

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER



Department of
Education

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8 January 2021

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

Dear Principal,

GCSE, AS AND A LEVEL QUALIFICATIONS IN 2021

As you are aware, it has been my priority to ensure that public examinations go ahead, if at all possible this year. However, given the very serious public health situation the Executive took the decision to move schools to remote learning for a number of weeks. Given this extended period of online learning, coupled with significant disruption already experienced by many learners in the last term, it became evident that it would not be possible to continue with examinations as originally planned. I therefore announced on Wednesday 6 January 2021 that all CCEA GCSE, AS and A level exams would be cancelled this academic year.

Alternative Awarding Arrangements

I want to assure you in the first instance that we are working to put in place, as quickly as possible, a robust alternative process to ensure that learners can be awarded grades for their qualifications that will enable them to progress to the next stage of their education training or employment in the autumn. CCEA had begun work on such a process as part of contingency planning and I have now asked for these plans to be refined and detailed advice brought forward as a matter of urgency.

While we have yet to agree the details of a process, I can confirm that it my intention that it would be based on the professional judgement of teachers, with moderation but no algorithm. We are aiming to have a more uniform approach across schools, based on best practice approaches used for the 2020 awarding. Detailed guidance, support and training for teachers will be provided by CCEA. I hope to be in a position to provide more detail on the framework for this process by the end of January.

I am conscious that learners in years 11 and 13 may have planned to take module examinations this year as part of working towards qualifications to be awarded next year. In developing alternative awarding arrangements for 2021, careful consideration will be given to arrangements for these students and the implications for awarding in 2022. Further information will be provided in due course.

It will be important, however, that with the cancellation of exams schools make full use of the remainder of this academic year to try, as far as is possible, to cover the full specification for all qualifications. You should continue to deliver the programmes of study as originally planned in the context of preparing pupils for examinations with reduced assessment requirements. The adaptations I announced last term related to the omission of units of assessment, not the removal of those modules from the specification. It remains the position that schools should aim to cover the full specification as far as is possible. Learners need to be adequately prepared for the transition to the next stage of their education and need to have covered sufficient content in relevant qualifications to be able to access qualifications at a higher level. I will also be writing to parents and learners to emphasise the need to continue to engage in remote learning and complete their programmes of learning.

Controlled Assessments

I can confirm that in cancelling exams for these qualifications I am cancelling all elements of assessment that were due to be completed, including planned controlled assessments. However, controlled assessments already completed are likely to be an important part of the evidence base for teacher professional judgements. Likewise, the outcomes of the GCSE unit exams taken by some learners in November 2020 will be an important part of the evidence for centres grading those qualifications, and CCEA will issue the results of those exams to schools as originally planned.

Occupational Studies

I have also decided that formal assessments for CCEA's Occupational Studies should be cancelled and replaced with alternative arrangements similar to those deployed in 2020. CCEA has been commissioned to bring forward advice on alternative arrangements for Occupational Studies qualifications, as well as advice on the way forward for CCEA's Entry Level and Vocationally Related qualifications. More information on these will be made available in the coming weeks.

Covid Tariff

In December 2020, as part of the package of measures to ensure that exams could go ahead as fairly as possible, I announced that I wanted to explore the possibility of a Covid tariff or allowance to be applied to exam results of learners whose education had been significantly disrupted due to the pandemic. With the cancellation of exams this measure is no longer needed and I have therefore instructed that the work on this should now cease.

Non-CCEA Qualifications

As we operate an open market for qualifications many of our young people are studying for qualifications provided by other examination boards which fall outside my control. WJEC had announced alternative assessment arrangements in December, but I understand that as those arrangements were predicated on learners being in school and the Welsh government is now reviewing these arrangements in light of recent developments. I understand that clarification on the approach to be taken for WJEC qualifications should be available by the end of the month.

Ofqual is working with exam boards in England to put in place alternative awarding arrangements there and plan to issue a consultation soon, but details of the arrangements to be deployed may not be finalised until mid-February. For schools with pupils working towards non-CCEA qualifications, you should contact the relevant awarding organisation for details of arrangements to be put in place for their suite of qualifications.

Non-CCEA Vocational Qualifications

Whilst vocational qualifications (VQs) fall within the remit of the Minister for the Economy, I know that some school learners will be undertaking externally examined vocational qualifications such as BTECs alongside GCSEs and A Levels. Further flexibilities have been put in place for external January VQ exams to enable learning centres, such as schools, to decide whether or not it is appropriate for the exams to take place or not, taking into consideration public health advice and the interests of pupils and staff.

Alternative arrangements will be put in place by relevant awarding organisations where it is not possible for learners to sit their exams in January to ensure that no learner is disadvantaged. Whether they sit an exam or not, it is very important that pupils continue to engage fully with their course of study and to undertake any learning or assignments as directed by their school.

Schools will therefore be permitted to facilitate these exams in January if they wish to do so. Operational queries should be directed to the relevant awarding organisation in the first instance.

Private Candidates

CCEA has been commissioned to bring forward proposals to ensure that arrangements can be made to award grades to all private candidates. Further information on these arrangements will be provided in due course.

Finally, I want to thank you for your continued hard work in responding to rapidly changing circumstances, and in particular for your dedication to the young people in your care throughout these challenging times.

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