

2023 NCEA and New Zealand Scholarship End of Year Examination Round

Date:	29 November 2023	NZQA Priority:	Medium
Security Level:	In Confidence	Report No.	OC00513

Action Sought	Deadline
Minister of Education	It is recommended you: a. note the contents of the annual end of year examination round report.

Enclosure/Appendix: Yes/No

Round Robin: Yes/No

Contact for Telephone Discussion (if required)

Name	Position	Telephone	Cellphone	1 st Contact
Jann Marshall	Deputy Chief Executive, Assessment	64 4 463 3389	[REDACTED]	√

The following departments/agencies have seen this report:

Ministry of Education Tertiary Education Commission Other (specify)

Minister's Office to Complete:

Noted Seen Approved
 Needs change Withdrawn Overtaken by Events
 See Minister's comments Declined

Referred to:

Comments:

2023 NCEA and New Zealand Scholarship End of Year Examination Round

Executive Summary

1. The NCEA and New Zealand Scholarship (NZ Scholarship) End of Year examination round ran between Monday 6 November and Thursday 30 November 2023.
2. NZQA's preparations this year included planning for the possibility of disruption to examinations nationally, regionally, or school-by-school, due to natural events such as floods, cyclones, earthquakes, etc.
3. The key statistics reflecting the scope of examinations planning included:
 - a. approximately 145,000 students entered for NCEA and NZ Scholarship examinations;
 - b. 138 examination sessions for NCEA and NZ Scholarship;
 - c. around 1.7 million examination booklets printed;
 - d. 469 examination centres established, including 74 in kura, seven in the Cook Islands, one on Niue, three in prisons, two Special Centres and three in Regional Health Schools;
 - e. around 45,000 students entered for NCEA Level 1 English, the largest session; and
 - f. around 6,000 examination supervisors and 1,650 contracted markers.
4. The 2023 NCEA results will be released on Wednesday 17 January 2024 and 2023 NZ Scholarship results will be released on Thursday 8 February 2024. You will be provided with a briefing about Provisional 2023 NCEA and University Entrance attainment statistics prior to results release.
5. Schools and students will be advised of the NCEA and NZ Scholarships results release dates in early December once examinations have finished.
6. We are commissioning an independent external review to determine the root causes that led to the performance issues with our online platform.

Recommended Action

It is recommended you:

- a. **note** the contents of the annual end of year examination round report.



Dr Grant Klinkum
Chief Executive
29 November 2023

Hon Erica Stanford
Minister of Education
...../...../.....

2023 NCEA and New Zealand Scholarship End of Year Examination Round

Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of this briefing is to update you on 2023 End of Year examination round which ran from Monday 6 November to Thursday 30 November 2023, and to advise you of the 2023 NCEA and NZ Scholarship results release dates. It also provides you with a summary of the performance issues we experienced with our online platform and actions we have taken in response.

Background

Key statistics for examinations planning

2. The key statistics reflecting the scope of examinations planning include:
 - a. approximately 145,000 students entered for NCEA and NZ Scholarship examinations;
 - b. 138 examination sessions for NCEA and NZ Scholarship;
 - c. around 1.7 million examination booklets printed;
 - d. 469 examination centres established, including 74 in kura, seven in the Cook Islands, one on Niue, three in prisons, two Special Centres and three in Regional Health Schools;
 - e. around 45,000 students entered for NCEA Level 1 English, the largest session; and
 - f. around 6,000 examination staff and 1,650 markers contracted.

Stages of the examination round

3. The following table provides a timeline for the critical stages of the examination round.

Timeline for 2023 Examination Round

Stage	Timing	Additional Information
1. Examination development	March 2022 – October 2023	At the same time, development is also underway for the following year's examinations.
2. Printing and Personalisation of papers	August – October 2023	Approximately 1.7 million examination booklets.
3. Distribution to examination centres	From October 2023	Approximately 5,500 boxes of examination materials.
4. Students sitting examinations	6 November - 30 November 2023	
5. Marking	Completed before Christmas	
6. Results release	NCEA: 17 January 2024 NZ Scholarship: 8 February 2024	A further briefing will be provided by 15 January 2024 on the provisional 2023 NCEA attainment statistics. Results are released online for approximately

Stage	Timing	Additional Information
		165,000 year 11-13 students ¹ .
7. Completed examinations returned to students	NCEA: 23 January 2024 NZ Scholarship: 9 February 2024	Students will be able to access their marked digital or scanned examinations online.
8. Reviews and reconsiderations process ²	NCEA: from late January to mid-February. NZ Scholarship: from early February to early March	
9. Provisional NCEA attainment statistics provided to schools	From 24 January.	

4. Details of the exam preparations, including digital external assessments follow.

Quality Assurance

5. We have comprehensive quality assurance processes in place across all stages of examination development, marking, and results processing. These ensure fair, valid, and reliable assessment for students. They are also designed to mitigate the risk of human error during the development of examinations.

Management of the examination round

6. Our control environment is supported by established processes including the following:
- Daily management, governance, and oversight to monitor all elements of the examination cycle.
 - An organisation-wide change freeze on all IT systems changes that could impact the examination cycle from late October until late January.
 - Network for Learning working with network providers to request a pause or reduction to routine maintenance on the fibre infrastructure outside the school gate during the examination period. This is to limit the risk of outages that might impact a school's ability to undertake digital examinations.
 - Strict procedures and training systems for NZQA's short term contracted workforce to cover the examination period.
 - Monitoring of vendor performance at all stages.

Special Assessment Conditions (SAC)

7. As of 28 November 2023, we received more than 20,000 applications for Special Assessment Conditions: 1,600 more than for the whole of 2022.
8. Schools are reporting pressure on their physical resources, particularly as a result of the increase in numbers requiring separate accommodation, either for isolation from the main exam rooms or small group accommodation. The increased uptake of digital examinations and further implementation of Universal Design for Learning principles (which address accessibility issues) into the design of examinations will somewhat alleviate these issues in the future.

Digital external assessments

9. In 2023, approximately two thirds of the NCEA subjects were examined digitally. This includes NCEA Level 1 pilot subjects. The subjects not available digitally require use of

¹ These are students who are working towards an NCEA in 2023, of whom approximately 145,000 are entered into one or more end of year examinations.

² Review – all sections of examination booklets are checked to ensure they are marked and results correctly recorded and transferred. Reconsideration involves re-marking the assessment.

diagrams, pictures, formulae, or symbols. We are investigating how to digitise these subjects in the future.

10. Handwritten NCEA examination responses are scanned and marked online, except for Accounting and Music.
11. In 2023, NZQA is running a pilot of scanning and online marking of NZ Scholarship student responses for Art History, Chemistry, Geography, Earth and Space Science, Economics, and Media Studies. The remainder of the handwritten NZ Scholarship examinations is marked physically.
12. NZ Scholarship Media Studies has been delivered digitally and on paper for the last three years.
13. NZ Scholarship Health and Physical Education, assessed through a report produced by the student in school, is uploaded through NZQA's student submission portal for marking online.
14. In 2023, Te Ao Haka was offered at NZ Scholarship level for the first time. Assessment is by portfolio submission.
15. All marked responses for NCEA subjects, including Accounting and Music, and NZ Scholarship, will be returned to students digitally.

Digital external assessment preparedness

16. More than 76,000 students from around 400 schools entered to sit at least one of the 72 subjects being offered digitally across Levels 1, 2 and 3. This number for which we will have results for, is expected to reduce, just as it does for paper-based examinations every year, as not all schools and students who enter will participate.
17. A personalised paper backup option was available to students entered for a digital external assessment. Students can choose at any time before or during the examination to revert to their personalised paper, if they change their mind or are unable to complete the examination digitally for other reasons, such as device failure.
18. NZQA had a comprehensive change management process in place to support students and schools to get ready for digital external assessments. Students had access to practice activities and to past examinations. Students had also been advised through various channels to get their student logon and test it before the digital examinations. This logon will also enable them to see their marked digital responses and their results through the NZ Record of Achievement.
19. Support for schools included training for staff in staging digital examinations, through both well-attended webinars and face-to-face training, and written guidance on preparing examination rooms. Support also included training for staff in checking their internet capability and devices (both school and student owned) to ensure these are compliant.
20. NZQA contracted markers have been trained in the use of the Online Marking Tool.
21. During the examination period, NZQA provided help desk facilities to support schools to manage the digital examinations process. Network for Learning monitors the Managed Network Services for schools offering digital external assessment and supports school IT staff for in-school connectivity issues, as needed.

Digital platform performance

22. Extensive testing by our technology vendor prior to the examination round gave NZQA confidence that the digital exam platform could support more than 30,000 students.
23. Following capacity issues experienced with literacy, numeracy and pāngarau assessments on 2 and 3 November, NZQA and its vendor put in place additional steps to increase the platform's capacity in preparation for the online examinations occurring in the morning of 10 November. A little more than 20,000 students were expected to log

in to those online exams, including for the largest ever exam session, NCEA Level 1 English.

24. The system began to slow after more than 18,000 students had logged in, and a decision was made to stop further logins to Level 1 English to guarantee the experience of these students. Students sitting other exams could log in through a URL provided by their Exam Centre Manager.
25. With another technical adjustment to address a root cause that had been identified as placing an unexpected load into the system, the next largest session, Level 2 English on 15 November, ran without issue as have the other online sessions.
26. NZQA has well developed systems (see business continuity planning section below) to manage issues where students have been disadvantaged.
27. We have commenced an internal review and are commissioning an external independent review into root causes that led to the performance issues. You will be briefed on the outcome of those reviews.
28. With the capacity issue of our digital platform encountered this year, NZQA is mindful that a significant step up in capacity will be needed next year (with new 'digital first' standards across NCEA Level 1).

Business continuity planning for external examinations

29. Preparations this year included planning in the event of disruption/s to examinations nationally, regionally, or school-by-school, due to natural events or a pandemic outbreak. Our work ensures that planning is in place for a wide range of scenarios.
30. In the event of a large-scale disruption, we do not reschedule NCEA examinations due to the far-reaching consequences that rescheduling would have across the system. NZQA's derived grade at scale process is used to manage the impact on students. In exceptional circumstances, NZQA may reschedule a NZ Scholarship examination. NZ Scholarship and the derived grade process cannot be used to provide a grade for NZ Scholarship students (as NZ Scholarship is a competitive process).
31. Each year, schools must submit standard-specific, quality-assured evidence of a student's learning for each externally assessed achievement standard entry, known as derived grades. The derived grade sits as a robust alternative grade if the student is prevented from sitting an examination or their performance is impaired. Our expectation is that students attend the examinations where possible and will then be awarded the best of either grade. We may apply a derived grade at scale where a group of candidates is significantly disadvantaged by unexpected circumstances beyond their control.
32. We have reviewed the quality assurance process for derived grades. Schools have been reminded of NZQA's quality assurance requirements for derived grades. The derived grade audit process has been refreshed, so that we can be confident that evidence gathered by a school for derived grades is valid and sufficient.

Results release

33. Marking is well underway, with 2023 NCEA results (including the results for the second literacy/numeracy | te reo matatini/te pāngarau co-requisite assessment event) release scheduled for 17 January 2024. NZ Scholarship results are due for release on 8 February.
34. You will be provided with a briefing by 15 January 2024 about Provisional 2023 NCEA and University Entrance attainment statistics prior to results release.

Risks

35. While the risk from COVID-19 is low, there are always risks of disruption due to natural events or a pandemic outbreak. For example, the measles outbreak this year was

closely monitored. These are mitigated through the application of the derived grade at scale process.

36. NZQA has robust mitigations in place to ensure potential disruption is minimised and impacts managed.

