

Review of 2021 COVID-19 mitigations and 2022 approach

Date:	25 March 2022	NZQA Priority:	Medium
Security Level:	In confidence	Report No.	CR 24090

	Action Sought	Deadline
Minister of Education	<p>Note that the COVID-19 related modifications to NCEA and University Entrance were largely successful in supporting students to achieve in 2021</p> <p>Note the information provided on the 2021 UEG results in relation to excellence levels and certificate endorsement.</p> <p>Note that NZQA is working on a planned review of the UEG process, with a particular focus on managing UEGs at scale.</p> <p>Note the proposed direction of COVID-19 mitigations for 2022, specifically:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continued reliance on the inherent flexibility of NCEA and schools' ability to provide distance learning Continued support for schools and kura for assessing reliably in COVID- 19-disrupted circumstances NZQA, in partnership with the Ministry, will continue to monitor the COVID-19 disruptions, engage with school leaders, communicate with schools and manage expectations provide further advice to you about specific mitigations should they later be required. <p>Provide feedback on the proposed measured approach for COVID-19 mitigations In 2022</p>	

Enclosure/Appendix: Yes

Round Robin No

Contact for Telephone Discussion (if required)

Name	Position	Telephone	Cellphone	1st Contact
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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- Needs change Withdrawn Overtaken by Events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:

Review of 2021 COVID-19 mitigations and 2022 approach

Executive Summary

1. The COVID-19 related modifications to NCEA and University Entrance were successful in supporting students to achieve in 2021. Provisional results show that overall attainment in 2021 was lower than 2020, but similar or higher than 2019.
2. This paper provides further information about the impact of Unexpected Event Grades (UEGs) on provisional 2021 results and sets out some early thinking about how to approach NCEA settings for 2022.
3. The use of UEGs across Auckland, Northland and parts of Waikato was an appropriate response to the significant level of disruption to learners. It provided security and assurance in a challenging time and was well-received by sector leaders.
4. UEGs at scale across the most impacted regions did however result in a non-standard distribution of excellence and not-achieved results, with an associated higher level of certificate endorsement.
5. The unexpected event grades recorded by schools were, on average, higher than their historic pattern of external examination excellence achievement, but lower than their average internal assessment excellence achievement. This resulted in elevated excellence achievement by UEG regions where the better of the UEG result or the examination result was applied.
6. Schools have provided evidence to NZQA of how they relied on a wider variety of standard-specific evidence to assess student achievement, rather than one-off practice exams (which replicate external exam conditions).
7. While there is therefore a logical explanation for the non-standard excellence levels, NZQA considers that the UEG system needs to be reviewed, with a particular focus on managing UEGs at scale.
8. In addition to working on possible changes to the UEG system, NZQA and MoE have begun engaging with sector leaders about how best to approach any 2022 NCEA supports.
9. Our current view is that a very measured approach to the possibility of mitigations in 2022 should be taken. Our joint position entails a commitment to monitoring the situation, but not necessarily assuming the use of any or all the 2020 and 2021 mitigations; relying on the flexibility of the NCEA qualification; and avoiding making commitments early in the year, when there is still time to address lost learning and assessment.

Recommended Action

It is recommended you:

- a. **Note** that the COVID-19 related modifications to NCEA and University Entrance were largely successful in supporting students to achieve in 2021
- b. **Note** the information provided on the 2021 UEG results in relation to excellence levels and certificate endorsement.

- c. **Note** that NZQA is working on a planned review of the UEG process, with a particular focus on managing UEGs at scale.
- d. **Note** the proposed, measured approach to COVID-19 mitigations for 2022; specifically:
- o Continued reliance on the inherent flexibility of NCEA and schools' ability to provide distance learning
 - o Continued support for schools and kura for assessing reliably in COVID-19 disrupted circumstances
 - o NZQA, in partnership with the Ministry, will continue to monitor the COVID-19 disruptions, engage with school leaders, communicate with schools and manage expectations
 - o Providing further advice to you about any specific mitigations if these later become necessary.

NOTED

- e. **Provide feedback** on the proposed, measured approach to COVID-19 mitigations in 2022

The proposed approach seems about right. Unless we have widescale school closures there is flexibility in the system to respond to individual needs without recourse to across the board supports.

AGREE/DISAGREE


Proactive Release Recommendation

NZQA recommends:

- f. **agree/disagree** that this report is not proactively released as part of the next publication of documents as it is too early to inform the sector about possible changes to COVID-19 policy.

AGREE/DISAGREE


Dr Grant Klinkum
Chief Executive
25 March 2022


Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister of Education
05 / 04 / 2022

Review of 2021 COVID-19 mitigations

Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of this report is to update you on the review of the 2021 COVID-19 mitigations and a proposed approach to 2022 COVID-19 mitigations. This report precedes the publication of the final 2021 NCEA and UE attainment statistics in late April, and the Annual Reports on NCEA, University Entrance and NZ Scholarship Data and Statistics in May.

Background

2021 interventions and data analysis

2. In order to ensure that students had a fair and equitable opportunity to achieve their NCEA qualifications and awards in 2021 despite COVID-19 related disruptions, changes to the qualification and award rules were made for the 2021 year. These changes varied significantly across New Zealand, given the disparity between time spent in lockdown in Auckland, Northland and Waikato, and the rest of the country. They included the following:
 - delaying the examination start date by two weeks (national);
 - the application of learning recognition credits (LRCs) (national);
 - changes to the rules for certificate and course endorsements (Auckland, Northland and Waikato);
 - changes to the University Entrance award (Auckland, Northland and Waikato);
 - allowing Unexpected Event Grades (UEGs) (Auckland, Northland and Waikato).
3. NZQA's statistics indicate that the COVID-19 related modifications to NCEA and UE were largely successful in supporting students to achieve in 2021:
 - Overall attainment in 2021 was lower than 2020, but similar or higher than 2019;
 - There was a decline in attainment from 2020 for Māori and Pacific students but levels were similar to or better than 2019 levels;
 - Attainment trends for those regions most affected by COVID-19, and for the rest of New Zealand, have largely been maintained.
4. Table 1 below outlines what would have happened in 2021 without the mitigations. The data shows that the mitigations were necessary – without them, attainment would have been lower than in 2019.

Table 1: 2021 attainment analysis

2019		2020 (with COVID mitigations applied)		2021 (with COVID mitigations applied) provisional		2021 (without COVID mitigations applied*) provisional <small>*LRCs, and for UE, reduction in credit requirements</small>	
<i>National attainment</i>		<i>National attainment</i>		<i>National attainment</i>		<i>National attainment</i>	
Level 1	70.6%	Level 1	71.8%	Level 1	68.5%	Level 1	61.1% (-9.5pp from 2019)
Level 2	77.5%	Level 2	80.1%	Level 2	77.4%	Level 2	72.3% (-5.2pp from 2019)
Level 3	67.3%	Level 3	72.1%	Level 3	69.9%	Level 3	63.6% (-3.7pp from 2019)
University Entrance	49.3%	University Entrance	53.4%	University Entrance	50.8%	University Entrance	46.7% (-2.6pp from 2019)
<i>Level 3 attainment by ethnicity</i>		<i>Level 3 attainment by ethnicity</i>		<i>Level 3 attainment by ethnicity</i>		<i>Level 3 attainment by ethnicity</i>	
Māori	55.1%	Māori	60.7%	Māori	57.8%	Māori	50.3% (-4.8pp from 2019)
European	70.8%	European	74.6%	European	72.7%	European	66.9% (-3.9pp from 2019)
Pacific	60.3%	Pacific	68.9%	Pacific	64.2%	Pacific	53.3% (-7pp from 2019)
Asian	71.3%	Asian	76.5%	Asian	75.8%	Asian	70.7% (-0.6pp from 2019)

Impact of Unexpected Event Grades

5. Fuller data on the impacts of UEGs is in the Tables 2-5 in Appendix 2. These cover:
 - Grade distributions for externally assessed achievement standards
 - Year 13 NCEA Level 3 attainment by decile band – Auckland
 - Year 13 NCEA Level 3 Certificate Endorsement at Excellence by decile – Auckland
 - Provisional 2021 University Entrance attainment

6. Keys points from this data are:
 - UEG grade distributions provided by schools in these regions were generally higher than the grade distributions of NZQA-marked and assessed external standards. UEGs primarily impacted on the not achieved and excellence results for externally assessed standards. For example, excellence results for externally assessed standards nearly doubled (45,574 to 82,162 in Auckland region).¹
 - Changes in attainment patterns in Auckland, the most affected UEG region, differed by decile². Decile 8-10 schools' attainment for Level 3 was the same as in 2020 (i.e. more than 5 percentage points higher than in 2019). Decile 1-3 and 4-7 schools had attainment patterns more in line with 2019.
 - UEGs also impacted on certificate endorsements. 2021 certificate endorsements at excellence in UEG-affected regions were well above 2020 levels, which in turn were well above 2019 levels. Nationally, provisional 2021 NCEA certificate endorsement rates are very similar to final 2020 rates.
 - The reduction in requirements for certificate endorsement, broadly intended to support high achieving students who experienced COVID-related disruptions, disproportionately advantaged those students, with higher certificate endorsement rates at excellence than in 2020. See Appendix Table 4 for the Auckland region picture by decile³.

¹ See Appendix 2, Table 2

² See Appendix 2, Table 3

³ See Appendix 2, Table 4

- 2021 provisional UE rates for Auckland, Northland and parts of Waikato⁴ were similar to 2020 levels and on average 5 percentage points higher than 2019 levels. Without the mitigations applied, they would have been lower than 2019 levels. They will still increase slightly as results are finalised⁵. 2021 provisional UE rates for the rest of New Zealand are likely to be similar to 2019 levels once attainment is finalised in late April.
- Stepping back from a UEG region picture to a national picture, 2021 national achievement standard grade distributions for Levels 1-3 showed only a small increase in excellence rates – from 22.7% in 2020 to 24% in 2021 (1.3 percentage points). For Level 3 only, this increase was only 1 percentage point (from 26.9% in 2020 to 27.9% in 2021).

Unexpected Event Grades monitoring and next steps

7. The spread of UEG results broadly sit within what NZQA typically sees for internally and externally assessed standards.
8. UEG evidence is typically generated through one-off practice examinations, one of the purposes being to understand the revision students still need to do for their end-of-year exams. In 2021, practice examinations were not generally possible in the most affected regions, and schools used a wider range of evidence gathering methods that were more like internal assessment in these regions, and quality assured that evidence against the standards. Schools prioritised the most important learning and assessment.
9. NZQA gave schools and kura as much time as possible to gather evidence for their UEGs. This left a short amount of time before Christmas for monitoring and analysis of the grade distributions of the UEG grades submitted and, before schools closed in mid- December, seeking clarification of the evidence gathering and quality assurance process and any assessment changes they made in 2021, as well as any reasons for overall differences in the 2021 UEG results and the 2020 UEG grades submitted
10. Schools have expressed that their 2021 UEGs were established with integrity and based on valid evidence, albeit from a wider range of sources and over a longer period than the usual, one-off practice examinations. Schools have subsequently reported that with the uncertainty of the COVID-19 disruptions, teachers and students recognised the higher stakes associated with these assessments.
11. Although the UEGs were a necessary tool for supporting students to achieve in 2021, they have created inequity between and within regions that received them, which saw higher rates of excellence and lower rates of not achieved, and regions that did not.
12. NZQA is currently working on a planned review of the UEG process, with a particular focus on managing UEGs at scale⁶.

Summary

13. Mitigations were necessary in both 2020 and 2021, but the data indicates that the UE, certificate endorsement, and UEG settings resulted in higher than expected attainment when compared to 2020 in Auckland, Waikato and Northland (particularly for high decile schools).

⁴ The regions where the rules for UE were amended.

⁵ See Appendix 2, Table 5

⁶ See Appendix 3

COVID-19 mitigations for 2022

14. The suite of interventions we deployed in 2020 and 2021 were important both for allowing students to credential their learning and for retaining sector confidence and engagement. However, the different profile of COVID-related disruptions this year, and the experience built by the sector in distance learning and assessment over the last two years, mean that we should not assume an identical response is needed in 2022.
15. The scale of, and widespread eligibility for, prior interventions were due to the proximity of some of the lockdowns to crucial periods of the year for NCEA assessments, particularly the preparation months leading up to term 4 end of year examinations. The current expectation is that COVID-19 disruption in 2022 will be strongest in the first quarter. Therefore, with the flexibility of NCEA, this should result in schools having sufficient time to catch up on lost learning and assessment time during the remainder of the year.
16. NZQA and MoE also anticipate that schools will have considered the possibility of further disruption in 2022 and devised NCEA programmes of learning that prioritise important standards, avoiding over-assessment.
17. In 2020 and 2021 the examination period was shifted out by 10 days, and two weeks, respectively. These delays provided students with more time to prepare for examinations and allowed time for the lockdowns to pass. Though it did provide relief, some students reported that their post-school plans (including holidays, work experience, family obligations) were disrupted. The delays also left less time for marking, and many markers had their holiday period disrupted. This option is available for future years but should be used with restraint.
18. Given the Government's focus on "living with COVID-19", NZQA recommends taking a measured approach to the possibility of mitigations in 2022. This will include avoiding making commitments early in the year when there is still time to address lost learning and assessment.
19. Early sector feedback is that if mitigations are required there may be a case for a more targeted approach directed at learners most in need of additional NCEA supports. Although agencies can see the rationale for this approach, we are conscious that the level of complexity involved in targeting qualification interventions at the level of individuals, rather than regions, should not be underestimated.
20. At this point we consider the best approach to be:
 - a. Continued reliance on the inherent flexibility of NCEA and schools' ability to provide distance learning.
 - b. Communications to schools that:
 - i. the situation is being monitored by the Ministry and NZQA.
 - ii. the previous suites of interventions were in response to lockdowns.
 - iii. any interventions employed in 2022, if required at all, will take into account the impact of the application of previous interventions, and be in relationship to the nature and timing of any disruptions.
 - c. Continued support for schools and kura for assessing reliably in COVID-disrupted circumstances (e.g. with staff and student absences).
 - d. LRCs, UEGs and changes to credit requirements are likely to be reserved for exceptional circumstances (e.g. the emergence of a variant that required a return to significant national lockdowns).
21. NZQA and MoE will continue to engage with schools, kura, advisory groups and peak bodies to help manage expectations for 2022 and ensure we understand their challenges.

Risks

22. There is a risk that schools anticipate a level of support that NZQA and the Ministry do not end up providing. If schools do this, some students may struggle to attain qualifications. This risk is mitigated by early communication and expectation management with schools.

Consultation

23. This paper has been developed with input from the Ministry of Education.
24. The advice in this paper includes feedback from peak bodies, and NZQA and Ministry advisory groups, including your NCEA Professional Advisory Group.

Next steps

25. NZQA, in partnership with the Ministry, will continue to monitor COVID-19-related disruptions and the challenges facing schools as a result of these. We will continue to engage with the sector to manage expectations for 2022.
26. NZQA will continue its work on the planned review of the UEG process and, potentially, new controls to support these operating at scale. These will be communicated to the sector by the end of Term 2.

Appendix 1: COVID-19: NCEA and University Entrance changes for 2021

Changes to NCEA and University Entrance (UE) gave students a fair opportunity to achieve qualifications and awards despite the disruption to teaching, learning and assessment from COVID-19, while preserving the integrity of NCEA and UE. These changes applied only for 2021.

The changes were:

- Students working towards an NCEA could gain additional Learning Recognition Credits, based on the number of credits they achieved during the 2021 school year. For every 5 credits a student achieved towards their NCEA through internal or external assessment, they could be awarded an additional 1 credit. Students at NCEA Level 1 were eligible for up to a maximum of 8 (16 for Auckland, 10 for Waikato and Northland) additional credits while those at Levels 2 or 3 were eligible for up to a maximum of 6 (12 for Auckland, 8 for Waikato and Northland) additional credits. These were known as Learning Recognition (LR) credits.
- Students in Auckland were awarded a certificate endorsement if they achieved 44 credits (46 for Waikato and Northland) at Merit or Excellence level, rather than the usual 50. Students in Auckland, Waikato and Northland achieving 12 credits at Merit or Excellence level in a course – rather than 14 – were awarded a course endorsement.
- UE requirements were reduced to 12 credits in three UE-approved subjects, from 14 credits in each of three approved subjects for students in Auckland, Waikato and Northland. Students still needed to attain NCEA Level 3 and meet the literacy and numeracy requirement to be awarded University Entrance.

Appendix 2: Data

Table 2: Grade distributions for externally assessed achievement standards – post application of the better of the UEG grade or the examination result

	Not Achieved		Achieved		Merit		Excellence		Total
	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	
Auckland Region									
2019	20.8%	69,928	36.1%	121,419	28.4%	95,460	14.7%	49,406	336,213
2020	20.4%	61,292	35.8%	107,677	28.7%	86,326	15.1%	45,574	300,869
2021	6.3%	18,305	33.2%	95,856	32.1%	92,719	28.4%	82,162	289,042
Waikato Region									
2019	22.8%	16,146	39.6%	28,025	26.7%	18,937	10.9%	7,712	70,820
2020	21.6%	13,975	39.6%	25,609	27.2%	17,613	11.5%	7,459	64,656
2021	12.0%	7,730	39.2%	25,180	30.0%	19,304	18.7%	12,029	64,243
Northland Region									
2019	30.3%	6,118	39.7%	8,028	22.2%	4,494	7.8%	1,579	20,219
2020	29.3%	5,058	40.7%	7,025	22.5%	3,874	7.4%	1,283	17,240
2021	13.1%	2,390	42.4%	7,724	28.3%	5,141	16.2%	2,942	18,197
Rest of New Zealand									
2019	21.5%	97,399	38.7%	175,236	27.6%	125,204	12.1%	55,013	452,852
2020	20.2%	83,445	38.8%	159,828	28.4%	116,957	12.6%	51,863	412,093
2021	18.2%	70,952	37.9%	147,724	30.1%	117,475	13.7%	53,541	389,692

Table 3: Year 13 NCEA Level 3 attainment by decile band – Auckland

Decile Band	Year	Achieved (n)	Achieved (%)	Total Students	Difference from 2020	Difference from 2019
Decile 1-3	2019	2,515	65.6%	3,834	-6.5pp	1.3pp
	2020	2,773	73.4%	3,777		
	2021	2,673	66.9%	3,994		
Decile 4-7	2019	3,468	72.6%	4,778	-2.6pp	3.8pp
	2020	3,887	79.0%	4,921		
	2021	3,807	76.4%	4,984		
Decile 8-10	2019	5,123	72.5%	7,070	0pp	5.8pp
	2020	5,766	78.3%	7,367		
	2021	5,800	78.3%	7,410		

Table 4: Year 13 NCEA Level 3 Certificate Endorsement at Excellence by decile, with and without mitigations – Auckland region

Year 13/NCEA Level 3	Merit				Excellence			
	2019	2020	2021		2019	2020	2021	
			Final	Without mitigations			Final	Without mitigations
Decile 1	12.2%	14.4%	13.8%	10.4%	4.9%	5.0%	6.2%	5.1%
Decile 2	15.1%	20.2%	18.1%	16.3%	5.4%	10.2%	11.7%	8.3%
Decile 3	22.8%	21.0%	20.4%	18.3%	10.2%	11.5%	14.0%	10.9%
Decile 4	23.4%	24.3%	25.6%	25.5%	12.1%	16.4%	20.8%	16.4%
Decile 5	27.2%	23.8%	27.1%	24.8%	14.9%	18.8%	19.6%	15.4%
Decile 6	21.9%	23.2%	24.7%	23.0%	12.4%	13.7%	17.7%	14.1%
Decile 7	31.8%	30.8%	31.1%	30.2%	18.3%	22.2%	27.7%	21.7%
Decile 8	31.9%	33.6%	28.9%	27.6%	16.1%	24.7%	27.4%	23.3%
Decile 9	36.3%	33.7%	32.1%	31.0%	20.6%	25.7%	30.9%	26.5%
Decile 10	35.1%	35.6%	34.1%	34.2%	23.9%	30.2%	36.2%	30.1%

Table 5: Provisional 2021 University Entrance attainment, with and without mitigations

Year 13/University Entrance	2019	2020	2021	
			Provisional as at 3 Feb	Without mitigations
Auckland	52.5%	57.3%	57.5%	49.9%
Waikato	43.1%	47.2%	48.8%	41.9%
Northland	38.3%	40.7%	42.6%	35.7%
Rest of New Zealand	48.8%	52.6%	47.2%	N/A

Appendix 3: Potential controls for managing Unexpected Event Grades at scale

Front end controls

- Stronger expectation setting of boundaries for expected performance by school and subject
- NZQA verification of UEG evidence, either sampling or spot checks
- NZQA assistance with marginal UEG evidence cases

Measurement controls

- Requirement for UEGs to have grade-score marking (more targeted and open to adjustment based on NZQA determined cut scores)

System controls

- Requirement to gather evidence in ways which more closely resemble NZQA's external assessment format for a standard
- Withholding level of UEG from students until NZQA has reviewed or after examinations have concluded