

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

WEBEX

5 February 2021, 14.00 - 15.30

DRAFT 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 everyone for attending today's meeting and welcomed Minister Foley to the meeting.

Minister Foley thanked everyone for their ongoing engagement in this process and for their time. The group now is moving to a critical part of the discussion and moving towards making decisions, and there is a welcoming level of engagement.

2. Minute of meeting

Minutes of meeting held on 2 February 2021 were approved.

3. 2021 State Examinations

The Chair (DT) brought the stakeholders through a presentation on the *2021 State Examinations – Moving to a way forward*. The presentation is reflective of the conversation so far and attempts to summarise some of the key discussion to date.

A commitment was made, at the last meeting, to consider a range of issues, including the option of standardised continuous assessment, these issues will be addressed through bilateral engagement.

The presentation focused on the overarching principles of the work at hand and the current position following the meetings of the subgroup.

Overarching principles

- Any solution must have regard to what is fair and equitable to students, rely on the support of the teachers and principals, and have integrity
- While Level 5 restrictions appear to be working, there remain heightened levels of stress and anxiety for everyone in society due to current uncertainty
- Despite overall improved online provision, closure of in-school provision has impacted on learning and preparedness for exams, particularly for students at greater risk of educational disadvantage
- There is emerging evidence that disruption to schooling arising from Covid-19 has led to measurable loss of learning
- Written examinations, in all likelihood, remain achievable subject to the current public health situation continuing to improve and only if fully in accordance with public health advice and guidance
- There is a strong shared desire to find a way to capture achievement through forms of assessment other than sit-down, written exams (viz. coursework, orals, practicals) but very little time at this stage for running such components
- The situation is not identical to last year and so any solutions need to be appropriate for this year's cohort
- Any alternatives must, as far as possible, achieve a consistency of approach across the school system, protect as far as possible the student experience and the student/teacher relationship
- We need to ensure smooth progression pathways into Further and Higher Education and Training
- There is some time to plan but there is an urgency to bring signal the direction of travel by making an announcement now

Current position:

- We need to offer an approach that
 - Is fair and equitable to students
 - Should have the confidence of parents, teachers, school management and the wider public, and can be delivered in a timeframe that is practicable in schools, meets the needs of learners and educational institutions
 - A number of different approaches have been suggested
- There is no perfect answer to what is a very challenging situation
- However, there are elements of approaches put forward to date by members of the Exams Advisory subgroup that merit further and more detailed consideration

- Examinations need to be available to students
- Given the disruption to learning which has already happened, there is a need to explore and scope out a corresponding measure which could also be offered to students
- Any corresponding measure should:
 - Have the confidence of partners
 - Incorporate certain new features compared to the process last year
- These would include:
 - The State Examinations Commission running both the exams and the corresponding process
 - Better provision for out-of-school learners in the corresponding process
 - Recognition of the skills and competences associated with orals, practicals and coursework should form a clear part of any such measure
 - Timely progression to higher and further education using either examinations or the outcome of any parallel process
- The Minister wants to thank members of the Exams Advisory Subgroup – Students, parents, teachers and school management – for their continuing engagement, contributions and efforts in advancing the thinking on the right approach
- In order to move to the more detailed conversations that now need to take place, the Minister will be inviting the education partners to a series of intensive bilateral meetings with her Department officials to work through that detail
- It is understood that this is not easy and each party involved has their own earnestly-held views
- The Minister is cognisant of the need to bring certainty and clarity to matters as soon as possible and be asking all education partners involved to participate on a very focused and immediate basis in moving towards a solution
- The decision will be made taking cognisance of the principles that have been discussed

The Chair (DT) invited the stakeholders to provide comment on the content of the presentation.

Summary of points raised:

- Very useful analysis of where the work of the group is at
- There is mention of the present disruption but the possibility of further disruption also needs to be captured
- View shared amongst a number of stakeholders that this strategy is the best way forward
- Certain elements are time critical and there is a need to start making serious decisions
- Welcome the involvement of the SEC in the process, there is great confidence in the organisation
- The degree of flexibility demonstrated is helpful
- The desire to find a way to capture achievement through forms of assessment other than written exams is welcome
- Regarding the corresponding measure, need to ensure that this doesn't lead to over assessment on students' return to schools
- Recognise the challenge of lack of evidence for teachers to use
- Need to take into account all forms of LC (LCA, etc.)
- Need to utilise skills of Inspectorate and SEC to describe what the "corresponding measure" should be, will need to develop guidance

- Welcome the idea of the written exams proceeding and are open to the idea of the timeline being pushed out
- There will be students who are unable to return to school who must also be accommodated
- Need to remember that the final few weeks at school fulfil a role beyond examinations
- Happy to engage in the follow-on process and engage constructively
- There are still many unknowns but agreed approach needs to have a clear rationale behind it
- Moving into a positive space of intensive engagement and finding solutions
- It is important that this clarity is communicated to students, parents and the system to dispel the disquiet that is out there
- This approach demonstrates the commitment of all stakeholders and represents an approach that all stakeholders have input to

The Chair (DT) noted that next steps will involve intensive bilateral engagement and this may move to multilateral engagement. These discussions will have to take place with a high level of confidentiality to allow for all options and solutions to be considered. There is a need to find solutions that address all of the objectives but also, the system needs time to implement those solutions.

The Chair (AF) thanked the stakeholders for their frank and honest engagement to date. The work ahead will be challenging but there is a commitment to finding a solution to help students progress to the next stage and to relieve some of the stress that they are currently experiencing.

The Chair (DT) concluded noting that contact will be made with each of the stakeholders before the end of the day to arrange the next round of bilateral meetings. The Chair (DT) asked that stakeholders begin itemising priority issues that can be addressed at these meetings over the coming days. The Chair (DT) advised that there will be an announcement following the group's engagement today and over the last few weeks, the statement will be reflective of today's presentation.

The Minister concluded by acknowledging the huge generosity and willingness of the group to move this process forward, and thanked them again for their inputs. The Minister looks forward to further engagement, mindful of the necessity of these decisions.