

**ADVISORY GROUP FOR CONTINGENCY PLANNING FOR STATE EXAMINATIONS 2020**  
**CLOCK TOWER, DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS, MARLBOROUGH STREET**

**1 May 2020, 11.30 – 13.30**

**Agreed Meeting note**

**Present**

|   | <b>Name</b>        | <b>Organisation/Position</b>            |
|---|--------------------|---|
| <b>Chair</b>  | Seán Ó Foghlú      | Secretary General, DES                  |
| <b>Students</b>                                       | Ciara Fanning      | President, ISSU                         |
|   | Alison Dervan      | Student Voice Development Manager, ISSU |
| <b>Parents</b>  | Aine Lynch         | Chief Executive, NPC-P                  |
|   | Mai Fanning        | President, NPC-PP                       |
| <b>Teachers</b>                                       | Deirdre MacDonald  | President, ASTI                         |
|   | Kieran Christie    | General Secretary, ASTI                 |
|   | Seamus Lahart      | President, TUI                          |
|   | John MacGabhann    | General Secretary, TUI                  |
| <b>School managers and leaders</b>                    | John Curtis        | General Secretary, JMB                  |
|   | John Irwin         | General Secretary, ACCS                 |
|   | Nessa White        | General Secretary, ETBI                 |
|   | Clive Byrne        | Chief Executive, NAPD                   |
| <b>National Council for Curriculum and Assessment</b> | John Hammond       | Chief Executive, NCCA                   |
| <b>Higher Education</b>                               | Alan Wall          | Chief Executive, HEA (Observer)         |
| <b>State Examinations Commission</b>                  | Aidan Farrell      | Chief Executive, SEC                    |
|   | Andrea Feeney      | Director of Operations, SEC             |
| <b>Department of Education and Skills</b>             | Harold Hislop      | Chief Inspector                         |
|   | Deirdre Shanley    | Assistant Secretary General             |
|   | 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             |
| <b>Observers</b>                                      | Philip O'Callaghan | Special advisor to Taoiseach            |
|   | Mark O'Doherty     | Adviser to Minister                     |

## Apologies

|                                    | Name         | Organisation/Position |
|------------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Department of Education and Skills | Eamonn Moran | Principal Officer     |

### 1. Welcome

The Chair thanked everyone for attending today's meeting and for their support and advice which informed the announcement regarding Junior Cycle on Wednesday. It was noted that the announcement seems to have been largely well received by the public.

### 2. Agree note of previous meetings

Some amendments to the meeting note of 29 April 2020 were submitted. A revised minute of the meeting will be circulated for agreement at our next meeting.

### 3. Running of Examinations – for initial discussion

A presentation was made by the SEC on possible practical arrangements required for delivering the 2020 Leaving Certificate (LC) examinations. The focus of the SEC is to develop a model for delivery which will allow the LC examinations to take place in schools in a way which is as close to normal as possible, maintaining the integrity of the examinations and ensuring the health and safety of all involved, bearing in mind the scale and logistics of the examinations process.

It was noted that this planning work is taking place under a number of assumptions, including the ongoing need for social distancing measures, that schools will re-open in July and that incidents of students gathering in groups must be limited at all times.

In presenting a Model for Exams delivery the following areas were addressed:

1. Revised exam timetable
2. Social distancing requirements – before, during and after the exams; getting to school, arranging exam centres; role of the Board of Management; role of the Superintendent etc.
3. No attendance by anyone at risk of Covid-19 – either students or those involved in the delivery of the examinations; how is this managed etc.
4. Hygiene and sanitation - regular routine sanitising and cleaning required; duty of care; PPE required etc.
5. Marking the Examinations

The SEC concluded noting that the presentation gives rise to further questions that require consideration and reflection.

The Chair opened the matter to the floor for discussion.. The following points were noted by the stakeholders:

- Boards of Management will need to be able to ensure that they can keep their staff and students safe and the situation and risk arising if this cannot be guaranteed. The burden of responsibility is firmly on schools
- There will be an expectation on students to adapt to large scale changes, an expectation which may be beyond reasonable

- The impact of a revised LC timetable on students' higher and further education opportunities should not be overlooked
- Possibility of having to run an exam timetable for 32 days would be exhausting and nerve inducing for students. It would be incredibly challenging with one exam a day to persevere for that long
- In relation to wearing personal protective equipment (PPE), if there is a need for PPE the question must be asked if it is safe for exams to be going ahead at all.
- While the introduction of health and safety measures might, at the outset, provide a level of comfort, the fact that such measures have to be taken will also give rise to serious questions.
- If students are required to attend examinations over an extended timetable there will be concerns regarding the health and safety of their families and the spread of the virus?
- It will be very difficult to prevent the congregation of students and parents
- There will be health and safety concerns for staff involved in the running of the examinations, including TY and 5<sup>th</sup> year students who sometimes fill these positions
- It is unfair to put students through this stress and anxiety
- While the SEC has been tasked with running the exams in a way which is as close to normal as possible, there will be nothing normal about these exams
- Carrying out daily checks in relation to hygiene and sanitation would be required but very difficult to complete and maintain
- There will be students who are unable to attend the examinations and students who will be diagnosed during the course of the exams. What happens then to the student and the students and staff that have been attending that exam centre?
- We must ask what's the purpose of the exams and what are we trying to achieve – we can't compromise in this kind of way
- While it might be possible to plan and carry out the exams with such measures in place, it may not be the right thing to do
- All arrangements must be primarily and ultimately guided by health advice
- It is recognised that the holding of the examinations is the fairest option but not if it puts anyone in danger
- Further information will be needed on how to manage the two weeks before the exams when it is hoped that LC students can return to schools
- Schools will need practical details of what's required and unless all of the issues outlined can all be addressed then we can't stand over the arrangements due to health and safety concerns
- The information provided today is what's required, at a minimum, and these requirements are very challenging. If we are making decisions it has to be based on evidence, and the evidence is startling
- The work required would need to be supported by an as yet uncanvassed army
- Congregation requirements won't work in a large number of schools due to them having a single entry/exit point, many schools also have an unusual footprint and new builds often exit into the centre of town
- Even if schools can manage students and social distancing requirements within the school building they may not be able to do so in the surrounding area
- In terms of making a final determination on these issues it is important that we are aware of what's happened in other jurisdictions

- There is an extraordinary level of planning and decision making that would need to take place urgently in order to make this work, yet advice in relation to public health is only being made on a 2 to 3 weekly basis
- The measures required involve a lot of new procedures, not previously experienced which, of itself, brings about significant levels of risk
- On a boarder point, the arrangements set out would hinder the post Covid-19 recovery in the autumn. It's important to bear in mind the significant impact such measures would have on the new school year
- It is important to return to the purpose of this work, the main reason for all this effort is to allow for the selection process for 3<sup>rd</sup> level, as well as the recognition of study and completion of post-primary education
- School principals are recognised as the school Safety Officers which will be a significant and serious role
- The system as outlined by the SEC is not doable by schools given the potential risks
- It must be noted that whatever decision is made will probably be challenged legally
- If the decision is to go ahead with the exams, we will do our best but is it worth doing given potential outcomes?
- The task for the SEC is enormous, to set out the logistics is mind boggling but to implement them is terrifying. Are the medical experts aware of the logistics and measures required?
- Need to look at alternatives, irrespective of the measures that we introduce, we will not combat the worry students and parents are currently experiences. There will be many students that won't attend their exams due to worry.
- There is an assumption that schools will reopen which may not happen, we have to look at alternative options now
- There seems to be some mixed messaging with regards to health advice currently and what is and isn't allowed, it is important that there is some cohesion in relation to this advice
- These new arrangements will be very stressful for students, adding further to the stress already being experienced. There are concerns regarding the capacity of an increasing number of students to manage and cope with this stress at this time

The Chair thanked everyone for their extensive inputs. It was noted that the decision to proceed with the LC exams in July was based on the health advice available at that time and the SEC and the Department are working to implement that decision. The health situation continues to develop and change, hopefully some clarity will be available later today or over the weekend following this evening's announcement. It is clear that any decision made will be informed by the health advice available at that time.

The Chair summarised some of the key points from the discussion:

- The key priority is the wellbeing of the students sitting the examinations and the significant numbers of others supporting the running of the examinations
- It is important to reflect on why we are doing this, the purpose of leaving certificate and entry to HE/FE
- The discussion highlighted whose responsibility this is – schools and the SEC
- Number of points made about the return to school and the strong likelihood that social distancing will continue in the autumn. There will need to be a shared effort in planning for the return to schools.

The Chair concluded this item noting that the views of the stakeholders had been recorded.

**Agreed:** Contingency measures to be discussed at Wednesdays' meeting, 6 May.

#### **4. Options Paper on Project, Coursework, Practical Examinations and LCA**

Item to be taken at future meeting of the Advisory Group.

#### **5. Supports for well-being of students**

A brief update was provided by NEPS, advising that the new Leaving Certificate 2020 webpage is now live. The webpage provides a comprehensive range of supports for leaving certificate students, and includes up-to-date information in relation to the exams. A link to the webpage will be circulated to the group.

#### **6. Equity of access to teaching and learning**

An oral update was provided by the DES chair of Continuity of Teaching and Learning Group:

- Matter of ICT supports for schools is progressing with a centralised procurement process developed to help speed up the provision of ICT equipment. Information is due to issue to schools today on how that procurement process will work. Schools will also be asked to think about devices they already have in place and how best they might be used
- Guidance on the continuity of schooling to supporting students at risk of educational disadvantage and for students with special educational needs have issued. This guidance material will continue to be updated
- Work with media broadcasters is ongoing regarding programmes that could be developed to support teaching and learning for leaving certificate students over the next couple of months
- Contact with telecommunication companies re zero-rating educational websites is continuing, hoping the suppliers will sign off on this shortly

#### **7. AOB**

- Request that equity in assessment and marking be included as an agenda item for follow-up meeting
- Queries regarding the Junior Cycle announcement can be sent to Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit via the Advisory Group secretary
- Circulate press statement which can be used by stakeholders for communicating with their members
- Need to ask health authorities to project 10/11 weeks forward and offer advice in order to inform our decision making

#### **8. Dates of future meetings, all at 11.30-13.30 unless otherwise agreed:**

- Wednesday, 6 May 2020
- Friday, 15 May 2020
- Friday, 22 May 2020
- Friday, 29 May 2020