

**FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER**



**To: All School Principals of Post-Primary Schools and Special Schools with 14-19 provision**

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Dear Principal

## **DELIVERY OF GCSE, AS AND A LEVEL QUALIFICATIONS IN 2020/21**

I have informed CCEA of my decisions in relation to a range of changes to CCEA GCSE, AS and A level qualifications that are due to be awarded in the 2020/21 academic year. CCEA will now work with centres to provide more information at centre level as quickly as possible. I know school leaders and teachers, parents and young people have been anxious for clarity on these changes and that it has been a difficult and challenging period. However, you will appreciate the need to ensure that we implement changes that make things better for young people and their teachers.

### **Public Examinations**

My first key message is to assure you that it is my priority to ensure that public examinations go ahead, if at all possible. I believe that public examinations in these key qualifications are the most valid and reliable measure of educational outcomes available. I also feel it is extremely important that following the cancellation of exams last summer, young people are given the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills through the examination process. It is clear that the requirement to sit public examinations can provide a source of focus, motivation and engagement for many of our young people.

### **Adaptations to Qualifications**

I have agreed the majority of adaptations to GCSEs, AS and A Level qualifications which have been proposed by CCEA Council, specifically:

- Public Health adaptations as set out in the consultation document should be implemented;
- Advice on the order in which units should be delivered (for years 11,13 and 14) to be set out in addendums for each qualification that will also include additional changes (where appropriate) pertaining to each qualifications for the 2020/21 academic year;
- CCEA to take forward work to support schools to conduct controlled assessments;
- A' level to be awarded on basis of A2, but with option for candidates to sit both AS and A2 and have award based on higher of A2 or combined outcome;

- 2020 AS grades should not contribute to the overall A level grade and should not be used as a "limiting" grade for A 'level awarding
- GCSE candidates to be permitted to omit assessment of one unit as specified by CCEA and set out in consultation document;
- students will be assessed in all written units of the qualification in GCSE English Language and GCSE Mathematics, but the speaking and listening unit of GCSE English language will not be assessed
- For modern languages (Irish, French, German and Spanish) and Gaeilge, schools should be required to provide an endorsement for the speaking element of these qualifications in place of a formal assessment;
- GCSE candidates to have option of sitting all units and having grade based on higher of the outcome of the specified unit or all units but there will be no statistical calculation for units for which candidates were entered but were unable to sit in 2020;
- Adjustments to assessments must not exceed total of 40% of overall assessment.
- Schools can enter current Year 11 pupils for modular GCSEs assessments in 2020/21 but they will not be able to avail of an omitted component.
- CCEA has also been asked to continue to explore optionality in papers as a means of reducing the burden of assessment.

The suite of adaptations to GCSE, AS and A Level qualifications, which I have agreed, are far reaching and provide a significant reduction in the burden of assessment for young people whilst still allowing as much opportunity as possible to cover the content of the specifications. The changes reflect appropriately the far reaching consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. They are designed to take account not only of lost learning during the period from March to June 2020 but also to reflect the ongoing disruption that we are currently experiencing during the 2020/21 academic year.

I would emphasise to you as school leaders that Northern Ireland has gone significantly further than other jurisdictions to reduce the assessment burden for young people and to recognise the ongoing disruption and difficulties that we face, whilst still ensuring qualifications have validity, rigour and portability, particularly for progression to university and other tertiary education providers. CCEA's changes mean young people in Year 14 will not have to take AS examinations which account for forty per cent of the A Level qualification and in the majority of GCSE qualifications a specified module will be omitted from assessment. In the small number of qualifications where omission of a unit would remove more than forty percent of the assessment requirements, I have asked CCEA to explore additional amendments in order to relieve burden.

The changes are designed to ensure young people are supported well and their well-being prioritised, including by providing them with the knowledge and skills required for progression.

Changes to CCEA Entry Level, Vocationally Related and Occupational Studies qualifications will be confirmed in the near future.

### **GCSE English and Maths**

I know some school leaders and teachers had significant concerns regarding the CCEA consultation proposals to retain all assessments in GCSE English and Maths and I want to assure you I have listened carefully to the views of stakeholders. Having reflected fully on the issues around these qualifications, I have decided to retain all written assessments in

both GCSE English and Maths in the current context, but the speaking and listening assessment for GCSE English will be omitted and replaced with an endorsement from the school – CCEA will provide further information on this in due course.

In taking this difficult decision, I have had to balance the merits of reducing the assessment burden, with a need to protect the interests of our young people going forward. Above all, there are significant risks around the comparability and portability of these key qualifications, particularly how they would be considered for university entry in 2023, should significant elements of the qualification be omitted. England and Wales have made limited or no adaptations to these qualifications. As you know GCSE English and Mathematics are key ‘passport qualifications’, which are required for a number of higher level qualifications, such as nursing and teaching qualifications. The risk that young people from Northern Ireland would be disadvantaged for entry to university in the future is simply too great.

I am also concerned that to reduce examination assessment in these two key qualifications to one high stakes exam could conversely increase pressure on young people. Under the current arrangements, young people have the opportunity to sit some or all units in English and Maths in January 2021, and if necessary repeat them in the summer series. Again this has the potential to ease the assessment process for the young people.

### **GCSE Modern Languages and Gaelge**

I have listened to the strong arguments for making some sort of adaptation in modern languages (Irish, French, German and Spanish) and GCSE Gaelge and have decided that the speaking element of these qualifications may be omitted and replaced with an endorsement from the school. CCEA will provide further information on this.

### **AS Grades**

Some stakeholders have expressed the view that the AS Grades awarded in Summer 2020 should form part of the A Level grades awarded in 2021. Views have been mixed on this issue and others are not in favour of this approach. I have again considered this proposal extremely carefully. CCEA considered a range of approaches in which the AS grades awarded this year could be recognised as part of the A Level awarding process. Whilst, such an approach would allow the A Level grade to take explicit account of candidates’ learning in Year 13, it is extremely difficult to implement in an equitable or consistent manner. It would also represent a significant divergence in approach from that of other jurisdictions, which again may have far reaching implications for the portability and comparability of our qualifications. I have therefore decided that the 2020 AS grades should not form part of the awarding of A’level grades in 2021.

### **Teaching Order**

I have agreed that CCEA will provide a set order of teaching for GCSE and A Level units for Years 11, 13 and 14. Whilst I would not normally wish to introduce this level of prescription, I know that you will understand that in the event of further significant disruption due to the wider public health context it is important that students have covered broadly similar content. I would remind schools that it will be important that they retain a portfolio of evidence of pupils’ progression throughout the year in case this is needed at some stage for contingency arrangements.

## **Contingency Arrangements**

I am conscious that the public health situation is extremely fluid and that there may be further significant disruption as the year progresses. While it is sensible to plan on the basis of the adaptations published today, it is also critical to ensure that comprehensive contingency plans are in place. I have, therefore, commissioned CCEA to consider contingency arrangements to deal with a range of potential public health scenarios.

I know you will appreciate that we are balancing the difficult task of trying to provide a degree of certainty and focus for young people and their teachers through the decisions I have announced, whilst recognising that there is a need to be flexible and respond dynamically to changing circumstances. These initial arrangements provide a strong framework but may need to evolve further as the academic year continues, particularly should the level of ongoing disruption significantly increase or in light of decisions taken by the Executive to protect public health. Such approaches might include widening question choice and increasing the use of optional questions within exam papers, particularly at A Level. While there are legitimate reservations about this approach on educational and technical grounds, difficult policy choices may have to be made in the extraordinary circumstances in which the education system is operating. I know that CCEA will be in contact with schools in the coming weeks to further discuss contingency arrangements. It is essential we have plans in place to enable us to respond quickly to the evolving situation should the need arise.

I have also tasked my officials to work with the Education Authority, CCMS and CCEA to consider the logistical arrangements for examinations in the current public health context and more information will be provided on this in due course.

I am determined to do everything possible to ensure that no student is prevented from fulfilling their potential by the pandemic. As you know, my Department and its support bodies have provided a range of support and interventions in response to the COVID-19, including the Engage Programme, the provision of digital devices and the Wellbeing in Schools initiative. I would reassure you that above all students due to complete their qualifications in the next academic year will be enabled to progress successfully to the next stage of education or employment

I have enclosed a letter for parents and students, which I would be grateful if you could send to all of your students in Years 12-14 and their families. I hope this will help explain the changes I have decided and the way forward. Copies of the letter and answers to frequently asked questions will also be available on the Department's website.

You should also note that in addition to changes to specific examinations, the start of the summer exam series will be delayed by one week to provide more time for preparation. CCEA exams will start no earlier than 12 May 2021 and will be completed by 30 June, with results issuing towards the end of August. CCEA will publish an updated timetable in the coming weeks.

I know you are all engaged in the difficult and critical task of operating our schools safely. The professionalism and expertise of school leaders and staff throughout schools in Northern Ireland has meant that children are again benefiting from full-time education.

I thank you for your commitment, perseverance and hard work.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Peter Weir". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'P' and a distinct 'W'.

**PETER WEIR MLA  
MINISTER OF EDUCATION**