education, whichever is later." (Education Welfare Act, 2000, p.26). In practice, the legal definition was almost immediately replaced in common understanding by the definition proposed by the Combat Poverty Agency (2001): that anyone who left the education system without a minimum of five passes in the Leaving Certificate or equivalent is considered ESL.

The DE (or DES) has published annual "retention rate" reports since 2005 on the percentage of students who entered the first year of post-primary school each year and who sat the Leaving Certificate examination either five or six years later. The most recent report was released in November 2020 and is based on those who started post-primary school in 2013 (DE, 2020).

Of the 2013 cohort of students, 91.2% sat the Leaving Certificate examination in either 2018 or 2019, and 97.5% sat the Junior Certificate examination in 2016 or 2017 (DES, 2020). Completion rates for males were 89.9% for Leaving Certificate and 97.3% for Junior Certificate, lower than the female completion rates of 92.8% (Leaving Certificate) and 97.8% (Junior Certificate). Thus, of the 59,524 students who enrolled in 2013, only 1,473 did not sit the Junior Certificate examination (including almost 700 who did not attend school for the third year of Junior Cycle).

Using Ireland's legal definition of ESL, 2.5% of the 2013 cohort of students are ESL, whereas the DE stance is that 8.8% of the cohort are ESL as they were not retained to Leaving Certificate. Definitional issues aside, a review of all retention reports published shows two notable trends. First, there has been a significant and gradual improvement in retention rates over several years. Second, retention to both Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate has decreased slightly in the last two years (DE, 2020). Further, although the EU's definition of ELET is based on 18-24-year-olds, it shows a similar pattern to Irish data on ESL: that the significant progress made in reducing ELET in Ireland (and other countries) has stalled or reversed in the past few years (Eurostat, 2020).

## Costs of ESL

ESL has costs for the individual, the economy, and wider society. The rest of this section summarises research outlining some of the negative consequences of ESL.

### ESLs are increasingly atypical

Irrespective of definition used, the number of young people in Ireland described as ESL has fallen considerably in recent years. As a result, the very small numbers of young people who do not complete Junior Cycle, including those at whom iScoil's support is targeted, have become *quite* atypical.

This section draws as much as possible on recent Irish research. Nonetheless, most of what is reported is from countries with higher rates of ESL than Ireland, or from older Irish studies. It is based on broader and less atypical groups of young people. Thus, it may not adequately reflect the cost of ESL to the current, very small cohort of students who drop out prior to Junior Certificate.

Leaving school without adequate qualifications has consequences for employment, poverty, mental health, general life satisfaction and life opportunities. Regarding work, ESL is associated with a higher risk of unemployment, less secure employment, more part-time work, and lower lifetime earnings (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Cedefop, 2014). Because of their poorer employment situation, ESLs are more likely to rely on social welfare programmes, are at elevated risk of poverty and social exclusion (Belfield, 2008), and are less likely to be active participants in society (e.g., taking part in elections, or in social or cultural activities) (Rousseas & Vretakou, 2006).

Those who leave school without qualification are more likely to engage in risky and criminal behaviour (e.g., Deloitte, 2012; Wolfe & Haveman, 2002). For example, a survey of over 800 inmates in Irish prisons found that 80% had dropped out of school before Leaving Certificate, 52% had left before their Junior Certificate, and 26% had not attended any post-primary school (O'Brien, 2018). Haase and Pratschke's (2010) survey of Irish teenagers found that while ESLs were somewhat more likely than their school-going counterparts to use common drugs such as tobacco, alcohol and cannabis, they were much more likely to use "harder" drugs such as cocaine, amphetamines, and solvents.

In terms of life satisfaction and mental health, Borg, Camilleri, Caruana, Naudi, Vella, and Raykov (2015) found that being ESL was associated with below average employment satisfaction, standard of living, and social life. ESLs were more likely than average to report emotional problems, and to feel tense, depressed and lonely. They were also much more likely to report taking anti-depressants on a regular basis, with anxiety and depression the most frequent reason supplied for taking the medication.

Esch et al.'s (2014) systematic review of the relationship between ESL and mental disorders found elevated levels of mental health issues and substance abuse among ESLs. They also found that anxiety disorders typically did not manifest until a few years after dropout, perhaps because dropping out can sometimes seem a relief and an escape from a stressful situation. However, in the longer term, the reduced capacity to integrate into work and social situations, coupled with often precarious living conditions, meant ESLs were at higher risk of anxiety disorders.

Aside from personal cost, ESL also has associated financial costs. For example, Brunello and Paola's (2014) analyses suggest that an additional year of schooling can increase individual lifetime earnings by between 4% and 10%, depending on country and how earnings are calculated. In terms of how that is reflected in costs to *government*, Eurofound (2012) estimated that the annual loss to all EU member states from young people who were not in education, employment or training (NEET) was €153 billion. In Ireland, there have been few analyses of the financial costs associated with ESL. An exception is Smyth and McCoy's (2009) work, which calculated an annual cost to the state of over €29,000 per *male* early school leaver, before health or crime costs were considered. As those estimates are well over a decade old, current costs are likely to be considerably higher.

In sum, leaving the education system without any qualifications or with limited qualifications has significant long-term negative consequences for the individual and significant costs to society.

## Summary

iScoil deals with students who disengage from school for a variety of reasons, but supports for home-based students are mainly directed at young people who experience anxiety-related school refusal. This chapter focussed on disengagement related to school refusal.

Although popular perception is that non-attendance due to school refusal is increasing, the research evidence is mixed, partly due to poor definitions of school refusal, and a reliance on studies of clinical populations. Also, although COVID *may* lead to an increase in rates of school refusal, the limited evidence available thus far is that it has had relatively little effect.

Unlike early school leaving (ESL) more generally, research on school refusal has tended to focus on individual factors. However, while conditions such as anxiety disorders, autism spectrum disorders and depression are associated with school refusal, aspects of the school climate (e.g., good teacher-student relationships, bullying), and system-level factors (transition supports) are also important.

Leaving school without adequate qualifications comes with significant costs to society and to the individual. Individual costs include increased risk of living in poverty, mental health issues, lower life satisfaction, and unemployment. As overall rates of ESL have fallen, the personal costs associated with being ESL may have increased.



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# Chapter 4: Methodology

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# Chapter 4:

# Methodology

This chapter outlines the main methods used to examine the efficacy of the iScoil home-based model. It describes the research timeline, numbers of students in the study, and research instruments used.

**NOTE:** As the numbers of students studied was very small, no tests of statistical significance are conducted, even where iScoil students are compared against large national student samples. Given the small size of the iScoil groups, only “descriptive” statistics are appropriate.

## Research timeline

The research began in **August 2020**, when a general research approach and questionnaire content were agreed with the iScoil central team. Final questionnaire content was signed off by the iScoil central team in late August and uploaded to Google Forms for delivery to incoming students during September.

The target was students who qualified for Home Tuition grant support 2020/21 for mental health issues, and who were either with or awaiting a formal diagnosis of a mental health issue. Initially, 39 students met the requirements, but three returned to mainstream school and did not avail of home-based support from iScoil.

As part of their induction to iScoil the remaining 36 students were asked to participate in the research. Consent forms were sent to students and parents as part of the general set of forms sent to all incoming students. The iScoil central team also explained the purpose of the research to students and their parents, as part of an initial induction video call. During this call, it was explained that students would be asked to complete short online questionnaires at two points: before they started the iScoil programme (September 2020), and in the first half of 2021. It was also explained that the purpose of the questionnaire was to examine how the *programme* worked, not to identify specific students, and that students should answer as honestly as possible as everything they reported was confidential.

Given the nature of the target group, it is not surprising that many expressed concerns about taking part in the research. Nonetheless, iScoil staff managed to reassure and persuade a large majority of students to participate. Only seven students refused to consent to take part in the research, leaving 29 potential participants.

Students completed an online questionnaire in **September 2020**, while pre-intervention administrative data (e.g., student age, sex, reasons for referral, attendance patterns) were provided in **October 2020**. In **February 2021**, a group interview was conducted with some parents. The interview, conducted via Zoom, was designed to gauge parental views on the efficacy of the iScoil programme and to see how they felt it had affected their child's attitudes and/or behaviours.

Students again completed the online questionnaire during **spring 2021**, with most completed in April 2021. Additional administrative data (on modules and SLOs completed) were shared with the researcher at the end of **May 2021**. A draft report was shared with iScoil in **June 2021**, and a final report submitted in **July 2021**.

In subsequent tables in this report the September 2020 questionnaire/administrative data are referred to as T1, while the spring 2021 questionnaire/May 2021 administrative data are referred to as T2.

## Student numbers

As noted, although the initial target was the 36 students scheduled to start iScoil in September 2020, not all consented, and not all took part in all aspects of the research. Of the 29 students who consented to take part in the research and to share their administrative data, three were unable to complete the initial questionnaire in time to be included in the research (e.g., one student had contracted COVID and was ill for much of September).

Thus, 26 students completed an online questionnaire at T1, while administrative data were provided for all 29 consenting students (Table 4.1). For the second questionnaire administration, 24 students completed questionnaires, including one student who had not completed a questionnaire at T1. For three students, only T1 questionnaire data are available. Two of these students never attended iScoil, and returned to a mainstream school in September 2020, while the third attended iScoil until December 2020, at which point she re-engaged with her former school. Thus, T2 administrative data for these students is limited.

	<b>T1</b>	<b>T2</b>
Total number of students	36	
Number consented	29	26
Administrative data available	29	26
Questionnaire completed	26	24

Given that full pre- and post-intervention data are available for only 23 students, it might seem logical to focus only on those students. This would allow like-for-like comparison, as the same group would be compared against themselves. However, doing so would exclude data from students who returned to school or students who did not fully engage with the questionnaire. It would provide an unnecessarily narrow description of iScoil participants. Thus, the decision was made that for each data source, all available data would be reported, with percentages included to facilitate comparison with other data sources of different sizes. For example, the percent of the 26 students who engaged in a behaviour at T1 can be compared with the percent of the 24 students who did so at T2.

## Data collection methods

This report presents data from three main sources.

1. Questionnaires completed by students, delivered online via Google Forms at two points (immediately prior to commencing iScoil, and late in the 2020/21 academic year). These data are available only for the subset who consented to take part in the research.
2. “Administrative data” (e.g., demographic data, reasons for referral, attendance, completion of assigned tasks, accreditation information) held by iScoil. These data are available only for the subset who consented to take part in the research.
3. Semi-structured interviews with some parents.

## Questionnaire content

Questionnaire content was developed based on three guiding principles:

- Relates to the intended aims of iScoil.
- Assesses risk factors of ESL and school refusal that are open to the possibility of change.
- Is accessible, brief, and uses age-appropriate language.

Questionnaire content, where possible, was based on existing measures that had been recently administered to a similar-aged population of Irish young people. In particular, *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) and *My World Survey* (MWS) were drawn upon as sources of questionnaire content. A few additional questions were drawn from the *OECD's Programme for International Assessment* (PISA) study.

Using studies with a similar target age group provides national reference data against which to benchmark iScoil students. It also meant that the content was likely to be easily understood by the target audience and was unlikely to contain problematic or unsuitable material. Some summary characteristics of the studies are outlined next.

- **GUI** is a national longitudinal study of children and youth in Ireland, funded by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and the Central Statistics Office. It follows two cohorts of children (those aged either 9 months or 9 years at the start of the study). The latter are the comparison group of interest. This nationally representative sample of 8,500 children was first surveyed in 2008, with follow up surveys at age 13 and 17. Aspects of the latter two surveys are drawn on in this report. Full details of GUI are available from [www.growingup.ie](http://www.growingup.ie).
- **MWS** is a collaboration between University College Dublin School of Psychology and Jigsaw, the National Centre for Youth Mental Health. Initially conducted in 2012, the second cycle (conducted in 2018 and 2019) is the cycle used as a source of questionnaire content and comparative national data. It draws on data from three distinct samples of young people. The “adolescent sample” is based on those aged 12-19 in post-primary schools in Ireland (10,459 students in 83 post-primary schools). It is the sample used for comparison in this report. For more details of MWS, see <http://myworldsurvey.ie/>.
- **PISA** is an OECD study of 15-year-olds that takes place every three years. It surveys those still enrolled in schools in participating countries. Of the more than 500,000 students who took part in



the 2018 cycle, more than 5,000 were students in Irish schools. Some of their responses are used as a comparison. For full details, see <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/>.

## Main topics covered

The specification for the iScoil research proposed examining five main themes. Two of those themes (accreditation and progression) are analysed using administrative data. The remaining three are the focus of the questionnaire:

- Student's attitude to education/learning
- Student confidence & self esteem
- Student connectedness to their community.

However, the wider research literature also informed the development of the questionnaire, and thus several measures of student *behaviour* were added to the questionnaire. Appendix B shows questionnaire content in full. This section summarises the types of questions asked, and identifies the source (where applicable).

### *Attitudes to and experience in education/learning*

For most young people, school is a major part of daily life. Thus, attitudes to education and experiences and interactions with others in an educational setting are important in the context of ESL. Research in Ireland and internationally shows a strong link between quality of student-teacher relationships and disengagement, disciplinary problems, academic achievement, and sense of belonging in school (e.g., Byrne & Smyth, 2010; Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

Sense of belonging in school is an important factor in promoting positive attitudes towards students' learning, and positive relationships with teachers and other students influences students' sense of belonging in school, which in turn, affects academic achievement (Juvonen, 2006). However, sense of belonging has a stronger relationship with student self-esteem than with academic achievement (Ma, 2010).

**Attitude to school** was assessed by this question from GUI: "How do you feel about regular school, in general?". The word *regular* was inserted to distinguish between iScoil and mainstream schools.

**Sense of belonging** was assessed with a question used in PISA, modified to ask if the student felt they belonged in the *last mainstream school* they attended ("I felt I belonged in school"). A similar question was later posed in a set of questions about returning to a mainstream school ("I feel like I wouldn't belong in a regular school").

**Interactions with teachers** were assessed using a set of questions from GUI. Two questions looked at general views of teachers ("Most of my teachers were friendly" / "I could talk to my teachers if I had a problem"). Six further questions addressed student and teacher interaction, but with a focus on **positive and negative behaviours in school** (e.g., "You were given out to by a teacher for messing in class" / "You asked questions in class").

**Likelihood of re-engagement** with mainstream schooling was assessed using three questions, one of which has already featured above under sense of belonging. Students were also asked if they would like to go back to a regular school, and if they would like to continue their education, somehow.

## *Confidence & self esteem*

Student self-esteem is closely linked to sense of belonging in school, and predictive of academic outcomes and of school refusal and ESL (e.g., Trzesniewski et al., 2006), as are student educational expectations, aspirations and perceptions of their own competence. Specific to academic self-concept, the relationship with persistence and achievement is likely to be circular. High academic self-concept makes it more likely that students will persist and achieve success, and successful achievement outcomes foster high academic self-concept (e.g., Guay, Marsh & Boivin, 2003).

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965, revised 1989) was used to assess **Self-Esteem**. It is particularly useful for an iScoil context as it is a very short questionnaire, is relatively easy to read, and recent Irish norms are available from the adolescent sample in MWS. Self-esteem is considered to be a stable measure, and tends not to lend itself to experimental manipulation (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1993). The scale contains 10 statements, of which half are positively phrased (e.g., “I feel that I have a number of good qualities”) and half negatively (“At times, I think I am no good at all”).

Student **academic expectations and aspirations** were assessed using two short questions, versions of which have previously been used in GUI. Students were asked to indicate the highest qualification they expected to get and hoped to get, with response options modified to include the Certificate of General Learning as an option.

**Academic self-concept** was assessed by a single question: “How good would you say you are at learning, compared with other people your age?”. This was modified version of a GUI question that asked about performance on tests and examinations. As iScoil uses a model of continuous assessment rather than terminal examinations, asking about learning was more appropriate than asking about examinations.

## *Community connectedness*

Albanesi, Cicognani and Zani (2007) examined adolescent well-being and identified sense of belonging and sense of connectedness and support in the community as two important elements. However, measuring connectedness to community was more complex than other concepts. A recent review of studies of adolescent neighbourhood social environment found “little consistency in how adolescent neighbourhood social environments have been both conceptualised and operationalised” (Martin, Gavine, Inchley & Currie, 2017, p. 343). Consequently, there are many poorly validated and overlapping measures of adolescent community connectedness. That noted, Martin et al. did identify some common themes, including positive interpersonal connections, safety or deviant behaviours, liking the neighbourhood, and having places to spend time and do things.

Two questions examined **sense of belonging** (“I feel I belong here” and “I feel safe here” [also included in MWS]). **Sense of connectedness** and **positive interpersonal connections** were measured by “People in my area look out for each other” and “Adults in my area listen to what people my age think”. Neither have Irish comparison data, but both were identified in Martin et al.’s review as important topics.

Another measure of connectedness is the extent to which young people **take part in activities** in their area. Such participation is linked to a variety of factors, including the young person’s self-esteem and self-efficacy, which in turn are linked to family cohesion and parent-child communication (Morgan, Thornton, & McRory, 2016). Barriers to participation include cost and lack of provision in the local area, both of which are more likely to manifest as problems among socially disadvantaged families (Smith et al.,

2010). Thus, four questions asked in GUI (about playing sports, and taking part in lessons or clubs) were included to assess connectedness via activities.

### *Behaviour*

A large body of research indicates behavioural problems are related to risk of early school leaving, with those who receive warnings, suspensions and/or expulsions at much higher risk (e.g., Jasińska-Maciażek & Tomaszewska-Pękała, 2017; Morrow & Villodas, 2018). Behaviour outside of school may also affect school outcomes. For example, MWS found that those attending Youthreach were more likely than those in mainstream school to have been in trouble with the Gardaí (Dooley, O'Connor, Fitzgerald & Reilly, 2019), while Eivers et al. (2000) found that ESLs were much more likely than their former classmates to have had contact with the Gardaí, even during primary school.

A behaviour often overlooked in its effects on ESL generally, and on school refusal in particular, is poor sleep patterns. However, poor sleep hygiene has well-known effects on cognitive functioning. In the short-term it can contribute to poor concentration and behaviour in classroom, which can contribute to longer-term poorer academic achievement and increased risk of disengagement from school (Everhart, 2011) and to school refusal (Heyne et al., 2019). Clerkin and Creaven's (2013) analyses of data from two large international studies of educational achievement show that Irish teachers are more likely than teachers in most countries to say that students suffering from lack of sleep affects their capacity to teach. Further, in those classes where sleep deprived students are a problem, average student achievement is poorer (Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Drucker, 2012).

Limited sleep or poor-quality sleep can also affect physical and mental health, contributing to increased risk of obesity, depression, substance misuse, and suicidality (Fitzgerald, Messias & Buysse, 2011; Owens, 2014). Downes, Nairz-Wirth and Rusinaite' (2017) suggest that longer-term sleep problems are a key health issue that affects risk of ESL, and proposed that socioeconomically disadvantaged areas or schools be targeted to raise awareness among students and parents about sleep issues and importance of regular sleep.

Unfortunately, there is relatively little Irish research on how poor sleep patterns affect adolescents. However, if recent trends in England are replicated here, it is likely to become an increasingly important issue. Among under-16s in England, hospital admissions for sleep disorder almost doubled between 2012-13 and 2018-19 (despite no perceptible change in admission rates among other ages) (Marsh, 2020). An additional concern is the effects of the COVID pandemic on sleep hygiene. Emerging research indicates that adolescents, generally, are likely to experience increased sleep difficulties (Becker et al., 2021), and that adolescence coupled with ASD is a particular risk (Türkoglu et al., 2020).

Thus, six questions were included asking about **positive and negative behaviour in the classroom**. To simplify comparison with iScoil data, only one set of GUI data were used (the 13-year-old sample, as they would, like iScoil students, have been in Junior Cycle). In addition, **behaviour outside of school** was examined in terms of contact with the Gardaí, and sleep patterns (e.g., average sleep per day, and any sleep problems).

## iScoil administrative data

An important aspect of the research involved analysing existing administrative data to see what it indicated about outcomes for different students. Two types of data were extracted from iScoil databases: information from the referral process, which was extracted as the student began iScoil; and, information about the student's interaction with iScoil, including attendance and completion of SLOs.

The first extract contained the following data fields:

- Student unique identifier
- Student age
- Student sex
- Attendance in school
- Reasons for referral
- Interventions attempted prior to iScoil.

The second extract, later in the year, contained the following variables:

- For each module taken:
  - Module name
  - Number of SLOs completed of the total for that module
  - Course passed (Y/N) based on 80% completion of SLOs
- Completed the Certificate in General Learning (Y/N) / or on target to achieve
- Student outcome / status (e.g., moved to QQI 4, job, still in iScoil, returned to mainstream school).

## Semi-structured interviews with parents / caregivers

Six interviewees were selected, based on their children's characteristics (i.e., reflecting a mixture by age, sex, diagnoses). The ID numbers of the chosen students were given to iScoil central office staff, to facilitate contact with parents. However, two selected students were excluded on the advice of iScoil staff (one had recently been hospitalised for an anxiety-related issue, and another's carer had recently given birth). All four remaining parents were contacted, and all agreed to take part.

All were directly emailed by the researcher, provided with a link to a Zoom meeting, and advised that a member of iScoil staff was available to provide technical help if they had problems accessing the link. One mother required considerable assistance to access the meeting, but was able to fully engage with the researcher and the other parents once that help was provided. In contrast, another parent who had agreed to take part did not do so, and did not respond to offers of technical help.

The interview was preceded by a short preamble during which the researcher introduced herself, explained about the research aims, and underscored the voluntary, confidential and anonymous nature of the conversation. She also introduced the parents to each other and asked that they also respect each other's privacy, by maintaining the confidentiality of any information discussed. To bolster the emphasis on confidentiality, the interviews were not recorded. However, participants gave permission for notes to be taken and (unattributed) quotes to be used in the final report.

The three (all mothers) who took part were asked for their views on iScoil and if it differed from what they had expected. They were also asked about the amount and difficulty of the work assigned to their

child, and about communication with mentors, tutors, central office staff and with other students. Finally, they were asked if they had observed any change in their child from participation in iScoil. The list of questions asked is contained in Appendix C.

## Data subject rights, data protection and security

Given that students were all under age 18, parental as well as student consent was required for each participant. Also, in the information sheet, consent forms, in interviews and in all communication with the students, plain English and age-appropriate language was used (see Appendix D for the information sheet and consent form). Prospective students and parents were provided with short explanations about the reasons for the research, what it would involve, why they should take part, and how to get further information if they had any questions not answered by the information sheet. They were also assured that their personal details would not be shared, that data would be pseudonymised, and that no individual student or parent would be identified in the eventual report.

The researcher accessed three types of data on students: pseudonymised administrative data from the iScoil system; pseudonymised questionnaire data developed for the research and collected as part of the admissions process, and then later in the calendar year; interview data collected by the researcher where three parents were identified by their name and their child's first name.

The data were stored in a secure, password-protected, cloud-based database. At no point were student names attached to the datafiles containing their administrative records or their questionnaire responses. These datafiles were linked to each other using a unique student numeric identifier.

## Summary

The focus of the research was a single cohort of students. These 29 students began their iScoil home-based tuition in September 2020. A mixture of self-report and administrative data was used to examine changes (if any) in their behaviours, attitudes, expectations, engagement, and educational outcomes at two points: September 2020, and spring 2021. To ensure no "programme effect" was evident in the first survey, students completed it as part of their induction to iScoil, and before they engaged with their individual learning programme.

As well as comparing students against themselves (pre- and mid-intervention), much of the questionnaire drew on content used in recent large studies such as Growing Up in Ireland, and My World Survey. This allowed the iScoil students to be compared against a nationally representative group of similar-aged students. In addition, a small group of parents were interviewed to discern their views of iScoil and its effects on their children.



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# Chapter 5: Student characteristics

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## Chapter 5:

# Student characteristics

This chapter uses administrative and questionnaire data to describe the cohort of iScoil students tracked as the focus of this research. The first two sections use administrative data to describe demographic characteristics, then attendance in school and iScoil, and module completion in iScoil. The remaining eight sections are based on responses to questionnaires, and outline attitudes to school and education, behaviour in a learning environment, educational aspirations and expectations, academic self-perception, connectedness to community, contact with An Garda Síochána, sleep problems, and self-esteem. Administrative data are based on all students that consented to participate, whereas questionnaire data are based on the slightly fewer students who completed questionnaires.

As explained in Chapter 4, where possible, comparisons are drawn between iScoil student questionnaire responses and responses from students to the same questions administered as part of large nationally representative studies. Thus, iScoil students are in many cases compared against themselves (at two points in time) and against “national” data. The national comparison group in most cases is drawn from Growing Up in Ireland (GUI), but data from Programme for International Assessment (PISA) and My World Survey (MWS) are also used.

**NOTE:** Percentages in tables and figures are rounded, whereas combined percentages in text are based on non-rounded data. Thus, not all percentages in tables and figures may sum to 100, and the summed data in text may differ marginally from that shown in figures and tables.



## Demographic and background characteristics

Table 5.1 summarises information provided by EWOs when referring the young people to iScoil. Checkley's (2015) review of BLC attendees during 2012/13 reported that 90% were male. However, the home-based group displayed a more even gender balance. Overall, 12 (41%) were female and 17 (59%) were male. Their age at intake ranged from 13 to 16, with 15 being the most common age.

<b>Table 5.1: Characteristics of home-based students at intake</b>			
		<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Sex	Male	17	59
	Female	12	41
Age	13	2	7
	14	10	34
	15	14	48
	16	3	10
Referral reasons	Anxiety	26	90
	School phobia	22	76
	Behavioural	1	3
	Social phobia	16	55
	Medical	11	38
	Other	4	14
Diagnosed SEN	Yes	14	48
ASD	Yes	12	41

Apart from age and sex, some information provided by EWOs was of varying quality. Thus, data in Table 5.1 and some subsequent figures should only be taken as a rough guide, particularly in relation to diagnoses of SEN and attendance rates. In several cases, it was clear from text provided that a student had very significant issues, but without the precise details needed to quantify those issues or to assign a specific diagnosis or referral reason. For example, an EWO may have noted that the young person had ongoing engagement with CAMHS, but that they did not have access to any information on formal diagnoses.

As can be seen from Table 5.1, the total number of reasons students were referred to iScoil far exceeds the total number of students: 86% had more than one reason for referral, while 24% had four referral reasons. The most common referral reason was anxiety (90%), then school phobia, social phobia and medical issues. Only one student was described as having a behavioural problem. Roughly half were described as having a diagnosed Special Educational Need (SEN), although in most cases this seemed to refer solely to a diagnosis of ASD. Overall, 41% of students had an ASD diagnosis.

As well as ticking a box to indicate if a student had a particular issue (e.g., anxiety), EWOs wrote a description of the main reasons for referral. These included references to issues with anxiety, triggers for non-attendance, problematic family circumstances (e.g., homelessness), and so on.

*Presents with extreme anxiety. Her mother brings her to school each morning to collect work, but she refuses to get out of the car and sits in the car with a blanket over her head. This is most distressing for young person.*

*Experienced quite bad bullying while in [School]. His mother advised that this triggered initial poor school attendance. He moved to [New School], to repeat 1st year.*

*Had a difficult start to secondary school and was attempting to school refuse on the 1st couple of days of school, however, he did settle into school and was attending relatively well. On occasion he would school refuse and usually this would be down to being unable for social situations in school and embarrassment about his poor reading. After a brief illness in early December he refused to return to school and has not returned since. ...His mother has made attempts to try and force him to go to school and young person would completely refuse to the point that he would shove his mother away from him and try and barricade himself into his bedroom.*

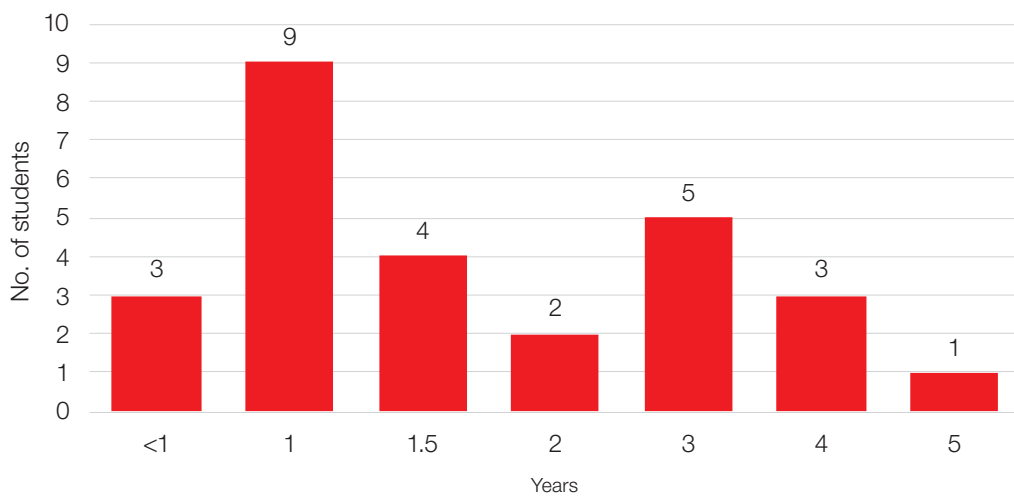
Only a minority (24%) had previously been attending a DEIS school, only one third had had previously received support from HSCL staff. Fewer again (17%) had received support from the School Completion Programme (Table 5.2).

**Table 5.2: Engagement with agencies, schools and additional supports**

	Number	Percent
DEIS school	7	24
HSCL	10	34
School Completion Programme	5	17

There was considerable variation in the length of time for which students had been engaging with Education Welfare Services (EWS) (Figure 5.1). While three (17%) had been engaging with EWS for less than a year, most had been engaging for a few years prior to referral to iScoil. Indeed, EWS had been engaging with nine students (31%) for at least three years.

**Figure 5.1: Number of years for which students had been in contact with EWS**



## Attendance and module completion

To be considered for iScoil, students must not have attended a mainstream school for at least six months prior to referral. Consequently, referrers are asked to indicate the number of days a student was absent in the most recent school year, and any patterns or trends in their absences. However, this information is complicated by the fact that referrals can be made at any point in the year, meaning that different referrers often use different reference points for attendance information. Some referral forms provide number of days absent for the previous school year, others refer to the current school year or current *calendar year*, while others gave slightly vague timelines (e.g., “out since November 2019”). Some EWOs included partial attendance days whereas others did not.

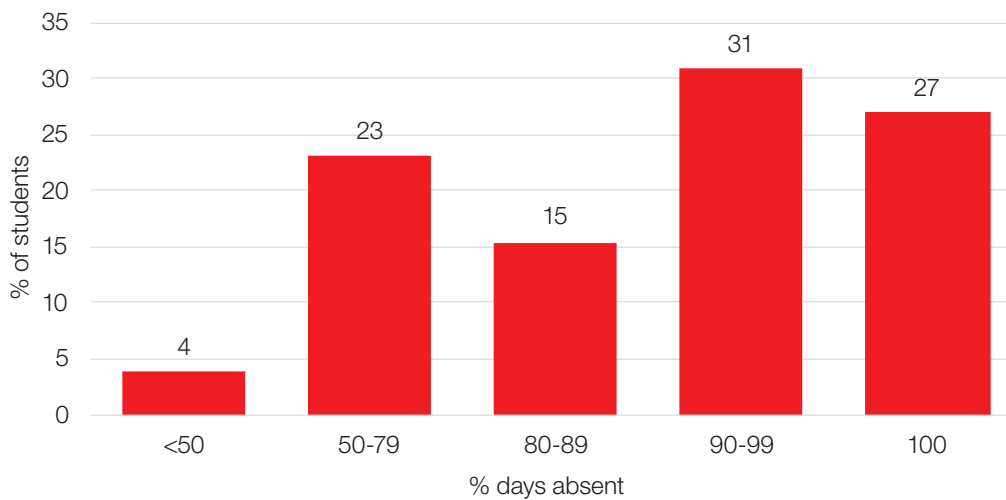
Because of the variable quality of information on the referral form, for three students it was not possible to establish a reasonable estimate of percentage non-attendance. For others, it was possible to use text and numeric responses to infer a reasonable estimate. For example, if a specific month was mentioned as the last time attended, the number of school days from the middle of that month to the end of the school year was used to calculate non-attendance. However, while this permits non-attendance rates to be provided for most students prior to starting iScoil, it should be interpreted with considerable caution.

Regarding the requirement for *non-attendance for at least 6 months*, a review of referral forms suggests that some EWOs adhered to the spirit, but not always to the letter, of that requirement. Some students had in fact “attended” school in the six months prior to iScoil. However, none had attended regularly or for the normal school day. Attendance was usually for an hour or two, sporadic, and did not normally include attending a regular lesson with their classmates. Thus, while they had technically attended school in the previous six months, the balance of evidence indicated highly problematic attendance behaviour and, typically, little chance of the student returning to their mainstream educational setting.

While some had sporadic recent attempts at attendance, one student has not attended school at all since October 2016 (i.e., no attendance in the previous **four** years), and seven have not made the transition from primary to post-primary school. Indeed, the number who did not successfully transfer may be higher, as the seven includes only those who were clearly described as either not having attended at all at post-primary level, or who attended for no more than two or three days. Other students may not have transferred to post-primary but have not been counted as such here because it was not clear from the text provided by the EWO.

Of the 26 for whom a *reasonable* estimate of non-attendance could be made, over one-quarter had been absent for 100% of the previous school year, while a further 31% were absent on at least 90% of days (Figure 5.2). Only one student (4%) had attended on at least half of days.

**Figure 5.2: Rates of absence in the previous school year**



All students exhibited very problematic attendance patterns. Many were described as having a long-term pattern of absences, often dating back to primary school. For example:

*... has been refusing to attend school since 6th class and for two years in secondary including repeat 1st yr. Awaiting assessment for suspected moderate to severe ASD.*

*When young person was in national school, he had some of the same issues and at times would either state he was ill and couldn't go to school or would school refuse, however, this usually could be resolved and he would enjoy long spells of good attendance.*

*Since the start of the academic year has been present for 3 full days, partially present for 34 days (2 morning classes per day) and absent for 80 days. The last date was in school was November 2019.*

In contrast, for some, attendance only became an issue with the transition to post-primary level.

*Attendance did not deteriorate until he transferred to post primary school.*

*There were some unexplained days, but school attendance was not a major concern at primary school level.*

Table 5.3 presents student-level attendance at iScoil. However, it needs to be interpreted with **considerable caution**, as it was not straightforward to calculate attendance rates. For example, many students are not expected to attend on 5 days a week. Thus, for students expected to log in on fewer than five days a week, attendance was calculated on a prorated basis. Also, given the nature of the home-based group of students, "excused absences" (e.g., unable to attend due to an appointment with CAMHS) were a likely feature but could not be captured here. Finally, some students had a delayed start to the academic year, while one had a short iScoil year as she re-engaged with school before Christmas 2020. For those with a shorter year, attendance was adjusted appropriately.

**Table 5.3: Attendance at iScoil, including reduced days, shorter school year for some students**

Student	Agreed days per week	Duration of school year	Potential school days	Actual days online	% days attended
1	5	162	162	147	91
2	4	157	126	83	66
3	4	157	126	121	96
4	5	167	167	158	95
5	4	150	120	123	103
6	4	167	134	120	90
7	5	167	167	157	94
<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>162</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>37</b>
10	5	147	147	134	91
11	4	162	130	154	119
12	5	167	167	155	93
13	5	167	167	103	62
14	4	167	134	153	115
15	4	167	134	131	98
16	3	147	88	52	59
17	3	152	91	107	117
18	3	142	85	27	32
19	4	147	118	112	95
20	3	140	84	70	83
21	4	157	126	138	110
22	3	152	91	93	102
23	4	167	134	107	80
24	4	142	114	90	79
25	4	152	122	109	90
26	5	162	162	136	84
<b>Average % attendance</b>					<b>87.0</b>

Bearing in mind those explanations and caveats, Table 5.3 can be interpreted as follows. Student number 2 agreed to attend 4 days per week. As he started in mid-September, his school year duration was only 157 days (167 minus two weeks). Prorated, this means he was expected to attend on 126 days. As he logged in to iScoil on 83 days during the year, his attendance rate was 66%. Student 8 is shown in bold, as she left iScoil to re-engage with school. Her iScoil year (5 days a week) was only 60 days. Thus, as she logged on to iScoil on 49 days, she had an attendance rate of 82%. Student 9 is somewhat unusual, as a home-based student who nonetheless was supposed to access iScoil via a blended learning centre. This

meant his access to the iScoil VLE was somewhat restricted during the second period of prolonged school closures (between January – March 2021) as he had limited capacity to log on at home. His attendance rate of only 37% can be at least partially attributed to access difficulties.

As can be seen, there was considerable variation in student schedules, duration with iScoil and in attendance on the agreed days. However, most students attended on most scheduled days, averaging an 87% attendance rate. Indeed, six students attended for *more* than their scheduled days. Excluding the student who had access difficulties due to being in a blended learning centre, 24 of the 25 students attended for at least half of their scheduled days. This is in stark contrast to their pre-iScoil attendance patterns, where only one student had attended on more than half of school days in the previous year. Thus, despite being a group of students who had previously demonstrated extremely problematic attendance patterns, the large majority of iScoil students attended iScoil on the days they were scheduled to attend.

The number of modules completed by students up to the end of the 2020/21 school year is shown in Table 5.4, limited to those who engaged for at least some time. Thus, three of the original group who had been allocated support but who did not subsequently engage with iScoil are not included.

**NOTE:** Students are not necessarily expected to have completed the Certificate in General Learning within a single school year. While some students do so, others take up to two years to obtain full accreditation. Thus, the rates of module completion and accreditation described in this section are somewhat premature and are very likely to underestimate the eventual attainment of the students concerned.

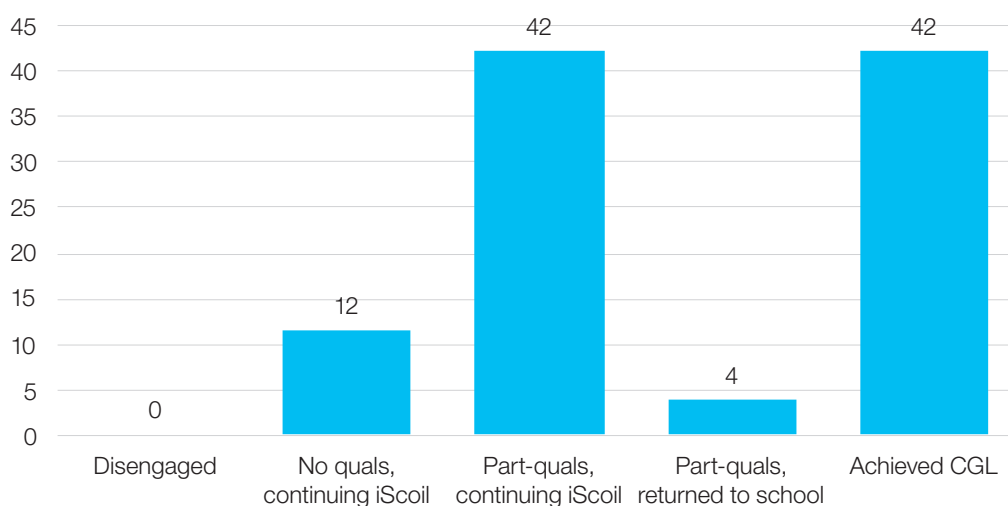
	<b>No. students</b>	<b>% students</b>	<b>Outcomes / Plans</b>
Left without completing any modules	0	0	N/A
None	3	12	Three: continuing into 2021/22
One	3	12	Three: continuing into 2021/22
2 – 5	9	35	One: re-engaged with school Eight: continuing into 2021/22
Cert. in General Learning	11	42	One: Employment One: Referred to TESS, no progression route Two: iScoil QQI Level 4 Two: Youthreach Two: Other educational provision Three: Re-engaged with school

None of the 26 who started iScoil left without completing any modules. Three had not fully completed any modules by the end of the 2020/21 school year, although each of the three had completed a number of SLOs. All three planned to continue with iScoil in the 2021/22 school year. A further three students had completed one module, and all that group also planned to continue with iScoil in the 2021/22 school year.

Of the nine students who had completed between two and five modules, one had re-engaged with school, while eight were continuing with iScoil. Of the 11 students who had completed the Certificate in General Learning, one had found employment, one had no progression route agreed (and was focussing on his mental health), while the other nine were continuing in education. Two planned to complete QQI Level 4 with iScoil, four had transferred to Youthreach or other educational providers, and three had re-engaged with school.

Figure 5.3 summarises progression routes for a core group of 26 students (excluding three students who never engaged with iScoil). Of this group, 88% had achieved at least some qualification, including 42% who had completed the Certificate in General Learning. One of the students who had not completed the Certificate in General Learning had returned to school, while all the remainder intended to continue with iScoil in 2021/22, with the aim of completing the Certificate in General Learning. Thus, at the end of the school year, the “dropout rate” was zero. All students had obtained a qualification or were on track to do so. Only one student (who achieved the Certificate in General Learning) did not have a pathway planned for the next year.

**Figure 5.3: Outcomes at the end of 2020/21 school year, core group\* only**



\* Based on the 26 students who engaged with iScoil.

Given that not all students were expected to complete their Certificate in General Learning within a single school year (especially a disrupted one), Table 5.5 shows the number of students who started each optional and core module, the number who completed at least 80% of SLOs within the module, and the percentage (of those who started) who completed a module.

Among the four core modules, all students had started work on at least some mathematics SLOs, but only 12 (46%) had completed the module before the end of the school year. Almost all students had also started communications and computer literacy, but the completion rate for the latter was much higher (88%) than for communications (57%). Of the four core modules, fewest had started personal & interpersonal skills, yet it had the highest completion rate, as 95% of the students who started it had completed the module.



Among optional modules, personal effectiveness was the most popular choice (16 students), followed by career preparation and digital media, each chosen by 9 students. None had chosen the hairdressing module. Each of digital media, health and fitness and personal effectiveness had been successfully completed by at least 80% of the students who chose the modules.

Table 5.5: Number of students choosing and completing optional modules, starting and completing (at least 80% of SLOs) core modules in 2020/21 school year*				
		N started	N completed	% of "starts" who completed
Core	Communications	23	13	57
	Computer literacy	24	21	88
	Personal & interpersonal skills	19	18	95
	Maths	26	12	46
Optional	Career preparation	9	8	89
	Challenging discrimination	8	3	38
	Digital media	9	7	78
	Health and fitness	5	4	80
	Personal effectiveness	16	14	88
	Hairdressing	0	N/A	N/A

\* Although core modules are required, students may opt to delay starting one or more of them until other modules are completed. Numbers include two students who only stayed with iScoil for a short period.

## Outcomes by gender

Of the 11 students who completed the Certificate in General Learning within the first school year, four were female. Thus, the female full completion rate for year one was 40% of the 10 females (i.e., excluding two who re-engaged with school rather than starting with iScoil). Seven males completed the Certificate in General Learning within the first year, which is a completion rate of 44% of the 16 males who engaged in home-based access to iScoil.

## Attitudes to school and education

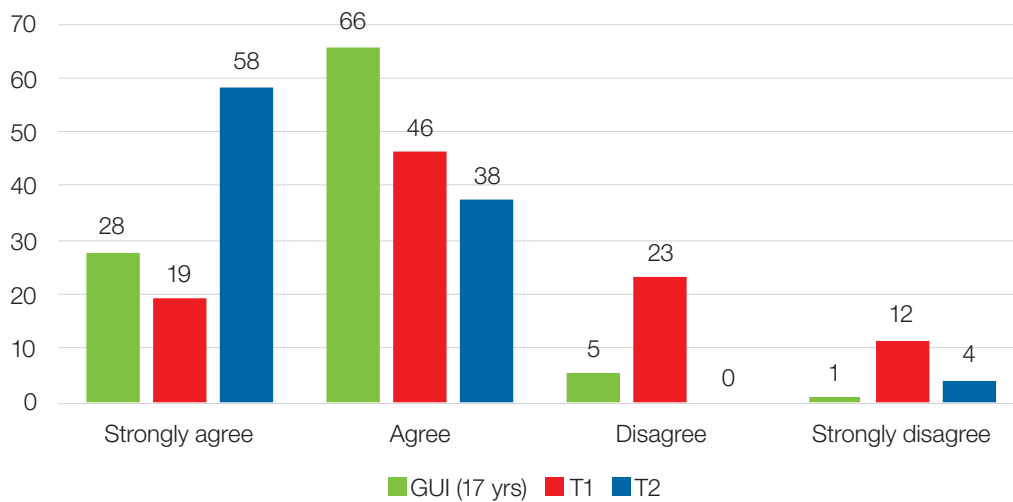
This section outlines student attitudes to school and examines any changes over time. It is based on responses to an almost identical questionnaire administered at two time points: September 2020 (T1) and late April/early May 2021 (T2). The main difference in content between T1 and T2 was that some questions that asked about mainstream school (described either as "your last school" or "a regular school") were changed in the second administration to refer to iScoil.

**NOTE:** Here, and in many subsequent Figures, data for the "national comparison group" (where such a comparison exists) are shown in green. iScoil T1 data are red and T2 data are blue.

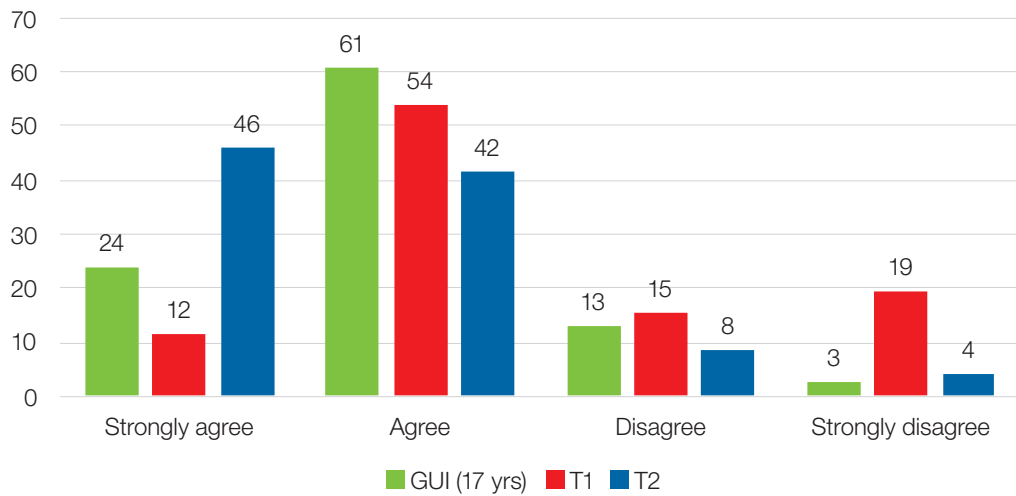
Regarding attitudes to teachers, a sizeable majority of iScoil students expressed positive attitudes, even when referring to teachers in the last mainstream school they had attended. For example, about two-thirds agreed that teachers in their last school had been friendly, and that they could talk to a teacher if they had a problem (Figures 5.4 and 5.5). Nonetheless, attitudes were slightly less positive than those expressed by 17-year-olds surveyed as part of GUI.

By the second questionnaire administration (T2), attitudes to teachers (mentors or tutors) had shifted. For example, 96% of iScoil students now agreed that most people (tutors, mentors) in iScoil were friendly while only 12% disagreed that they could talk to someone in iScoil if they had a problem. The attitudes expressed by home-based students at T2 were not only markedly more positive than those they expressed at T1, but also noticeably more positive than those expressed by the nationally representative sample of students in GUI.

**Figure 5.4: Perceived friendliness of teachers**

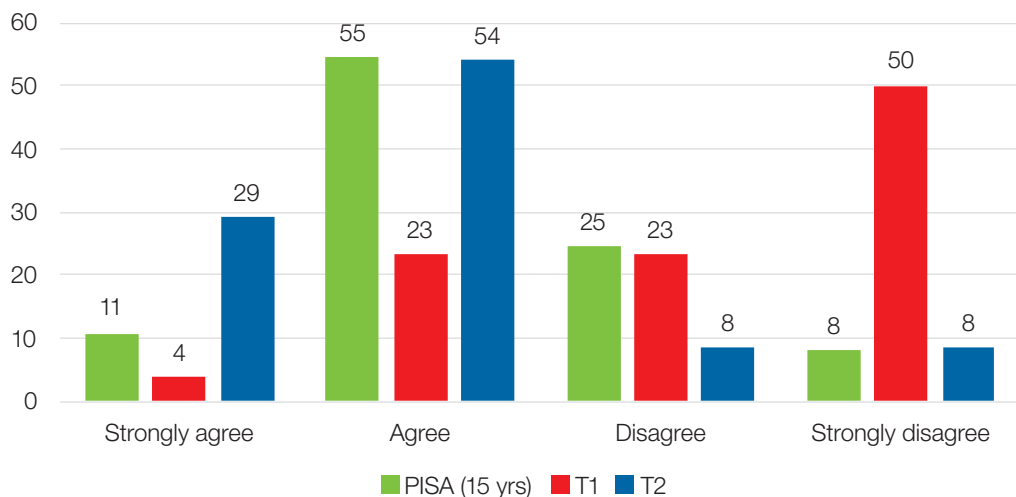


**Figure 5.5: Perceived approachability of teachers**



In contrast to the generally positive views about teachers, only a minority of iScoil students at intake felt that they belonged in their last mainstream school (Figure 5.6). For example, while 66% of 15-year-olds surveyed as part of PISA 2018 agreed or strongly agreed that they belonged in school, only 27% of iScoil students did so at intake. Rather strikingly, half strongly disagreed that they belonged in school, compared to 8%, nationally. By T2, there were markedly more positive ratings on sense of belonging in iScoil (not school). Only 16% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they did not belong.

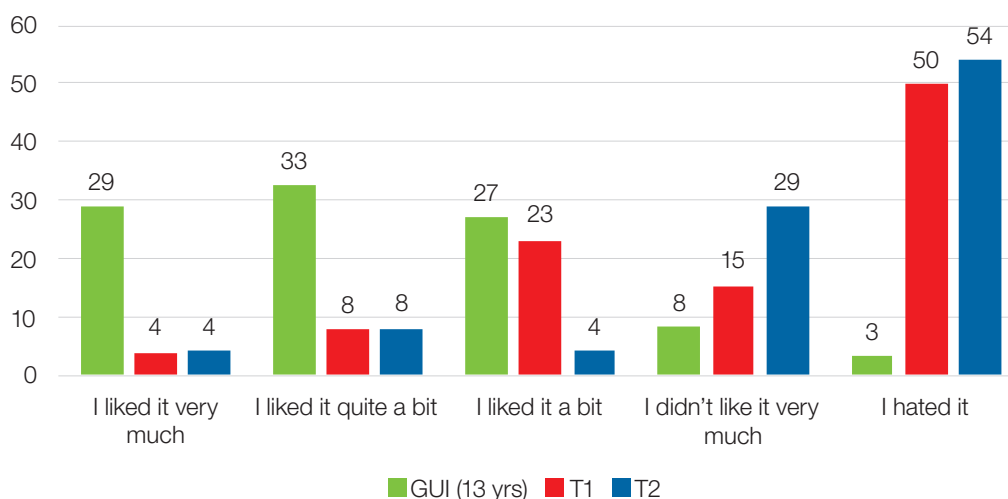
**Figure 5.6: Sense of belonging in school (T1) or iScoil (T2)**



When asked broader questions about attitude to school, *generally*, answers from iScoil students were much less positive. For example, only 4% of students on intake responded that they liked “regular” school very much, compared to 29% of students in GUI (Figure 5.7). Half said they hated school, considerably

higher than the 3% of GUI students who answered similarly. At T2 students were asked how they would feel if they were in a regular school, at that time. As can be seen from Figure 5.8, attitudes to school remained overwhelmingly negative. Indeed, there was a shift towards more students expressing a negative attitude to mainstream school, as the percentage who did not like or who hated it increased from 65% to 83%.

**Figure 5.7: How students feel about (regular) school**



At T1, only 19% agreed or strongly agreed that they would like to go back to a regular school, while 69% felt that they would not belong in a regular school (Table 5.6). By T2, the percentage who agreed they would like to go back to a regular school was largely unchanged (21%) although there was a slight drop (to 58%) in those who felt that they would not belong in a regular school.

**Table 5.6: Percentages who would like to return to “regular” school, or felt they would not belong in a regular school**

		Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
...would like to go back to regular school	iScoil T1	4	15	23	58
	iScoil T2	13	8	25	54
...feel would not belong in a regular school	iScoil T1	38	31	27	4
	iScoil T2	38	21	25	17

## Behaviour and interaction during lessons

Very large differences were apparent in classroom interactions and feedback reported by iScoil students at intake, when compared to students in GUI, or against themselves later in the year. Generally, when the home-based students were in mainstream schools, they were less likely than average to receive any feedback (positive or negative) on their behaviour or work (Tables 5.7 and 5.8).

For example, when asked how often a teacher had described their work as good, 15% said it had never happened, compared to only 1% of students in GUI, while 50% said they had *never* been praised for answering a question in class (GUI: 9%). iScoil home-based students were noticeably less likely than average to ask a question in class in mainstream schools or to have the quality of their written work praised by a teacher. Regarding negative feedback in lessons, the iScoil group at T1 were less likely than their national comparison group to have been given out to for messing in class, and about average in terms of being given out to because work was untidy or not done on time .

By T2, there was a marked increase in positive feedback. Almost all students (92%) said someone in iScoil very often or often said their work was good, while almost half (46%) said they very often received praise for their written work. Both represent not only a much more positive experience than reported at T1, but are also more positive than the responses of students in GUI. Between T1 and T2, the frequency with which students asked questions in class also increased. One-third often or very often asked questions in class, up from 19% at T1. However, active engagement was still below the levels of engagement among the GUI national comparison group.

There were also noticeable changes in the frequency with which students were criticised. AtT2, none of the students reported being criticised for messing in class (compared to 31% at T1), while criticism for late or untidy work fell from 46% of students at T1 to 12% at T2. In sum, between T1 and T2 student reports show a noticeable increase in the frequency of positive experiences and behaviours and a decrease in the frequency of negative experiences.

Table 5.7: Percentages having positive experiences in lessons					
		Very often	Often	A few times	Never
A teacher* said your work was good	GUI (13 yrs)	26	44	29	1
	iScoil T1	19	19	46	15
	iScoil T2	50	42	4	4
You asked questions in class	GUI (13 yrs)	29	37	14	29
	iScoil T1	4	15	46	35
	iScoil T2	13	21	54	13
Praised for answering a question	GUI (13 yrs)	16	35	40	9
	iScoil T1	12	4	35	50
	iScoil T2	25	33	33	8
Praised by a teacher because written work was well done	GUI (17 yrs)	10	46	38	5
	iScoil T1	8	8	38	46
	iScoil T2	46	13	33	8

\* At T2, students were asked about “someone in iScoil” rather than about what a teacher had done.

**Table 5.8: Percentages having negative experiences in lessons**

		Very often	Often	A few times	Never
Given out to because work was untidy or not done on time	GUI (13 yrs)	4	7	41	48
	iScoil T1	8	8	31	54
	iScoil T2	0	4	8	88
Given out to for messing in class	GUI (13 yrs)	4	8	44	44
	iScoil T1	4	4	23	69
	iScoil T2	0	0	0	100

## Educational aspirations and expectations

One striking finding is that at the point of intake, **all** students agreed with the statement “I would like to continue my education, somehow” (69% strongly agreed and 31% agreed). Thus, even though they had disengaged with mainstream education and held many negative opinions about school, all still saw a value in education and wanted to persist.

In a related vein, many students had relatively high educational expectations and aspirations for themselves. However, as is typically found, expectations tended to be lower than aspirations (Weir, Kavanagh, Kelleher & Moran, 2017). For example, while over half wanted to get a college degree, only 23% expected to do so (Table 5.9). At the point of intake, two students expected not to gain *any* educational qualifications, and two expected that the Certificate in General Learning would be the highest qualification they achieved.

At the second time they were surveyed, students’ views had not changed much. Whereas all at T1 had agreed that they wanted to continue in education, at T2, one student now *disagreed*. Similarly, at T2, three students (13%) neither expected to nor wanted to obtain any educational qualification (oddly, including one who had completed the Certificate in General Learning).

Comparable national data for educational expectations are available from 13-year-olds taking part in GUI. Nationally, half of students expected to get a college degree, and a further 23% expected to gain a post-Leaving Certificate qualification. Only 4% thought they would progress no further than Junior Certificate. Thus, the expectations of the home-based iScoil students were well below average on both survey administrations. By T2, those expecting to attend college had fallen from 23% to 13%, while those who wanted to go to college also decreased (from 58% to 42%).

Although overall, aspirations and expectations did not noticeably increase, there was a sizeable increase in interest in PLC courses, diplomas or apprenticeships. Whereas at the outset only 4% said they would like to obtain a PLC, this increased to 29% by T2. Likewise, the numbers who expected to obtain a PLC more than doubled from T1 to T2.

**Table 5.9: Percentages reporting that highest qualification they expected/would like to obtain**

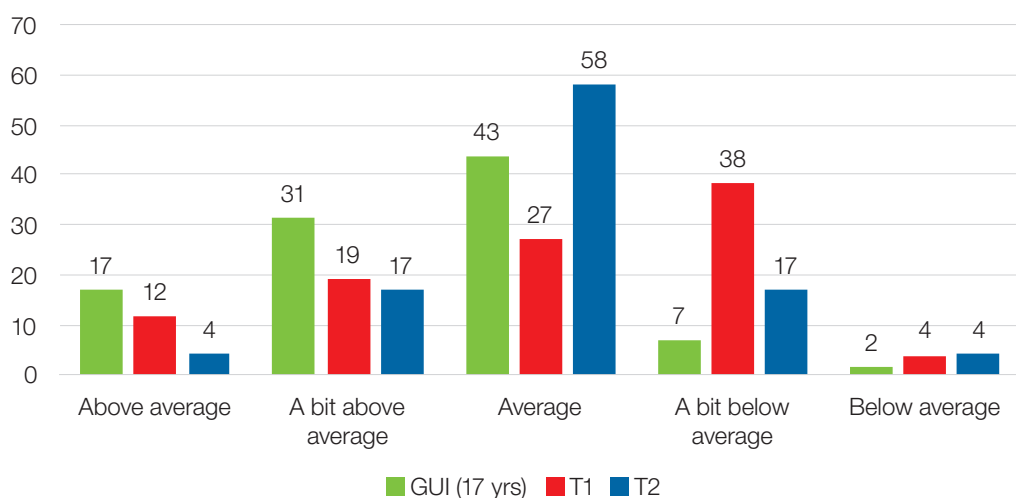
		None	Cert in General Learning	Junior Cert	Leaving Cert	PLC, diploma or apprentice	College degree
Would like	iScoil T1	4	4	8	23	4	58
	iScoil T2	13	0	8	8	29	42
Expected	iScoil T1	8	8	19	27	15	23
	iScoil T2	13	0	17	21	38	13
	GUI (13 yrs)	-	-	4	22	23	51

### Academic self-perception

When asked to rate themselves on learning, relative to people their own age, 12% rated themselves as above average at T1, and 19% rated themselves as a bit above average (Figure 5.8). In contrast, 42% rated themselves as a bit below, or below, average. While this might appear to be a reasonably balanced set of ratings, it is in fact quite atypical. For example, almost half of the GUI cohort rated themselves as above, or a bit above on tests and exams, while only 9% described themselves as a bit below average or below average. The tendency for self-rating of academic skills to be overly positive has been reported in other representative Irish school samples (e.g., Eivers et al., 2010). Thus, the ratings provided by the students at intake can be viewed as much more negative than expected for a group of students of that age.

By T2, the percentages rating themselves as above or a bit above average decreased (from 31% to 21%). However, this was accompanied by a large drop in those describing themselves as below or a bit below average (from 42% to 21%). At T2, a majority of iScoil students felt that they were in the average range.

**Figure 5.8: Self-rated learning skills (percentages)**



## Connectedness to community

Four questions sought information on sense of connectedness to community. Although there are no direct national comparison data for these questions, a positive feature of student responses at both T1 and T2 was that almost all students felt safe in their local community and most felt they belonged (Table 5.10).

At intake, 93% of students either agreed or strongly agreed that they felt safe in their local area, as did 88% at T2. Students in MWS answered a broadly similar question about sense of safety in their local area, with 88% indicating they felt “safe” or “very safe”. Thus, in terms of feeling safe in their community, iScoil students were quite like students, nationally.

Responses were slightly less positive regarding a feeling of belonging in their local area. At both T1 and T2, approximately two-thirds of iScoil students agreed that they felt they belonged in their local area, but a small number strongly disagreed that this was the case.

**Table 5.10: Percentages answering about feeling connected within the local community**

		Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I feel safe here	iScoil T1	31	62	4	4
	iScoil T2	33	54	4	8
I feel I belong here	iScoil T1	23	42	19	15
	iScoil T2	21	46	17	17
People look out for each other	iScoil T1	12	35	38	15
	iScoil T2	21	38	25	17
Adults listen to what people my age think	iScoil T1	4	31	38	27
	iScoil T2	0	63	21	17

A further two questions asked about interaction with other people in the area, and responses to both questions were slightly more positive at T2 than T1. For example, while 46% initially agreed that people in the area looked out for each other, this rose to 58% at T2. In a related vein, only approximately one-third at T1 felt that adults in the area listened to what young people thought, whereas by T2 almost two-thirds agreed that this was true.

Four questions used in GUI to assess engagement in sports and clubs were also administered as another measure of connectedness to community.



## COVID and involvement in activities

Findings on sports and leisure activities must be interpreted in the context of the Covid pandemic and the formal and informal barriers it created during 2020-21. The first administration of the survey at T1 was in September 2020, at a point when restrictions on small group activities were relatively lax. Students *could* have engaged in most activities, but it is likely that activity was at least slightly reduced due to COVID restrictions or fears about the safety of group activities.

For the second administration in late April (T2), *considerably* more restrictions on formal group activities had been in place for the preceding months. For example, underage non-contact outdoor group training was banned until April 26, 2021. Seven students completed their survey prior to or on that date, while most of the remainder completed it the following week. Thus, unless respondents explicitly focussed on what they did between various national lockdowns, most would not have been able to engage in formal group activities, and may have been constrained in how they engaged in informal activities too.

In sum, it would be difficult for *any* group of students surveyed at T1 and T2 to have regularly engaged in a wide variety of activities. Thus, in this instance, the national comparison with GUI data is likely to mislead, as it reflects what was normal for young people prior to 2020, but not since then. GUI data are nonetheless included, to demonstrate how atypical the iScoil group were in terms of their activities in 2020-21.

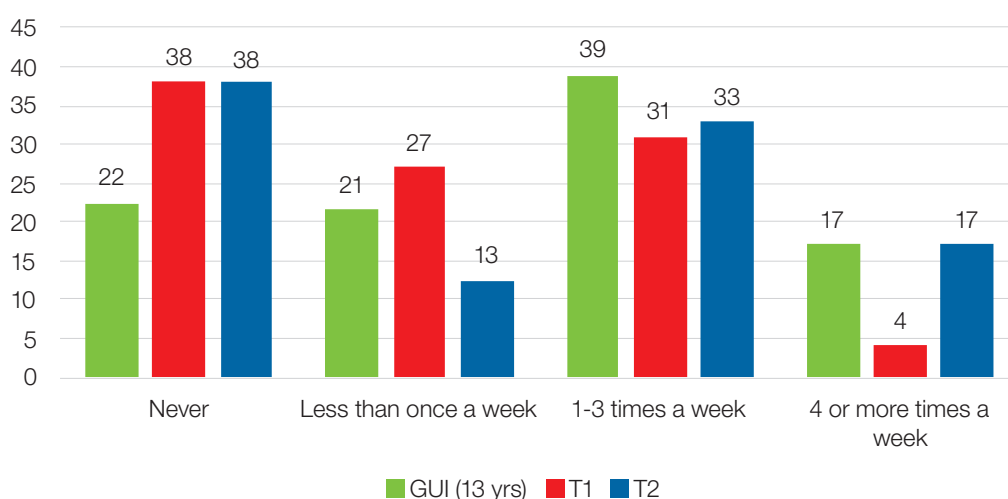
Compared to the population of 13-year-olds surveyed as part of GUI, the home-based students at T1 were far less likely to take part in organised sports, lessons, or clubs (Table 5.11). Between 88% to 96% reported that they *never* engaged in such activities. Only one student took part in organised team sports (and even that was done very rarely). Only two very occasionally attended formal lessons for music, drama or dance, while only three students (12%) took part in youth club or community group activities. There was relatively little change between T1 and T2 for involvement in lessons or clubs, but the numbers involved in an organised team sport rose from one to four students, a positive and unexpected change, given the restrictions in place.

In contrast to organised activities, students had somewhat more freedom to engage in informal or non-coached sports activities. At T1, iScoil students reported engagement levels well below those reported on GUI (Figure 5.9). For example, well over a third never played sports informally, and only one student did so on four or more days per week. However, by T2, regular informal sporting activity had increased. Half of iScoil students reported playing sports at least once a week, up from one-third at T1, and quite close to the 56% reported in GUI.

**Table 5.11: Involvement in organised leisure activities (percentages)**

		Never	Less than once a week	1-3 times a week	4 or more times a week
Play sports with a coach or as part of an organised team	GUI (13 yrs)	24	12	45	20
	iScoil T1	96	3	0	0
	iScoil T2	83	4	8	4
Take part in dance, drama or music lessons	GUI (13 yrs)	67	9	22	2
	iScoil T1	92	8	0	0
	iScoil T2	88	0	8	4
Take part in clubs or groups	GUI (13 yrs)	66	13	20	1
	iScoil T1	88	4	8	0
	iScoil T2	88	0	8	4

**Figure 5.9: Percentages engaging in sports, without a coach**



## Contact with An Garda Síochána

Analyses of MWS showed that contact with the Gardaí varied with age and by gender. For example, while an average of 9% reported Garda contact, it was least likely among First Years (7%), and much more common among male (14%) than female students (5%). As contact tended to increase as students aged, a slightly more detailed version of the question was used with iScoil students. This allowed checking the recency of contact and if it had occurred during their time in iScoil. At T1, 92% iScoil home-based students said that they had *never* been in trouble with the Gardaí, which is consistent with the 91% of students reported in MWS (Table 5.12). Rate of contact with Gardaí is also much lower than that for centre-based iScoil students, as reported in Eivers (2021). Of the two students who had been in contact, one was female, and one male.

At the second questionnaire administration, two additional students reported having been in trouble with the Gardaí at some stage. Somewhat confusingly though, neither indicated they had been in trouble in the past year, and both indicated at T1 that they had never been in trouble with the Gardaí.

	<b>Yes, very recently</b>	<b>Yes, in the last year</b>	<b>Yes, but a while ago</b>	<b>No, never</b>
MWS	9 (ever in trouble)			91
iScoil T1	0	0	8	92
iScoil T2	4	0	13	83

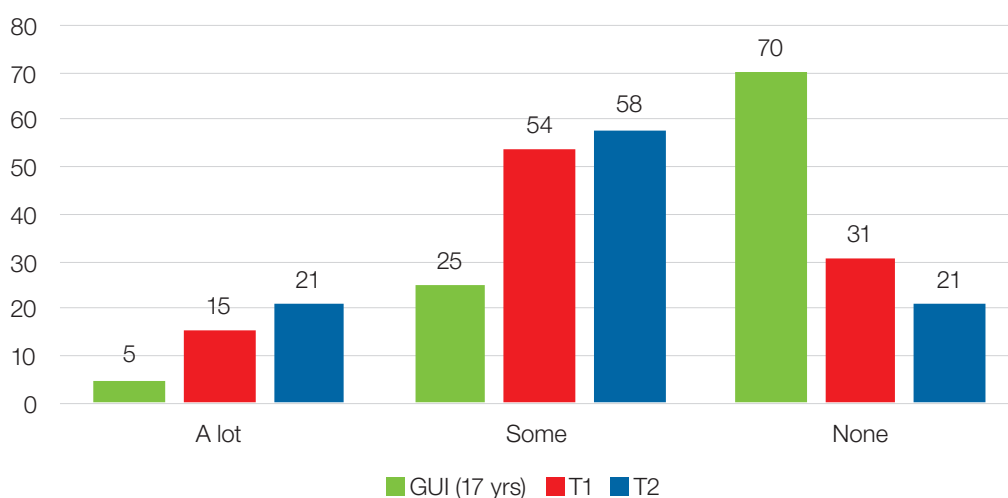
## Sleep problems

Based on self-report, the average amount of sleep per night at T1 was just over 8 hours. However, the group average hides the extent of sleep problems at the individual level. For example, four students reported typically sleeping only five to six hours a day, while another two reported 12 hours sleep per day. Likewise, at T2, average hours sleep for the group was just under 8 hours, but four students slept for only six hours a night while one slept for 12 hours.

When asked if they had any difficulty with sleep, only one-third at T1 indicated that they had no sleep problems, considerably less than the 70% of the GUI sample who reported no sleep problems (Figure 5.10). Further, 15% of iScoil students at T1 reported they had a lot of difficulty with sleep, compared to 5% of the GUI group. By T2, reports of sleep problems had increased, with 21% reporting that they experienced a lot of sleep problems, and only 21% reporting none.

However, as with sports and leisure activities, these data need to be interpreted in the context of Covid. As noted in the preceding chapter, the COVID pandemic has contributed to increased sleep difficulties among adolescent populations generally, and the combination of adolescence and ASD may represent a particular risk for sleep problems (Becker et al., 2021; Türkoglu et al., 2020). Given that all the iScoil students are adolescents, and many have an ASD diagnosis, it is quite possible that the experience of living in a pandemic has contributed to increased sleep disturbances.

**Figure 5.10: Percentages with sleep problems**



As well as a general question on sleep problems, students were asked which of five different types of sleep problems they experienced (e.g., difficulty getting to sleep). At T1, 19 students (73%) reported at least one specific form of sleep problem, rising to 20 students (83% of the final group) by T2. The most common problem on both occasions was not sleeping at “normal” times, followed by difficulty getting to sleep (Table 5.13). At T1, the next most frequent issue was waking up during the night, while at T2, the next most common issue was problems waking up in the morning.

**Table 5.13: Types of sleep problems reported by iScoil students**

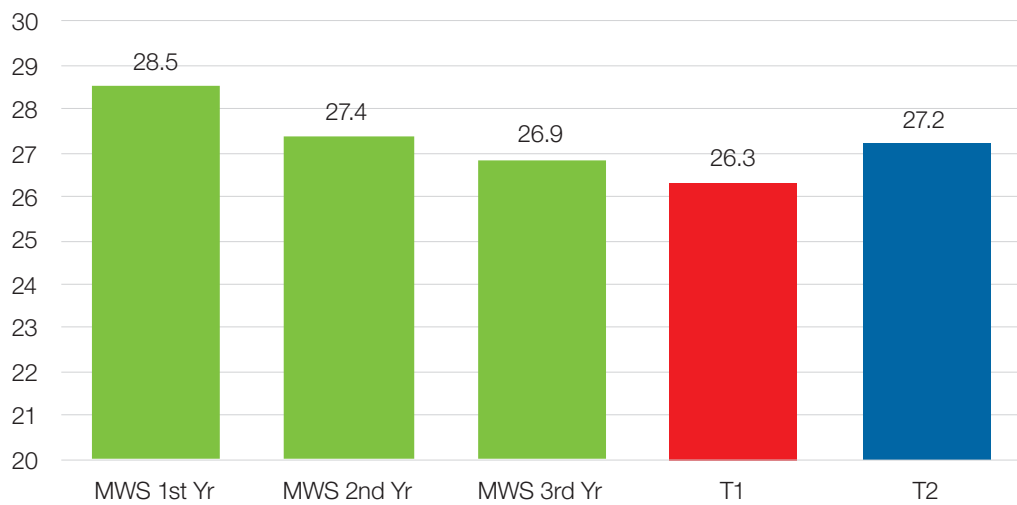
Type of problem	T1		T2	
	N	%	N	%
Do not sleep at normal times	14	54	11	46
Cannot get to sleep	10	38	9	38
Wake during the night	9	35	5	21
Sleep disturbed	5	19	2	8
Can't wake up in the morning	4	15	7	29

## Self-esteem

Self-esteem was measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. The scale has a potential score range of 10 to 40, with higher scores reflecting higher self-esteem. Student responses can be compared to the adolescent sample in MWS. However, MWS found that mean scores tended to decline with years in school. For example, the highest mean score was found amongst First Years (28.5) and the lowest amongst Sixth Years (26.1). Also, males tended to obtain higher mean scores than females (28.8 vs 25.7, respectively). Thus, Figure 5.11 compares the iScoil group to MWS data from across Junior Cycle, as these grades span the age range for iScoil students.

As can be seen, the average score on the Rosenberg scale for iScoil students at T1 is lower than the average scores for students in each of the Junior Cycle years in MWS, meaning that the self-esteem levels of the iScoil students at intake was lower than students of their age, nationally. As with MWS results, there was a large gender difference in favour of males (28.6 vs 23.1, respectively), and older students tended to have lower scores on the scale. At T2, the average score on the Rosenberg scale had increased to 27.2. This is not only higher than their own scores at T1, but also higher than that obtained by the MWS Third Year sample, and quite similar to the mean score of Second Year students in MWS. As was the case when the questionnaire was first administered, there was a large gender difference, favouring males (28.9 vs 24.2), and scores declined with age.

**Figure 5.11 Mean scores on Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale**



## Summary

A combination of administrative and questionnaire data show that the home-based iScoil students were atypical at intake in many ways. Apart from the obvious difference of not attending a mainstream school, most had significant mental health issues and relatively long-term disengagement from the mainstream education system. Anxiety and/or school phobia were features of almost all referrals. Half had a diagnosed SEN and 41% were diagnosed with ASD. However, most students attended iScoil on almost all their scheduled days. All but three had completed at least one module, many had completed several, and 42% had completed the full Certificate in General Learning within a single school year. All had either obtained certification or were on track to do so in 2021/22, and almost all were continuing in education in either iScoil, school, or Youthreach.

Questionnaire responses from T1 (September 2020) showed that, relative to comparisons with students nationally, iScoil students were reasonably positively disposed towards teachers in their last school, but that they held much more negative attitudes to school in general. iScoil students were well below average in their sense of belonging in school, in their self-perception of their academic skills, and their educational expectations. Sleep problems were widespread, self-esteem was lower than average for their age group, and they reported receiving less feedback than average (either positive or negative) during their time in mainstream school.

When surveyed again in 2021, most students expressed very positive attitudes about the support they received in iScoil, but retained negative attitudes towards mainstream schooling. Their perception of their own academic ability had improved, and they reported far more positive interactions related to their schoolwork, but there was no marked change in their academic aspirations or expectations. They expressed slightly more positive attitudes to adults in their local community and showed a slight increase in informal sports activities (despite Covid restrictions) but no improvement in the high levels of sleep problems. Finally, there was a noticeable increase in the average scores on the Rosenberg self-esteem scale between T1 and T2.



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## Chapter 6: Interviews with parents

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## Chapter 6:

# Interviews with parents

The parents of six students were selected by the researcher for interview, based on student characteristics (i.e., reflecting a mixture by age, sex, diagnoses). However, two selected students were excluded on the advice of iScoil staff, as one had recently been hospitalised, and another's carer had recently given birth and would have been unable to take part. The four remaining families were contacted by iScoil staff, and all agreed to take part.

All were directly emailed by the researcher, provided with a link to a Zoom meeting, and advised that a member of iScoil staff was available to provide technical help, if needed. One parent who had agreed to take part did not do so, and did not respond to offers of technical help from iScoil staff. Thus, content in this chapter is based on conversations with three parents, all mothers.

The interview was preceded by a short preamble during which the researcher introduced herself, explained about the research, and emphasised the voluntary, confidential and anonymous nature of the conversation. The parents were introduced to each other and asked that they also respect each other's privacy, by maintaining the confidentiality of any information discussed. To bolster the emphasis on confidentiality, all parents were told that the interview would not be recorded. However, they were asked for permission for notes to be taken and for (unattributed) quotes to be used in the final report. All agreed.

The three who took part were asked for their views on iScoil and if it differed from what they had expected. They were also asked about the amount and difficulty of the work assigned to their child, and about communication with mentors, tutors, central office staff and with other students. Finally, they were asked if they had observed any change in their child from participation in iScoil. The list of questions asked is contained in Appendix C. The information gleaned from the interview was combined with other communication with iScoil staff, to provide a context within which to interpret the quantitative data from the questionnaires and administrative systems, and to understand how iScoil operated in practice. Not all the interview is reported here, and what is reported does not follow the order of the questions as they were asked. Instead, this chapter describes some themes that emerged from the conversations.

### Family background

All three students had started in September 2020, after a year of non-attendance. All had significant anxiety issues, one had additional educational needs and one had ASD. In one case a friend of the family mentioned iScoil, and the family then raised it with their assigned EWO as a potentially suitable option. The EWO was unfamiliar with iScoil, but investigated and agreed it was a suitable fit for the young person.

For the other two students, the Home Tuition Scheme was first looked at as a preferred model, but the assigned EWO eventually suggested iScoil. One student had been approved for the Home Tuition Scheme just before the first national lockdown, which prevented the tutor from visiting the house. When restrictions



were eased, the young person was initially anxious about visitors to the house and was unwilling to allow the tutor into her home. Her mother subsequently was told that she would have to re-apply for support under the Home Tuition Scheme, which she described as a very inflexible approach.

As a result, none of the three students experienced the Home Tuition Scheme. This means we cannot really compare the experiences of a family who have experienced the model of support provided under the Home Tuition Scheme versus iScoil home-based support. The only insight that could be gleaned was that the process of applying for the Home Tuition Scheme was described as very complicated and that EWOs provided considerable help to the family in dealing with the DE Home Tuition Scheme section.

All three mothers indicated that their child's issues escalated after the transfer from primary school to post-primary school. One mother described how the change from "a nice little country national school" to a large secondary school where she knew only one student (in a different class) was a culture shock for her child. The child found the busy environment too stressful and alien, and refused to attend, having panic attacks each time she was brought near to the school building.

The other mothers agreed that the post-primary environment was stressful for their child, and that they struggled to deal with the large numbers, changing classes and classmates, and disrupted routine. Being separated from classmates familiar to their child in primary school, and interacting with "strange" classmates seemed to exacerbate anxiety levels.

*She just couldn't cope dealing with the different boys and girls.*

## Routine with iScoil

The typical iScoil week was described as logging on every day, or most days, if stress levels were not too high. The students had set times to log on, and usually stuck to these times, spending between an hour to two hours a day in the iScoil VLE. One did the assigned work in the middle of the day and then checked for corrections later in the afternoon. The other two tended to do their daily iScoil work in a single sitting.

The parents noted that they were not always clear what their child was doing online – for example, whether they were working on a project, a new task, or interacting with tutors or mentors and addressing corrections. However, they did not express any concerns that their child was engaging in any unsuitable activities, as they felt that the iScoil VLE was a secure environment. They also appreciated the time structure and the fact that students could not access content later in the evening. They felt that this helped maintain a more normal structure to their child's day.

They all also noted that they found the terminology of mentor / tutor a little confusing and had trouble remembering which role was which. All three agreed that their child appeared to be engaging on a regular basis, in sharp contrast to their engagement in school. They seemed to understand the feedback from mentors and tutors and were able to manage their work and keep up with their assigned tasks, without the need for parental pressure. The students were described as getting on well with their mentors and seeing them as a good source of help. However, they had initially been reluctant to show that they did not understand something, but they had gradually become more comfortable admitting a perceived weakness to their mentor.

Each student received a weekly call from their mentor, and parents sat in on the call. Parents also sometimes had separate calls with the mentor to discuss issues and progress and had the option of texting the mentor to ask for a chat. As well as calls, parents received an email on Fridays during term time, with a brief update on what their child had done that week. While appreciative of the update, it seemed that they did not see the email as very informative.

Other than the mentor, they tended not to have much ongoing contact with iScoil staff, although there was intermittent contact.

## iScoil in the context of COVID

To a certain extent, the three parents felt that the national lockdowns and school closures had normalised the home-based learning experience. Prior to lockdown, few people understood how a child could be educated at home. After lockdown happened, remote learning was in the media and people understood that you did not have to be physically attending school to be engaged with learning. Other people now understood that teachers would be able to assign work remotely and that young people could be working on their education while at home. Thus, as parents, they felt less stigmatised by the fact their child was engaged in home-based learning.

*It's made iScoil normal. Any stigma is gone.*

From the point of view of the students, their friends were now also engaged in remote learning, so they did not feel as if they were different to their peers. In fact, to a certain extent, they had an advantage over their peers as they had advance familiarity with home learning. One mother noted that it had also helped with issues within her family. Her younger child had previously felt it was very unfair that her older sister did not have to go to school. Since lockdown, she had realised that you can study from home and that her sister was doing school work, not playing computer games.

## Social and peer interaction

All three students had very limited social circles outside their family, and all three parents were concerned about this. In particular, they were concerned that their children were not engaging with their peer group, and recognised that school is about more than studying a set of subjects. One noted that learning to interact with others and make friends is part of the purpose of school.

*It's where you learn all those skills that you need if you ever get a job – how to talk to people, how to behave around others.*

In one case, the first lockdown had significantly affected the young person's social contacts. She was extremely anxious about contracting the virus and had stopped meeting even the few friends she had previously met, although she did continue some online contact. The other two had maintained their small social circle during the first lockdown, but had not expanded it.

However, all three saw some improvements since starting iScoil. Their children's anxiety levels had dropped and their parents saw improved contact with their peers in the local area (either with online chats

or calls, or in-person meetings). In a related vein, all three felt their children had increased in confidence over the past few months. For example, one mother noted that her daughter had become less anxious around non-family members and was now a little more likely to engage with her mother's friends. Another noted how her daughter had been extremely anxious about logging on to iScoil but now had the confidence to do so and to interact with her mentor. A third remarked that her son had been gradually disengaging from activity outside the home, but had again begun to go out and engage with the outside world.

All three students now engaged regularly with their mentors, but their parents remained concerned about the lack of any real-life engagement with other students in iScoil. The parents were aware of efforts to create student groups, had discussed them with their children, and tried to encourage participation. All three were aware of the book club, for example. However, their children still did not want to interact with other students. This was attributed to a variety of factors. First, as all three were anxious, they were reluctant to interact with strangers. Second, as they did not know the other students, they were less keen to get involved in iScoil groups. Third, one mother noted that while her child had considered becoming involved in an iScoil book club, the book chosen was not appealing to her child, who then refused to engage further.

In sum, the three parents felt that lack of peer engagement had been and remained a significant issue for their children. However, they all felt that their child's interaction and social engagement outside of the iScoil environment had improved.

## Parent involvement

iScoil is very much student-centred, but parents also have a role to play and are provided with regular feedback. The feedback from the mentor was appreciated, as was the regular progress email, yet two of the three parents said they still found it hard to gauge their child's progress.

They pointed out that when your child is attending a mainstream school, there is an opportunity to see how your child was progressing along with the rest of a class, to talk to teachers and to other parents. While the information they gleaned was not always positive, they had a context for their child's progression and they could compare it to other students. The feedback from mentors, while generally positive, could not provide the wider context.

*You need something like a parent-teacher meeting. I'm not 100% sure where [child] is. I get some feedback but not enough.*

iScoil is designed so that students work independently. Parents do not check their work. However, an unintended side effect is that parents who might have been familiar with checking homework and using that to gauge their child's progress can no longer do so. Two of those spoken to flagged this as information they missed having.

One key theme that arose at multiple points in the interview was that parents missed the shared experience aspect of school. They acknowledged that post-primary school was different to primary school, and parents did not stand and chat to other parents and to teachers at the school gate. However, parents of post-primary students knew other parents in the same situation and could talk to someone "in the same boat" as them. This had not been an option for iScoil parents, and all three had felt very

isolated because of that. In that regard, they all appeared to be *very* appreciative of the chance to talk to each other and to share experiences. They felt that ongoing chances to talk to others in the same situation would be helpful, although primarily to counter the feeling of isolation or stigma, and to discuss ways to get their child to engage in group and social activities, rather than as a gauge of academic progress.

*This [talking to others] has been really helpful. You think it's only happening in your house.*

*It's reassuring you're not the only ones.*

## Communication with parents

Communication with parents is related to, but distinct from, parental involvement. All three parents contrasted the nature of communication with iScoil and with TESS, schools and other state agencies. While some individual EWOs and school staff were described as helpful, the process was described as adversarial and exhausting for families. Each family had prolonged engagement with TESS and had been warned they would be brought to court over non-attendance.

*No family should be threatened with court.*

*Every second day we had meetings. We even had family support meetings. We were very stressed, but what could we do?*

*We couldn't force her to attend. She still gets panic attacks passing by a school.*

In contrast, communication with iScoil was described as compassionate and helpful. They felt that iScoil was willing to support them as parents, rather than punish them for not being able to get their child to attend school.

*It's [iScoil] been a very good experience.*

All three also appreciated the ongoing feedback provided to parents, which was contrasted with how a typical post-primary school operated. They felt that while schools contacted parents to discuss issues if they arose, they would not normally contact them with positive news, whereas iScoil did so on a regular basis.

*Usually when a school contacts a parent, it's because something is wrong.*

However, while the tone of communication between iScoil and parents was overwhelmingly positive, some aspects could be better clarified. All three parents thought that iScoil had a set duration of two

years, although all also agreed that they could not remember being explicitly told this at any stage. As one mother said:

*I don't think anyone ever said it, but I suppose you just think, it's like the Junior Cert, so that'll take two years.*

In fact, the duration of the programme is largely dependent on the progress of the student, and mentors will discuss potential progression routes with students (and parents) as students approach completion of modules. For families that have had ongoing difficulties in establishing attendance, progression routes are probably not foremost in their mind when they start iScoil – something the parents interviewed acknowledged. They may like to draw breath before considering future steps. However, given the confusion among parents, it might be helpful to talk to the parents of those making slow but steady progress, to advise on whether an additional year is needed or feasible.

## Student confidence and control

One aspect of iScoil that was remarked on by all three was the emphasis on putting the young people in control of the process. This was described as a sharp contrast to how the students had been treated in school. In particular, their children were surprised by the fact that they had been asked to sign a contract. The parents noted how their children had taken the contract very seriously, and felt that it gave them back control.

The progression charts were described as a very good motivational tool as young people can track their progress and easily see that they are achieving something. The certificates of achievement were also popular. Two noted that their children had not always had experience of success in an educational setting, so the certificates were a nice change and appreciated.

The relationship between the mentor and the student was described in very positive terms, and how it had improved their child's confidence and reduced their anxiety levels. All three felt that the young people's confidence had improved since starting iScoil. Their confidence in their own abilities to engage with iScoil and with education had improved, as had their confidence in dealing with peers and with adults. Two noted that the student's relationships with their siblings had improved since they started iScoil, and that the atmosphere in the family home was less fraught than had been previously the case.

More generally, being part of an organised entity that was not school, but which nonetheless supported their education in a holistic manner appealed to the students. Rather than being defined in the negative (a non-attender), they were part of something that had status. One mother noted how her daughter's interactions with adults had gradually changed because of enrolling in iScoil.

*Any adult, the first question they ask is "Where are you in school? What year are you in?" And she'd be too embarrassed to say she wasn't in school, so she'd just avoid talking to any adults. Now, she can say "I'm in online school" and it's a thing, it has a status. Now, she doesn't hide if I bump into friends, and she'll even speak to strangers.*

## Coherence and suitability of materials

Although there was general conversation around the work done by their child in iScoil, the content of the work or its appropriateness was not discussed. There appeared to be an implicit assumption that the work was appropriate for supporting their child in continuing in education, to the point of certification. All three appeared very comfortable trusting iScoil to provide suitable material, monitor progress, and support their child in achieving certification.

As none of the families had experience of the Home Tuition Scheme, we cannot say for certain how their experience of iScoil home-based tuition compares. However, the relevant DE circular is clear that responsibility for organising tutors, vetting them, and general timetabling lies with the family. Families do not have access to centrally planned course modules, and they must ensure that any requirements such as practical coursework for certificate examinations are met. Thus, on the balance of probabilities, families supported under the Home Tuition Scheme are likely to be much more concerned about how their child is progressing, and about ensuring that all relevant content is adequately covered because, in the Home Tuition Scheme, that responsibility lies with the family.

That said, there was clear variety in the speed at which the students were progressing. One was easily progressing through the tasks and described it to his mother as:

*Some of it is a bit like going back over primary school stuff.*

Subsequent communication with iScoil staff revealed that he had been assigned additional more challenging materials to maintain engagement and to ensure that he did not complete all modules too far ahead of the end of the academic year.

The other two students were making slower progress, and for them, the pitch of the core materials was probably a better match. One mother described how her daughter felt that the materials were much more manageable for her and that because of this her confidence in her own ability had returned.

## Pathways

The misunderstanding that iScoil is a two-year programme had already been flagged. However, a related issue is what pathways are available to students who enrol in iScoil. The DE view of the Home Tuition Scheme, generally, is that it is a short-term solution, not intended as a substitute for attending a mainstream school. That view was not shared by parents.

None of the parents interviewed believed that their child would reintegrate into a mainstream school. Part of this might be attributable to a residual high level of anxiety about attending school (i.e., what caused them to disengage in the first place), but some might also be attributable to the stress caused by prolonged attempts to get the student to re-engage with school. In each case, the year that preceded iScoil was described as full of meetings to get the young people back into school, irrespective of how that affected them and their family.

*Things were so stressful we were all crazy. We were very stressed and we could hardly speak to each other but it's much better now.*

*He's angry. He really thinks the whole system is flawed in how long this [provision of alternative to school] took. They wouldn't listen to us.*

If the young people do not reengage with mainstream school, then what options can iScoil provide? None of the parents spoken to saw a clear pathway for their child after iScoil. Each of them wanted their child to remain as an iScoil student for two years, although it seemed likely that at least one would have completed his Certificate in General Learning within a single year. If a student started iScoil at the point when their disengagement from school began, and progressed at a reasonable pace with iScoil, they would complete all modules well before they were eligible for any other form of alternative provision. At the moment, Level 4 is only available to a very small number of iScoil students, meaning that younger students unable to reintegrate into mainstream school may reach an impasse.

Pathways had not really been discussed with parents. Typically, iScoil staff do not pressure parents by talking about future pathways in the early stages of their child's engagement with iScoil. Instead, they wait until the student is nearing completion of modules. However, at the point of interview (in February 2021), parental relief at finding a suitable programme for their child had subsided and they were beginning to become concerned about what would happen next.

That noted, although the parents interviewed did not have a clear educational pathway for their child, they now felt a pathway through education was *possible*. Even if the details were unclear, they felt hope where there had been none. Two of the students had expressed a specific career interest since starting iScoil, and the parents of both noted that their child knew that they would need to be educated and pass exams to work in their field of interest. While they were not sure how that might happen, it was a positive sign in the eyes of the parents.

*A year ago, you couldn't mention school. Now, what does she want to be.... a primary school teacher!*



## Summary

The parents of three iScoil students were interviewed in a group Zoom call. One of the clearest points to emerge from interview was that parents had felt isolated, and that the experience of talking to other parents in a similar position was very much appreciated.

Generally, the parents were very positive about their child's experiences with iScoil, contrasting it with the adversarial nature of engagement with schools and TESS. The young people all had major anxiety issues, but felt supported by their mentor and tutors, and were able to regularly engage with their learning programme.

There was a consensus that the COVID-related lockdowns had normalised home-based learning, and largely removed any stigma that might be attached to something like iScoil. Parents felt that their children's interactions with others had improved since starting iScoil, but remained concerned about lack of interaction with peers, and with options for progression once the Certificate in General Learning was completed.





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**Chapter 7:**  
**Summary**  
**and conclusions**

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# Chapter 7:

# Summary and conclusions

This chapter summarises the main findings of the research and makes some related recommendations. First, student engagement and accreditation are summarised. Second, attitudinal and behaviour changes between the first and second time of being surveyed are discussed. Third, cost and value for money is considered. The chapter ends with general conclusions and some recommendations.

## General note

It is worth reminding readers who it is that iScoil targets. They are a very small group of young people who, for various reasons, cannot or will not engage with mainstream school. iScoil is usually the intervention of last resort, after other attempts to re-engage the student have failed. Most have a lengthy history of non-attendance and of multiple related issues. Half had a diagnosed SEN, 41% were diagnosed with ASD, many had mental health issues and many also had a complex family situation. They are far from being an average group of students. This is the backdrop against which the outcomes of the research should be interpreted.

## Engagement and accreditation

Of the initial group of 29 young people, three never engaged with iScoil. Thus, subsequent description of engagement and accreditation is based on the group of 26 who engaged for at least some time with iScoil. Of that group, over one-quarter had not attended on *any* day in the previous school year, while only one student had attended on at least half of days. Attendance was often for part-days and might not extend to attending a regular class with their classmates. In contrast, average attendance at iScoil (defined as logging on to access the iScoil VLE on scheduled days) was 87%, indicating very regular engagement with scheduled sessions. In the case of six students, they not only attended on all scheduled days, but also on non-scheduled, additional, days.

None of the students could be classified as having “dropped out”. The sole student who left iScoil during the 2020/21 school year did so to return to school, having already successfully completed several QQI Level 3 modules. Close to half (42%) completed the full Certificate in General Learning within a single school year, while the remaining students were on course to complete it in the 2021/22 school year. Progression routes had been established for all but one of the 11 students who had completed the Certificate in General Learning. While one had found employment, the other nine planned to continue in education (either in iScoil, school, Youthreach, or other alternative educational provision).

## Conclusions

**The target group of students had, prior to iScoil, highly problematic engagement with the education system. Despite this, almost half had obtained the Certificate in General Learning within**

**a single school year, while the remainder were making progress towards obtaining it in 2021/22 or had returned to school. Attendance data shows that almost all students attended for almost all scheduled days. Bearing in mind that there is no expectation that the Certificate in General Learning must be completed within a single school year, the iScoil intervention can therefore be described as extremely successful in terms of both student engagement and student outcomes.**

## Attitudes and behaviours

Information on attitudes and behaviours was collected using a short survey. An almost identical survey was completed by students as part of their induction to iScoil (T1, usually September 2020), and later in the school year (typically, at the end of April) (T2).

The surveys at T1 showed a group of young people with reasonably positive attitudes towards teaching staff, but negative attitudes towards school (half said they hated it). Their classroom experiences were characterised by infrequent positive interaction or feedback, and relatively infrequent negative feedback. They were well below average in their sense of belonging in school, in their perception of their own academic skills, and in their educational expectations. Sleep problems were widespread and their self-esteem was below average.

By T2, their attitudes to teaching staff (“people in iScoil”) were extremely positive, and they reported very large increases in lesson-related positive interactions and drops in negative interactions. For example, while only 19% at T1 said that their teachers very often said their work was good, by T2 50% did so. While over one-third at T1 reported that they never asked questions in class, this dropped to 13% at T2.

However, there was no noticeable improvement in attitudes to “regular” school. In fact, more students expressed a negative attitude to school at T2 than at T1. In a related vein, there was no marked change in academic aspirations or expectations. Academic expectations (e.g., *I think I will complete the Leaving Certificate*) were much lower than those expressed by students surveyed as part of Growing Up in Ireland (GUI), and they remained low from T1 to T2. That noted, there was a sizeable increase in interest in PLC courses, diplomas or apprenticeships. At T1, students were far more likely than students nationally to rate their learning skills as below average, whereas by T2, most described themselves as in the average range.

In terms of non-academic behaviours, the students demonstrated a reasonable level of connectedness to their local community at both points in time, although about one-third felt that they did not belong in their local area. Their views of adults in the area improved over the duration of the research. At T1, only approximately one-third felt that adults in the area listened to what young people thought, whereas by T2 almost two-thirds agreed that this was true.

The young people surveyed showed limited engagement in formal leisure activities (clubs, sports, music, etc) at both T1 and T2, relative to a national sample in GUI. However, the extent of involvement in formal activities at T2 was hugely constrained by very strict COVID restrictions in place at the time, while activity in September 2020 would also have been constrained by COVID-related restrictions. In contrast, while engagement in *informal* sporting activities at T1 was well below average, by T2, regular informal sporting activity increased. The increase meant that the students not only differed from themselves at T1, but that by T2 they were reasonably like the young people surveyed in GUI. This represents a very positive finding in the face of COVID restrictions, especially as anxiety and social phobia were issues for many students.

Sleep problems were prevalent at both survey points, increasingly slightly over the period of the research. This might be considered unexpected, as anecdotal reports from support workers in iScoil's Blended Learning Centres suggest that improved sleep hygiene is common by-product of iScoil. However, in the broader context of a global pandemic in which a common side effect has been a marked increase in sleep disturbances, especially among adolescents with ASD (Türkoglu et al., 2020), it is unsurprising.

Finally, the surveys looked at self-esteem, which tends to decline slightly as students progress through from First to Sixth Year. When first surveyed, the students had lower average self-esteem scores than students surveyed across the Junior Cycle years. By T2, their average score was not only higher than at of their own average score at T1, but also higher than that obtained by a nationally representative sample of Third Years, and quite similar to the mean score of Second Year students. Thus, by T2 their self-esteem was broadly what might be expected for their age.

## Conclusions

**Not all aspects of student behaviour and attitudes showed significant positive change during their iScoil year, but many did. Students showed large increases in positive lesson-related interactions, they expressed overwhelmingly positive attitudes to those working in iScoil, but most remained of the view that they would not belong in a regular school. Because of COVID, engagement in leisure activities was hard to gauge, but there were positive signs in terms of a slight increase in informal sporting activities (which were least constrained by lockdown restrictions). Sleep disturbances remained widespread and increased slightly, possibly reflecting increased sleep problems in the wider community. Average self-esteem levels improved, to that which might be expected for the age group.**

**In terms of student attitudes and behaviours, iScoil can be described as having had a positive impact on students' experiences in lessons and attitudes towards teachers/tutors/mentors, having little impact on attitudes to school, and a moderate positive impact on wider activities and behaviours, despite the constraints that arose because of COVID.**

## Cost and value for money

Cost is not the only element of value for money. Effectiveness and impact are also key. The previous two sections have shown that iScoil is an effective intervention. It achieves the objective of re-engaging a disengaged cohort of young people with education, and it largely achieves the objective of student certification and accreditation (largely, as the time frame for this review is too short to establish how many students will achieve accreditation within a two-year period).

Impact is also important, and impact is not restricted to the young people alone. Families are typically not concerned with the costs of the various models of support under the Home Tuition Scheme. They are, however, concerned with what they must do to manage that support. For families, iScoil provide a much easier model of support to deal with than the Home Tuition Scheme. Families do not have to search for tutors, ensure that they are appropriately qualified, Garda vetted, and then monitor their hours.

From the perspective of the family, iScoil manage their child's support and individual education plan, and ensure that any requirements for coursework and certification are met. Only three parents were

interviewed as part of this research, although iScoil central team also provided clips of verbal feedback provided by a small number of other parents. What was clear was that the coherence underpinning the iScoil approach was greatly appreciated, and that parents felt the iScoil model of support was much less stressful for them than trying to deal with multiple state agencies.

A weakness of the current research is that none of those interviewed had previously experienced the Home Tuition Scheme. However, Kovačič et al.'s research (2021) included some families who had experience of both iScoil and the Home Tuition Scheme. Their research supports the view that iScoil is considerably easier for families to deal with, in terms of difficulties in finding, scheduling and managing support.

Regarding cost, the iScoil model of home-based support is considerably less expensive than the standard model in the Home Tuition Scheme. Under the terms of the 2020/21 SLA, iScoil home-based support costs approximately €4,800 per student. As outlined in Chapter 3, the *average* unit cost of Home Tuition Scheme grants is approximately €10,600, but will be considerably higher if only post-primary grants under the mental health criterion are considered. Assuming a similar level of support provided to the average iScoil home-based learner (two hours a day, on four or five days a week), tutors paid for under the Home Tuition Scheme would cost between €12,561 and €15,700 per student. This excludes the general support and contact provided by mentors, tutors, and occasional contact from iScoil central team, which usually fall outside those two hours a day. It also excludes costs incurred within the DE and the Special Education Section to administer the scheme.

## Conclusions

**In broad terms, the level of support provided to students by iScoil would cost about three times as much were it provided under the standard model of Home Tuition Scheme. Added to that is the coherence provided by the iScoil model, the demonstrated efficacy (in terms of accreditation), and the stress-reduction for families. The iScoil model of home-based provision for young people clearly provides value for money, when compared against the model of provision under the Home Tuition Scheme.**

## Recommendations

The aims of this report are to establish if iScoil provision funded under the Department of Education (DE) is effective and provides value for money. This section contains several recommendations or suggestions as to how iScoil home-based provision might be improved. However, it is underpinned by a single important recommendation: that DE continue to fund such places. iScoil offers a cost-effective approach that has succeeded in re-engaging a large majority of very disengaged students. Almost half have already obtained the Certificate in General Learning, and the remainder are on track to do so or have re-engaged with school. That this engagement and certification took place against the backdrop of a hopefully once-in-a-lifetime global pandemic is even more impressive.

**Main recommendation: Places with iScoil should continue to be funded by the DE.**

While generally endorsing the efficacy of the iScoil approach, and the funding of iScoil places by the DE, the next sections outline some suggestions as to how it might be improved. Most suggestions are

actions that can be taken by the iScoil team, while one relates to funding. Unfortunately, no information is available regarding outcomes for students availing of the Home Tuition Scheme. Further, despite requests from the researcher, no detailed information about the cost of the scheme was made available. Thus, no comparison can be made about student outcomes in iScoil versus the Home Tuition Scheme. Also, analyses based on costs can only draw on the limited information available in the public domain.

## Funding iScoil provision

It is government policy that Departmental budgeting is done using a model of multi-annual budgeting. This is intended to support the principle of transparency regarding the setting and review of Departmental spending priorities, and to facilitate efficient medium-term planning. Thus, there has been a shift from the previous system of annual budgeting to a three-year model of budgeting for current expenditure for Government Departments. In contrast, funding of iScoil is done on an annual basis, and has been since it began in 2015. Funding is grant aided to iScoil under a Service Level Agreement (SLA) between iScoil and the DE, with the current group of students covered by an SLA that ran from June 2020 to June 2021.

It is unfortunate that there is a predictable need for a small cohort of students to be supported each year under the mental health criterion of the Home Tuition Scheme. However, that need *is* predictable. Given that iScoil provision is considerably less expensive than the standard model of individual tutors hired by families, is less stressful for the families involved, and has been shown to be effective, it is illogical and inefficient to fund the provision on an annual basis only. Doing so militates against iScoil being able to plan strategically, to have financial stability, and to retain staff and institutional knowledge. It also militates against medium-term planning within the Special Education Section of the DE.

**Recommendation: The SLA between iScoil and the DE should extend to cover a three-year period, with options to extend on a rolling basis, subject to regular formal evaluation and review. Funding for additional places should be considered subsequent to a review of need for iScoil or similar services.**

## Administrative changes within iScoil

An issue identified during this research was the quality and accuracy of information provided by EWOs about prospective students on referral forms. There was *considerable* diversity in the level of detail supplied and in the accuracy of some of the information. Some referrals were too vague to provide information that was comparable, while others left out key information or provided it in a way that made it difficult to interpret. This is not to suggest that EWOs were deliberately withholding information about students. Indeed, in some cases, information may not have been available to them.

The iScoil referral process has evolved as the number of students supported has increased. With larger numbers comes an increased need to establish reliable, comparable and comprehensive data on students as they present to iScoil and are evaluated for suitability. The iScoil referral form, in its current format, allows for too much variability in content and in interpretation. An improved referral form is strongly recommended. Changes are needed in how information on attendance, SEN, and referral reasons are collected. It is also worth considering if useful information about student achievement (standardised tests or similar) can be accessed.

At a very basic level, iScoil central team should be able to access an overview of all referrals, with level of student need described in comparable format. This would mean referrals can be compared based on need rather than on the level of detail provided by the referring EWO. It also provides a base against which to benchmark outcomes and inform iScoil interventions.

**Recommendation: The iScoil referral form should be amended to improve the quality and comparability of the information supplied. On the referral form, more types of data should be required, not optional. Text fields should only be used to supplement required information, rather than being the sole means by which some key information is collected.**

## Focus on family

In terms of how a student's family is affected, the iScoil model contrasts favourably with the model of Home Tuition Scheme support. Despite support from EWOs, many families struggle to identify suitably qualified and vetted tutors, struggle to organise support within the confines of the scheme, and struggle to provide the breadth and depth of curriculum coverage necessary for their child to achieve certification. iScoil removes those pressures from families, and provides an integrated model of support, adapted to the young person's individual learning needs. That noted, there are ways in which families could be better supported (which, in turn, enables them to support the young person at the heart of the process).

It was clear from the parent interviews was that some aspects of the iScoil model were not fully understood by parents. For example, at a very simple level, all three mothers interviewed noted that they were confused by iScoil terminology (mentor, tutor, etc). There was also confusion about the duration of iScoil placements and what pathways were available, post-iScoil. Currently, where a student is nearing completion of iScoil or nearing completion of the Certificate in General Learning, the Student Support Coordinator will liaise with the family to establish that an appropriate pathway has been established. Discussion of student progression is also a regular feature of the student-mentor communication, but families are not always in this communication loop. Once a student has settled into iScoil, it is probable that families start to consider progression routes. Thus, it is advisable that information about progression is available from an early stage.

The three parents interviewed were generally very positive about their experiences with iScoil and with the flexibility and approachability of the mentors, tutors, and central team. However, all three shared some misconceptions and some gaps in their understanding of how iScoil worked. Part of this may arise as information about iScoil is typically provided to families when they are at the end of a prolonged stressful situation, trying to get their child to engage with education. It is a situation not conducive to information retention. One option would be to provide user-friendly information for families, readily accessible throughout student engagement with iScoil. This might include a short introductory video that explains how iScoil works, and addresses gaps and misconceptions. Content should draw on discussion with a larger pool of parents about their experiences and misconceptions.

**Recommendation: iScoil should engage with some parents to identify gaps in their understanding of iScoil. That should subsequently inform the development of some user-friendly material, targeted at families, and accessible for family reference throughout a student's engagement with iScoil.**

Finally, the most obvious outcome of the interviews with parents was how appreciative they were of a chance to talk to another parent in a similar situation. Obviously, there is a certain amount of self-selection bias, and those who agreed to be interviewed may not be representative of iScoil families. Some others may have no wish to share experiences, but it seems that many do.

Having a child in iScoil (and the process of getting to that point) makes a family unusual. Being able to share experiences with a family or families in the same situation is likely to prove helpful to at least some. There are legal and other constraints around sharing information and personal contact details. Setting up a forum or support group for parents needs time, thought, and investment. However, with good planning and using an opt-in model, it is feasible.

**Recommendation: iScoil should facilitate some form of communication or support group for parents of home-based students.**





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# Appendices

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## **Appendix A:**

iScoil organisational chart

## **Appendix B:**

Student Questionnaire

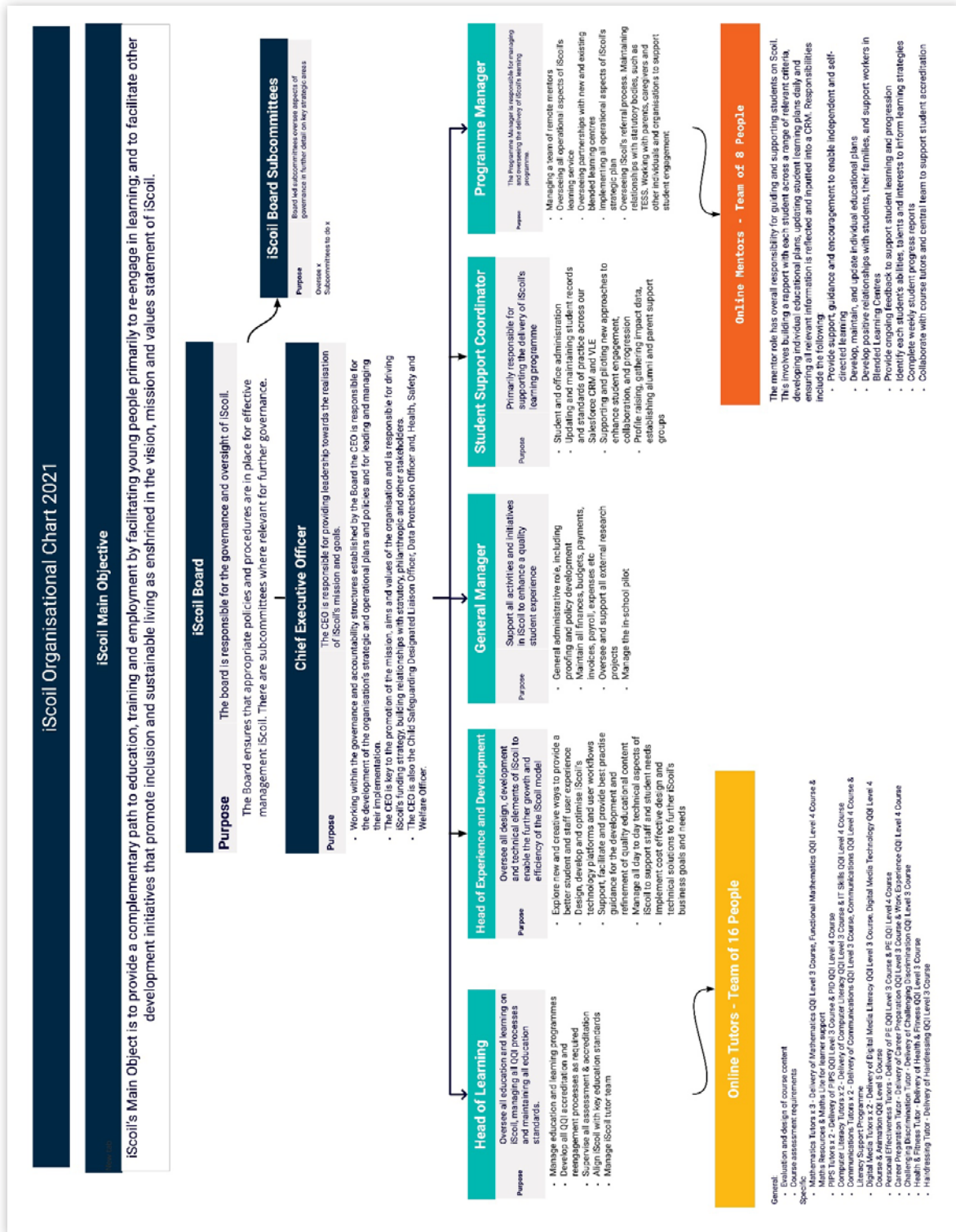
## **Appendix C:**

Parent Interview

## **Appendix D:**

Information and Consent form

# Appendix A: iScoil organisational chart



# Appendix B:

# Student Questionnaire

**NOTE:**

The questionnaire was delivered to students via an online form. What is shown in this appendix is the content presented to students, but not the format in which they saw it.

## Version used in initial administration

*“Here are some questions about what you think and what you do. There are no right or wrong answers, so just answer as best you can. If you don’t understand something, ask me for help or to explain.”*

Think of the **last school** you were in. How much do you agree or disagree with these sentences?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Most of my teachers were friendly				
I could talk to my teachers if I had a problem				
I felt I belonged in school				

Think about the **last year** you attended school. How often did the following things happen?

	Very often	Often	A few times	Never
A teacher said your work was good				
You asked questions in class				
A teacher praised you for answering a question				
You were given out to by a teacher because your work was untidy or not done on time				
You were praised by a teacher because your written work was well done				
You were given out to by a teacher for messing in class				

	I liked it very much	I liked it quite a bit	I liked it a bit	I didn't like it very much	I hated it
How do you feel about regular school, in general?					

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I would like to go back to a regular school				
I feel like I wouldn't belong in a regular school				
I would like to continue my education, somehow				

	None	Cert in General Learning	Junior Cert	Leaving Cert	PLC, diploma or apprentice	College degree
What's the highest qualification you <b>think</b> you will ever get?						
What's the highest qualification you <b>would like</b> to get?						

	Above average	A bit above average	Average	A bit below average	Below average
How good would you say you are at learning, compared with other people your age?					

	Yes, very recently	Yes, in the last year	Yes, but a while ago	No, never
Have you ever been in trouble with the Gardaí?				

Think about your **local area**. Do you agree or disagree with these sentences?

	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
I feel safe here				
I feel I belong here				
People in my area look out for each other				
Adults in my area listen to what people my age think				

How often do you do each of these activities?

	<b>Never</b>	<b>Less than once a week</b>	<b>1-3 times a week</b>	<b>4 or more times a week</b>
Play sports or physical activities without a coach (e.g., biking, skate-boarding etc.)				
Play sports with a coach or as part of an organised team (swimming, soccer, etc)?				
Take part in dance, drama or music lessons				
Take part in clubs or groups (e.g., youth club or community group)?				

On an average day, how many hours sleep do you get? \_\_\_\_\_

	<b>Yes, a lot</b>	<b>Yes, some</b>	<b>No, none</b>
Do you have any difficulty with sleep?			

**[Skip next question if “No, none” selected]**

What type of difficulty do you have? (Tick as many as you like.)

- I can't get to sleep at night
- I wake up during the night
- I can't wake up in the morning
- I don't sleep at “normal” times
- My sleep is disturbed by someone or something

Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

Below is a list of statements dealing with your general feelings about yourself. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal level with others				
I feel that I have a number of good qualities				
All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure				
I am able to do things as well as most other people				
I feel I do not have much to be proud of				
I take a positive attitude toward myself				
On the whole, I am satisfied with myself				
I wish I could have more respect for myself				
I certainly feel useless at times				
At times, I think I am no good at all				

**[To end on a positive note, two (unused) questions were added after the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale above.]**

Write **one thing** you are proud of or like about yourself. You can write whatever you want but here are some examples: won a medal, good at sports, a good friend, help mind my little sister, a good singer.

Look at the list below and pick the **one thing** you most like doing.

- Music
- Sport
- Dance
- Technology
- Art
- Making or fixing things

Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

## Version used in second administration

*“Here are some questions about what you think and what you do. There are no right or wrong answers, so just answer as best you can. If you don’t understand something, ask me for help or to explain.”*

Think of this year in **iScoil**. How much do you agree or disagree with these sentences?

	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
Most of the adults in iScoil were friendly				
I could talk to someone in iScoil if I have a problem				
I felt I belonged in iScoil				

Think about the time you’ve attended iScoil. How often did the following things happen?

	<b>Very often</b>	<b>Often</b>	<b>A few times</b>	<b>Never</b>
Someone said your work was good				
You asked questions about the work you were given				
Someone praised you for answering a question				
You were given out to because your work was untidy or not done on time				
You were praised because your written work was well done				
You were given out to for messing instead of doing your work				

	<b>I liked it very much</b>	<b>I liked it quite a bit</b>	<b>I liked it a bit</b>	<b>I didn’t like it very much</b>	<b>I hated it</b>
How would you feel if you were in a regular school, now?					

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I would like to go back to a regular school				
I feel like I wouldn't belong in a regular school				
I would like to continue my education, somehow				

	None	Cert in General Learning	Junior Cert	Leaving Cert	PLC, diploma or apprentice	College degree
What's the highest qualification you <b>think</b> you will ever get?						
What's the highest qualification you <b>would like</b> to get?						

	Above average	A bit above average	Average	A bit below average	Below average
How good would you say you are at learning, compared with other people your age?					

	Yes, very recently	Yes, in the last year	Yes, but a while ago	No, never
Have you ever been in trouble with the Gardaí?				



Think about your **local area**. Do you agree or disagree with these sentences?

	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
I feel safe here				
I feel I belong here				
People in my area look out for each other				
Adults in my area listen to what people my age think				

How often do you do each of these activities?

	<b>Never</b>	<b>Less than once a week</b>	<b>1-3 times a week</b>	<b>4 or more times a week</b>
Play sports or physical activities without a coach (e.g., biking, skate-boarding etc.)				
Play sports with a coach or as part of an organised team (swimming, soccer, etc)?				
Take part in dance, drama or music lessons				
Take part in clubs or groups (e.g., youth club or community group)?				

On an average day, how many hours sleep do you get? \_\_\_\_\_

	<b>Yes, a lot</b>	<b>Yes, some</b>	<b>No, none</b>
Do you have any difficulty with sleep?			

**[Skip next question if "No, none" selected]**

What type of difficulty do you have? (Tick as many as you like.)

- I can't get to sleep at night
- I wake up during the night
- I can't wake up in the morning
- I don't sleep at "normal" times
- My sleep is disturbed by someone or something

Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

Below is a list of statements dealing with your general feelings about yourself. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal level with others				
I feel that I have a number of good qualities				
All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure				
I am able to do things as well as most other people				
I feel I do not have much to be proud of				
I take a positive attitude toward myself				
On the whole, I am satisfied with myself				
I wish I could have more respect for myself				
I certainly feel useless at times				
At times, I think I am no good at all				

Write **one thing** you are proud of or like about yourself. You can write whatever you want but here are some examples: won a medal, good at sports, a good friend, help mind my little sister, a good singer.

Look at the list below and pick the **one thing** you most like doing.

- Music
- Sport
- Dance
- Technology
- Art
- Making or fixing things

Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

# Appendix C:

# Parent Interview

This appendix contains the questions asked of parents. There was a short preamble during which the researcher introduced herself, explained to participants about the research aims, and underscored the voluntary, confidential and anonymous nature of the conversation. To bolster the emphasis on confidentiality, the interviews were not recorded. However, participants gave permission for notes to be taken and (unattributed) quotes to be used in the final report.

The questions were delivered as written, in informal English rather than formally phrased.

1. When did your child start iScoil?
2. How did you get the place on iScoil?
3. What's the typical iScoil week like for your child? How many hours are they on, what sort of activities do they do?
4. And what about contact with people in iScoil? Does your child talk to their mentor much?
5. How do they get on with the mentor?
6. And yourselves? Do you have much contact with people in iScoil?
7. Do you know how your child is getting on with their school work? As in, are they finding it interesting, is it too easy or too hard for them?
8. Do you think that the online method works better for them than face to face or being in a class?
9. Were any of you in the standard Home Tuition Scheme before iScoil?
10. What's iScoil like, compared to that?
  - Did your child prefer the face-to-face tutor or the online support?
  - How easy was it for you as a parent to deal with the Home Tuition Scheme versus iScoil?
  - EWO
  - What about the forms?
11. Do you see any downside to the online approach?
12. Has iScoil had much effect on your child? I'm thinking not just about education, but any other changes too.
13. And yourselves? Has it made any much difference to your day-to-day life?
14. Is iScoil different to what you expected it to be – either in a good or a bad way?
15. Do you think your child will complete their iScoil course?
16. Where do you see them in a few years? ... Is that much different to if I asked you the same question a year or so ago?
17. Any questions you would like to ask me or have you any suggestions for iScoil to improve it?

# Appendix D:

# Information and Consent form

## Research study on iScoil: Information Sheet

Your child is being asked to take part in a research study about iScoil. It is being carried out for iScoil by Dr Eemer Eivers, an independent researcher. All students are asked to fill in an online survey before they start iScoil, and again, near the end of the school year. Some parents will also be invited to take part in a focus group interview.

### *Why am I being asked to take part?*

iScoil receives funds from the Department of Education and Skills to support home-based learners. It is important that we use the funds as effectively as possible, and support learners as best we can. The research study will look at how much progress students make, and how well-supported they feel. It will also ask some parents for their views on iScoil and their child's education.

### *What do I need to do?*

**STUDENT:** You will be asked to fill in two short questionnaires. These will ask your opinion about school/iScoil, some questions about you and your hobbies.

**PARENT:** First, *all parents* have the option to email Eemer with their views. Second, *a small group of parents* will be randomly picked and asked to take part in a focus group. The group will discuss things like changes since your child started with iScoil, and your general thoughts on iScoil.

### *Confidentiality*

All information collected will be stored securely on password-protected computers. Students and parents will not be identifiable in any files related to the study. In the final report, and any subsequent publications or presentations, those who took part in the research will not be identified. Only information about the group of students as a whole will be provided. Feedback from parents will be combined to give a general summary of parental opinion. Individuals will not be named, and only anonymous quotes or data will be used.

### *Why should I take part?*

The research will help us to identify how to make iScoil as effective as possible. Your privacy is assured, and there are no known risks to taking part. The only possible negative is the effort of taking part in a short interview or filling in a questionnaire.

### *What next?*

If you want more information about the study, contact **Margaret O'Donoghue** on 01-4537570. If you want to know more about Eemer, who is a Senior Research Fellow in DCU, see here: [www.linkedin.com/in/eemer-eivers](https://www.linkedin.com/in/eemer-eivers)

Once you are happy to consent to take part in the study, please **SIGN** and return the consent form on the reverse of this page.

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## CONSENT FORM: Study of iScoil

**Student Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

*When you sign and return this consent form you agree with the following:*

- I have read and understood the *Information Sheet*.
- I have had a chance to ask questions and discuss the study.
- If I asked any questions, I am satisfied with the answers.
- I have received enough information about this study.
- I understand that the researcher may be given information from iScoil about the reason for referral, such as absence from school, type of medical or mental health issues.
- I agree to take part in the study.

Student Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please write your name in BLOCK CAPITALS**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Return this consent form to **Margaret O'Donoghue**, signed by the student **AND** a parent/guardian.

**All information used in this research will be treated confidentially. This consent form is the only place your full name will be used. The form will be seen only by iScoil staff, not by Dr Eivers.**

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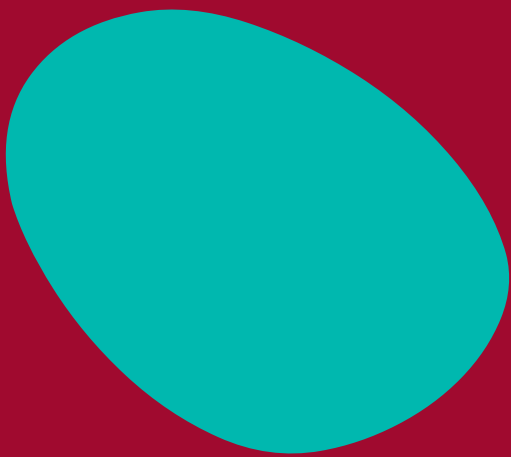


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