

30 July 2025



Tēnā koe [REDACTED]

Official Information Act Request

Thank you for your request of 2 July 2025 for the following information:

The proactively released document, Aide-Memoire: Preparations for 2024 End of Year Examinations, dated 22 October 2024 refers to an IQANZ assessment of NZQA's readiness to deliver end-of-year exams. The aide-memoire says "Throughout the process the reviewer has provided regular updates and highlighted any emerging risks or issues."

Can I please have a copy of those updates and a copy of all reports IQANZ completed for NZQA. I expect this would include initial assessments of NZQA's readiness. Could I please also have a copy of any report completed by IQANZ or by NZQA assessing NZQA's actual delivery of the 2024 end-of-year exams.

Your request has been considered under the Official Information Act 1982 (OIA).

I attach copies of the following information covered by your request.

- NZQA Technical Readiness Review Sept 2024
- NZQA 2024 EOY Assessment Readiness Review (IQANZ)
- NZQA EOY Assessment Review Dec24
- Email: NZQA September Assessment Technical Readiness Review
- Email: Bullet Points Early Observations for the Board

All other updates provided by IQANZ were verbal and no minutes were recorded.

Under section 9(2)(a) of the OIA, the names and contact details of IQANZ and RM staff have been withheld to protect privacy.

Some information has also been withheld in *NZQA Technical Readiness Review Sept 2024* and *NZQA EOY Assessment Review Dec24* under:

- section 9(2)(b)(ii) of the OIA where making this information available would likely unreasonably prejudice the commercial position of the person who supplied or who is the subject of the information under section; and
- section 9(2)(ba)(i) of the OIA to protect information which is subject to an obligation of confidence, where the making available of the information would be likely to prejudice the supply of similar information, or information from the same source, and it is in the public interest that such information should continue to be supplied.

NZQA has concluded that the need to withhold information under section 9(2)(b)(ii) or section 9(2)(ba)(i) in relation to our commercial arrangements with RM Assessor is not outweighed by the public interest in its release.

Some information has also been withheld in *Email: Bullet Points Early Observations for the Board* under:

- Section 9(2)(g)(i) of the OIA to maintain the effective conduct of public affairs through the free and frank expression of opinions by or between or to Ministers of the Crown or members of an organisation or officers and employees of any public service agency or organisation in the course of their duty.

NZQA has concluded that the need to withhold information under section 9(2)(ba)(i) and 9(2)(g)(i) in relation to the IQA is not outweighed by the public interest.

Our response to your request may be published on our website after five working days. Your name and contact details will be removed before publication.

If you require further assistance or believe we have misinterpreted your request, please contact Elizabeth Templeton in the Office of the Chief Executive, email elizabeth.templeton@nzqa.govt.nz or telephone (04) 463 3339.

You have the right to seek an investigation or review by the Ombudsman of this decision under section 28(3) of the Official Information Act 1982. Details of how to make a complaint can be found at www.ombudsman.parliament.nz. You can also telephone 0800 802 502 or write to the Ombudsman at PO Box 10152, Wellington, 6143.

Nāku nā



Dr Grant Klinkum
Pouwhakahaere/Chief Executive

Encl

- NZQA Technical Readiness Review Sept 2024
- NZQA 2024 EOY Assessment Readiness Review (IQANZ)
- NZQA EOY Assessment Review Dec24
- Email: NZQA September Assessment Technical Readiness Review
- Email: Bullet Points Early Observations for the Board

Hannah Colling

From: Sheryl Ching
Sent: Tuesday, 8 July 2025 8:54 AM
To: Hannah Colling
Subject: Fw: Bullet Points/Early Observations for the Board

From: 9(2)(a)
Sent: Tuesday, October 15, 2024 5:01 PM
To: Sheryl Ching <Sheryl.Ching@nzqa.govt.nz>
Subject: RE: Bullet Points/Early Observations for the Board

Hi Sheryl,

Here is a summary of my key findings and recommendations in advance of the review memo.

9(2)(g)(i)
There needs to be a stronger focus on tracking and oversight of preparation activities.

Outside of the obvious issues that everyone is aware of, I'm aware of people's well-being. There are some experienced people who are taking even more than usual on through this assessment event due to several key people leaving. The team is very passionate and dedicated to delivering a good assessment experience but I can see people are under more pressure than I have seen in other EoY assessment events. There are also some very new people who are getting their first exposure to the EoY assessment pressure and will need support.

The other item to call out is the delays in the digitisation of exam content. There is a risk around quality when this process is being rushed and there is less time to do quality testing on the content in the system before exams start.

Key points are outlined below.

The HCM issues are having an impact on readiness but are being managed appropriately to minimise impacts. You are well aware of this but I consider the controls and escalations that have been put in place are appropriate. Teams in P&C and the contact centre have been bolstered with additional personnel, sourced internally and externally, to support managing this issue.

My only recommendation around this observation is that NZQA is careful to ensure that supporting the management of this issue doesn't put additional pressure on other areas of EoY assessment preparation. For example, if additional personnel for the contact centre are sourced from business units that need to complete other EoY Assessment preparation or support functions.

The technical solutions are on track to be ready for the EoY Assessments. Considerable risk has been mitigated by deferring the deployment of the latest releases of Assessment Master and Assessor. There is a final release to be deployed to eQA, which is on track to be deployed before the change freeze. Performance testing results for Assessment Master are still pending, but a successful September assessment and previous performance testing are giving confidence. It's positive to hear that RM will have a solution architect on site this year to provide timely support if needed. RM also appear to be putting additional effort into readying their team for the assessment event.

Planning and tracking of preparedness is not as comprehensive as I have seen in previous EoY assessment events. This aspect has been hit by the HSM issues response and some resourcing challenges due to illness. There is tracking in place through the External Assessment Tracking Calendar and Digital Readiness Tracking Sheet but these are still being updated to reflect new accountabilities due to the organisational changes. I also consider that these tracking tools do not accurately reflect the issue and risk profile. E.g. there is a lot of green and little amber in these trackers and we know the current issues are impacting aspects of readiness such as ECM and ECO training (including the issue of having some specialist workforce walking away).

There is an increased risk associated with the loss of knowledge and experience through organisational change. This is putting additional pressure on key personnel who do have the knowledge and experience. These people are getting pulled into the resolution of issues when they need to be lifting up to support clarity in planning and oversight. With several new managers/team leaders and team members, there is a stronger need for clarity of roles and responsibilities, which is not yet clear in some of the schedules and tracking tools.

Digitisation of the exams looks to be behind schedule and will push out the quality testing activities. The later digitisation of exams is completed the less time there is for testing the assessment content on the platform and resolving any issues. This area may need additional oversight to ensure risks are being managed as effectively as possible.

Support organisation, roles and responsibilities need further refinement and communication. Several interviewees stated that they were not clear on how the Tier 2 support would be delivered for the EoY Assessments, given the team that has previously provided this level of support was not retained in the organisational change process. Understanding how the functions previously provided by the Teir 2 support is important to clarify and communicate as it will likely impact the load on Teir 3+ support groups who will need to ensure appropriate capacity is in place. Business continuity and critical incident roles and responsibilities also need to be confirmed.

There is a strong foundation of documented processes for providing support through the EoY Assessment event. Teams, roles and responsibilities within this documentation should be updated to reflect the current state. This should then be actively communicated with the wider EoY assessment delivery team to ensure awareness of any changes in responsibilities and information flows.

Please give me a call if you have any queries on the observations/recommendations above.

Regards,

9(2)(a)

IQA New Zealand Limited (IQANZ)

9(2)(a)

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From: Sheryl Ching <Sheryl.Ching@nzqa.govt.nz>

Sent: Tuesday, 15 October 2024 12:47

To: 9(2)(a)

Subject: Bullet Points/Early Observations for the Board

Kia ora 9(2)(a)

Just checking that you're all good with getting these to me today? Just getting prepared for the Board hui tomorrow.

Thanks

Sheryl

Sheryl Ching

Chief Operating Officer | Pouwhakahaere Tōpū

Assessment Division | Te Wāhanga Aromatawai

New Zealand Qualifications Authority | Mana Tohu Mātauranga o Aotearoa



Mana Tohu Mātauranga o Aotearoa
New Zealand Qualifications Authority



+64 21 2499577



(04) 460 7346



sheryl.ching@nzqa.govt.nz



www.nzqa.govt.nz



Level 14, 125 The Terrace, PO Box 160, Wellington, 6140

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Hannah Colling

From: Alan Bailey
Sent: Monday, 7 July 2025 11:57 AM
To: Hannah Colling
Subject: FW: NZQA September Assessment Technical Readiness Review

Pre-report comments to Sheryl

From: 9(2)(a)
Sent: Thursday, 29 August 2024 3:53 PM
To: Sheryl Ching <Sheryl.Ching@nzqa.govt.nz>
Cc: Alan Bailey <Alan.Bailey@nzqa.govt.nz>
Subject: NZQA September Assessment Technical Readiness Review

Hi Sheryl,

As discussed yesterday, here is a summary of my findings and recommendations in advance of the review memo.

The digital assessment systems are technically ready to support a successful September 2024 assessment event, pending the outcome of security testing, which had not yet been received at the time of fieldwork. Regression, functional and performance testing has been completed successfully.

The readiness of business units and personnel required to support the digital assessment is a key factor in ensuring a successful assessment event. We have identified several areas that require urgent attention to achieve this goal.

Assignment of responsibilities for Tier 2 technical support needs to be addressed to ensure appropriate capability and capacity is available to support the assessment event. There is some uncertainty as to what business unit and personnel are responsible for delivering Tier 2 support. If this is not clarified, there is a risk that the appropriate resource planning is not carried out and the quality of support for the September assessment event is impacted, resulting in a poor experience and potentially disadvantaging students.

9(2)(b)(ii) and an Authority to Operate has not been completed. In the last two previous assessment events, the assessment technology was used without an Authority to Operate (although we understand senior leadership approval to proceed was gained). 9(2)(b)(ii)

. We recommend that conditional Approval to Operate is sought for the September assessments, 9(2)(b)(ii)

Responsibility for testing assessments within the assessment system to verify user experience should be addressed. The need for user experience testing was highlighted in the May assessment event, where content that was not presented in the way that was intended created student confusion and subsequent additional work for NZQA to adjust marking results. It is currently unclear what business unit holds the responsibility for executing this type of testing which needs to be carried out from the perspective of the end user (the learner) but also requires the tester to have a strong understanding of the assessment context and the intent of the creator of the assessment. Information Services testers do not have an understanding of the assessment context, so they are not well-positioned to carry out this testing.

Other findings that we consider should be addressed but are lower priority for the September assessment include:

- Improve linkages between the various plans, checklists and runsheets to support a move away from siloed planning, create a more cohesive view of the activities and reduce the risk of activities being missed, duplicated, or impacted by dependencies not being recognised.
- 9(2)(b)(ii) [REDACTED]
- NZQA assessments would benefit from improved monitoring across the end-to-end delivery to identify and actively manage delivery disruptions. Greater monitoring and understanding of the activities contributing end-to-end delivery also supports a better understanding of the return on investment in enhancements such as:
 - Developing technical knowledge of the digital assessment functionality in the exam development team to reduce user experience issues identified later in the assessment delivery lifecycle.
 - Enhancing test automation to reduce the time needed to carry out regression, functional and performance testing activities.
- Sign-off for planning and decision documentation should be more consistently supported by evidence of the authorisation.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any queries on the above.

Regards,

9(2)(a) [REDACTED]

IQA New Zealand Limited (IQANZ)

9(2)(a) [REDACTED]

| Level 2 PSA House, 11 Aurora Terrace, PO Box 11-757, Wellington 6011, New Zealand | W: www.iqanz.com

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IQANZ MEMO

Level 2, PSA House
11 Aurora Terrace
P O Box 11-757
Wellington 6011

P | +64 4 473 4340
W | www.iqanz.com

DATE	August 2024
TO	Sheryl Ching – Chief Operating Officer, Assessment Delivery
CC	Alan Bailey – Manager, Operations and Logistics
FROM	9(2)(a), Lead Assurance Consultant, IQANZ
SUBJECT	NZQA September 2024 Digital Assessment Technical Readiness Review
STATUS	Final

INTRODUCTION

New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) hold digital assessments at three key stages during the year: May, September and November. All these assessments are carried out on the same assessment platform (Assessment Master), but the marking is done on two different platforms (Assessment Master and RM-Assessor). For each assessment event, a thorough set of readiness checks and preparation processes are carried out, but given the risks associated with delivering high-stakes digital assessment, it is important that independent quality assurance is provided.

NZQA has requested that IQANZ conduct a technical readiness assessment for the September 2024 digital assessment event.

The objective of this review is to:

- Assure the NZQA Board that the digital assessment technical readiness processes and controls are fit for purpose for the September 2024 digital assessment event.
- Assure the NZQA Board that the digital assessment team have completed the agreed technical readiness activities for the September 2024 digital assessment event.
- Identify residual risks and propose management approaches to achieve a high-quality student experience for the September 2024 digital assessment event.

The external review of the 2023 assessment event observed that groups contributing to that event worked in silos. More connected planning and active oversight are essential mechanisms to reduce siloed working.

Operational support processes for the technical delivery of the September Assessment are clearly articulated.

The 2024 External Assessment Support Operations Manual comprehensively outlines operational support processes and activities. This document also includes references (including links) to other supporting information, creating good traceability.

It is also positive to see an outline of the continuous improvement approach in the Operations Manual. This approach outline includes specific review activities that will be carried out and focus areas for these activities.

Clearer assignment of some technical support roles needed to ensure appropriate capacity and capability is in place.

The teams historically tasked with Tier 2 support for digital assessments have seen several changes as a result of the NZQA organisation change proposal that is currently underway.

This has created uncertainty around the business units and personnel providing Tier 2 support for the September Assessment event. We understand there is an expectation that the Assessment Delivery Team (currently being established) will take on the responsibility of delivering Tier 2 support. There is some concern that this team may not yet have the capacity and technical knowledge to deliver this function effectively. If this is the case, the quality of support could be impacted because more issues than forecasted will be escalated to Tier 3 support, which will impact Tier 3 support's ability to triage and resolve issues and, where necessary, effectively support escalation of issues to Information Services, software vendors and N4L.

The assignment of roles and responsibilities across the external assessment support operating model must be clarified and signed off by management to support resource planning and ensure the necessary capability and capacity is in place across this critical function.

The 2024 External Assessment Support Operations Manual provided for review was not signed off. We recommend this document is finalised as a priority and includes evidence of each approver's sign-off to ensure clarity of roles and responsibilities and management commitment to addressing resourcing requirements.

NZQA functional testing has been completed successfully.

A Test Summary Report outlines the scope of the regression testing and system change-related testing for the September Assessment event that the Information Services Test Team has carried out. No Severity 1 (Critical) or Severity 2 (High) defects remain unresolved from the testing. Three high severity defects have been accepted and closed due to the defects being identified as "expected behaviours" by RM. The nature of these three high severity defects was presented to the EACAB on Monday 26 August, where the decision was made to accept these issues in the production environment. The defects were then closed.

A Performance Test Summary Report had not been released at the time of the review but was expected to be available on Wednesday 28 August. Discussions with the Performance Tester indicated that the testing results confirmed acceptable performance for the load expected for the September Assessment Event.

Performance testing and monitoring carried out for the May assessment event provided confidence in the ability of the solution to support the likely loads generated by the September assessment event. This has been further validated by more recent performance testing, which demonstrated the solution's ability to support [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] concurrent logins per minute and between [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] concurrent users on the platform.

Responsibility for testing to verify user experience should be addressed.

There is a broad awareness of the need to test/verify assessments within the solution to confirm that the assessment delivers the intended user experience. Issues experienced in the May assessment strengthened this awareness, as some assessment content was not presented as intended, creating student confusion and subsequent additional work for NZQA to adjust marking results.

It is currently unclear what business unit is responsible for executing user experience and assessment content testing. This testing needs to be carried out from the perspective of the end user (the learner), but the tester also needs to have a strong understanding of the assessment context and the intent of the assessment editor.

Stakeholder feedback indicates that having the Information Services team carry out user experience verification as part of functional testing is not appropriate due to their limited understanding of the assessment context. We consider the Assessment Development Team an appropriate team to carry out this testing/verification.

We understand that there are capacity constraints in the Assessment Development Team. As such, there may not be an immediate solution to mitigate the risk for the September assessment event. We recommend that NZQA consider how appropriate capability and capacity can be sourced in the future.

9(2)(b)(ii)

Authority to Operate has not been completed for the Assessment Technology.

In October 2023 a memo to the DCE Assessment was presented and accepted noting that no Approval to Operate would be sought in 2023 9(2)(b)(ii)

It is critical NZQA senior management understands the security risks associated with the digital assessment technology environment, that the appropriate authority makes decisions to accept these risks, and that they are intentional and documented. We expect a clear outline of the known security vulnerabilities to be presented before every digital assessment to ensure transparency and accountability for accepting this risk.

We recommend that if there is an intention to proceed with the September digital assessment (and other subsequent assessments) under the same security risk profile, this decision should be documented as a conditional Authority to Operate with an agreed expiration date to trigger additional

evaluation. This approach recognises that an Authority to Operate has been given but ensures an ongoing focus on resolving residual risks.

NZQA Assessments would benefit from improved performance metrics and monitoring across the end-to-end delivery to identify and actively manage delivery disruptions.

An end-to-end view of the sequencing of key activities¹ for the delivery of the digital assessment event is currently lacking. This makes it difficult to get a consolidated view of the performance of each delivery component involved in preparing for and delivering a digital assessment. Pulling together this view and understanding each component that makes up this view offers several benefits, including:

- Helps develop the contributing team's awareness of how their work contributes to technical readiness and delivery and how it impacts other teams.
- Identifies all the work necessary to deliver the digital assessment event and how it contributes to the end outcomes of a successful assessment event.
- Assists in identifying how the performance of each component impacts the technical readiness and delivery and supports prioritisation of investment in performance improvement.

To develop maturity in digital assessment delivery, the performance of each component that contributes to the full technical readiness must be understood, as well as the tolerances for each component to ensure the performance of downstream activities is not compromised (only as strong as the weakest link). Feedback from stakeholders indicates it is common for delays in earlier activities to impact later technical delivery activities, forcing them into a compressed timeframe or, in some cases, overlapping with the commencement of the assessment period, which adds risk to the technical support of the assessment event.

Examples of improvement areas that would likely benefit the overall digital assessment delivery include:

- Developing technical knowledge of the digital assessment functionality in the exam development team to reduce user experience issues identified later in the assessment delivery lifecycle.
- Enhancing test automation to reduce the time needed for regression, functional and performance testing activities.

Sign-off for planning and decision documentation should be more consistently supported by evidence of the authorisation.

We reviewed several planning and decision documents where sign-off sections had been completed, but there was no evidence of the specific authorisation(s). Including evidence of authorisation is important for maintaining accountabilities for planning and decision-making. Such evidence also provides assurance that the people signing the document have intentionally done so, removing the risk of ambiguity and assumptions. For example, a verbal discussion about a document may be construed as authorisation for sign-off by one party but not by the accountable signatory.

Evidence of authorisation can include written signatures, e-signatures and embedded or linked email containing authorisations.

The NCEA Online Test Strategy no longer reflects the demands of operational digital assessment delivery.

The NCEA Online Test Strategy has not been updated since 2022 and reflects the needs of the NCEA Online programme rather than the needs of the current operational environment. The current Test Strategy strongly focuses on delivering the technical systems rather than a more holistic view of the

¹ This is sometimes referred to as the development value stream.

digital assessment solution, which also includes processes, data and assessment content that should be verified and tested to support readiness.

We recommend that the Test Strategy is reviewed and updated to reflect a broader scope, including less technical testing, such as process verification (e.g. support processes) and user experience testing of assessment content in the tools.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- REC01 Clarify Tier 2 technical support responsibility for the September assessment event (High Priority)** – If the uncertainty as to what business unit and personnel are responsible for delivering Tier 2 support is not clarified, appropriate resource planning might not be carried out and the quality of support for the September assessment event would be impacted, resulting in a poor experience and potentially disadvantaging students.
- REC02 Confirm a conditional Authority to Operate for the September assessment (High Priority)** - A conditional Authority to Operate will ensure known security vulnerabilities are clearly articulated to support an informed authorisation and clear accountability accepting any residual security risks.
- REC03 Confirm responsibility for testing assessments within the assessment system to verify user experience (High Priority)** - The need for user experience testing was highlighted in the May assessment event, as content not presented in the way intended created student confusion and subsequent additional work for NZQA to adjust marking results. Which business unit is responsible for executing this testing type is currently unclear. This type of testing needs to be carried out from the perspective of the end user (the learner) but the tester must also have a strong understanding of the assessment context and the intent of the creator of the assessment.
- REC04 Improve the linkages of component plans to an overarching plan (Medium Priority)** - Several good quality plans, checklists, and runsheets are being used by different teams contributing to the September assessment readiness, but there are few linkages between them. Without clear linkages from the overarching plan to each of the component plans, activities may be missed, duplicated or impacted by dependencies not being identified and managed.
- REC05 Improve performance metrics and monitoring across the end-to-end delivery to identify and actively manage delivery disruptions (Medium Priority)** – With no end-to-end view of the sequencing of key activities for delivering the digital assessment event, it difficult to get a consolidated view of the performance of each delivery component involved in preparing for and delivering a digital assessment. Pulling together this view and understanding each of the components that make up this view offers several benefits, including:
- Helps develop the contributing team's awareness of how their work contributes to technical readiness and delivery and how it impacts other teams.
 - Identifies all the work necessary to deliver the digital assessment event and how it contributes to the end outcomes of a successful assessment event.
 - Assists in identifying how the performance of each component impacts the technical readiness and delivery and supports prioritisation of investment in performance improvement.

- REC06** **Review and update the Test Strategy to ensure it reflects the needs of the current state (Medium Priority)** – The NCEA Online Test Strategy has not been updated since 2022 and reflects the needs of the NCEA Online programme rather than the needs of the current operational environment. The current Test Strategy strongly focuses on delivering the technical systems rather than a more holistic view of the digital assessment solution, which also includes processes, data and assessment content that should be verified and tested to support readiness.

MANAGEMENT COMMENT

The recommendations made are valuable and will allow us to focus attention on the key issues, some that we were already aware of, and others that have been identified through this review.

The tier 2 support is a known issue, and direct result of the recent NZQA wide changes. There is an interim plan in place that will ensure we have a manageable tier 2 to 3 escalation process that will be used throughout the September assessment events to ensure support levels are maintained.

Authority to Operate is being addressed, 9(2)(b)(ii) with established mitigations in place that will be maintained throughout the September events.

User Experience testing is being carried out by the business, using the same versions of the assessments as learners will use, and will be completed prior to the assessment events starting. The documentation and sign-off of these tests still requires work – this will be addressed before the start of the fortnight’s assessments.

Component plan linkages are being worked on within our current documented systems – for the September events we are ensuring that we have some form of evidential link to the accountable manager’s approval for any step in the go-live process they have oversight of. For future events the Operations and Logistics team are developing a more transparent and user-friendly process of linking documentation, with a clearly visible and shareable sign-off / approval step for each deliverable.

Performance metrics for the full end-to-end delivery process, where different deliverables are the responsibility of various business units, will be worked on at pace for future events. The new Assessment Division structure is designed with this type of integration in mind, but in order to meet end of year requirements, we will need to start this integration process before the new structure is fully functional.

The NCEA Online Test Strategy will be looked at as a priority following the September assessment events. We understand the importance of regularly reviewing and updating this strategy, and will incorporate regular unpacking of what we test as part of each event’s debrief process in future – this will ensure that testing becomes part of the continuous improvement process carried out to ensure lessons are captured and addressed as close to the end of each event as possible.

SIGNOFF

Sheryl Ching
Chief Operating Officer, Assessment Delivery
New Zealand Qualifications Authority

9(2)(a)

9(2)(a)
Lead Reviewer
IQA New Zealand Limited

06/09/2024



IQANZ MEMO

Level 12, 89 The Terrace
P O Box 11-757
Wellington 6011

P | +64 4 473 4340
W | www.iqanz.com

DATE	19 December 2024
TO	Sheryl Ching – Chief Operating Officer, Assessment Delivery
FROM	9(2)(a), Lead Assurance Consultant, IQANZ
SUBJECT	NZQA 2024 EoY Assessment Readiness Review (Part 3)
STATUS	Final

INTRODUCTION

New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) hold assessments at three key stages during the year: May, September and November. Besides the diminishing traditional paper-based format, all digital assessments are carried out on the same assessment platform (Assessment Master). Still, the marking is done on two platforms (Assessment Master and RM Assessor). A thorough set of readiness checks and preparation processes are carried out for each assessment event. However, given the risks associated with delivering high-stakes assessments, independent quality assurance must be provided.

After reviewing readiness for the November 2024 End of Year (EoY) assessment event, NZQA requested that IQANZ conduct a subsequent review to provide assurance across the 2024 EoY marking and preparations for publishing results.

The objective of this review is to:

- Assure the NZQA Board of the organisation's readiness to complete the remaining 2024 End of Year Assessment activities through to results release.
- Assure the NZQA Board that progress has been made on improvements against the recommendations from the 2023 external review report and validate whether appropriate actions have been taken to mitigate risk.
- Identify residual risks and propose management approaches to achieve a high-quality student experience for future assessment events.

This memo outlines the key observations and recommendations from the IQANZ review undertaken between 1-10 December 2024.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

NZQA is well positioned to deliver the remaining 2024 EoY assessment activities, including finalising marking, releasing results, and implementing reviews and reconsiderations. Some risks remain that should be addressed to further decrease the likelihood of issues arising over the coming months. However, we note that mitigation activities are underway in some cases, and we consider there is time for mitigations to be implemented.

Risks and issues and their associated management activities are actively monitored and discussed in the Digital External Assessment Reporting (DEAR) group. This regular connection of leaders across the assessment system is working effectively and is providing significant value. Feedback from review participants echoes this observation.

The four key areas that we have identified as posing a risk to the remaining 2024 EoY assessment activities are:

- **Capacity constraints for personnel supporting and quality assuring Māori and Pacific Island language marking.** The realisation of this risk could impact assessment outcomes for Māori and Pacific Island language learners or impact personnel wellbeing given the long hours that some of the NZQA workforce are working.
- **Performance testing of results release system components has not yet been completed.** Performance testing was underway, and no issues had been communicated during the review fieldwork. The performance of the systems during peak assessment loads provides confidence in the authentication component of the solution. However, formal performance testing will provide added assurance.
- **The required surge capacity for the contact centre to support the release of results has not yet been confirmed.** This should be addressed as a priority to ensure personnel are confirmed before the start of the holiday period.
- **Handwriting detection may impact the readiness of a small number of results.** The new technology for handwriting detection is taking longer to run than anticipated. There is a risk that results may not be ready for a small number of cases where handwriting has been detected on a paper, and manual assessment identifies the need for additional marking. The DEAR group is actively monitoring this issue.

We have also identified some other areas that should be addressed after the 2024 EoY assessment activities. These are outlined below:

- **The establishment of the Planning Integration and Improvement Team can deliver significant value for NZQA.** Positioning this team as a supporting function across the various delivery teams will be key to realising potential value. Clarifying the purpose and priorities for this team and communicating these across the organisation will also be critical to support NZQA in getting value from the investment in this business unit.
- **Planning information is fragmented (by business unit) and spread across various systems.** There is a strong awareness of the remaining activities, and planning information at a business unit level is robust. Bringing planning information into a single solution will support greater visibility across teams and reduce the risk of planning gaps. Understanding the overall assessment system activity planning will help ensure that the associated roles and responsibilities are addressed in the workshops planned for the new year. We understand that the Planning Integration and Improvement Team has been tasked with establishing a more integrated view of assessment system processes and planning. We consider this would be a beneficial investment.

- **NZQA needs to strengthen the organisation's business change management capability**, specifically business impact assessment and management capability. The 2024 EoY assessment has been significantly impacted by ineffectual business change management from other business initiatives. This has put considerable strain on personnel, impacted the reputation of NZQA as an employer (specifically for the specialist workforce) and materially increased the risk profile for the assessment event.
- **It is positive to hear that there is an intention to review and update the NZQA digital assessment strategy.** NZQA's digital assessment strategy should ensure a clear "light on the hill" to guide and align NZQA business units and other education stakeholders. We consider the planned review and update to be timely given the recent changes in the organisation and the need for strong prioritisation of investment resulting from heightened fiscal constraints across government organisations. An agreed Digital Assessment Strategy is also an essential input into any service agreement discussions that NZQA plans to have with key digital assessment platform service providers.

KEY OBSERVATIONS AND MESSAGES

The 2024 EoY Assessment Marking is progressing well

Despite the HCM issues that continue to challenge this year's EoY assessment, marking is progressing well, and marking is expected to be largely complete by 20 December. This should allow a reasonable period of time for other teams to prepare result data for publishing.

Robust tracking tools are in place across marking and the spread of performance for each subject. Many of these digital tracking tools are well-proven. With an increasing number of subjects being assessed and marked digitally, there have been several efficiency improvements across the marking component of the assessment system.

It is positive to see that the increased use of virtual panels has worked well. This has been another example of NZQA realising the benefit of investment in digital tools to support the assessment system.

Marking has not been entirely without issues. 9(2)(b)(ii)

he support team has managed these issues effectively to resolution, and they do not appear to have had a material impact on marking.

Another current issue is that the new technology for handwriting detection is taking longer to run than anticipated. There is a risk that results may not be ready for a small number of cases where handwriting has been detected on a paper, and manual assessment identifies the need for additional marking. The DEAR group is actively monitoring this issue.

Multiple review participants have highlighted an area of risk concerning the capacity constraints for personnel supporting and quality assuring Māori and Pacific Island language marking. Concerns have been raised concerning the risk that if appropriate assurance and support are not in place across Māori and Pacific Island language marking, then quality and consistency of marking may be impacted, resulting in lower quality assessment outcomes for Māori and Pacific Island language learners. It appears this risk is currently being managed through the available personnel working longer hours. However, this is not a sustainable solution and does not appropriately mitigate the risk. It is likely that this approach will transfer to a risk of personnel wellbeing being impacted rather than reducing the overall risk profile of the 2024 EoY assessment.

Recommendation: Review the capacity of qualified and experienced personnel to provide support and assurance across Māori and Pacific Island language marking to ensure the quality of this marking is to the level expected while also managing the wellbeing of personnel providing this function.

Planning and awareness of activities leading up to results release period is at an appropriate level, but information is fragmented.

Planning for the remaining EOY assessment activities is in place to an appropriate level, with detailed supporting information available where appropriate. Planning information is organised by delivery business units and captured across multiple systems, including Confluence (Data and Data Analysis Calendar) and Microsoft Planner (IS Calendar). Planning in both the Confluence and Microsoft Planner environments includes links to more detailed information, although this is also spread across multiple systems, including Confluence, Jira and Promapp.

More detailed progress monitoring and reconciliation tools, such as the Assessment Reconciliation Tool (ART), support early identification of issues and delays so they can be addressed or escalated as needed. The risk of “missing” a result for results release is diminishing due to the improved reconciliation tools.

Although planning information is fragmented across systems, there is a strong awareness of key activities and milestones running through to the completion of the 2024 EoY assessments within the various business units.

Bringing planning information (at a high level) into a consistent solution will support greater visibility across teams and reduce the risk of planning gaps.

Recommendation: Consolidate planning information to provide a more comprehensive single pane of glass for key activities across the assessment system. We recommend this activity be undertaken at the same time as the roles and responsibilities review in the new year. Understanding overall assessment system activity planning will help address the need for greater clarity of roles and responsibilities.

Contact centre surge capacity has not yet been confirmed for results release

Surge capacity (typically 30 additional personnel) is required to address the heavier load on the contact centre, from the release of results to final reviews and reconsiderations.

Over the EoY assessment event, the timeliness of addressing more complex contact centre tickets was higher than in previous events. This was impacted by capacity constraints and some misalignment in the understanding of responsibilities for the management of issues escalated from the contact centre. This issue was likely masked to some extent due to the higher-priority HCM issues being managed during this time. Capacity and responsibilities should be confirmed as soon as possible for the upcoming release of results and the period for reviews and reconsiderations to ensure the customer experience is not materially impacted.

Recommendation: Confirm the personnel to support surge capacity for the contact centre during results release as soon as possible to manage the risk of a poor customer experience during this time.

There is also an opportunity to improve the efficiency of the contact centre by extending the use of current tools. Specifically, the current Dynamic CRM implementation is not integrated with Exchange Online to support a single view of Contact Centre tickets through all channels.

Recommendation: Connect Microsoft Dynamics to Exchange Online to track tickets received via email to support more integrated reporting and customer insights.

This change is also expected to reduce reporting overheads for email tickets as these tickets require additional effort to generate and compile with data relating to other channels.

Establishing the Planning, Integration and Improvement (PII) Team has the potential to deliver significant value for NZQA

We expect the formation of the PII team will help resolve several of the outstanding recommendations from the previous 2024 EoY reviews and the external review of the 2023 EoY assessment. The resolution of several of these outstanding items has been delayed due to delivery teams needing to focus on the delivery of assessment preparedness and execution activities (while also juggling HCM-related issues).

It is positive to see that this group will be looking at the assessment system as a whole, and we expect this will benefit the assessment delivery teams by providing a clearer understanding of priorities across the system.

The PII team needs to be established and promoted as a supporting business unit. The benefit of this team will be maximised if the assessment delivery teams are open to the PII team working with them to support them in the context of the broader assessment system. Communication and clear responsibilities will be key early in the bedding in of the new team. It is positive to hear that workshops are being planned in the new year to clarify roles and responsibilities. As highlighted in previous reviews, clear roles and responsibilities across the assessment system are critical to ensuring appropriate personnel are in place to deliver the service levels expected of NZQA.

NZQA needs to strengthen the organisation's business change management capability.

The 2024 EoY Examination Event highlighted the need for NZQA to develop the organisation's business change management capability. Specifically, NZQA would benefit from improving business impact assessment and management. The 2024 EoY assessment has been impacted by a range of changes for which business impact assessments and management of impacts have not been carried out to an appropriate level. This poor business change management practice continues to impact the 2024 EoY assessment as teams have had to implement reactive emergency management activities.

The HCM programme rollout and the organisation change rollout are examples of insufficient business impact assessment and management having a material impact on the EoY assessment event. These initiatives have significantly impacted the EoY assessment process and the NZQA's permanent and contracted specialist workforce.

The DEAR meetings work effectively and support greater awareness across NZQA stakeholders.

The DEAR meeting has developed into a valuable mechanism for leaders across the assessment system to raise issues and concerns to promote greater awareness and understanding across teams. It has a standard agenda that ensures all groups have an opportunity to raise issues and concerns.

These meetings now run every second day, which is appropriate given the stage of the EoY assessment. They are also recorded to ensure people unable to make the meeting can catch up, or discussions can be reviewed if needed.

The DEAR meeting has struck a good balance of formality with minimal overhead. It is also positive to see that the DEAR meeting has adapted over time to ensure it remains relevant and appropriately addresses its intended purpose.

Feedback from review participants was universally positive about the DEAR meeting being a valuable approach.

Updating NZQA's digital assessment strategy is important to ensure a clear "light on the hill" for NZQA assessments.

NZQA is realising benefits through the continued adoption of digital assessment delivery and management tools. Given the ever-increasing variety of digital tools and approaches, the NZQA must have an up-to-date, relevant digital assessment strategy that provides a "light on the hill" to guide and align NZQA business units and other education stakeholders. It is positive to hear that one of the areas of focus for the NZQA in the new year will be updating the digital assessment strategy. An agreed Digital Assessment Strategy is an important input into any service agreement discussions NZQA plans to have with key digital assessment platform service providers.

We consider the planned review and update timely given the recent changes in the organisation and the need for strong prioritisation of investment that comes with fiscal constraints introduced across government organisations.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

NEW RECOMMENDATIONS

- EOYR08** **Review the capacity of personnel qualified and experienced enough to provide support and assurance across Māori and Pacific Island language marking (High Priority)** – Appropriate oversight and assurance are required to ensure the quality of this marking is to the level expected. Multiple review participants mentioned the limited capacity available for this oversight and assurance, concern about the heavy load on the personnel providing this function, and the wellbeing of this group who are working long hours to meet business needs.
- EOYR09** **Consolidate planning information to provide a more comprehensive single pane of glass for key activities across the assessment system (Medium Priority)** - Planning information is currently organised by delivery business units and captured across multiple systems, including Confluence (Data and Data Analysis Calendar) and Microsoft Planner (IS Calendar). NZQA should consider consolidating this information into single solutions at the same time as reviewing the roles and responsibilities in the new year. Understanding overall assessment system activity planning will help clarify associated roles and responsibilities.
- EOYR10** **Confirm personnel to support surge capacity for the contact centre during results release (High Priority)** - Surge capacity (typically 30 additional personnel) is required to address the heavier load on the contact centre over the period from release of results through to final reviews and reconsiderations. Personnel to meet this requirement were not confirmed during the review, posing a risk that the necessary surge capacity is not available, impacting customer experience.
- EOYR11** **Connect Microsoft Dynamics to Exchange Online to track tickets received via email to support more integrated reporting and customer insights (Medium Priority)** - This change is also expected to reduce reporting overheads for email tickets as these tickets require additional effort to generate and compile with data relating to other channels.

PREVIOUS UNRESOLVED RECOMMENDATIONS

- EOYR01** **Avoid transfer of issues and risks resulting from the management of the HCM issues (High Priority)** - NZQA leadership must ensure that supporting the management of the HCM issues doesn't put additional pressure on other areas of EoY Assessment preparation and delivery. For example, if additional personnel for the contact centre are sourced from business units that need to complete other EoY Assessment preparation or support functions, later activities in the assessment process may be impacted.
- December IQANZ Update:* This recommendation continues to apply to the release of the results and final reviews and reconsiderations. There is a risk that the contact centre may be impacted by HCM support demands if clear prioritisation is not put in place.
- EOYR03** **Confirm and communicate the support organisation, roles and responsibilities and support process documentation updates. (Immediate Priority)** – Several review interviewees stated that they were unclear on how the Tier 2 support would be delivered for the EoY Assessments given the outcomes of the recent organisational change. Understanding how the functions previously provided by the Tier 2 support team is important to clarify and communicate as it will likely impact the load on the Tier 3+ support groups, who will need to ensure appropriate capacity is in place. Clarifying Tier 2 support will also impact Tier 1 resourcing and preparations since triage and escalation processes will likely need to change.
- December IQANZ Update:* This recommendation remains in place for the remaining activities for the 2024 EOY assessment. We recognise that this recommendation will likely be addressed as part of the planned workshops in the new year.
- EOYR07** **Confirm business continuity plans have been updated to reflect organisational changes (Immediate Priority)** – Business Continuity Plans and Critical Incident Plans should accurately reflect the current operating environment to reduce the risk of confusion in a disruption event.
- December IQANZ Update:* No update on this recommendation.
- REC02** **Confirm a conditional Authority to Operate for the September assessment (High Priority)** - A conditional Authority to Operate will ensure known security vulnerabilities are clearly articulated to support an informed authorisation and clear accountability accepting any residual security risks.
- December IQANZ Update:* Recommendation remains as NZQA decided to continue with the passive authorisation approach for the 2024 EOY Assessment. We recommend the active approach of conditionally authorising the operation of solutions should be taken in the future.
- REC03** **Review and confirm responsibility and resourcing for testing assessments within the assessment system to verify user experience (High Priority)** - The need for user experience testing was highlighted in the May assessment event, as content not presented in the way intended created student confusion and subsequent additional work for NZQA to adjust marking results. Which business unit is responsible for executing this testing type is currently unclear. This type of testing needs to be carried out from the end user's perspective (the learner), but the tester must also have a strong understanding of the assessment context and the assessment creator's intent.
- December IQANZ Update:* This recommendation remains, and we suggest it should be addressed in the roles and responsibilities workshops planned for the new year.

REC05 **Improve performance metrics and monitoring across the end-to-end delivery to identify and actively manage delivery disruptions (Medium Priority)** – With no end-to-end view of the sequencing of key activities for delivering the digital assessment event, it is difficult to get a consolidated view of the performance of each delivery component involved in preparing for and delivering a digital assessment. Pulling together this view and understanding each of the components that make up this view offers several benefits, including:

- Helps develop the contributing team's awareness of how their work contributes to technical readiness and delivery and how it impacts other teams.
- Identifies all the work necessary to deliver the digital assessment event and how it contributes to the end outcomes of a successful assessment event.
- Assists in identifying how the performance of each component impacts the technical readiness and delivery and supports prioritisation of investment in performance improvement.

December IQANZ Update: This recommendation remains, and we suggest it should be addressed by the Planning, Integration and Improvement team as part of their work plan for the new year.

MANAGEMENT COMMENT

This report marks the final readiness review report, Part 3 of a 3-part review process that NZQA proactively instigated as part of an overall assurance plan across the end-to-end delivery of external assessment. Whilst good progress has been made to address issues and to strengthen current processes, we acknowledge that several of the recommendations from the earlier reviews do not yet have longer term sustainable approaches in place. To address this, work is underway to ensure that those actions that have interim measures in place are fully reviewed, addressed, and documented with clear roles and responsibilities. Thanks goes out to all staff who have contributed their time, knowledge, and expertise to ensure that issues, risks, and areas for improvement have been raised through these series of reviews.

He waka eke noa

“A canoe which we are all in with no exception”

SIGNOFF

Sheryl Ching
Chief Operating Officer, Assessment Delivery
New Zealand Qualifications Authority

9(2)(a)

11/02/2025

9(2)(a)
Lead Reviewer
IQA New Zealand Limited

REVIEW PARTICIPANTS

We thank the following review participants for their contribution to this review.

- Sheryl Ching
- Katy Yung
- Natasha Ropata
- Max Adler
- Richard Li
- John Berry
- Steve Bargh
- Hamsa Lilley
- Catherine Edser
- Vipin Kumar
- Andrew Hocking



IQANZ MEMO

Level 12, 89 The Terrace
P O Box 11-757
Wellington 6011

P | +64 4 473 4340
W | www.iqanz.com

DATE	22 October 2024
TO	Sheryl Ching – Chief Operating Officer, Assessment Delivery
CC	Alan Bailey – Manager, Operations and Logistics
FROM	9(2)(a), Lead Assurance Consultant, IQANZ
SUBJECT	NZQA 2024 EoY Assessment Readiness Review
STATUS	Final

INTRODUCTION

New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) hold assessments at three key stages during the year: May, September and November. In addition to the diminishing traditional paper-based format, all digital assessments are carried out on the same assessment platform (Assessment Master), but the marking is done on two different platforms (Assessment Master and RM Assessor). For each assessment event, a thorough set of readiness checks and preparation processes are carried out, but given the risks associated with delivering high-stakes assessments, it is important that independent quality assurance is provided.

NZQA requested that IQANZ conduct a readiness review for the November 2024 End of Year (EoY) assessment event.

The objective of this review is to:

- Assure the NZQA Board that appropriate paper-based assessment processes and controls are in place for the 2024 EoY Assessment Event.
- Assure the NZQA Board that the digital assessment technical readiness processes and controls are fit for purpose for the 2024 EoY Assessment Event.
- Assure the NZQA Board that the digital assessment team have completed the agreed technical readiness activities for the 2024 EoY Assessment Event.
- Identify residual risks and propose management approaches to achieve a high-quality student experience for the 2024 EoY Assessment Event.

This memo outlines the key observations and recommendations from the IQANZ review undertaken between 1-11 October 2024.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

2024 EoY Assessment Readiness is not as progressed as we expected, given the time remaining before the commencement of exams. The two key items impacting readiness activities are:

- The Human Capital Management (HCM) solution issues are impacting the time taken to onboard the necessary specialist workforce (especially Exam Centre support staff). This is also consuming additional effort that would otherwise be progressing other preparation activities.
- The outcomes of the organisational change process included the material loss of experience and knowledge across various areas contributing to EoY Assessment Readiness. This has led to some activities taking longer to complete compared to previous years as new personnel are coming up to speed, and bottlenecks have emerged due to the increased reliance on the remaining experienced personnel. There are also several areas noted in the review where roles, responsibilities and processes have not yet been updated to reflect the organisational change outcomes. These need to be addressed to manage the risk uncertainties impacting the quality of the EoY Assessment.

We have identified some key areas that require immediate focus. These are outlined below:

- **Provide greater confidence in current preparedness by revising, updating and baselining the key activities and milestones within the readiness tracking controls**

This should be a collaborative effort by functional leaders to ensure key activities and milestones on or near the critical path leading up to and through the EoY Assessment Event are reflected and appropriately represented in tracking.

- **Confirm and communicate the support organisation, roles and responsibilities and support process documentation updates**

There is not a consistent understanding of how Tier 2 support would be delivered for the EoY Assessments given the outcomes of the recent organisational change. It's important to understand and communicate how the functions that were previously provided by the Tier 2 support teams will be managed, as it will likely impact the workload on the Tier 3+ support groups. These groups will need to ensure they have appropriate capacity is in place. Clarifying Tier 2 support will also impact Tier 1 resourcing and preparations since triage and escalation processes will likely need to change.

- **Confirm business continuity plans have been updated to reflect organisational changes**

Business Continuity and Critical Incident Plans were not provided for review, so we could not confirm that they had been updated. This should be confirmed as soon as possible, so if required, updates are made and communicated to key stakeholders to manage the risk of confusion and inefficiencies in a disruption event.

Comprehensive Business Continuity Plans and Critical Incident Plans have been evidenced in previous reviews, so where updates are required, we expect these updates will primarily relate to new roles and responsibilities rather than significant updates to the documents.

In addition to three immediate focus areas, we have made three high priority recommendations and one medium priority recommendation from this review. These primarily relate to supporting personnel and reinforcing behaviours to manage risks associated with disconnects within the functional teams that need to work collaboratively to deliver a high quality assessment experience for learners.

It is important to recognise that there is a strong foundation of process and technology in place from previous EoY Assessment Events. It is crucial that this is leveraged effectively so the lessons learned from previous assessment events are applied.

Technical readiness is a positive for this year. The decision to defer the deployment of the latest Assessment Master and RM Assessor has reduced the technical risk profiles. The current software versions have been well tested by the IS testing team and, in the case of Assessment Master, during the September Assessment Event. Further performance testing was being carried out at the time of the review, and we expect this will provide additional confidence as it will cover loading simulations above what is expected for the largest exams.

Further details on the observations and other findings and recommendations are outlined in the following sections.

KEY OBSERVATIONS AND MESSAGES

The HCM solution is having a material impact on readiness for the 2024 EoY Assessment Event but is being managed to minimise any impacts on EoY Assessments

The challenges with onboarding and paying the specialist workforce are having a material impact on the preparations for the EoY Assessments. This issue has impacted the timely establishment of Examination Centres and NZQA's relationship with parts of the specialised workforce.

There is a strong awareness of this issue and appropriate escalation to the senior leadership team. We have also seen investment in managing the impact of these issues through bolstering People & Capability and Contact Centre teams with additional personnel sourced internally and externally. This management approach is appropriate, and we expect the supplementary personnel to have a positive effect on reducing the impact of the issues. Care must be taken to ensure that refocusing the internal personnel to manage the HCM issues does not add unacceptable risk or create issues for other functions needed to support the EoY Assessment Event.

Recommendation: NZQA leadership must ensure that supporting the management of this issue doesn't put additional pressure on other areas of EoY Assessment preparation and delivery. For example, if additional personnel for the contact centre are sourced from business units that need to complete other EoY Assessment preparation or support functions, later activities in the assessment process may be impacted.

Maintain collaborative linking meetings and cross-functional collaboration

As mentioned in previous IQANZ reviews and the External Review of End of Year Assessments, NZQA has suffered from being a siloed organisation in the past. We have seen several areas where approaches have been put in place to break down siloes and promote greater collaboration and transparency across NZQA business units. Examples such as using Microsoft Teams channels to create greater visibility across groups supporting External Assessments, establishing the Daily External Assessment Review (DEAR) meeting and strengthening the eCAB have all supported greater awareness and collaboration across teams contributing to assessment events.

Multiple review interviewees have commented on reduced engagement in collaboration events/meetings as the pressure has increased leading up to the EoY Assessments. This also includes cancelling some instances of eCAB, an important forum for communicating upcoming activities, risks and issues to the cross-functional attendees. Maintaining these intentional collaboration events creates a forum for sharing information and maintaining awareness. As was the case in several September Assessment DEAR meetings. These meetings may not use the full allocated time, but they provide a dedicated forum for participants to "look up and out," maintaining awareness of other functional areas, dependencies and issues being addressed.

Bolstering engagement and contribution to these supporting mechanisms will be critical over periods of pressure to ensure teams do not revert to working in silos as the pressure mounts before the EoY

Assessment. Maintaining and actively contributing to intentional collaboration events will be critical to supporting the rapid identification and quantification of risks and emerging issues.

Recommendation: Promote cross-functional awareness through strengthening engagement in collaboration events and approaches to manage the risk of teams reverting to working in silos and will support rapid identification and quantification of risks and emerging issues.

Organisation, roles, and responsibilities for assessment support need further refinement and communication

Several review interviewees stated that they were not clear on how Tier 2 support would be delivered for the EoY Assessments, given that the team previously responsible for this level of support was not retained in the recent organisational change. Understanding the functions that were previously provided by the Tier 2 support team is important, as this will likely impact the workload of the Tier 3+ support groups. These support groups will need to ensure they have sufficient capacity in place. Clarifying Tier 2 support will also impact Tier 1 resourcing and preparations since triage and escalation processes will likely need to change.

There is a strong foundation of documented processes for providing support through EoY Assessment. Teams, roles and responsibilities within this documentation should be updated to reflect the current state and support leadership in ensuring appropriate resourcing is in place. This should be communicated with the wider EoY Assessment delivery team to ensure awareness, and to minimise the risk of confusion impacting the performance of delivery and support teams.

If the organisation, roles and responsibilities are not confirmed and effectively communicated across the teams affected, then appropriate personnel may not be secured. This could negatively impact the quality of support for the EoY Assessment Event, resulting in a poor student experience and potentially disadvantaging some students.

Recommendation: Confirm and communicate the support organisation, roles and responsibilities for the EoY Assessment Event as a priority. Support process documentation should also be reviewed and updated where appropriate to ensure that the support organisation, roles and responsibilities, and processes are reflected correctly to minimise confusion if referenced during the assessment event.

Planning and tracking of preparedness are not as advanced as in previous EoY Assessment Events

The demands caused by the HCM issue have impacted progress on updating and establishing planning and tracking controls. This has been further impacted by the loss of some experienced personnel to support the validation of activities and some resourcing challenges due to the illness of key personnel. As a result, the planning and tracking controls for the EoY Assessment have not progressed as we expected.

EoY Assessment Event preparation and delivery are being tracked using the External Assessment Tracking Calendar (high-level) and the Digital Readiness Tracking Workbook. However, these controls are still being updated to reflect new accountabilities due to the organisational changes and changes made to the Digital Readiness Tracking Workbook. The Workbook is being adapted to track broader assessment readiness, whereas previously the Operational Readiness Plan was used as a consolidated tracking tool. This creates a considerable risk that emerging risks and issues may not be identified effectively, especially given the other distractions in the environment.

Review and confirmation of activities within the Readiness Tracking Workbook should not be the responsibility of one person. Instead, it should involve collaboration among functional leaders working together to confirm a list of key activities and milestones that reflect the critical path leading up to and through the EoY Assessment Event.

The current tracking tools do not accurately reflect the current issue and risk profile. Several areas in the Digital Readiness Tracking Workbook are rated 'green,' but would more accurately be rated

‘amber’ given the impact of the current issues or incomplete state of refinement. An example of this inaccuracy is reflected in the tracking of ECM and ECO training activity. We have observed risks to on-time delivery including instances of some specialist workforce leaving the team.

There are also some areas where activities/milestones are reflected as green even though updates are pending or responsibilities are not yet confirmed. In these cases, we recommend changing the status to amber to indicate that there is a risk the current information may not be up to date.

It is critical that reporting on progress accurately reflects risks and issues to ensure that informed decisions can be made on prioritisation and resource investment. Reinforcing a no-blame culture (through consistent messaging and behaviours) to support early identification of risks and emerging issues is a key way leadership and senior personnel can maintain a high performing, collaborative environment through a period of heightened pressure.

Recommendation: Revise, update, and baseline activities within the Readiness Tracking Workbook to ensure appropriate coverage of critical activities, clear roles and responsibilities across the activities being tracked, and at-risk activities are appropriately reflected through the RAG status.

Recommendation: Leadership should reinforce (through messaging and behaviour) a no-blame culture and encourage transparency to support early identification of risks and emerging issues.

Digitisation of the exams looks to be behind schedule and will push out the quality testing activities

The tracking information provided and feedback from review interviewees highlighted that although paper-based assessments are on track, the digitisation of assessment content is behind schedule. Delays in the digitisation of exams will reduce the time available for testing the assessment content on the platform and for resolving any issues relating to content and candidate experience. This area may need additional oversight to ensure risks are managed as effectively as possible and that the quality assurance of assessment delivered on the Assessment Master solution is resourced appropriately.

We note that the recommendation from the September assessment review (relating to reviewing and confirming responsibilities and resourcing for testing assessments within the assessment system to verify user experience) has not yet been resolved. We have included this in our ‘previous unresolved recommendations’ outlined below.

Risks associated with knowledge and experience loss need to be actively managed

The impact of the organisational changes, specifically the loss of highly experienced people and subject matter leaders, has been mentioned by nearly all review interviewees as a critical risk for the 2024 EoY Assessment Event.

This risk is not captured in the Risk & Issue Register provided. As a result, it is unclear what actions or mitigations have been put in place, or whether there are any plans to manage the risk around key roles that have been impacted. Not having this information in the risk register makes the gross and net risk magnitude unclear.

Recommendation: Include the risk associated with critical personnel loss in the risk register with management actions relating to specific roles impacted.

The technical solutions are on track to be ready for the EoY Assessments

The decision to defer the latest releases for the Assessment Master and RM Assessor applications until after the EoY Assessment Event was appropriate and has assisted in managing the risk profile of the 2024 EoY Assessment. This decision has been especially beneficial given the abovementioned issues and risks.

Given the successful functional testing and use of the current version of Assessment Master for the September assessment, there is a justifiable level of confidence in the functional quality of the solution leading into the EoY Assessment period.

Assessment Master performance under load is still a concern for many stakeholders interviewed. Changes have been made in the solution during the year to improve performance. Testing and monitoring the Assessment Master during the September assessment event has demonstrated that these changes have resulted in performance improvements. The Assessment Master performance testing was underway during the review and will provide confidence that the solution can support loads higher than will be experienced during the largest assessment (NCEA Level 1 English).

The current production version of the RM Assessor software has also been tested successfully since deployment. This provides confidence that this solution is ready to support the marking of EoY Assessments.

Some additional eQA changes are expected to be deployed before the Change Freeze commences. The NZQA IS team will test and deploy these releases using a well-proven internal delivery approach. The release will be deployed during the week commencing 21 October, leaving some time to resolve issues, if any arise.

As the September Assessment Readiness Review mentioned, we consider the testing coverage appropriate for the external assessment technology environment. We also support further development of test automation capabilities to drive greater efficiencies in the solution development pipelines. As previously recommended, the Test Strategy for external assessment technology should be reviewed and updated to reflect the current testing intent and business needs to guide further investment.

It is positive to see the increase in virtual marking panels, which will release additional value from the investment in digital marking

Increasing the use of virtual marking panels (to 97% for the 2024 EoY Assessments) provides greater flexibility for engaging markers and is expected to save in travel and accommodation costs. This is an excellent example of where the use of technology, such as RM Assessor and contemporary collaboration tools, can effectively support assessment events.

There is a recognition across the National Assessment Facilitation team that there will be challenges in setting up and supporting the larger scale adoption of virtual marking panels. To manage the risk of technical challenges disrupting the marking schedule, the team have updated the documents within the Marking section of the Accessible Repository for External Assessment (AREA) secure SharePoint site to provide additional guidance to the marking workforce.

Updates to Business Continuity and Critical Incident Plans should be confirmed

Business Continuity and Critical Incident Plans were not provided for review, so we could not confirm that they had been updated. This should be confirmed as soon as possible, as updates should be made to manage the risk of confusion in a disruptive event.

Comprehensive Business Continuity Plans and Critical Incident Plans have been evidenced in previous reviews. Hence, if updates are required, we expect these to be relatively minor changes to reflect new roles and responsibilities rather than being significant updates to the documents.

Recommendation: Review and update Business Continuity and Critical Incident Plans to ensure they accurately reflect the current operating environment.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

NEW RECOMMENDATIONS

- EOYR01** **Avoid transfer of issues and risks resulting from the management of the HCM issues (High Priority)** - NZQA leadership must ensure that supporting the management of the HCM issues doesn't put additional pressure on other areas of EoY Assessment preparation and delivery. For example, if additional personnel for the contact centre are sourced from business units that need to complete other EoY Assessment preparation or support functions, later activities in the assessment process may be impacted.
- EOYR02** **Promote cross-functional awareness through strengthening engagement in collaboration events and approaches (High Priority)** – Maintaining and, in some cases, strengthening engagement in collaboration events and approaches will manage the risk of teams reverting to working in silos and will support rapid identification and quantification of risks and emerging issues.
- EOYR03** **Confirm and communicate the support organisation, roles and responsibilities and support process documentation updates. (Immediate Priority)** – Several review interviewees stated that they were unclear on how the Tier 2 support would be delivered for the EoY Assessments given the outcomes of the recent organisational change. Understanding how the functions previously provided by the Tier 2 support team is important to clarify and communicate as it will likely impact the load on the Tier 3+ support groups, who will need to ensure appropriate capacity is in place. Clarifying Tier 2 support will also impact Tier 1 resourcing and preparations since triage and escalation processes will likely need to change.
- EOYR04** **Revise, update and baseline activities within the Readiness Tracking Workbook (Immediate Priority)** – This activity must be completed as soon as practicable to ensure appropriate coverage of critical activities, clear roles and responsibilities across the activities being tracked, and at-risk activities are appropriately reflected through the RAG status. Review and confirmation of activities should not be the responsibility of one person but a collaboration of functional leaders.
- EOYR05** **Leadership should reinforce (through messaging and behaviour) a no-blame culture and encourage transparency to support early identification of risks and emerging issues (High Priority)** - It is critical that reporting on progress accurately reflects risks and issues to ensure that informed decisions can be made on prioritisation and resource investment. Reinforcing a no-blame culture (through consistent messaging and behaviours) to support early identification of risks and emerging issues is a key way leadership and senior personnel can maintain a high performing, collaborative environment through a period of heightened pressure.
- EOYR06** **Include the risk associated with key personnel loss in the risk register with management actions relating to specific roles impacted (Medium Priority)** – The risk associated with the loss of key personnel, knowledge and experience in the organisational change process was raised by interviewees as a critical concern throughout the review interviews. Yet, this risk is not present in the risk register. There is a strong awareness of this risk, and it should be formalised in the risk register with appropriate management activities.
- EOYR07** **Confirm business continuity plans have been updated to reflect organisational changes (Immediate Priority)** – Business Continuity Plans and Critical Incident Plans

should accurately reflect the current operating environment to reduce the risk of confusion in a disruption event.

PREVIOUS UNRESOLVED RECOMMENDATIONS

- REC02** **Confirm a conditional Authority to Operate for the September assessment (High Priority)** - A conditional Authority to Operate will ensure known security vulnerabilities are clearly articulated to support an informed authorisation and clear accountability accepting any residual security risks.
- REC03** **Review and confirm responsibility and resourcing for testing assessments within the assessment system to verify user experience (High Priority)** - The need for user experience testing was highlighted in the May assessment event, as content not presented in the way intended created student confusion and subsequent additional work for NZQA to adjust marking results. Which business unit is responsible for executing this testing type is currently unclear. This type of testing needs to be carried out from the end user's perspective (the learner), but the tester must also have a strong understanding of the assessment context and the assessment creator's intent.
- REC05** **Improve performance metrics and monitoring across the end-to-end delivery to identify and actively manage delivery disruptions (Medium Priority)** – With no end-to-end view of the sequencing of key activities for delivering the digital assessment event, it is difficult to get a consolidated view of the performance of each delivery component involved in preparing for and delivering a digital assessment. Pulling together this view and understanding each of the components that make up this view offers several benefits, including:
- Helps develop the contributing team's awareness of how their work contributes to technical readiness and delivery and how it impacts other teams.
 - Identifies all the work necessary to deliver the digital assessment event and how it contributes to the end outcomes of a successful assessment event.
 - Assists in identifying how the performance of each component impacts the technical readiness and delivery and supports prioritisation of investment in performance improvement.
- REC06** **Review and update the Test Strategy to ensure it reflects the needs of the current state (Medium Priority)** – The NCEA Online Test Strategy has not been updated since 2022 and reflects the needs of the NCEA Online programme rather than the needs of the current operational environment. The current Test Strategy strongly focuses on delivering the technical systems rather than a more holistic view of the digital assessment solution, which also includes processes, data and assessment content that should be verified and tested to support readiness.

MANAGEMENT COMMENT

The 2024 EoY Assessment Readiness Review is the second part of a three-stage review process that we have proactively instigated to ensure that we have a robust independent review of our existing systems, process, communications as we lead into the 2024 exam period. We appreciate the effort that our internal teams have gone to so that the IQANZ reviewer has been able to provide a review, assessment and findings relating to the areas that have been identified for NZQA to address

particularly those that have been identified as a High Priority. We have already begun to address some of the High Priority areas and will be working with urgency to ensure that there are mitigations in place prior to the live exam round.

SIGNOFF

Sheryl Ching
Chief Operating Officer, Assessment Delivery
New Zealand Qualifications Authority

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9(2)(a)
Lead Reviewer
IQA New Zealand Limited

22/10/2024

REVIEW PARTICIPANTS

We would like to the following review participants for their contribution to the EOY Assessment Readiness Review.

- Sheryl Ching
- Alan Bailey
- Neda Sal
- Jackie Ryan
- Lana Waterhouse
- Stephanie Slack
- Amanda Picken
- Frank Moran
- Andrew Macklin
- Wititoria Osborne
- Keri-Ann Stephens
- Natash Ropata
- Nehi Tukapua
- Wiremu Chrisp
- Uma Muthukrishnan
- Saroj Ranasinghe
- Tan Xin Wei
- Stephen Mair
- Norbert Lee
- Sarah De Graaff
- Lynette Jones
- Richard Li
- John Berry
- Andrew Wood
- Paul Fernyhough
- Luke Waring
- Steve Bargh
- Joanna Pilcher
- Catherine Edser
- Matt Hesson
- 9(2)(a) (RM)
- 9(2)(a) (RM)