

Sub-group of the Advisory Group on Planning for State Examinations 2021

WEBEX

29 January 2021, 14.00- 15.30

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
	Paul Byrne	Deputy Director, NAPD
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
	Orlaith O'Connor	Assistant Chief Inspector
	Eamonn Moran	Principal Officer
	Ciara Molloy	Assistant Principal Officer
Observer	Áine Doyle	Adviser to Minister

1. Welcome

The Chair (DT) thanked everyone for attending and welcomed Minister Foley to the meeting.

Minister Foley again thanked everyone for their ongoing engagement.

2. Updates

The Chair invited the SEC to provide a number of updates.

2.1 Approaches taken in the UK

The SEC provided an update on various approaches taken in the UK to address the impact of Covid-19 and school closures on running state examinations. While all have cancelled their examinations the alternative approaches being considered vary across the jurisdictions.

- In Scotland the examinations were cancelled at a relatively early stage, with schools to provide predicted grades, under a process that started last November. Following a detailed

and multi-staged process involving guidance, support, sampling of work, and feedback, the predicted grades will be provided to the central authorities who will carry out further quality assurance checks and revert to schools if necessary, in cases where the grades are out of line with what would have been expected. It is a resource-heavy and process that also requires a long timeline

- Public consultation processes are being conducted by the authorities in England, with the provisionally proposed approach being a form of predictive grades to be provided by teachers. The grades provided would not be standardised by purely statistical methods, but advice and guidance would be provided to teachers on how they should produce the predictive grades, and further QA checks would be carried out by exam boards; the exam boards would not release the results from any school until they were satisfied that they were justifiable
- In Northern Ireland, consideration of alternative arrangements has been underway since the announcement of the cancellation of the examinations, and an announcement regarding the proposed arrangements is expected shortly
- Less information available regarding the position in Wales but there is reference to some form of hybrid between a school-based and external form of assessment which appears to have many similarities to exams

2.2 Engagement with Public Health

The Chair (AF) also provided an update on engagement with Public Health (PH):

- Now looking at alternative arrangements depending on the level of restrictions in place at the time of the examinations
- Normal arrangements in schools for exams involve centre consolidation. This year, students will have to be organised into exams pods with a minimum amount of consolidation
- Two meter distance confirmed
- On the larger exam centres, i.e. PE halls, it might be possible to have more than 25 or 50 with additional measures in place
- Duration of exams is a concern and consideration has been given to splitting them, but that leads to other concerns including students mixing as they enter and exit the centre
- On the possibility of a second sitting of the exams, consideration has been given to what control measures might be put in place to ensure fairness in accessing a second sitting
- On the orals, details were provided to PH on how these might transact and these measures were acknowledged as sufficient. There was also some discussion regarding practicals.

The conversation with PH was positive. There is further work to be done, but no indication has been given that the exams can't run in June in the way they ran in November.

3. Exploration of further possible options for the state examinations, having regard to the findings of the ISSU Report on the 2021 State Examinations and Return to School

The Chair (DT) provided a summary of the emerging position of subgroup of the Advisory Group following Wednesday's (27 January 2021) meeting:

- While Level 5 restrictions appear to be working, there remain heightened levels of stress and anxiety due to current uncertainty
- Despite overall improved online provision, closure of in-school provision has impacted on learning, particularly for students at greater risk of educational disadvantage
- There are significantly reduced opportunities for running non-written exam components (coursework, orals, practicals)
- Written examinations in June remain achievable but we need to guard against over-optimism about incidence of virus or progress of vaccination programme
- Any alternatives must, as far as possible, achieve a consistency of approach across the school system, protect the student experience and the student/teacher relationship
- We need to ensure a good and timely link-up with progression pathways (Further and Higher Education and Training)
- There is some time to plan but there is an urgency to bring some certainty to the direction of travel

Discussion on the possible options for the state examinations continued, with a focus on:

- Scope and form of assessment
- Further adaptations/changes to examinations

The Chair (AF) invited the group to consider the following questions

Scope and form of assessment

- What arrangements could be made to provide support to home -schooled students and students studying subjects outside of schools so that they had the same opportunities as all other students at leaving certificate 2021?
- Is the suggestion that there should be standardised continuous assessment offered one that has merit? What does this look like? What are the challenges of this suggestion/approach? How practicable would it be to create and provide such standardised instruments for use in schools?
- With further lost time, notwithstanding remote learning provision, what arrangements could be made to enable the orals and practicals to proceed? Are there other alternatives to be considered if these tests that cannot be completed as planned?
- Are all students able to category 1 coursework at home? What are the challenges? Are there other ways to support students in completing their category 2 coursework if they continue to not have access to the facilities they need for this completion in the coming weeks?

Further adaptations/changes to examinations

- What further measures could be taken to reduce the demand on students preparing for examinations so that they have a fair opportunity to attain in their examinations in a way which reduces their levels of anxiety and stress?
- Are there increased adaptations to the examinations being planned that could be made that would provide added reassurance to students?
- What arrangements could be made to delay the exam timetable and facilitate a later finishing of the school year to allow more face-to-face tuition time? Noting potential consequences for transition into FET/HE.

In order to aid discussion on the scope and form of assessment, the Chair (AF) gave a brief overview of the two categories of coursework and the arrangements in place in relation to same.

Category 1 coursework requires the student to submit a digital or hardcopy report with teacher oversight required throughout the candidate's engagement with the coursework. However, it is acceptable for the student to engage with the coursework outside of the school setting, provided there is appropriate oversight.

Category 2 coursework requires the student to complete an artefact and supporting portfolio. Some elements of the portfolio may be completed outside of school while the production of the artefact requires access to specialist rooms and equipment. In the interest of equity and fairness to all students and due to health and safety concerns, it is not permissible for the student to complete the artefact element of this coursework, or certain elements of the portfolio, outside of the school setting.

Summary of discussion by key topic:

Coursework:

- Essential that all assessment components are available to students
- Category 2 coursework remains a challenge, could consider additional flexibility to allow for completion of some aspects at home
- Orals will be a challenge for the system, particularly the release of teachers
- Extending timelines for coursework, practicals, orals etc. will lead to a build-up of pressure
- Student's feel underprepared for orals and practicals due to the disruption of schools closures and online learning

Clarity:

- There needs to be a balance between providing clarity to the system now, and taking some time to work through the issues arising, and how those issues might be addressed; direction needs to be given to allow students and teachers to begin preparing
- Clarity is needed as to when students will be back in school, this will also help inform decision making regarding the state examinations
- Public Health advice is positive regarding the written exams in the summer, but aware how quickly the situation can deteriorate
- Any delay in making a decision, the greater the impact on student mental health

Alternatives:

- Standardised continuous assessment could have a similar feel to past papers but would be a much shorter form of assessment; it would provide a more level playing field for all students across all schools; assessments could be completed within the school setting and submitted with the written examination in June for external marking; results of standardised continuous assessment could be used for the purposes of calculated grades if needed as teachers are concerned they do not have sufficient data
- Standardised continuous assessment could lead to a doubling up of effort on the part of students, if it is felt that the exams can go ahead in June; it would be a huge logistical challenge and a huge ask on the system to develop such a form assessment in such a short timeframe; it would be challenging for all students to engage in a new form of assessment; equity issues would also arise
- Higher Education should be asked to consider what they can do in terms of supporting alternatives
- Leaving Certificate is not just about entry to Higher Education, any alternative must stand on its own merit

- Need to consider how time for face-to-face teaching can be increased, including looking at cancelling holidays; extending the end of term?
- Elongating the period for assessment, extending deadlines or extending timetables, could be counterproductive for students and teachers following a very difficult year for all

The Chair (DT) provided a summary of the discussion, noting:

- There is a shared acceptance of the theme to move from discussion to decision and bring certainty to the system, but more time is needed to consider issues arising
- There is a strong desire to capture the alternative assessment components out of fairness for students, how this could be done is difficult but can explore the matter in more detail
- Key difference this year is that the public health advice is positive regarding the running of the exams, and there is an obligation to run them and mark the end of second-level education, it is just a matter of how.

The Minister concluded by thanking all stakeholders for their contributions and noted that it is very clear that there is a shared view among the group and that is to do what is fair, and right, and best, for students.

4. AOB

The Chair (DT) noted that a press statement will issue from the Department after the meeting and will be shared with the group in advance.

5. Date of next meeting

A meeting of a subset of the Advisory Group will be arranged for next week.