

**ADVISORY GROUP FOR CONTINGENCY PLANNING FOR STATE EXAMINATIONS
2020**

**CLOCK TOWER, DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS, MARLBOROUGH
STREET**

6 May 2020, 12.00 – 13.30

Agreed Meeting note

Present

	Name	Organisation/Position
Chair	Seán Ó Foghlú	Secretary General, DES
Minister	Joe McHugh, TD	Minister for Education and Skills
Students	Ciara Fanning	President, ISSU
	Alison Dervan	Student Voice Development Manager, ISSU
Parents	Aine Lynch	Chief Executive, NPC-P
	Mai Fanning	President, NPC-PP
Teachers	Deirdre MacDonald	President, ASTI
	Kieran Christie	General Secretary, ASTI
	Seamus Lahart	President, TUI
	John MacGabhann	General Secretary, TUI
School managers and leaders	John Curtis	General Secretary, JMB
	John Irwin	General Secretary, ACCS
	Nessa White	General Secretary, ETBI
	Clive Byrne	Chief Executive, NAPD
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment	John Hammond	Chief Executive, NCCA
Higher Education	Alan Wall	Chief Executive, HEA (Observer)
State Examinations Commission	Aidan Farrell	Chief Executive, SEC
	Andrea Feeney	Director of Operations, SEC
	Tim Desmond	Head of Examinations and Assessment, SEC
Department of Education and Skills	Harold Hislop	Chief Inspector
	Dalton Tattan	Assistant Secretary General
	Yvonne Keating	Deputy Chief Inspector
	Anne Tansey	Director, NEPS
	Orlaith O'Connor	Assistant Chief Inspector
	Ciara Molloy	Assistant Principal Officer
Observers	Philip O'Callaghan	Special advisor to Taoiseach

	Mark O'Doherty	Adviser to Minister
	Ed Carty	Press advisor to Minister

Apologies

	Name	Organisation/Position
Department of Education and Skills	Eamonn Moran	Principal Officer
	Deirdre Shanley	Assistant Secretary General

1. Welcome

The Chair thanked everyone for attending and welcomed the Minister for Education and Skills, Joe McHugh, TD, who joined the meeting.

Minister McHugh thanked the group for their ongoing stakeholder engagement at this time, particularly in their role as an advisory group on these important issues.

2. Agree notes of previous meetings

- Note of meeting 29 April – revised note circulated and now agreed
- Note of meeting of 1 May – amendments to be submitted

3. Contingency Plan for Leaving Certificate

A presentation was made on a possible alternative approach to the Leaving Certificate for 2020. The presentation set out the context in which alternative options are being considered, i.e. the unprecedented situation of a global pandemic. The presentation looked at the possible approaches and challenges in constructing calculated grades.

Members of the group were invited to express their views about:

- The features of any calculated grades model that they would prefer to see
- The challenges envisaged in constructing and implementing a calculated grades model
- The benefits to taking such a calculated grades approach

Comments made included:

- Only perfect solution is the running of the Leaving Certificate exams in the traditional manner and that is not possible.
- Discussions have shown that many elements of the examination process are not possible, we are not operating in normal circumstances, and as you carve up the exam process, you erode the extent of its validity and reliability
- Schools would be able to respond and collaborate with a calculated grades model but universities should also be asked to look at matriculation processes
- Should the written exams go ahead, a very large proportion of candidates will not be able to participate due to Covid-19 related issues. In addition, the huge number of superintendents required will not be available
- SEC presentation last week really brought the enormous challenges of running the exams later in the summer into perspective, taking into the account social distancing

requirements and other measures that may be in place at the time – not satisfied that exams can take place safely

- Calculated grades model is a way forward, cannot assume that 29 July exams are definitely going ahead
- Calculated grades approach would allow the system to avoid risks of running the examinations; they would provide a clean solution for all students; all would be treated fairly in a calculated grades model
- Robust standardisation procedure would need to be applied
- Calculated grades process must be valid and the integrity of the system, in terms of the mathematical modelling and the professional judgement of teachers, is paramount
- Inter-class equity is also needed within schools
- Bands of grades might need to be considered
- Appeals mechanism would be essential
- Development of calculated grades would require more than historic data from the SEC, schools would need to reflect on what individual students have learned in schools. School based and national level data needed would be required
- It is important that the data is school-generated – data should be provided at school level with significant input from the teacher, offering teachers a level of protection
- Where a student is dissatisfied and appeals a result, the appeal cannot include a questioning of the professional judgement of the teacher
- Teachers understand the complexities of the exam process and value its fairness, the system would trust in their professionalism and judgement and ensure their professional standing is respected without undue pressure being placed on them
- Continuity of teaching and learning is becoming harder to maintain - entire school community would benefit from use of calculated grades model and would allow school management to plan for next academic year
- Means of communication with teachers, students and parents would need careful consideration, with clear visuals and an FAQ. Junior Cycle decision was well received because communication was clear
- There is a need to provide answers quickly; students feel that they are not being listened to, no reference to LC in roadmap for reopening of Ireland
- Timeline for implementation of this approach would be a challenge
- Exams become more and more inequitable the longer schools are closed, calculated grades, which would apply to all, could tackle some of this inequity
- Incumbent on all parties here to support the agreed approach
- Matter of alternative approach must be viewed through the prism of equality, sustainability and mental health
- Students are terrified for their health and that of their families; the lack of certainty is causing increased anxiety; student wellbeing must be taken seriously. Level of anxiety out there is palpable
- Almost 24,000 final year examination students participated in the recent survey conducted by the ISSU, where 78.5% of students were in favour of cancellation of exams, and for a calculated grading model to be used; 15.4% for exams going ahead as planned in July; 6% for calculated grades with an option to take the exam
- On a scale of 1-10 in terms of satisfaction, an average of 3.24/10 was recorded for the continuation of the exams and an average of 8.02/10 was noted for cancellation of exams and use of a calculated grade model
- Teachers and students are intrinsically linked, in protecting the mental health of the teachers we will protect the mental health of our students

- Any decision made regarding the leaving certificate will need to be based on medical advice

The Chair concluded the discussion, noting:

- There appears to be a consensus among members of the Advisory Group that, given the health requirements, it would not be possible to operate the reliable and valid examinations in a manner that could guarantee the health and safety of students and personnel in the July/August period
- It is acknowledged that the widespread feeling of the group is that calculated grades should be considered
- There is significant minority who would not welcome calculated grades
- The role of the group is advisory and advice cannot be published until it has been considered by the Minister
- Means of communication of an alternative approach is as important as the operational issues that would arise from same

The Minister commented that:

- There is a great value in the reflective process of this group
- Any proposed solution must be worked through, including how to protect teacher judgement
- At the moment, no decision has been made to change the position to run examinations but it is recognised that health advice is evolving

4. Higher Education (HEA)

The HEA observer was invited to provide comment, who noted that:

- A priority is the mental wellbeing of students, and a system that is equitable and fair
- A number of alternatives for entry to higher education have been discussed with both the University and IOT sectors
- The rewarding the ongoing work of students, which the proposed approach of calculated grades addresses, cannot be served by the sudden creation of 3rd level entry exams
- HEIs could put in place their own admissions procedures but these would pose similar challenges to the leaving certificate examinations in relation to organisation, social distancing, health and safety etc.
- A central matriculation examination across 22 institutions would have all the challenges of running the leaving certificate exams without the structures and expertise of the SEC to do so. Also each institution could potentially run their own matriculation exams, meaning students would have to sit 3 or 4 rounds of exam depending on the CAO preferences. This would be great source of stress
- It's important to note 30% of students have no interest in progressing to third level and will progress through to further education or the world of work
- SATs could be developed but again would have all the same logistical challenges
- Moving the problem somewhere else does not answer the problem
- Some have suggested an "open the gates" approach at third level, however this would result in significant student non-completion rates during the first academic year. No other solution would be as efficient and fair as what is being proposed this morning

- CAO have indicated that they would accept calculated grade system
- Third level would favour calculated grades model which would have validity and reliability

5. Running of Examinations

Members of the group expressed further reflections on the presentation made last week by the SEC:

- Running of the exams is not possible, the risk of harm to students and superintendents is too great. Not acceptable on wellbeing grounds and many could not participate
- There has been a marked change in queries to teacher unions concerning the implications of holding the examinations, with many from individuals expressing grave concerns regarding the running of the exams. Many queries are coming from those traditionally most supportive of holding the examinations
- Not possible at this point in time to guarantee/persuade teachers to work with a calculated grades model but cannot be party to running unsafe examinations
- Public opinion is ignoring statements of Minister and Taoiseach that exams will go ahead
- Continuity of schooling has been much more successful than might have been expected, teachers have done enormous work in the last few weeks
- If we had been able to open schools earlier, we might have been able to run the exams but not possible, realities are staring all of us in the face
- Need for a decision soon and need for engagement with teachers regarding the detail of any alternative model

The Minister concluded:

- Offering thanks for the open and frank discussion
- Noting the value of this process in feeding in to the decision making
- Highlighting that the wellbeing of students and teachers will remain at the heart of his decision making.

6. Supports for well-being of students

Update provided by NEPS. Guidance document, *Supporting the Wellbeing of Students: Guidance for Post-Primary Schools and Student Support Teams during School Closures and Public Health Restrictions arising from COVID-19*, has been published and is available here: <https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/National-Educational-Psychological-Service-NEPS-/supporting-the-wellbeing-of-post-primary-students.pdf>

NEPS psychologists are contacting student support teams in schools, for now they are prioritising post-primary schools.

7. Dates of future meetings, all at 11.30-13.30 unless otherwise agreed:

- Monday, 11 May 2020
- Friday, 15 May 2020
- Friday, 22 May 2020
- Friday, 29 May 2020