

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER



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8 January 2021

Dear Parents, Guardians and Students,

CCEA GCSE, AS AND A LEVEL QUALIFICATIONS IN 2021

I am writing to update you on the situation in relation to CCEA qualifications in this academic year. As you will be aware, I have had to cancel all exams this year, but I did so only as a last resort.

It has been my priority to ensure that public examinations go ahead, if at all possible as I believe that public examinations are the most valid and reliable measure of educational outcomes available. However, given the very serious public health situation, the Executive took the decision to move schools to remote learning for a number of weeks. Given this extended period of online learning, coupled with significant disruption already experienced by many learners in the last term, it became evident that it would not be possible to continue with examinations as originally planned. I therefore announced on Wednesday 6 January 2021 that all CCEA GCSE, AS and A level exams would be cancelled this academic year.

Alternative Awarding Arrangements

I want to assure you that we are working to put in place as quickly as possible, a robust alternative process to ensure that learners can be awarded grades for their qualifications this summer, to enable them to progress to the next stage of their education, training or employment in the autumn. CCEA had begun work on such a process as part of contingency planning and I have now asked for these plans to be refined and detailed advice brought forward as a matter of urgency.

While we have yet to agree the details of a process I can confirm that it my intention that it would be based on the professional judgement of teachers, with moderation but no algorithm. I hope to be in a position to provide more detail on the framework for this process by the end of January.

I am conscious that learners in years 11 and 13 may have planned to take module examinations this year as part of working towards qualifications to be awarded next year. In developing alternative awarding arrangements for 2021, careful

consideration will be given to arrangements for these students and the implications for awarding in 2022. Further information will be provided in due course.

It will be important, however, that with the cancellation of exams schools make full use of the remainder of this academic year to try, as far as is possible, to cover the full specification for all qualifications, and **learners need to stay fully engaged in their programmes of learning to be adequately prepared for the transition to the next stage of their education, or into training or employment.**

Controlled Assessments

I can confirm that in cancelling exams for these qualifications I am cancelling all elements of assessment that were due to be completed, including controlled assessments. However, controlled assessments already completed, and the outcomes of the GCSE unit exams taken by some learners in November 2020 will be an important part of the evidence for centres to use in the grading process. Results for the November series will be issued by CCEA as originally planned.

Occupational Studies

I have also decided that formal assessments for CCEA's Occupational Studies should be cancelled and replaced with alternative arrangements similar to those deployed in 2020. Details of these arrangements will be provided in the coming weeks.

Non-CCEA Qualifications

As we operate an open market for qualifications many of our young people are studying for qualifications provided by other examination boards which fall outside my control. Schools with pupils studying for non-CCEA qualifications have been advised to contact the relevant awarding organisation for details of arrangements to be put in place for their suite of qualifications. If you/your child was due to sit non-CCEA examinations your school will provide details of alternative arrangements when these are made available. However it may be a number of weeks before information is available from these organisations.

Non-CCEA Vocational Qualifications

Whilst vocational qualifications (VQs) fall within the remit of the Minister for the Economy, I know that some school learners will be undertaking externally examined vocational qualifications such as BTECs alongside GCSEs and A Levels. Further flexibilities have been put in place for external January VQ exams to enable learning centres, such as schools, to decide whether or not it is appropriate for the exams to take place or not, taking into consideration public health advice and the interests of pupils and staff.

Alternative arrangements will be put in place by relevant awarding organisations where it is not possible for learners to sit their exams in January to ensure that no

learner is disadvantaged. Whether they sit an exam or not, it is very important that pupils continue to engage fully with their course of study and to undertake any learning or assignments as directed by their school.

Private Candidates

CCEA has also been commissioned to bring forward proposals to ensure that arrangements can be made to award grades to all private candidates. Further information on these arrangements will be provided in due course.

Finally, I appreciate these are challenging times for our learners, their families and their teachers. I am very proud of how our education system has adapted very quickly to fluid and rapidly changing circumstances. Our teachers and school leaders deserve every credit to lengths they have gone to in order to ensure young peoples' education can continue. I also want to praise our young people for their resilience and determination to continue with their education. I can assure you that I and my officials are working to ensure that our young people are not disadvantaged by these circumstances which are outside their control. We will work to provide further details and information as quickly as possible.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Peter Weir". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'P'.

Peter Weir
Minister of Education