

Statement to the Assembly

ALTERNATIVE AWARDING ARRANGEMENTS FOR SUMMER 2021 EXAMS

Tuesday 2 February 2021

**Peter Weir MLA
Minister of Education**

With your permission Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement to outline to this house the arrangements for awarding CCEA qualifications this summer, in the absence of examinations. I will set out arrangements for GCSE, AS, A level, Occupational Studies and CCEA Entry Level and vocationally related qualifications.

As Members will be aware, it was my intention that exams should go ahead this year if at all possible. I previously announced a range of adaptations to the planned examinations to ease the assessment burden on students and take account of the disruption they have experienced. There is no doubt that examinations are the fairest and most robust method for awarding qualifications. It was therefore my hope and expectation that we would be able to deliver these. However, I had to announce, on 6 January, that it was no longer possible

for exams to proceed as planned, due to the worsening public health situation.

I am very aware that our young people have been impacted by this whole situation, and many are anxious about their future. My priority is therefore to ensure that those who are taking qualifications in 2021 will not be disadvantaged by the COVID-19 outbreak. I hope that the details I will lay out today will help ease some of those anxieties and provide the clarity needed so that students can move forward.

However, there is a careful balance to be struck between facilitating progression and ensuring that learners are fully prepared for the next stage of their lives be that in education, training or employment. Of equal importance

to the awarding of grades, is that we find a way to maximise the remaining time in the school year for learning and teaching and that we support young people to acquire the knowledge of content, skills and understanding they need to advance to their chosen next stage.

It is therefore vital that schools continue, as far as possible, to teach the content essential for progression, and I would encourage every young person to remain engaged in their education, whether this be face to face in the classroom or remote learning, right up to the end of the academic year.

Earlier in the academic year, my officials had instructed CCEA to prepare contingency arrangements that could be deployed should exams have to be cancelled. Since 6

January, my officials have been working closely with CCEA to refine those proposals for alternative awarding arrangements. In doing so they have engaged with the Education and Training Inspectorate, as well as a wide range of stakeholders including school leaders, trade unions, managing authorities, parents and, very importantly, young people.

While I had hoped that we would not be in this situation this year, it should be recognised that we are in a better position than we were last March. We have the experience of last year to draw on and lessons have been learnt.

As you will be aware, I pro-actively commissioned an independent review of the 2020 awarding arrangements which was recently completed by Deloitte and which I

published on 8 January. The lessons set out in this report have been taken into account in finalising arrangements for 2021. These include:

- More weight has been given to the professional judgement of teachers.
- This year there will be no statistical standardisation using an algorithm;
- There will be a direct link between the grade awarded and the actual work completed by the learner;
- There remains alignment with the approaches across the other UK jurisdictions;
- Equity and fairness are at the core of the approach which has been developed ; and
- There will be moderation of centre assessments both within and across centres.

In refining arrangements my officials and CCEA have been working to a set of underlying assumptions including:

- All students, including private candidates, who are in their final year of study and due to progress to the next stage of learning or work, will receive a grade;
- focus will be on the establishment and implementation of robust processes so students can receive a fair and accurate grade to allow them to make the right choices in relation to progression;
- Additional training and support will be provided to teachers, heads of departments and heads of centres to assist them in undertaking the assignment of grades. This will also assist with internal and external quality assurance processes with the aim of having more consistency in approaches across centres; and

- No student should be penalised for being unable to complete any part of a course, including a non-examination assessment, during a period of school closure or a period of self-isolation.

Standards

CCEA will not set a statistical ceiling on grades. Each school and college will determine outcomes for its students based on the evidenced standard at which the student is performing. It is likely, however, that across our system overall grade outcomes in 2021 will be broadly similar to those awarded by Centres in 2020.

How will grades be awarded?

Last year we asked schools and colleges to make a judgement as to the grade they expected their students most likely to have achieved in the examinations had they gone ahead. At that time learners had almost completed their courses of study and were well advanced in their preparation for timetabled exams.

It has to be acknowledged that the cohort this year has experienced significant disruption to their education across two academic years and it would therefore be unreasonable to ask teachers to make a judgement about a learner's grade had examination taken place. Centres will therefore be asked to use a range of evidence to arrive at a judgement of the standard at which each learner is performing in the context of the specification being studied. CCEA will provide guidance, support and

training to help teachers make holistic judgements in order to deliver Centre Determined Grades.

We are asking teachers to use the full breadth of evidence available in the context of the specification in order to arrive at a judgement about what each learner knows, understands and can do.

Due to the different degrees of disruption experienced by individuals and across different schools, it will be important that teachers have the flexibility to draw on a range of evidence to inform their judgment. They will therefore be able to draw on evidence generated that relates to any part of the specification.

To assist teachers in this process, CCEA will also make available to all schools and colleges assessment resources which may be used as part of the broad portfolio of evidence. These resources will be repurposed papers, providing unseen questions and an associated mark scheme.

The use of these resources will be **optional** for schools to support their judgements – they are **not** exams and **should not** be treated as such. The assessment resources can be used alongside a range of other evidence and the emphasis should be on a broad portfolio of evidence and not a single source. If a learner indicates that they want to take an assessment, it is recommended that the school facilitates this request provided that the school feels that the subject content has been covered in

a way that enables the learner to complete all or part of the assessment resource.

While assessments using these resources should not be the sole evidence used to support a judgment, there may be exceptional circumstances where this is the only evidence available. For example, in the case of private candidates. Examination centres should ensure that private candidates can be facilitated to take any necessary assessments to ensure there is sufficient evidence on which to award a grade.

The Process

There will be a five stage process for awarding GCSEs, AS and A levels this year.

In stage 1, training, support and guidance will be provided by CCEA to schools. Guidance will be provided on how to arrive at holistic judgements and evidence that may be used. Schools will develop internal moderations processes and CCEA will provide schools with best practice exemplars. Before moving on to the next stage, the processes schools intend to deploy this year will be reviewed.

CCEA will be issuing guidance to Heads of Centre throughout February, with training commencing during the same period. Schools and colleges have already begun to enrol for this training.

Stage 2 is the provision of assessment resources and the evidence gathering process.

In this period, schools will wish to give further opportunities for candidates to demonstrate what they know, understand and can do. Schools can use evidence of students' performance against the specification, and in order to promote ongoing engagement by candidates in teaching and learning during the coming months, schools can utilise evidence from the current period of remote learning, as well as when candidates return to school. In April, to support the evidence gathering process, CCEA will provide schools with assessment resources digitally for all subjects. This will enable schools to begin the process of gathering evidence, including making use of the assessment resources as necessary.

Stage 3 is the process of determining grades and internal moderation of those grades.

During the month of May schools will complete the process of determining grades and undertaking internal moderation in line with the plan set out at stage 1 and the guidance and training provided by CCEA.

There is no prescribed weighting for any piece of evidence. Rather, the Centre Determined Grade is the holistic judgement of the standard at which the candidate is performing in the context of the specification that has been studied.

Centre determined grades must be submitted to CCEA towards the end of May. These are not candidates' final

grades and centres will be subject to an external quality review.

Stage 4 is the external review of evidence

We want young people, parents, universities and employers to have confidence that grades awarded by different schools and colleges are of the right and consistent standard.

In order to ensure fairness and consistency across centres there will be a process undertaken by CCEA to review the process used by centres to determine grades. Throughout June 2021, CCEA will carry out an external quality assurance process looking at the grades submitted by all schools and colleges and reviewing samples of candidates' work to make sure the grades submitted accurately reflect the outcomes provided.

Work from every school and college across Northern Ireland will be reviewed. Where there are any concerns that the evidence does not support the grades submitted, CCEA will undertake a more extensive review of the centre's evidence, engage in professional dialogue with the centre, and in some cases may require the centre to re-run their grading process.

Stage 5 is the distribution of grades and post-award review

The date for results to issue remains as I previously announced, 24th August for AS and A levels, and 27 August for GCSEs. However, it will be important that results are issued to students in Northern Ireland on the same dates as candidates in other jurisdictions that share the GCSE and A level brand, especially in relation

to A level results that are needed for university admissions. Ofqual has been consulting on bringing forward the date for issuing results to early July. We have been clear with colleagues in the Department for Education in England that this will not suit Northern Ireland schools, and have urged them to take this into account. CCEA is working closely with awarding organisations and qualifications regulators in England and Wales to agree the date and, as soon as it is agreed, will let centres and students know.

Finally, there will also be a post-award review service to enable any candidate dissatisfied with their grade to appeal the outcome. .

Candidates will have a right of appeal to their school or college around the centre determined grade.

Challenges relating to the processes and whether they were followed or implemented correctly or consistently and in line with guidance will be processed by CCEA.

CCEA will be working with other examination boards over the coming months to make sure that a similar appeals process is put in place across all examination boards and further details will be provided in due course.

However, I can confirm that I will put in place the same indemnity arrangements as last year to protect schools should they face legal challenges in relation to their role in the alternative awarding process.

Who will be awarded grades?

All those planning to complete and cash in their qualifications this summer will be awarded a grade. This includes those completing their A level and GCSE qualifications (mainly Year 12 and year 14 learners and those in Further Education and training), as well as those taking AS qualifications. Grades will not be awarded for GCSE units or modules.

I have decided that those in Years 11 and below who may have been planning to cash-in GCSE qualifications this summer may not be entered or awarded GCSE qualifications in 2021. There are two exceptions to this where awarding the grade early may facilitate access to extended learning in the same area:

- Those taking GCSE Maths who plan to progress to GCSE Further Maths in Year 12 will be awarded grades; and,

- Grades will also be awarded to GCSE Irish students who may progress to GCSE Gaelige or require it for progression to other courses delivered in Irish. This decision is in line with the statutory duty to encourage and facilitate Irish Medium education.

Year 11 and Year 13 – implications for 2022 awarding

Candidates in Year 11 and Year 13 will wish to have more information on the arrangements for qualifications in 2022. CCEA has been asked to look specifically at the arrangements for Years 11 and 13, and the implications for awarding in 2022

As I mentioned earlier, GCSE units or modules will not be awarded grades this summer. Work is still ongoing to consider if AS grades might be carried forward to the A

level awards in 2022. I am not in a position to confirm arrangements today as this is a very complex matter. However, CCEA is continuing to explore all options and I hope to be able to provide clarity by the end of March or as soon as possible thereafter concerning the arrangements for awarding GCSEs and A levels in 2022. I am conscious that these learners have also experienced significant disruption this year so I will be looking to take steps to reduce the assessment burden in 2022, similar to the adaptations I had announced for 2021 exams.

Occupational Studies, CCEA Entry Level and CCEA Vocationally Related qualifications

Alongside the qualifications that I have already mentioned, CCEA offers 6 pathways through

Occupational Studies Levels 1 and 2, 14 Entry level qualifications and 26 vocationally related qualifications. These qualifications have no examinations and are not affected by the cancellation of the GCSE and GCE summer examinations timetable. However, the award is based on internal written assessments and practical assessments which are subject to an external moderation process. Whilst some public health adaptations were put in place already, with the ongoing disruption, completing the full quota of practical components and other formal internal assessments for these qualifications will be challenging.

Therefore, for CCEA's Occupational Studies, Entry Level and Vocationally Related qualifications there will be no formal assessment in 2021. Instead, teachers will be

asked to use their professional judgement and the evidence available to them in order to reach a Centre Determined Grade. A moderation process, similar to that for GCSEs, will also be incorporated. I have listened to feedback from teachers and Further Education colleagues and I can provide assurances that CCEA will provide detailed guidance and support to help teachers make these judgements.

I recognise that some learners may be working towards other Entry Level or Vocational qualifications provided by an Awarding Organisation other than CCEA. These qualifications fall under the remit of the Department for the Economy.

The Minister for the Economy recently announced the cancellation of all external vocational exams for the remainder of this year, including Essential Skills. Adaptations to assessments will also be required, where possible, for the wide range of vocational qualifications relating to occupational competence, such as Licence to practice. I understand that the Minister has instructed CCEA Regulation to ensure that awarding organisations put in place suitable alternative awarding arrangements that are reflective of this year's particular circumstances and which will ensure that learners receive fair and timely results.

I understand that Minister Dodds expects clarity on the alternative arrangements for the majority of vocational qualifications to be provided by awarding organisations

as early as possible in March 2021. In relation to Essential Skills and other Northern Ireland only qualifications, the Minister expects clarity on the alternative arrangements to be available by the end of February 2021.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I thank the House for the opportunity to address you on these importance issues.

Fairness to pupils is my priority, and will continue to be at the forefront of every decision I take.

In these exceptional times, I have taken exceptional and unprecedented steps to ensure our young people are supported to progress in education, training or employment.

Again, I commend all of our school leaders and teachers for their efforts in these difficult times.