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

WEBEX

2 February 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
DFHERIS	Fiona O'Byrne	Principal Officer

1. Welcome

The Chair (DT) thanked stakeholders for their attendance at today's meeting and welcomed Minister Foley to the meeting.

Minister Foley thanked everyone for making themselves available and their commitment to the process.

2. Minutes of meetings

Minutes of meetings held on 27 January 2021 and 29 January 2021 were approved.

The observation regarding the Terms of Reference relate to minutes of the main Advisory Group and not the subgroup.

3. Junior Cycle

The Chair (AF) noted that in order to give priority to the Leaving Certificate (LC) examinations, it will not be possible to run the Junior Cycle (JC) examinations at the same time as the LC examinations. However, it is important that JC students be provided with some form of recognition for their learning and attainment at the end of the JC.

A number of options have been suggested previously, including; school based tests and assignments; use of CBAs and continuous assessments; truncated form of JC exam; defer JC exams to later in the year; or to take the same approach as last year. Are there other options that may be considered here?

The Chair (AF) invited the views of the stakeholders:

- Reality is that JC cannot take place at the traditional time as schools will need the additional space for the LC, particularly given public health advice
- See a huge value in the JC with SEC involvement, but have to acknowledge the challenges in running this simultaneously with the LC
- Has to be a State element to this and an acknowledgement of the completion of JC
- The model from last year worked well, and could be replicated this year, build on that process and embellish it where needed, working with NCCA. While the process is familiar to schools and teachers, ii would be useful to have some guidance on what would be expected in terms of this process
- Concern last year was that JC students would disengage but this did not happen to the degree expected, but would need to ensure that students continue to engage in learning
- Deferral of JC exams is not a preferred option, students will want to progress into Transition or 5th year
- Important to acknowledge role of JC results as a data source in the Calculated Grades process
- It may be possible to do the JC before the end of the academic year, teachers could supervise the exams in schools when LC students have finished. Could set aside assessment tasks and CBAs and hold the 2 hour exams in all 23 exams. Results could issue when possible
- If numbers sitting the written exams for the LC reduce significantly, then there may be capacity to hold the JC
- Use of CBAs or continuous assessment may be an option
- Would be very useful to issue communication to school on this as soon as possible

The Chair (DT) thanked stakeholders for their contribution and noted that these points will be taken into consideration.

4. Presentation on Leaving Certificate options

The Chair (DT) advised that a short presentation has been prepared to consider the following options for the LC, noting that this is not intended to be an exhaustive list:

i. Proceed with Leaving Certificate as close to normal as possible
ii. Cancel examinations and introduce a Calculated Grades model similar to that of 2020 (reflecting any 'lessons learned' and taking account of any legal judgements)

iii. A combination of Calculated Grades and an optional written Leaving Certificate (i.e. LC with written papers only with no oral or practical components where applicable)
iv. Written Leaving Certificate examinations with preparations made for Calculated Grades to be used only if examinations have to be cancelled
v. Altering the dates of the final school term to extend the available tuition period and commencing the Leaving Certificate examinations at a somewhat later date
vi. More open access to further and higher education.

The Chair (DT) brought the group through the presentation, noting some of the advantages and disadvantages for each option and highlighting some key questions in relation to each option. Comments were invited from stakeholders.

Summary of discussion on options outlined:

- Option 1, to proceed as normal, could lead to further mental duress, particularly with the curriculum not completed; it is the preferred option for some with modification to the papers but is dependent on students returning to school soon; does not allow for contingency, previously some form of the Bereavement Policy was considered
- Option 2, 2020 CG model, is not a preferred option; inflated grades and inequity for students; some representatives and their members are opposed to this model but understand that all options need to be considered; huge work put in by teacher and management las year to make the process work for students
- Option 3, a combination of Calculated Grades and an optional written Leaving Certificate, unsure what this actually means, but Calculated Grades not the preferred option; alternative assessment components must happen or an alternative way to capture the learning must be arranged; this seems close to what students have sought in terms of providing choice, the choice to opt into CG and the option to sit written exams, but also highlights the challenges in completing the assessment components; there will need to be some form of written examination for students who can't access a CG
- Option 4, written examinations with CG if exams are cancelled, will lead to further uncertainty; acknowledge that this is dependent on students returning to school soon; have to prepare a contingency
- Option 5, a deferred timeline, student are opposed to extending the academic term; can see the advantages in addressing some loss of learning but unsure students would be able to sustain themselves for the extended period; teachers were willing to work last summer, and might offer to do the same this year; later start of written exams worth considering if LC exams started a week later there would be a wide pool of examiners available in week between term and written exams
- Option 6, open access to HE, is not a preferred option; does not provide students with a Leaving Certificate or recognition of end of second-level education; it is not the progression route for all students; do think HE could do more to support this work, e.g. increasing number of places; would acknowledge role they played last year in providing additional places

Summary of key points raised:

- These options do not reflect the student voice, whose preference is standardised continuous assessment and a choice of calculated grades. Students will not be in agreement with exams going ahead without a choice, or going ahead at a deferred date
- Disappointed with the options outlined today. Expected full and open discussions and equal positions on the group, but the options set out do not reflect all voices represented at the table
- Need to really interrogate what has been put forward in the ISSU report regarding standardised continuous assessment
- Orals, practicals and coursework really need to be factored in to all options, all students deserve the same chance and opportunity; need to provide clarity to the system as to what is happening on these elements at least; assessment of some type for the orals and practicals – once students are back in schools we need to preserve teaching time, so no time for practical and oral tests
- Have to accept that orals and practicals will not be able to continue as planned, and there will have to be some form of contingency
- While there may not be any physical barriers to running the exams, there may be other barriers, particularly due to disruption to in class tuition and poor engagement with online learning
- Fairest option is choice, particularly when considering the level of disrupted learning
- All stakeholders have equal empathy and compassion for the students and what they're going through
- There is no ideal solution; the solution may not satisfy everyone at the table
- This year's LC must stand up against other years, the students of 2021 and previous years must be confident their LC will stand up to scrutiny.
- Commitment has been to get students back into schools and continue with the traditional leaving certificate, but with school closures extended this is not possible
- There is some certainty now regarding the JC, orals and practicals, and a LC in June – with contingency
- There is a will and commitment here to look after students

The Chair (DT) thanked everyone for their inputs. He noted that while the CG process has been met with some criticism, it did allow the vast majority of students to progress to third level/work last year. Every option will be met with some form of criticism, but this does not mean that it is not the right thing to do.

It is important that the student voice is heard, but also have to factor in what is doable, what the system is capable of delivering, and what is the right thing to do in the round. Today's discussion has highlighted areas where there is some agreement and others where there are still some differences.

The Chair (DT) asked if there were any final comments regarding the orals and practicals and also on the choices set out.

- Current orals and practicals are not do-able;
- With CG, there will be major challenges; but continuous assessment could address these

The Chair (DT) noted that standardised continuous assessment will be given further consideration at the next meeting. Stakeholders were asked to consider what standardised continuous assessment means – how many for each subject for each level, how would they be marked and used? SEC colleagues will be able to provide some details on the logistics of this approach.

The Chair (DT) invited the DFHERIS representative to add anything further regarding option 6 above, regarding open access to HE.

The DFHERIS representative noted that a lot of the challenges have been covered in the discussion, commenting that while such an option might ease some of the post-assessment problems, it does not solve the issue of providing a LC. There are challenges around capacity and inter year comparability.

In a normal year 30k don't get their first preference. This year there has already been an increase in the CAO applications. DFHERIS have carried out in depth analysis on CAO applications and areas of demand, noting that the top 9 courses account for 25% of all CAO applicants. DFHERIS have agreed to share this analysis.

The Chair (DT) concluded, advising that the next meeting will address:

- Elements of consensus
- Areas that are more challenging
- How to capture elements such as orals, and how these could be treated

Minister Foley noted that we have now reached the more challenging part of the discussions. The challenge now is to acknowledge those differences, work through the different views and find a pathway forward. Most critical period. It is important to acknowledge that in outlining the options, the mechanisms on how these options work have not been set out. Must tease out the issues around the practicals and orals, and would be useful to do that on Thursday. The focus must be on the delivery of a LC to provide an avenue for students to progress to third level or to work, and consideration has to be given to the considerable loss of tuition time that students have suffered.

The Chair (AF) commented that there will significant challenges in getting equitable solutions, including system level challenges, and the collaboration of all partners is required. Need to ensure that the system can actually deliver the proposed solution.

5. Date of next meeting

A meeting of a subset of the Advisory Group will sought to be held on Thursday, 4 February 2021