

## **INTO POSITION PAPER ON PUBLIC EXAMINATIONS 2020/21**

The problems created by the pandemic for public examinations and the delivery of other methods of assessment for various qualifications, including GCSE and A Level are well articulated at this stage.

### **Context:**

The current situation is an apparent patchwork of experiences across the post primary sector with strong indication that, while few schools are unaffected by pupils and staff having to self-isolate, take sick leave, exceptional dependants leave and work from home for other COVID-19 related reasons, the experience of Trade Union representatives points to a wide and varied rate of disruption between different areas, schools, year groups, classes and individual teachers and students.

Such disruption is almost certain to continue well into the New Year.

Lack of detailed, freely accessible statistics relating to this disruption does not disguise the fact that the ability of teachers and centres to prepare students properly, for even the reduced assessments currently required by CCEA, has been seriously adversely affected and that this will continue to be the case and only worsen as the academic year goes on. The best efforts of schools to compensate for disruption through remote learning, timetable adjustments and other methods cannot compensate for the extent of the disruption experienced and the unknown further disruption yet to be experienced.

There are widespread reports, including from NICCY, of detrimental impact on the current cohort of students' mental health and well-being due to uncertainty in schools around how academic progress will be assessed this year and external qualifications will be awarded. While there are published plans from the Minister of Education there is little confidence among those delivering qualifications that these plans will survive the remainder of the school year. Therefore, centres and teachers, by the Minister's own admission in the NI Assembly, appear to have increased the number of in-school assessments by way of building banks of evidence should 'Centre Assessed Grades' be reintroduced. This is not helpful in terms of our members workload or wellbeing.

INTO is on record as having supported the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, Koula Yiasouma's call for the scrapping of public examinations in Northern Ireland for this academic year.

This call was based on a consideration of the current context and the foreseeable future disruption to schooling for the duration of this academic year and the negative impact that continuing with plans for examinations is having on the learners themselves. It is not difficult to conclude, to paraphrase from our own trade union lexicon, that detriment to learners is also detriment to teachers.

It is widely accepted that further contingencies have been and are being considered by CCEA. Sharing and discussion of these contingencies in an open forum with the relevant stakeholders, including the Trade Unions, is essential.

In the absence of full knowledge of these contingency plans, INTO's initial call has been and continues to be for an end to examinations for this year to be replaced by a combination of existing controlled assessment/coursework where available alongside CCEA produced and provided 'Staged Assessments' taken during identified windows of the remainder of the school year and assessed externally by CCEA appointed examiners as per the normal arrangements for assessment of examinations. We differ here from the NAHT call for internally assessed and moderated assessments.

The benefits of this are a clear and deliverable method of delivering quality assured assessments; paid work for those teachers and others who undertake external marking for CCEA, most of whom are teachers and members of our unions; clarity for centres, teachers and learners and the removal of the perceived need to gather 'banks of evidence'; safeguard against additional and excessive workload; reduction of stress for all concerned.

The detail of this is not a matter for the trade unions to work out. Our task is to call for solutions that safeguard our members' conditions which in turn will benefit their students. We should be consulted alongside other stakeholders but to seek to assume any responsibility for developing proposals which, inevitably, will involve compromise and come under immense political pressure and pressure applied by sectional interests within education, would leave the teaching unions open to valid criticism should the system prove unfit for purpose, burdensome on our members and detrimental to students.

INTO objects to 'teacher managed assessments' (TAG's) as they represent significant additional workload for teachers. It is hard to envisage how a level of consistency could be assured across the system and widespread adjustment of moderated marks is likely and would be likely to lead to claims of bias toward one sector or another, between schools and

within centres themselves. It is entirely possible that any proposals for TAGs would increase rather than decrease pressure on teachers and pupils.

Any proposals for the range of data to be used for CAGs is also problematic, particularly those relating to previous performance of centres with which INTO would have a fundamental objection. Each student and each cohort in each school is unique and is subject to a range of variables and should be assessed as such.

There is no way of moderating or standardising internal 'tracking' assessments across the system and they can vary enormously in quantity and quality across and within centres. Internal quality assurance, monitoring and evaluation for CAGs or TAGs would at best 'aspirational' and more frankly hugely time consuming, workload intensive and open to systemic abuse and failure. They have the potential to be an industrial relations and malpractice minefield.

Any proposal, such as have emerged from some quarters, to use ETI in part to monitor CAGs/ TAGs is impractical and undesirable from INTO's perspective. For instance, it is unlikely that the ETI or EA have enough specialist staff to be able to assess and quality assure the range of subject areas covered by CCEA qualifications. It is further questionable as to whether the staff who do have such specialisms have any experience outside of their own previous praxis, in the rigours of working as examiners or assessors. No doubt there are some, but there is a bank of trained and paid examiners available to CCEA who are much better placed and qualified to carry out assessment work than ETI or EA Link Officers.

Indemnification is provided by the employer or employing authority or DE and is dependent on adherence to agreed procedure, protocol and best efforts to ensure compliance with all regulations, legislation and statutory obligations. Externally marked papers are far more preferable to internal assessment in this regard.

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