

Aide-Memoire: Preparations for 2024 End of Year Examinations

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| To: | Hon Erica Stanford, Minister of Education |
| From: | Dr Grant Klinkum, Chief Executive |
| Date: | 22 October 2024 |
| Reference: | OC01283 |

Purpose

1. This aide memoire provides you with an overview of NZQA's preparations for the upcoming 2024 End-of-Year NCEA and New Zealand (NZ) Scholarship examination period.
2. NZQA will proactively release this briefing as part of the next publication of documents, once examinations have finished.

Background

3. The 2024 End of Year examination period¹ will commence on Tuesday 5 November 2024 and conclude on Friday 29 November 2024. Preparations are all on track and detailed in this briefing.
4. The key statistics for the examination period include:
 - a. approximately 152,000 students entered for NCEA and NZ Scholarship examinations;
 - b. 121 examination sessions for NCEA and NZ Scholarship;
 - c. around 1.7 million examination booklets printed;
 - d. 465 examination centres established, including 71 in kura, six in the Cook Islands, one on Niue, three in prisons, two Special Centres and three in Regional Health Schools;
 - e. around 40,000 students entered for NCEA Level 1 English, the largest session; and
 - f. around 6,700 examination staff and 1,400 contracted markers.
5. Our largest examination cohort is Level 1 English, to be held on 12 November, with just over 31,000 digital entries out of 40,000 students. The digital platform performed well during the NCEA co-requisite assessments with no issues. This follows enhancements to improve the platform's capacity by the vendor and the alignment of our testing regimes. Our testing confirms the platform can support 35,000 concurrent users.
6. NCEA results will be released on 15 January 2025 and NZ Scholarship results released on 11 February 2025. You will be provided with a briefing about Provisional 2023 NCEA and

¹ The 2024 Examination Timetable is available on our website,
<https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/assets/NCEA/2024-Timetable-FINAL-4-3-24.pdf>

University Entrance attainment statistics prior to results release. We will be in contact regarding any external communications at that time.

7. Details about NCEA results release day and NZ Scholarship results release day will be published and schools advised in early December, once examinations have finished.

Discussion

Quality assurance

8. 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 and marking of examinations.
9. NZQA's short-term contracted workforce comprising Examination Centre Managers and Examination Centre Officers are provided with resources and training to cover the examination period. We contract this workforce to ensure a high level of experience and expertise is maintained each year.
10. In addition, the following actions are undertaken to ensure the smooth running of examinations:
 - a. A freeze from October until mid-January on any changes to Information Technology systems relating to End-of-Year assessments, unless approved by exception.
 - b. Network for Learning (N4L) work with network providers during the examination period, to request a pause or reduction to routine maintenance on the fibre infrastructure outside the school gate. This is to limit the risk of outages that might impact a school's ability to undertake digital examinations.
 - c. Monitoring of the Information Technology vendor's performance of the digital platform at all stages.
11. NZQA has been implementing the recommendations from the internal and external reviews of the 2023 platform issue. We report to the Board on progress every month and publish a summary of progress on NZQA's website.
12. IQANZ is reviewing our readiness to deliver external examinations. Throughout the process the reviewer has provided regular updates and highlighted any emerging risks or issues. To date, we have received positive feedback about our technical readiness for the delivery of digital assessment on the platform.
13. The reviewer has identified challenges with the new recruitment and payroll processes. We have provided you with a separate update on progress to onboard our examination workforce (examination centre managers, examination centre officers, and assistants) [OC01284 refers].
14. The IQANZ second phase report will be finalised by 25 October 2024.

Preparation and support for assessment

15. In the lead up to the examination period, weekly, then daily meetings occur to monitor all elements of the examination cycle. These meetings are part of the governance and oversight processes to ensure that every aspect of the examination cycle is closely monitored and managed.
16. Since late 2023, when the issues with the platform occurred, we have been working closely with the vendor. This includes aligning our functional and performance testing to align with our operating requirements. We also validate our testing requirements following each assessment event.
17. Prior to an assessment event, we have a 'go-live' process in place to ensure all aspects of delivering digital assessments work as expected.

18. As mentioned in our fortnightly updates and in paragraph 5, the platform performance is well within what will be required to meet demand for our largest examination cohort, Level 1 English. This follows the delivery of intra-year NCEA co-requisite assessments and performance testing which shows that 6,000 logins per minute and 35,000 concurrent users can be supported.
19. These thresholds are a little lower than for NCEA co-requisites because of the 'richer' content in end of year exams. For illustrative purposes, the maximum number of logins per minute for the corequisites was 1,234. Therefore, a threshold a 6,000 per minute is considered more than sufficient. It should also be noted that attendance at exams is routinely 20% lower than entries and therefore the 31,000 figure for NCEA L1 English, referred to in paragraph 5 in practice will be approximately 25,000.
20. As part of our Business Continuity Planning, all students entered in a digital assessment will continue to receive back-up personalised examination papers. Students sitting their assessment can decide at any time to complete their assessment on paper. This option, along with derived grades, would be used in the event of platform failure.
21. During the examination period, our contact centre will have a dedicated examination line in place to ensure that any queries in relation to examination support are prioritised. Network for Learning also monitors school connections and provides network support for some schools.

Training of Examination Centre staff

22. Training for Examination Centre staff was strengthened following last year's digital assessment platform issues and in response to the External Review. New content was designed to support Examination Centre Managers (ECMs) in delivering digital external assessments and to provide trouble shooting advice when there are issues with students sitting digital assessment or the platform itself.
23. As of 15 October 2024, we have conducted 28 regional in-person training sessions for ECMs. Feedback is being sought from participants prior to the commencement of the examination period to ensure any outstanding issues are addressed and to inform future training materials.
24. In 2025, we will be redesigning the training programme to further upskill ECMs in delivering digital external assessments.

Business continuity planning

25. 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 provides a valid 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 the two grades. We may apply a 'derived grade at scale' where a group of candidates is significantly disadvantaged by unexpected circumstances beyond their control, such as an earthquake.
26. As part of our preparations, our planning considers disruption by unforeseen events to examinations either nationally, regionally, or locally.
 - a. In the event of large-scale disruption, due to the far-reaching consequences that rescheduling would have across the system, we will not reschedule NCEA examinations. The derived grades process will be used to manage the impact on students.
 - b. In exceptional circumstances, we may reschedule a NZ Scholarship examination, as these examinations are competitive, and the derived grade process cannot be used.

New Human Capital Management System – digitising how we manage our specialist workforce

27. In August this year, we extended our new Human Capital Management System, that manages recruitment, payment and claims processing, to our examination workforce. This brings

management of the approximately 7,500 examinations personnel into the same online systems as other NZQA staff, supporting consistent and compliant processes.

- 28. We have provided you with separate updates on this activity [OC01239 and OC01284 refer].
- 29. We will continue to update you on this matter through daily situation reports and fortnightly reporting.

Communications with schools and Examination Centres

- 30. Schools were advised of important dates and processes for the End-of-Year examinations through the 15 October EmailLink² to Principals' Nominees. We are also holding online information sessions for Principals' Nominees to check-in and guide them with End-of-Year processes. Additionally, our School Relationship Managers continue to engage with schools and their Principals' Nominees on a responsive individualised basis.
- 31. We are also maintaining regular communication with our Examination Centre Managers, with daily updates during the examination period, including a text messaging system to alert them of any issues that need their immediate attention before or during an exam session.

Next steps

- 32. Our Communications Team has been working with your office regarding external communications and they have been provided with a communications pack which includes a draft press release.
- 33. We will keep you updated on the delivery of external examinations through our fortnightly reporting. The next formal briefing will follow the examination period but prior to results release in January.



Dr Grant Klinkum

Chief Executive, NZQA
22 October 2024

Hon Erica Stanford

Minister of Education

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² Regular communications providing information for Principals' Nominees about any changes and upcoming deadlines.