

Aide-Memoire: 2019 NCEA and NZ Scholarship Examination Round

To:	Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister of Education
From:	Dr Karen Poutasi, Chief Executive
Date:	18 October 2019
Reference:	CR19475

Purpose

1. This aide-memoire is to brief you on the preparations for the 2019 NCEA and New Zealand Scholarship (Scholarship) examination round including our business continuity planning.
2. NZQA proposes to proactively release a redacted version of this briefing in line with our commitment to open and transparent government.

Discussion

Key Statistics

3. The NCEA and Scholarship examination round commences on Friday 8 November and finishes on Tuesday 3 December 2019. The headline statistics for the upcoming round include:
 - o approximately 140,000 students are entered to sit NCEA and Scholarship examinations¹
 - o as of this date more than 21,000 students from 210 schools are entered to sit at least one examination digitally
 - o 119 examination sessions are scheduled
 - o approximately 1.6 million examination booklets will be printed
 - o 413 examination centres are established to date, which includes seven in Cook Islands, one in Niue, two prisons and three health schools
 - o the largest session is Level 1 English, with approximately 46,300 students
 - o approximately 6,000 examination staff are being contracted
 - o approximately 1,630 markers are being contracted
 - o marking will be completed by Christmas

¹ Total student numbers are approximately 172,000 when internally assessed standard entries are included.

- results will be released mid-January for NCEA and early February for New Zealand Scholarship².

Stages of the Examination Round

4. The table below provides a timeline for the critical stages of the examination round.

Stage	Timing	Additional Information
1. Examination Development	March 2018 – October 2019	This is an 18-month cycle whereby development is also underway for the following year's examinations
2. Printing and Personalisation of papers	August - October	Approximately 1.6 million ³ examination booklets
3. Distribution to examination centres	From October	Approximately 5,500 boxes of examination materials
4. Students sitting examinations	8 November – 3 December	Approximately 140,000 students entered for NCEA and New Zealand Scholarship examinations
5. Marking	Completed before Christmas	NZQA contracts approximately 1,630 markers
6. Results release	NCEA: mid-January New Zealand Scholarship: early February	Results released online for approximately 172,000 students ⁴
7. Papers returned to candidates	NCEA: from third week of January Scholarship: from early February	Approximately one million examination booklets are sent back to students
8. Reviews and reconsiderations process⁵	NCEA: from third week of January to mid-February NZ Scholarship: from early February to early March	NZQA continues to process reviews and reconsiderations that are submitted late on a case by case basis. Usually until May

Progress Update

NZQA's preparations for the examination round are progressing to plan.

² NZQA confirms the dates to the sector and students prior to Christmas once the round is well progressed.

³ Buffer packs are printed in case students arrive at an examination centre where they don't have personalised papers.

⁴ For the 2018 results release, approx. 85,700 students logged in to check their results on the day they were released and approximately 8,000 calls were made to NZQA's expanded call centre.

⁵ Review – all sections of examination booklets are checked to ensure they are marked and results correctly recorded and transferred.
Reconsideration – involves re-marking the assessment.

Common Assessment Tasks (CATs)

5. Prior to the external examination round, schools are involved in implementing Common Assessment Tasks (CATs). CATs allow externally assessed achievement standards to be assessed outside of the November examination period.
6. Since 2011 there has been a Mathematics Common Assessment Task (MCAT) for a single Level 1 Mathematics standard; 91027 (Apply algebraic procedures in solving problems). This year, students sat the MCAT in secondary schools on 17 and 19 September 2019.
7. Since 2018 there have been CATs in Level 1 Digital Technologies, and Levels 1-3 of Korean, Cook Islands Māori and Lea Faka-Tonga. These have extended to the assessment of Levels 2 and 3 Digital Technologies in 2019.
8. The CATs are set by NZQA. The Digital Technologies CATs, which are being held between 16 and 27 September, and 14 and 29 October, are marked by NZQA markers; the Mathematics and Cook Islands Māori CATs are marked by teachers and their marker judgements are verified by NZQA verifiers.
9. The language CATs were undertaken in schools, under examination conditions, at prescribed times between 18 and 19 September 2019. The Lea Faka Tonga and Korean CATs will be marked by NZQA markers for the first time in 2019.

Digital Examinations

10. This year 14 subjects are being examined digitally. This means that there will be digital examinations on all but one day, where those students will be typing their answers on laptops and computers using a digital platform, rather than writing their answers into a printed booklet.
11. As at this date more than 21,000 students from 210 schools have entered to sit at least one of the 14 subjects being offered digitally across Levels 1, 2 and 3, although we expect these entries to reduce as not all schools and students who enter will participate. After five years of trialling and piloting, digital examinations have become a mainstream option for NCEA end of year examinations as NZQA continues its planned and staged scaling up of online examinations.
12. Prior to the formal decision to proceed with digital examinations this year, NZQA has in place a rigorous go-live decision process that ensures all aspects of digital assessment readiness, including school, NZQA, technical and data readiness have been accounted for.
13. This informs a final decision to "Go-Live" by NZQA's Strategic Management Team, following recommendation by the NCEA Online Programme Board. The NZQA Board will be asked to endorse the final decision.
14. The digital option is being offered alongside paper booklets. Students can choose at any time, before or during the examination to revert to their personalised paper, if they change their mind or are unable to complete the examination digitally for other reasons (such as device failure).
15. NZQA has a comprehensive change management process in place and has been supporting students and schools to get ready for digital examinations. We have provided preparation assistance including practice activities and access to past examinations for students. Support for schools has included training for staff in staging digital

examinations, through both well-attended webinars and face-to-face training and written guidance on preparing examination rooms. It also includes training for staff in checking their internet capability and devices (be they school or student owned) to ensure they are compliant.

16. In addition, Network for Learning is working with schools and their IT providers, particularly those with less experience in staging digital exams, to enable schools to develop a better understanding of their technical readiness.
17. During the examination period, NZQA will have structured help desk facilities to support schools regarding digital examination management. This includes on-site support from the digital assessment vendors and support from Network for Learning, who will be monitoring the Managed Network Services for digital assessment schools and making themselves available to support school IT people if required for in-school issues.
18. NZQA is adopting a staged approach to its NCEA Online programme and will be further expanding the range of subjects offered next year. As technology evolves, NZQA will offer those subjects where special characters are required, such as mathematics, science subjects and music.

Quality Assurance

19. NZQA has comprehensive quality assurance processes in place across all stages of examination development, marking, and results processing to underpin fair, valid and reliable assessment of students.

Management of the Examination Round

20. NZQA's control environment is supported by established processes including the following:
 - Daily management governance and oversight to monitor all elements of the examination cycle.
 - An organisation-wide change freeze on all information technology systems changes that could impact on the examination cycle, from late October until late January each year. Network for Learning is also working with network providers to request any routine maintenance on the fibre infrastructure outside the school gate is paused or minimised during the examination period to limit the risk of outages that might impact on a school's ability to undertake digital examinations.
 - Strict procedures and training systems for the externally contracted workforce. NZQA manages this workforce to ensure a high level of experience and expertise is maintained each year.
 - Monitoring of vendor performance at all stages.

Business Continuity Plans (BCP) during External Examinations

21. NZQA has continued to strengthen Business Continuity Plans for managing the examinations. These have been reviewed and strengthened through the year including BCP for NCEA Online. Key elements of the BCP include:

Initial Activation

- The activation process is designed to ensure that you receive immediate advice on NZQA's response, and that your office, the Ministry of Education, and key stakeholders are kept informed following an emergency event. A copy of this process is attached for your information.

Incident Management

- NZQA has a structured incident management process to manage an emergency response, and action plans with clear roles and responsibilities.

Communications systems

- Systems are in place for onsite and remotely activated communications for web, email and text communications to Principals, Principal's Nominees, and Examination Centres.

Information Technology

- NZQA has established procedures and plans in place for disaster recovery and business continuance. Regular scheduled failover⁶ and disaster recovery testing is carried out throughout the year and simulated Business Continuity Planning events allow for an end-to-end test of processes and systems.

Auckland

- Experienced staff are relocated to Auckland during the examination period to coordinate our response in the event that telecommunications from Wellington are disrupted. Staff would work closely with the Ministry of Education's Auckland office in that event. This year, staff from the NCEA Online team are also being relocated to Auckland to ensure schools undertaking digital assessment can continue to be supported if required.

Confirmation of Vendor BCP Readiness

- NZQA requests confirmation from our print and distribution vendors that they can activate their business continuity plans, if required, and we work with vendors to check these plans through the year. For the 2019 examinations, we are also confirming our digital assessment vendors' BCP arrangements.

Unexpected Event Grade Process

22. To minimise any disadvantage to students, NZQA will again use well-established processes for schools to submit results to NZQA in advance of the examination round if required, following a significant event affecting part(s) of the country. These processes have been used following the Christchurch and Kaikoura earthquakes, and have been further improved this year.

⁶ *failover* is switching to a redundant or standby computer server, system, hardware component or network upon the failure or abnormal termination of the previously active application, server, system, hardware component, or network

23. NZQA changed the term Emergency Grade to Unexpected Event Grade this year to better describe the process used for situations where schools apply for derived grades for a large group of students.
24. The purpose of the unexpected event grade is to minimise any impact on students if they are unable to take part in all or some of the national end-of-year NCEA examinations following a significant event. NZQA is unable to reschedule NCEA examinations due to the far-reaching consequences across the system.
25. The unexpected event grade is based on standard specific evidence that may come from practice examinations or from evidence gathered from assessment activities during the teaching and learning process. Schools advise students to take these practice examinations seriously as the results may be used to support a derived grade application where, for example, a student is unable to attend their examination because of illness.
26. In the event of disruption to examinations through a local emergency, schools can use the grade they have derived from practice examinations or other assessments as the basis of a bulk application for unexpected event grades under a streamlined administrative process developed by NZQA specifically for these circumstances. Students can achieve with Merit or Excellence through both the derived and unexpected event grade processes.
27. The unexpected event grade process does not apply for New Zealand Scholarship examinations as these are competitive examinations. NZQA can consider rescheduling a Scholarship examination as the size of the cohorts is relatively small. However, any rescheduling would depend on the circumstances, and the availability of sufficient time (at least five hours) to enable communications to all examination centres to ensure that the integrity of the examination was not compromised. NZQA is not able to reschedule NCEA examinations because of the scale of NCEA and the national disruption this would cause.
28. NZQA has plans in place to manage situations that may arise from the measles outbreak. The derived grade and unexpected event grade processes will ensure students can achieve an authentic grade if they are unable to sit one or more scheduled examinations or their performance is impaired as a result of the event.
29. Our advice to schools about whether a student is well enough to sit their examination is in accordance with the Ministry of Health's advice and this information is on our website. We have provided you with a summary of how we will support and work with schools for situations arising from the measles outbreak (see Appendix 1).

Next steps

30. NZQA will provide your office with the 2019 examination communications plan on 22 October 2019.
31. NZQA will provide a briefing to you in early November outlining the timelines for the release of the NCEA and New Zealand Scholarship results and reporting to the sector.
32. NZQA will provide your office with a breakdown outlining the numbers of students sitting each examination each day by region.

33. NZQA will update you regularly, in our fortnightly update reports, as the examination round progresses.



Karen Poutasi (Dr)
Chief Executive, NZQA

18 October 2019

Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister of Education

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Appendix 1. Measles Outbreak – Examination Management

Key messages

1. NZQA is working with schools under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 (HSWA) and Human Rights Act 1993 in preparation for the 2019 NCEA and NZ Scholarship examinations.
2. NZQA has procedures in place for students, schools and other agencies to manage the measles outbreak.
3. The derived grade and unexpected event grade processes will be used to ensure students can receive an authentic grade for their work if they are not able to sit one or more of their examinations.

Communications to schools

4. NZQA has contacted all schools to remind them of the process for notifying NZQA of the unexpected event and derived grade to be awarded to any student/s who are precluded from school/examinations following an outbreak of measles at their school.
5. Candidates entered for NZ Scholarship examinations who are precluded from school/examinations following an outbreak of measles at their school will not be able to sit the NZ Scholarship examinations they are entered for during the quarantine period. There is no derived grade process for NZ Scholarship examinations.
6. To help ensure that no examination centre staff, school staff, students or other individuals who may come into contact with the examination centre are exposed to measles at examination centres or risk spreading measles (having been exposed prior), NZQA is working with schools through the Examination Centre Managers (ECM) to ensure that each examination centre has a documented communication plan should there be a measles outbreak at their school. This communication plan will need to include students scheduled to sit an examination at a school that they do not usually attend.
7. NZQA will re-issue communications to schools in the lead up to examinations.

Key principles

8. The Health and Safety requirements of schools and NZQA, and the advice from Public Health will guide procedures and any decisions.
9. Schools, along with the local Medical Officer of Health are responsible for the preclusion of students from school, and therefore preclusion from examinations, if they believe on reasonable grounds the student/s may have measles and pose a public health risk.
10. Any unique circumstances that affect an individual's attendance at an examination will be dealt with on a case by case basis, following these principles.