

RE: Petition No P00013/17, entitled “Make the New English Junior Cert Exam fairer by adding Thirty Extra Minutes” from Ms. Tara O’Sullivan.

Chairman,
Committee Members

1. Background

The State Examinations Commission, or SEC as we are known for short, welcomes the opportunity to attend today’s Committee meeting to assist the Committee in fully considering the petition “Make the new English Junior Cert exam fairer by adding Thirty Extra Minutes”. I note that the Committee would particularly like to discuss how the mock examination papers provided by commercial suppliers might be scrutinised in advance of their sale to schools.

Before dealing with the issue at hand I might briefly set out to the Committee the role and functions of the SEC within the state examinations system.

The SEC is a statutory body established in 2003 under Section 54 of the Education Act, 1998. The SEC’s role is to provide a high-quality state examinations and assessment system incorporating the highest standards of openness, fairness and accountability in operating the Irish State Examinations, principally the Junior¹ and Leaving Certificate and Leaving Certificate Applied. Examinations and assessment policy is set by the Minister for Education and Skills and the SEC is then responsible for the operation and delivery of the state examinations system.

The SEC is headed by a board of Commissioners, appointed by Government on the nomination of the Minister for Education and Skills, whose role is to act as the custodians of the state examinations in terms of affirming and upholding the principles and integrity underpinning the system and the need to maintain public confidence in the examinations themselves.

The functions of the SEC are precisely defined in the State Examinations Commission (Establishment) Order, 2003. These encompass the preparation of state examination materials to their marking, resulting and ultimately appeal processes, along with arrangements for the conduct of the examinations. The SEC prepares over 500 test items each year, which are taken by almost 120,000 candidates, leading to the marking of 1.9 million items of candidate work and the award of 1 million grades.

2. Preparation of Examination Papers

The purpose of the state examinations is to measure the extent to which candidates demonstrate achievement in relation to their meeting the aims and objectives of each particular subject specification, or syllabus as they are often known.

Examination papers do not exist in a vacuum. Central to the SEC’s role in maintaining public confidence in the state examinations is the setting and maintenance of examination standards from year to year. We do this through the relationship between the preparation

¹ The Junior Certificate will be replaced by an award called the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement to be introduced on a rolling basis starting in 2017

of examination papers and their marking schemes, how we standardise these in order to maintain standards year on year and then how we quality assure these through our marking and appeal processes. The examination paper preparation process itself involves the key personnel of Chief Examiners, drafters, setters, translators and in the case of the Leaving Certificate, university observers and scrutineers. The process takes over 15 months to conclude and contains a number of overlapping steps in order to provide examination papers of the highest possible standard in order to test, and give candidates the opportunity to answer on, the appropriate aspects of the subject specification (syllabus).

I have set out these processes in greater detail in the appendix to these opening remarks.

3. SEC Supports to Teachers and Candidates

The SEC provides a range of supports and services to teachers and candidates in preparing for the examinations. These are an important element of the work of the SEC as candidates are understandably apprehensive in the lead up to the state examinations, particularly when a new programme is being introduced, as happened this year with the introduction of a new style of examination in Junior Cycle English.

[Examination Material Archive, including Chief Examiner reports](#)

In order to provide appropriate support for future candidates and their teachers, the SEC provides full, open, and free access to its entire electronic archive of past examination materials. This includes past examination papers, past marking schemes, and Chief Examiners' reports on previous examinations. Such access to past papers and marking schemes allows all stakeholders to have equal and fair access to information about what to expect as regards the structure, format, and style of the examinations, so as to be appropriately prepared. Chief Examiners' reports are issued periodically in each subject, and provide additional information and insights into how candidates have performed with respect to the various assessment objectives of the syllabus, and offering advice to future candidates.

[Sample examination papers](#)

When a new subject specification (syllabus) is introduced, such as the new Junior Cycle English examination which candidates sat for the first time earlier this month, past examination papers in that subject are of more limited use for the purposes described above. For this reason, sample examination papers are produced by the SEC, in consultation with the Department of Education and Skills and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment in advance of the first state examinations for any new subject or revised subject specification (syllabus). These sample papers are produced as a guide to students, teachers and the public as to the structure and format of the new examination and, like 'real' examinations, are produced with a high level of oversight and quality assurance to ensure their fitness for purpose.

4. Commercially produced "mock" examinations

Mock examinations take place in many schools in Spring each year. These examinations, as the name suggests, are intended to mimic the forthcoming state examinations in June. Despite the fact that they have no official status and that their use is not approved of or endorsed by the Department of Education and Skills or any state body, they have been used

by schools for some time as a means to help prepare their students for the state examinations. The teachers and schools that choose to use them believe that their value rests in providing students with an opportunity to sit a full-length examination which attempts to replicate the demands of the state examinations when they come around, thereby enhancing candidate preparedness. While in the past, many teachers prepared their own papers for this purpose, commercially available alternatives have existed for a long time and have become increasingly prevalent. Decisions to hold mock examinations are taken by schools themselves. The SEC and Department play no role in this activity.

Mock examinations are not the business of the SEC. We have no role or involvement in the preparation or delivery of examinations provided by mock examination providers, which are private commercial entities. The companies involved go to lengths to make their products look similar to the state examinations, mimicking the layout and fonts of the state examinations, including in some instances logos and subject codes akin to those used by the SEC. These companies usually provide solutions and marking schemes, and in some instances also provide, on a commercial basis, a 'marking' service, returning marked scripts and results to schools who engage them to provide this additional service.

Because of the efforts made by such providers to mimic the look and feel of the SEC's examination papers, many students and parents may incorrectly believe that these mock examinations have some official status, or that they are subject to some form of state endorsement or oversight, but this is not the case. The SEC does not engage with the mock examination providers or the public in respect of the mock examinations. As with any other commercially produced educational service or product, such as school textbooks, both the SEC and Department consider that it is not appropriate for a state agency to comment on the quality of either the papers or the quality of the marking service provided. Indeed, to do so would certainly constitute inappropriate interference by a state agency in a private commercial market.

The proposal that the SEC would provide commentary or advice on mock papers to the providers of those papers or any degree of oversight on the papers or the process of their preparation is a cause for concern. The reality is that mock examinations are produced by private companies within a competitive commercial market. In our view it would have a number of inevitable inappropriate implications:

- (i) It would imply an endorsement by the State of the very process of conducting mock examinations in schools, enhancing their perceived value, despite the fact that the Department does not endorse their use or consider them to be an appropriate and effective use of school time.
- (ii) It would effectively provide endorsement or criticism of the products and services of private commercial companies.
- (iii) The legislative and administrative architecture that would be required to ensure that such oversight and/or involvement with a commercial market by a state body was in full compliance with Irish and EU competition law would be onerous in the extreme.

- (iv) The resources required to provide an adequate level of oversight to allow any credible endorsement by a state body of the quality of these commercial products and services, including the large numbers of additional staff required, would not be tenable, particularly in pursuit of a goal that is at variance with stated educational policy.
- (v) The SEC, in giving its observations or guidance, would as a result inevitably be providing insights into examination paper development in such a way as to increase predictability of examinations and/or provide inappropriate guidance as to future live examination paper content.
- (vi) The SEC's endorsement would result in inappropriate expectations as to the relationship between material that appears on mock papers and material that might appear on the "real" state examinations provided by SEC.
- (vii) It would expose the SEC to legitimate avenues of criticism if, by sheer coincidence, the content of a mock paper from one company turned out to be a closer match than the content of a paper from another company as to the content that later appeared on the real examination, both mock papers having received the endorsement of the SEC.

In short, unless the 'mock' examinations could be subjected to the level of preparative rigour as the real state examinations, with suitable oversight mechanisms placed on a sound legislative footing, it would not be credible for the SEC to provide any endorsement of these products. Even if the substantial resources required to implement this oversight role were made available, the negative consequences of carrying out this role would substantially outweigh any conceivable positive effects. Consequently, SEC considers that it would be inappropriate for us to have any involvement in the setting or oversight of mock examination papers.

5. Online Petition

Today's meeting has come about as a result of an online petition organised by Junior Cycle candidates arising from their concerns based on the adverse experience of some candidates who sat mock examinations in Spring of this year in advance of the new 2017 Junior Cycle English examinations. The petition sought the addition of an extra thirty minutes for the completion of these examinations as many candidates had experienced real time pressures in the mock examination.

Candidates, who this year were facing into the first examination in this new programme, were understandably concerned for their prospects in the "real" English examination in June based on this experience in their mocks. Following receipt of the online petition last March the SEC moved to reassure candidates that the examination papers in preparation for the June 2017 sitting of Junior Cycle English would be suitable for completion in a two hour examination and that they would be fair to candidates.

The English examination sat by candidates earlier this month was fully in accordance with the structure, format and likely time demands of the sample papers at Higher and Ordinary Level set by SEC and issued in November 2015 for the assistance of teachers, candidates and

indeed for the guidance of the producers of the mock examinations. I am pleased to report to the Committee that the reports from teachers and candidates on the 2017 Junior Cycle English examinations set by SEC show that they executed without any issues arising and no difficulties were experienced by candidates in respect of completion time.

In conclusion, the SEC and Department do not believe that it is appropriate for the State to make any intervention aimed at improving the quality of commercial products and services in a market, particularly since those products and services do not advance the Government's educational policy. The reality is that commercial producers have identified an opportunity in a market – that is their right. However, the SEC and Department cannot get involved in endorsing any such commercial opportunities or activities.

My colleagues and I would welcome any observations or take any questions which the Committee would like to raise. Thank you.

Appendix

Role of State Examinations Commission and its Responsibilities in Setting and Maintaining Examination Standards

1. Background

The SEC's role is to provide a high-quality state examinations and assessment system incorporating the highest standards of openness, fairness and accountability. The State Examinations Commission (SEC) is a statutory body established in 2003 under Section 54 of the Education Act, 1998. The functions of the SEC are defined in the State Examinations Commission (Establishment) Order, 2003.

Section 6 of the establishment order deals specifically with the SEC's remit in respect of the conduct of the state examinations. Therein it states:

6. (1) The functions of the Commission shall be to -
 - (a) organise the holding of examinations,
 - (b) ensure the preparation of examination papers and other examination materials,
 - (c) determine procedures in places where examinations are conducted including the supervision of examinations,
 - (d) make arrangements for the marking of work presented for examination,
 - (e) issue the results of examinations,
 - (f) determine procedure to enable the review and appeal of results of examinations at the request of candidates,
charge and collect fees for examinations and apply such monies to the carrying out of its functions, and
designate places where examinations may be held.

In relation to the subject matter of today's meeting §6(1) (b), (d) and (e) of the SEC's remit in relation to the conduct of the state examinations is central and some detail in relation to how the SEC acts to meet these requirements is important to inform the discussion.

In meeting its remit SEC is charged with the issue of results which reflect the maintaining of standards year-on-year and it endeavours to achieve this by the processes it has in place for the preparation of examination papers and other test items, its standardising processes and by the quality assurance procedures it implements at the marking and appeal stages of the state examinations.

At the outset it must be emphasised that the result of an examination is a measure of the achievement of a candidate in relation to their meeting the aims and objectives of a subject specification (syllabus). That measurement is achieved based on the combined interactions of an examination, a marking scheme, and the views of a subject expert on what a candidate

presents in their response to the examination with regard to the expectations set out in the marking scheme.

2. Overview of examination preparation and quality-assurance processes

The preparation of high-quality examination papers, and associated marking criteria and procedures, is a lengthy and complex process, not usually interrogated in detail by those outside this area of specialisation. In order to fully appreciate the implications of a potential expansion of the role of the SEC, it is first helpful to give at least a brief overview of what the SEC does to fulfil its mandate with the degree of rigour and quality that is rightly expected of a public body.

Preparing examination papers

All of the SEC's examinations are prepared in accordance with the principles outlined in two key documents, *The Preparation of Test Items – Principles and Protocol*, and the *Manual for Drafters, Setters and Assistant Setters*, available on its website at www.examinations.ie. All examinations are developed over a period of approximately 15 months and are repeatedly assessed during their preparation process for alignment with the relevant syllabi and with the key assessment principles of validity and reliability. Validity relates to the extent that an examination measures the kinds of knowledge and skills that we want to measure, while reliability is the degree of consistency with which this is done.

The examination preparation process itself involves subject experts who are contracted to the SEC as Drafters, Setters and in some instances Assistant Setters who work under the management of Examinations and Assessment Managers (EAMs) who are for the most part subject experts and permanent staff members of the SEC. EAMs are represented on NCCA subject review and development groups so that they are fully au fait with curricular developments. A high premium is placed by the SEC on subject expertise as this is critical for the development of quality assessment items. The SEC also has contracted experts in translation who are used in the preparation and editing of the Irish versions of examination papers, and who operate under the management of a permanent SEC Examinations and Assessment Manager who is a translation and editing expert. The setting and proofing process for both English and Irish versions involves the careful checking of content for compliance with subject content and skills specification, and assessment specifications as set down by the Department for Education and Skills; checking there is appropriate assessment across the range of content and skills from lower to higher order, and that all test items are free from all forms of bias. Furthermore, Leaving Certificate examinations are also subject to a University Observations process by nominated representatives of the university sector to assess their suitability as a basis for determining matriculation. In addition, Leaving Certificate examination papers go through an SEC-developed Scrutineer Process where, prior to examination papers going to press, an additional subject expert (not involved in the examination paper preparation) works through examination papers to assess their appropriateness in respect of content and demand. The entire process is an iterative one, involving drafts going through several proofs over a protracted period of many months during which draft marking schemes are developed in parallel as a further check on the examination paper suitability, to ensure clarity as to the purpose and effectiveness of each

item and the alignment of the examination with the syllabus as regards the types of cognitive skills being tested.

Establishing standards

Standards are established for new specifications (syllabuses) in Ireland in advance of examining. The approach taken is sometimes described as a “college of professionals” approach. In the first instance, a group of people who are deemed to have an expert knowledge of what the students in the target audience ought to be able to achieve in the subject concerned reach a consensus regarding the *content standards* of the syllabus. This is achieved through the various committees in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

Following on this, these *content standards* are then put into effect as a set of *performance standards* by the SEC. Once these performance standards have been tested, reviewed and fully established, the SEC, in accordance with its Establishment Order, then endeavours to ensure that the standards remain consistent over time.

Maintaining standards

Standards of achievement of large cohorts of students do not radically change in the space of a year. A certain amount of variation from year to year is allowed, and a gradual change in the pattern of grades may occur over time, provided the subject experts involved are satisfied that it reflects real changes in achievement. Furthermore, syllabus change and other deliberate interventions may impact on grade patterns, as may changes in the size or composition of the cohort.

In order to maintain standards, the Chief Examiner for each examination takes all necessary steps to ensure that the examination paper, the marking scheme and its application combine to ensure that established standards are maintained.

Quality assurance in the marking process

The examinations are marked by examiners, (generally experienced teachers in the subject), who work under the overall direction and management of the Chief Examiner for the subject. Examiners normally mark scripts from a number of schools. Examiners do not know either the region or the schools from which the papers they mark are drawn. They have sight only of examination centre numbers and candidate numbers, thus maintaining the anonymity of the system.

The marking process is overseen by a team consisting of a Chief Examiner, a Chief Advising Examiner and a number of Advising Examiners, who monitor and advise the examiners in their work. The Chief Examiner and the advisory team test the draft marking scheme at a two day pre-conference. During the pre-conference, the draft marking scheme is also considered in the light of commentary and correspondence from teachers, professional bodies and other interested parties on the content of the examination papers, before being applied to exemplars of candidates' work.

All examiners attend a training conference prior to commencing the marking. The training process involves the use of exemplars of candidates' work both for standardising purposes and for purposes of training examiners in the consistent application of the marking scheme.

Random sampling is conducted in the early stages of the marking process which serves to assist in the appropriate adjustment, clarification and refinement of the marking scheme as well as an initial quality assurance on the work of examiners. If the grade distribution differs substantially from the established norm, or indeed if an examination in any year proves easier or harder than in former years, adjustments may be made to the marking scheme before the full marking process executes. Once the marking scheme has been finalised, the marking proceeds, subject to rigorous ongoing monitoring of the process.

Ongoing and systematic monitoring is a critical element of the marking process. The monitoring is designed to enable each examiner to apply the agreed marking scheme consistently and accurately to all scripts. A minimum of 5% of the scripts marked by each examiner is monitored by Advising Examiners during the course of the marking. As a consequence of this, examiners who are found to be off-standard are required to remark all scripts that had been marked to that point. This may result in grade changes. Advising Examiners are also available to the examiners for consultation and advice throughout the marking period.

The marking schemes in each subject are made available annually. In the case of Leaving Certificate subjects these are published shortly after the issue of the examination results and in advance of the viewing of their scripts by candidates. The marking schemes are issued to all schools and are available to download from the SEC's website.

A formal appeals process is provided by the State Examinations Commission. It is open to every candidate to appeal the result awarded in any particular subject. The appeals system involves a sophisticated combination of measures. Leaving Certificate candidates are provided with the option of viewing the marked scripts and are also provided with the facility to comment on the marking through a dedicated form. Appealed scripts are re-marked by different examiner in accordance with the same standard as applied in the initial marking, and the same marking scheme as utilised in the initial marking. Candidates may again view the appealed script after the appeal marking.

Quality assurance measures are in place at each stage of the appeal process to ensure that the marking scheme is applied fairly to the work of each candidate. If a candidate is still dissatisfied with the result after the appeals marking has concluded, he/she has recourse to a review by the Independent Appeals Scrutineers and beyond that to the Ombudsman.

As is evident from this description, the process of arriving at a result in an examination involves the interplay of an examination, a marking scheme, its application by suitably qualified personnel with carefully considered inputs in respect of subject experts along the way to ensure the combination of all parts gives a measure of achievement which is appropriate and consistent with year-on-year standards.

3. Key Statistics

The SEC currently employs just over 150 permanent staff supplemented by 80 temporary staff at peak period to assist in key seasonal functions such as the packing and distribution of examination material and the examination resulting process.

To give an idea of the scale of activities involved in conducting the state examinations, it is worth noting that the 2016 examinations involved the following activities and outcomes:

- Providing examinations to **118,713** candidates across all examination programmes; **60,248** at Junior Certificate, **55,707** at Leaving Certificate, and **2,758** at Leaving Certificate Applied Programme;
- Arranging for **examinations** in **90** curricular and **16** non-curricular examination subjects; Engaging **578 drafters**, setters and translators to develop **506** different test **instruments** – including oral tests, aural recordings, practical briefs, project briefs, portfolio and coursework items as well as the written examination papers;
- Producing 4 million examination papers comprised of almost 47.7 million A4 pages; Arranging for the recording of over **92,000** Leaving Certificate and Leaving Certificate Applied oral tests;
- Engaging **5,123 superintendents** to superintend at ordinary examination centres;
- Providing **20,209 reasonable accommodations** to facilitate **16,764** candidates with individual needs (**14% of the overall cohort**) to access the certificate examinations and establishing **10,685 special examination centres** as a result;
- Engaging **6,848 examiners** to mark the examinations comprised of 4,417* written examiners, 1,154 oral examiners and 1,277 practical examiners;
- Examining over **1.9 million individual test items** including written examination scripts, art and craftwork pieces, project and practical pieces in Leaving Certificate Construction Studies and Engineering and Junior Certificate Metalwork, Materials Technology (Wood) and Technology, oral tests, coursework journals, research reports and portfolios;
- Generating just over 1 million individual grades leading to the award of 118,713 examination results;
- Returning **383,108 marked scripts** to schools for viewing;
- Processing some **13,399 appeals** at Leaving (including LCA) and Junior Certificate.

** includes examiners of the written scripts and the supervisory teams for the Leaving (including NonCurricular languages) and Junior Certificate examinations, along with those for the Leaving Certificate Applied.*