

## **Aide-Memoire: 2020 NCEA and New Zealand Scholarship Examination Round**

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<b>To:</b>	Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister of Education
<b>From:</b>	Dr Grant Klinkum, Chief Executive
<b>Date:</b>	6 November 2020
<b>Reference:</b>	CR21130

### **Purpose**

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1. This aide-memoire is to brief you on the preparations for the 2020 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**

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#### **2020 Examination Round in the context of COVID-19**

3. The NCEA and New Zealand Scholarship examination round is scheduled to start on Monday 16 November and finish on Wednesday 9 December 2020. The start date reflects the decision on 13 May 2020 to delay examinations by 10 days, to give students more time to prepare due to COVID-19 disruptions.

#### **Planning for the Examination Round**

4. COVID-19 Alert Levels 1 – 4 may fluctuate for New Zealand or within regions between now and the end of the examination round. This year preparations are taking account of the possibility of disruptions to examinations nationally, regionally, or school-by-school, due to a resurgence of COVID-19. NZQA has worked with the Ministries of Health and Education to ensure planning is in place for a wide range of scenarios.
5. Planning has also included the consideration of how best to address the potential impact on student performance due to further disruption to their schooling arising from any change in Alert Levels in Term 4.
6. NZQA is planning to run examinations under Alert Levels 1, 2 and 3. Appropriate health and safety measures agreed by the Ministry of Health for Alert Levels 1 or 2 are in place at examination centres and venues used for sorting and marking examination material.
7. If examinations are held under Alert Level 3 conditions, all students will be encouraged to attend. NZQA anticipates, however, under Alert Level 3 conditions, some students will not

be able to attend given associated health risks, community concerns and difficulty in arranging safe travel to examinations; and some may also have impaired performance.

8. To minimise any disadvantage to students for circumstances beyond their control, NZQA has established processes in place, such as the Unexpected Event Grade (UEG) for large groups of students and Derived Grade processes for individuals.<sup>1</sup> These processes enable students to achieve a grade, if they are not able to sit the examination or whose performance may be impaired due to the event.
9. NZQA is planning to invoke the UEG process for any locality or region that is placed under COVID-19 Alert Level 3 during the examination period.
10. Students who attend an examination under Alert Level 3 will receive the higher of either their examination grade or the UEG.
11. The UEG process will also continue to apply under any alert level for one or more schools that need to close for an extended period, prior to, or during, the examination period.
12. The Derived Grade process will continue to be available to individual students on a case-by-case basis.
13. NZQA is not planning to run NCEA examinations under Alert Level 4. Current restrictions do not make this logistically possible as schools are required to close.
14. It will not be possible to reschedule NCEA examinations under Alert Level 4 because of the scale of NCEA and the widespread disruption this would cause. However, it may be possible to reschedule New Zealand Scholarship examinations to a later date due to the relatively small number of students involved.
15. Marking of examinations under Alert Levels 1 and 2 is expected to be completed by Christmas, with NCEA results ready to be released in late January 2021, and New Zealand Scholarship results ready to be released in early February.
16. Delays to marking, sorting and distributing examination booklets are likely under Alert Level 3, if these restrictions are in place between the examination period and results release. Such a delay would put the results release date at risk. Where possible, NZQA will prioritise NCEA Levels 3 and 2 marking and results processing, to minimise impacts on learners progressing to tertiary studies and employment.

### **Key statistics for 2020 Examinations planning**

17. The key statistics reflecting the scope of examinations planning include:
  - approximately 140,000 students entered for NCEA and Scholarship examinations.<sup>2</sup>
  - 120 examination sessions scheduled.
  - more than 35,000 students from 292 schools entered for at least one examination digitally.
  - 21 subjects to be examined digitally in 58 examination sessions.
  - around 1.6 million examination booklets printed.
  - 415 examination centres established, including seven in the Cook Islands, one on Niue, two in prisons and three in Regional Health Schools.
  - around 34,300 students entered for NCEA Level 1 English, the largest session.
  - around 6,000 examination staff and 1,630 markers being contracted.

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<sup>1</sup> Assessment (including Examination) Rules for Schools with Consent to Assess 2020: Rule 7.1.5 Derived Grade, and Rule 7.1.6 Unexpected Event Grade.

<sup>2</sup> Total student numbers are approximately 172,000 when internally assessed standard entries are included.

## Stages of the Examination Round

18. The following table provides a timeline for the critical stages of the examination round, subject to any large-scale changes that may arise.

Stage	Timing	Additional Information
1. Examination Development	March 2019 – October 2020	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 examination booklets
3. Distribution to examination centres	From November	Approximately 5,500 boxes of examination materials
4. Students sitting examinations	16 November – 9 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: late January New Zealand Scholarship: early February	Results released online for approximately 172,000 students (includes internally assessed results for 32,000 students)
7. Papers returned to candidates	NCEA: from late January Scholarship: from early February	Approximately one million examination booklets are sent back to students
8. Reviews and reconsiderations process <sup>3</sup>	NCEA: from late January to mid-February NZ Scholarship: from early February to early March	

## Progress update

19. Preparations for the examination round are progressing to plan, despite COVID-19 disruptions.
20. NZQA has been in regular contact with schools informing them of how they can best organise their NCEA and Scholarship examinations; and prepare to provide accurate and current results for the UEG, should circumstances require.

## Common Assessment Tasks (CATs)

21. Many schools are involved in delivering Common Assessment Tasks (CATs). CATs are set by NZQA; and allow externally assessed NCEA achievement standards to be assessed before the November examination period.
22. Since 2011 there has been a Mathematics Common Assessment Task (MCAT) for a single NCEA Level 1 Mathematics standard; 91027 (Apply algebraic procedures in solving

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

problems). This year, 26,019 students were entered for the MCAT on 15 and 17 September 2020.

23. CATs were introduced in 2018 for NCEA Level 1 Digital Technologies and extended to Levels 2 and 3 Digital Technologies in 2019. CATs were introduced for NCEA Levels 1 – 3 Korean, Lea Faka-Tonga, and Cook Islands Māori during the last three years.
24. The Mathematics CATs are marked by teachers and their marker judgements are externally verified by NZQA verifiers. The Digital Technologies, Cook Islands Māori, Lea Faka-Tonga and Korean CATs are marked by NZQA markers.

## **Digital Examinations**

25. In 2020, 21 subjects are being examined digitally in 58 examination sessions. This is an increase from 2019 of 14 subjects and 35 sessions respectively. This means there will be digital examinations every day, where those students will be typing their answers on laptops and computers using a digital platform, rather than writing answers into a printed booklet.
26. As at this date, more than 35,000 students from 292 schools have entered to sit at least one of the 21 subjects being offered digitally across Levels 1, 2 and 3. This is an increase in entries of 14.7% since 2019. The number of students who will finish with a digital result is expected to reduce, just as it does for paper-based examinations, as not all schools and students who enter will participate.
27. NZQA has a rigorous go-live decision process in place to ensure all aspects of digital assessment readiness, including school, NZQA, technical and data readiness are accounted for.
28. The digital option is available to students 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.
29. NZQA has a comprehensive change management process in place and has been supporting students and schools to get ready for digital examinations. Students have had access to practice activities and to past examinations. Students have also been advised through various channels to get and test their student logon before the digital examinations. This logon will also enable them to see their marked digital responses and their Record of Achievement.
30. 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 (both school and student owned) to ensure these are compliant.
31. Network for Learning is working with schools and its IT providers, particularly those with less experience in staging digital examinations. Some schools are receiving assistance with technical readiness, while support is available for all schools to develop a better understanding of their technical readiness.
32. During the examination period, NZQA will have structured help desk facilities to support schools to manage the digital examinations process. This includes on-site support from Network for Learning, which will be monitoring the Managed Network Services for digital assessment schools; and supporting school IT people for in-school issues, as needed.

## Quality Assurance

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

## Management of the Examination Round

34. 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 IT systems changes that could impact the examination cycle from late October until late January.
  - Network for Learning working with network providers to request a pause or reduction to routine maintenance on the fibre infrastructure outside the school gate during the examination period, to limit the risk of outages that might impact 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, which includes printing, distributing examination papers; and providing platforms for digital examinations, and for marking them.

## Business Continuity Planning for External Examinations

35. NZQA is continuing to review and strengthen business continuity planning for managing the examinations, including for NCEA Online.
36. NZQA's Business Continuity Plans (BCPs) have been updated to include the procedures for running examinations under COVID-19 Alert Levels 1, 2, and 3 to meet the current restrictions for Alert Level 3 as the standard approach for 2020 examinations.
37. Each Examination Centre is also required to update their BCPs to manage under Alert Levels 1 – 3.
38. Key elements of business continuity planning include the following activities:

### *Initial Activation*

- The activation process is designed to ensure that the Minister of Education receives immediate advice on NZQA's response, and that the Office of the Minister of Education, the Ministry of Education, and key stakeholders are kept informed following an emergency event.

### *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 failover<sup>4</sup> and disaster recovery testing is undertaken 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.

### *Confirmation of Vendor BCP Readiness*

- NZQA requests confirmation from our print and distribution vendors that they can activate their business continuity plans, if required. NZQA works with vendors to check these plans through the year. NZQA is also confirming our digital assessment vendors' BCP arrangements for the 2020 examinations.

## **Next steps**

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39. NZQA will provide your office with the 2020 examination communications plan.
40. NZQA will provide your office with a breakdown outlining the numbers of students sitting each examination each day by region.
41. NZQA will provide a briefing to you in mid-November outlining the timelines for the release of the NCEA and New Zealand Scholarship results and reporting to the sector.
42. NZQA will update you regularly, in our fortnightly update reports, as the examination round progresses.



**Dr Grant Klinkum**

Pouwhakahaere /Chief Executive  
6 November 2020



**Hon Chris Hipkins**

Minister of Education  
20 / 11 / 2020

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<sup>4</sup> *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.