

## Education ministers meet to plan for year 12 as coronavirus crisis affects schools and exams

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As Zac Bonham plays the Devil's Waltz on his trombone, the notes seem to sound extra forlorn.

He'd been practicing to play it as a duet as one of five major year 12 music assessments. That one has now been scrapped.

"That was actually the piece for my music extension that I was looking forward to the most, which is a bit of a bummer," he said.

"It was the one I'd worked on the most too."

Zac's mother Belinda Bonham has been helping her son with his homeschooling and knows just how much work went into the performance.

"It was heartbreaking," she said.

"It hasn't been just that, but they have been preparing for these performances since, in his case, he's been preparing since last year."

Zac is doing music extension at his NSW state school to achieve his dream of being a professional musician.

He doubts the performances of other tunes he's spent countless hours practising on his cherished trombone will end up happening either.

"The rest of my music, one of the pieces I'm supposed to be playing with my school band — I don't think that's going to be able to go ahead."

Added to that is the disappointment of missing the shared milestone of finishing school.

The parties, the formals — the valves that let off pressure in a tough year — all have all been shut off.

"It couldn't have come at a worse time really. Because this is the most important year, really I don't know how I'm going to get through this."

### 'Trust teachers'

Education ministers and department chiefs have been battling with just how to soothe that anxiety while finding a way for students to graduate.

The national Education Council will meet today, and Federal Education Minister Dan Tehan hopes Zac and his 180,000 year 12 peers will have clarity by the end of the day.

"Hang in there. We all understand how difficult this is for you, we all understand how important this year is for you and we want to get you through it. We'll work with you," Mr Tehan said.

Few people know the year 12 testing system as well as Sydney University's Jackie Manuel, and she wants the council to be bold.

Professor Manuel was the chief examiner of year 12 HSC English in NSW and used to be a member of the body that existed before the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA).

"My message to people that are making decisions would be to trust teachers," she said.

"Teachers are best placed to be assessing and reporting on the achievement of these students.

"They know their students better than anybody. They know their students' achievements better than anybody. They are well positioned to be able to assess and report on those achievements without the examination at the end of the year."

That's the approach that's been taken in the UK, where final year exams have been cancelled to be replaced by teacher assessments.

Professor Manuel said she had assessed the benefits and risks and found that pushing ahead with end-of-year exams could have profound consequences on students and teachers.

"I think the time is now to make that decision so that it removes the kind of uncertainty and high levels of stress that students are certainly experiencing and teachers are experiencing," Professor Manuel said.

### **What could happen next?**

Several options have already been floated by the states ahead of the meeting.

They include extending the academic year to have final exams next year, dropping some assessments, and giving principals more flexibility to decide when assessments need to be completed.

Mr Tehan said providing year 12 students with certainty was now "top of our priority listing".

He would like all states to work on an approach that was as unified as possible, he said.

"We've asked for a paper for all the state-based curriculum and assessment authorities to give us a sense as to how assessments, in particular, could pan out this year," he said.

The ministers are expected to issue a communique after today's meeting, outlining as much of that detail as they can agree on.

The [Victorian Government has already announced schools will reopen in that state next week](#). The vast majority of students will study from home, but Premier Daniel Andrews said year 12 students "will receive their VCE or their VCAL certificate". However, exams are likely to be held later than usual, in December.

Students across the country are being warned, though, that in 2020 no plans can be certain.

"How the pandemic plays out over the next six months ultimately will dictate, to a large part, what that looks like," Mr Tehan said.

Professor Manuel said now could be a chance for historic change — moving to assessments over the full school year, rather than end-of-year exams that determined much of a student's university admission rank.

"I think a number of people have called for a rethink of the way we assess and report," she said.

"And we have to remember that the NSW external HSC examination system [has] remained relatively unchanged for more than 100 years. A lot has changed."

At the Bonham household, and right across the country, parents and students will still face a huge amount of uncertainty.

"There's a lot of anxiety," Ms Bonham said

"It's hard enough getting a 17-year-old boy to focus on anything very much.

"The anxiety and the uncertainty about what they do going forward, and how they go about doing it, and when it's going to end, and what allowances might be made are just — they're almost paralysing."