

Advisory Group on Planning for State Examinations 2021

WEBEX

25 November 2020, 11.00 – 13.00

Agreed Note of Meeting

Present

	Name	Organisation/Position
Joint Chair	Dalton Tattan (DT)	Assistant Secretary General
Joint Chair	Andrea Feeney (AF)	CEO, SEC
Minister for Education	Norma Foley, TD	Department of Education
Students	Reuban Murray	President, ISSU
	Alicia O'Sullivan	Education Officer, ISSU
Parents	Aine Lynch	Chief Executive, NPC-P
	Mai Fanning	President, NPC-PP
Teachers	Ann Piggott	President, ASTI
	Kieran Christie	General Secretary, ASTI
	Martin Marjoram	President, TUI
	Michael Gillespie	General Secretary, TUI
School managers and leaders	John Curtis	General Secretary, JMB
	John Irwin	General Secretary, ACCS
	Paul Fields	Director of Schools, ETBI
	Clive Byrne	Chief Executive, NAPD
NCCA	Barry Slattery	Deputy CEO, NCCA
State Examinations Commission	Hugh McManus	Asst Head of Examination & Assessment, SEC
	Elaine Sheridan	Asst Head of Examination & Assessment, SEC
Department of Education	Harold Hislop	Chief Inspector
	Deirdre Shanley	Assistant Secretary General
	Yvonne Keating	Deputy Chief Inspector
	Anne Tansey	Director, NEPS
	Orlaith O'Connor	Assistant Chief Inspector
	Eamonn Moran	Principal Officer
	Ciara Molloy	Assistant Principal Officer
	Grainne Cullen	Principal Officer
Observer	Áine Doyle	Adviser to Minister

Apologies

DFHERIS	William Beausang	Assistant Secretary General
	Keith Moynes	Assistant Secretary General
Higher Education	Alan Wall	Chief Executive, HEA (Observer)

1. Welcome

The Joint Chair (DT) welcomed everyone to the meeting, particularly the Minister for Education and also the new representatives on the Advisory Group. The Joint Chair noted the central role each organisation has played over the last number of months in respect of the 2020 state examinations, and will continue to play over the coming months in relation to the 2021 Examinations.

The Joint Chair (DT) thanked everyone for accommodating the move from an in-person to an online meeting, noting that while it is the preference to convene these meetings in person, given the level 5 restrictions in place, online is the best available option for now.

It was advised that the meetings would be jointly Joint Chaired by Dalton Tattan and Andrea Feeney.

The Joint Chair (DT) invited the Minister to provide her opening remarks.

2. Opening remarks by the Minister

The Minister again thanked everyone for attending today's meeting of the reconvened Advisory Group on Planning for the State Examinations.

The Minister acknowledged the invaluable contribution of the group to the work on the altered arrangements for the running of the 2020 state examinations, in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, with this contribution being assisted by the highly collaborative and constructive manner in which every member of the group engaged. The Minister thanked all advisory group members for their commitment in helping to deal successfully with the unique challenges the system faced this year, which allowed over 60,000 young people to receive Calculated Grades, and has allowed them to progress to the next stage of their lives.

The Minister also thanked the teachers, schools leaders and all others who facilitated the successful operation of the Calculated Grades system and who are now facilitating the holding of the written examinations.

The Minister commended the students in the Leaving Certificate class of 2020, for their resilience and perseverance.

Noting that some aspects of Leaving Certificate 2020 are still ongoing, the Minister restated her firm intention, and that of the SEC, that the 2021 examinations should run as close to normally as possible, while taking account of the prevailing public health advice. The Minister asked that members of the advisory group assist the Department and the SEC in planning for these important examinations, by sharing their expertise, experience and advice, in a spirit of mutual co-operation. In this way, the system can provide as much clarity and certainty as possible to assist students who

are preparing to take the state examinations in 2021. The preparation for these examinations must again first and foremost have the interest of students at heart.

3. Minutes of previous meetings

Minutes of meetings held on 21 July and 1 September will be circulated to members of the advisory group for their observations. Observations are to be provided by 27 November. Final versions of the minutes will be circulated prior to their publication.

4. Terms of Reference

A draft Terms of Reference will be circulated to the advisory group in advance of the next meeting. The draft will reflect the role of the newly reconvened advisory group. Members will have opportunity to provide comment on the Terms of Reference before they are signed off at the next meeting.

5. Presentation by the State Examinations Commission on 2021 Examinations

The SEC gave a presentation on the 2021 Examinations. The presentation included:

- A recap of decisions made and actions taken over recent months in relation to state examinations 2020;
- Details in relation to the running of the November written examinations, including the valuable learning to be gained, changes to the approach to marking and the approach to training for examiners;
- Information on the revised 2021 assessment arrangements previously announced, including details on the duration of exams and timelines for coursework;
- An overview of the timelines for the various examinations 2021 assessment components for schools over the coming months, including LCA examinations, orals, project work/coursework and practical examinations, leading up to the final written examinations in June, acknowledging a significant level of activity for schools and an understandable reluctance by schools to release teachers during this time. There is also a reluctance on the part of schools regarding visits to the school by non-school personnel.

The SEC concluded by noting that all stakeholders are motivated to do the very best that can be done for the students, to allow them to experience the normal examinations process, but it must be acknowledged that things will have to be done differently.

The Joint Chair (AF) invited comments from the stakeholders.

Summary of comments from stakeholders:

- Comments made by the Minister regarding a conventional and traditional Leaving Certificate 2021 are welcomed, but relevant contingency plans must be made and these plans made clear to the system as soon as possible. Important to minimise the extent of rumour-mongering;
- Over-assessment of students in sixth year due to possibility of Calculated Grades process being applied for the Leaving Certificate 2021 cohort. This is causing anxiety among some students;

- Assessment arrangements for 2021, in terms of choice on the exam paper, duration of exams etc. need to be reviewed. Sense is that changes do not go far enough to alleviate the burden on teachers and students;
- Important to provide for all assessment components and not only the final written examination in June. Particularly important to provide for Leaving Certificate Applied students' assessment arrangements;
- Need to consider students who have had to self-isolate and avail of online learning, would they be eligible for an extension to assessment deadlines;
- Leaving Certificate candidates need assurances as to how students diagnosed with Covid during any periods of assessment will be handled. Specific measures need to be put in place for high risk students;
- Clarity to be provided on all elements of the assessment arrangements, including orals and practicals;
- Schools will be slow to release teachers, being mindful of the loss of tuition time already experienced by their students;
- The use of schools holidays and weekends for assessment purposes needs to be considered to allow for assessment components to take place in a meaningful way, but this will need to be balanced with students and teacher wellbeing;
- If, in order to provide for all elements of Leaving Certificate assessment, other aspects of the state examinations need to be curtailed, changes to Junior Cycle assessment may need to be considered;
- Alternative view that Junior Cycle examinations should not be seen as something that can be cancelled, and must go ahead in line with the Leaving Certificate.

Department Response to comments:

Minister Foley thanked members for their views. The Minister noted that she has endeavoured to be very clear that it is her intention, and that of the Department, to hold a traditional and conventional Leaving Certificate in 2021. The Minister commented that fact of schools remaining open through level 5 restrictions has been very encouraging. The Minister also commented that as much clarity as can be provided to the system will be provided.

The Minister concluded by noting the unanimous view on what the group wants to achieve, and that the preparation for these examinations must have the interests of students at heart.

The Joint Chair (DT) summarised the key points highlighted by the stakeholders and provided updates where available:

- Concerns regarding over assessment – this is linked to the issue of clarity. A single overarching comment regarding planning for the state examinations is needed and we are seeking to provide that;
- Adjustment to assessment arrangements – further clarity on assessment arrangements in the case of some subjects for 2021 will issue shortly;
- A statement will issue from the Department following each meeting, to be shared with members of the group in advance and can be used as a record of the meeting. Today's statement will include a reference to the view of this group, that it is the intention to hold a traditional leaving Certificate in 2021;
- There is a need to balance various elements at play here, the intention to provide for a traditional leaving certificate and the noted reluctance of schools to release teachers. Sustainability is an important issue;

- The level of contingency that will be required needs to be considered. Vaccines will be in place but not among the entire population. Clarity will be sought on this issue from Public Health officials;
- A meeting will be arranged in the next two weeks where we can further consider these issues.

6. Update on Covid 19 and schools

An update was provided to the group on the experience so far of schools and Covid-19:

- Public Health are working closely with schools and the Department of Education are closely monitoring the outcome of testing in school settings;
- The evidence demonstrates that schools are safe places;
- The testing and positivity rates in schools for close contacts reflects the international position that schools are not key drivers of transmission;
- The low numbers are a tribute to the whole school community to the adherence and implementation of the public health measures for safely running schools;
- Testing figures and positivity rates in the school YTD were outlined and the schools mid-term review by PH will be sent to the group.

An update on the Public Health supports for schools was provided which included:

- Prioritised testing of close contacts within the school community;
- Enhanced dedicated school teams within the HSE PH Department throughout the country which are supported by resources from DE Inspectorate;
- Dedicated contact number for PH for Principals which operates 7 days per week.

Overall Public Health want to reinforce the message for school communities to keep doing what they are doing to implement the Covid measures in schools.

7. AOB

The Minister for Education will issue a statement regarding today's meeting of the advisory group. The statement will be shared with the members of the group prior to its release and will serve as a summary record of the meeting which members can use in their own engagements.

8. Date of next meeting

The next meeting of the advisory group will take place in approximately two weeks. The date will be communicated to members of the advisory group in the coming days.