



NEW ZEALAND QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY
MANA TOHU MĀTAURANGA O AOTEAROA

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2021 NCEA and New Zealand Scholarship Examination Round

Date:	5 November 2021	NZQA Priority:	Medium
Security Level:	In Confidence	Report No.	CR23084

	Action Sought	Deadline
Minister of Education	It is recommended you: a. note the contents of the annual pre-examination round report b. agree/disagree that this report is proactively released after the release of exam results in 2022	

Enclosure/Appendix: No

Round Robin Yes/No

Contact for Telephone Discussion (if required)

Name	Position	Telephone	Cellphone	1 st Contact
Andrea Gray	Deputy Chief Executive – Assessment Division	64 4 463 4264	██████████	√

The following departments/agencies have seen this report:

Ministry of Education Tertiary Education Commission Other (specify)

Minister's Office to Complete:

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 Needs change Withdrawn Overtaken by Events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

Referred to:

Comments:

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2021 NCEA and New Zealand Scholarship Examination Round

Executive Summary

1. The NCEA and New Zealand Scholarship examination round is scheduled to start on Monday 22 November and finish on Tuesday 14 December 2021.
2. This year preparations are taking account of the possibility of further disruptions to examinations nationally, regionally, or school-by-school, due to a resurgence of COVID-19, as well as the disruptions that are ongoing.
3. Planning has also included the consideration of how best to address the potential impact on student performance due to disruption caused by the recent Delta lockdowns.
4. To reflect the COVID disruption in Term 4 when students are normally preparing for examinations, NZQA invoked a regionally based Unexpected Event for Auckland, Waikato and Northland. This is also to alleviate high levels of reported student anxiety arising from the uncertainty surrounding the achievement of qualifications. An Unexpected Event will also be invoked in other regions where students are in Alert Level 3 in Term 4.
5. The key statistics reflecting the scope of examinations planning include:
 - a. approximately 140,000 students entered for NCEA and NZ Scholarship examinations.
 - b. 129 examination sessions for NCEA and Scholarship.
 - c. around 1.7 million examination booklets printed.
 - d. nearly 450 examination centres established, including seven in the Cook Islands, one on Niue, three in prisons and three in Regional Health Schools.
 - e. around 44,600 students entered for NCEA Level 1 English, the largest session.
 - f. around 6,000 examination staff and 1,530 markers being contracted.

Recommended Action

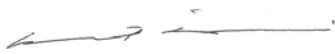
It is recommended you:

- a. **note** the contents of the annual pre-examination round report below

Proactive Release Recommendation

- b. **agree/disagree** that this report is proactively released after the release of exam results in 2022

Agree/Disagree



Dr Grant Klinkum
Chief Executive
5 November 2021



Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister of Education
11/11/2021

2021 NCEA and New Zealand Scholarship Examination Round

Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of this briefing is to update you on the preparations for the upcoming 2021 examination round.

Background

2021 Examination Round in the context of COVID-19

2. The NCEA and New Zealand Scholarship examination round is scheduled to start on Monday 22 November and finish on Tuesday 14 December 2021. The start date reflects the decision on 26 August 2021 to delay examinations by two weeks, to give students more time to prepare due to COVID-19 disruptions.

Planning for the Examination Round

3. COVID-19 alert levels are liable to fluctuate regionally between now and the end of the examination round. There is also recognition that Auckland has endured a significant lockdown starting in August, with Waikato and Northland also facing additional disruptions when compared to the rest of New Zealand. This year preparations are taking account of the possibility of further disruptions to examinations nationally, regionally, or school-by-school, due to a resurgence of COVID-19, as well as the disruptions that are ongoing. NZQA has worked with the Ministries of Health and Education to ensure planning is in place for a wide range of scenarios.
4. Planning has also included the consideration of how best to address the potential impact on student performance due to disruption caused by the recent Delta lockdowns.
5. As announced on 20 October, NZQA is planning to run examinations where schools are open. Senior secondary students in Auckland, Waikato and Northland returned to school on Tuesday 26 October, and so it is currently expected that examinations will run across all of New Zealand.
6. Appropriate health and safety measures agreed by the Ministry of Health will be in place at examination centres and venues used for sorting and marking examination material. These requirements include:
 - a. A gap of 1.5 metres between students in all directions.
 - b. All teachers and other school staff (this extends to NZQA's examination workforce) at secondary schools must have received their first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine by 15 November 2021, unless a medical exemption is provided.
 - c. All exam centre staff, even if fully vaccinated, must receive a negative COVID-19 test no more than 5 days before entering school property for the first time
 - d. Any exam centre workers who are not fully vaccinated will need to complete weekly COVID-19 tests and provide this information to NZQA
 - e. Schools will need to establish a cleaning regime before, between, and after exam sessions.
 - f. Rooms must be sufficiently ventilated
 - g. Additional supervision protocols apply – supervisors should limit themselves to supervising a section of a large room, such as a hall, limit movement between desks, and only attend to candidates with raised hands.

- h. All students and exam supervisors are required to wear face masks while inside the exam room.
7. With examinations being held, 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 mitigate these considerations and to reflect the COVID disruption in Term 4 when students are normally preparing for examinations, NZQA invoked a regionally based Unexpected Event for Auckland, Waikato and Northland. This is also to alleviate high levels of reported student anxiety arising from the uncertainty surrounding the achievement of their qualifications. An Unexpected Event will also be invoked in other regions where students are in Alert Level 3 in Term 4.
9. Each year, schools are required to provide standard specific, quality assured evidence of a student's learning for each externally assessed Achievement Standard entry; the Unexpected Event Grade (UEG) sits as a robust alternative grade if the student is prevented from sitting an examination or their performance is impaired. Our expectation is that students in regions in Alert Level 3 attend the examinations if possible and will then be awarded the best of either grade. However, students in these regions who cannot attend an exam because of a specific COVID-19 disruption will receive their UEG.
10. 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. Under a 'hard' Level 3, where schools are not open, examinations could potentially run in bubbles of 10. This will be logistically taxing for most schools, and so NZQA recommends that examinations in this case would be limited to NCEA Level 3 and New Zealand Scholarship. For students entered for NCEA Level 1 and Level 2, UEGs would be available. If the situation of a 'hard' Alert Level 3 applied, NZQA would provide you with further information and seek your guidance on whether or not to proceed with some or all external exams in a bubble.
11. Marking of examinations under Alert Levels 1 and 2 is expected to be completed by Christmas, with NCEA results ready to be released on 20 January 2022, and New Zealand Scholarship results ready to be released on 10 February 2022. There is likely to be lower than normal attendance at examinations in 2021, particularly in Auckland, Waikato and Northland regions. NZQA Marker Panel Leaders will be advised early in the marking process of large changes by standard in cohort numbers against expected volumes, as background information for the marking process.
12. Delays to marking examinations are possible 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.
13. Low turnout, which is likely to be more common in certain schools and examinations than others, may make some of the hired exam room supervisors unnecessary. It will be impossible to predict in advance which supervisors, if any, will be surplus to requirements, if students are going to have the opportunity to sit examinations. NZQA's expectation is that staff who have been recruited but not needed for a given session will be paid for the minimum of four hours per session. If examinations are cancelled at scale, there may be other options for compensation, but these are not yet finalised.

14. We are also working with a small number of already contracted examination supervision staff whose vaccination status will not enable them to be onsite, or whose decision to be vaccinated is currently unclear. Many of these staff were recruited prior to the announcement of the vaccination requirements. We have contingency plans underway to backfill these staff with others.

Comment

Key statistics for examinations planning

15. The key statistics reflecting the scope of examinations planning include:
- approximately 140,000 students entered for NCEA and NZ Scholarship examinations.
 - 129 examination sessions for NCEA and Scholarship.
 - around 1.7 million examination booklets printed.
 - nearly 450 examination centres established, including seven in the Cook Islands, one on Niue, three in prisons and three in Regional Health Schools.
 - around 44,600 students entered for NCEA Level 1 English, the largest session.
 - around 6,000 examination staff and 1,530 markers being contracted.

Stages of the examination round

16. 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 2020 – October 2021	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 1.7 million examination booklets
3. Distribution to examination centres	From November	Approximately 5,500 boxes of examination materials
4. Students sitting examinations	22 November – 14 December	Approximately 140,000 students entered for NCEA and New Zealand Scholarship examinations
5. Marking	Completed before Christmas	NZQA contracts approximately 1,530 markers
6. Results release	NCEA: 20 January New Zealand Scholarship: 10 February	Results released online for approximately 165,000 Year 11-13 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 ¹	NCEA: from late January to mid-February NZ Scholarship: from early February to early March	

¹ 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.

Progress update

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

Common Assessment Tasks (CATs)

19. 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.
20. 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 problems). This year, students sat the MCAT in secondary schools on 28 and 30 September 2021.
21. Schools that were in alert levels 1 and 2 were expected to make all possible effort to deliver the MCAT. Those in levels 3 or 4 were instructed to use existing processes for determining grades for students who did not or were unable to sit the assessment on the scheduled date.
22. CATs were introduced in 2018 for NCEA Level 1 Digital Technologies and extended to Levels 2 and 3 Digital Technologies in 2019.
23. The Mathematics CATs are marked by teachers and their marker judgements are externally verified by NZQA verifiers. The Digital Technologies CATs are marked by NZQA markers.

Digital examinations

24. NZQA has been trialling and piloting digital examinations for six years on an opt in basis. In 2021, NZQA has been engaging with the sector on the pathway towards “opt-out” for digital examinations and the support required to achieve this.
25. 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.
26. This informs a final decision to “Go-Live” by NZQA’s Strategic Leadership Team, following endorsement by the NCEA Online Programme Board. The NZQA Board is kept informed of progress.
27. 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.
28. In 2021, 24 subjects are being examined digitally in 69 examination sessions, including for the first time a NZ Scholarship level examination (media studies). This is an increase of 3 subjects and 11 sessions respectively from 2020. 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.

29. A significant step-up for NCEA Online in 2021 will be the scanning and subsequent digital marking of most answer booklets across all NCEA external assessments, regardless of whether the examination was available in a digital format.²
30. As at this date, more than 50,000 students from around 350 schools have entered to sit at least one of the 24 subjects being offered digitally across Levels 1, 2 and 3. This is an increase in entries of 78 percent since 2019 and just over 50 percent on 2020 entries. The number of students who will finish with a digital result is expected to reduce, just as it does for paper-based examinations every year, as not all schools and students who enter will participate. This will be exacerbated by the anticipated lower than usual attendance in Auckland.
31. 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.
32. 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. Staff have been trained in the use of the Online Marking Tool. Support also includes training for staff in checking their internet capability and devices (both school and student owned) to ensure these are compliant.
33. 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.
34. During the examination period, NZQA will have 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

35. 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. Despite these rigorous processes, there can never be a guarantee that every element of a human process will be error free. However, NZQA works very hard to reduce the level of risk of material matters arising.

Management of the examination round

36. NZQA's control environment is supported by established processes including the following:
- a. Daily management governance and oversight to monitor all elements of the examination cycle.
 - b. An organisation-wide change freeze on all IT systems changes that could impact the examination cycle from late October until late January.

² We are unable to scan Music and Accounting examinations this year because the structure of the examination creates difficulties in marking in an online environment without further work.

- c. 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.
- d. 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.
- e. Monitoring of vendor performance at all stages.

Business continuity planning for external examinations

- 37. NZQA is continuing to review and strengthen business continuity planning for managing the examinations, including for NCEA Online.
- 38. 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 2021 examinations.
- 39. Each Examination Centre is also required to update their BCPs to manage under Alert Levels 1 – 3.
- 40. Key elements of business continuity planning include the following activities:

Initial Activation

- a. 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

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

Communications systems

- c. 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

- d. NZQA has established procedures and plans in place for disaster recovery and business continuance. Regular scheduled failover³ 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.

Confirmation of Vendor BCP Readiness

- e. 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 2021 examinations.

³ *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.

Risks

41. The situation with COVID-19 is still uncertain, and there are ongoing risks of further disruption. These have been mitigated via the means outlined above.

Communications plan/issues

42. The necessary information has already been relayed to schools. NZQA is in close contact with schools and Exam Centre Managers to provide support where needed.