

**ORAL STATEMENT TO THE ASSEMBLY BY EDUCATION MINISTER, PETER WEIR MLA, ON ALTERNATIVE AWARDING ARRANGEMENTS FOR SUMMER 2020 EXAMINATIONS (GCSE, AS AND A LEVEL)**

Good afternoon. I welcome this opportunity to update Members on decisions I have taken to ensure that young people in Northern Ireland, who were due to complete their GCSE, AS and A level qualifications this summer, will be awarded grades that will enable them to move on to the next stage of their lives.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of March the First Minister and deputy First Minister announced a radical package of measures that the Executive was taking to deal with the unprecedented challenges facing our society as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. Amongst many other things, this included the closure of schools from Friday 20 March for an unspecified period of time.

Something which is of itself unprecedented.

With schools closed and young people unable to complete all of the work required for this year's public examination series, it was vitally important that I consider how best to provide certainty to the system (and particularly those entered for the examinations) as soon as practicably possible.

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I am very aware of the importance of these exams for the future of the young people who have been working so hard towards them. However, it was clear from the point at which the decision to close the schools was made that, it would be very unlikely that the examinations could take place as scheduled.

Therefore, following engagement with, and in line with Ministerial colleagues in England and Wales, I announced on the 19<sup>th</sup> of March that GCSE, AS and A level exams would not proceed.

My priority from that point was to ensure that we put in place a robust process that would provide the young people affected with fair and equitable results. Those results should reflect their hard work and effort. Equally, they should enable them to make judgements and decisions about their next stage in education, training and employment. It is important, I am sure you will agree, that the 2020 cohort of students are

not disadvantaged in comparison with those who went before them or will come after them.

Over the past few weeks my officials have been working with CCEA, to develop a process that has fairness at its core: fairness to the young people whose lives will be impacted by the current circumstances; fairness to the teachers who have supported those young people along

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their journey and share in their joys and disappointments; and fairness to the families of these young people who are undoubtedly anxious about the potential impact this situation may have on their children's future.

The Department has received a number of queries from pupils, parents and teachers all anxious to know what will happen. Today I am providing the certainty they seek about the process for awarding A level, AS level and GCSE qualifications.

### **Vocational Qualifications**

I am also mindful that there are many young people in our schools who have been able to access a wide range of vocational qualifications through the Entitlement Framework and they too are seeking certainty. While I cannot provide that certainty today, I can assure Members that we are working closely with officials in the Department for the Economy who lead on vocational qualifications policy, and collectively we are very aware of the need to ensure that young people taking these qualifications are, likewise, not disadvantaged. The Minister for the Economy will provide clarity in relation to these qualifications in the next few weeks.

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### **Process of Engagement**

I received a detailed paper from CCEA setting out a series of options for each of the qualifications under consideration. CCEA had undertaken an options appraisal including testing each of the options against four criteria:

- Fairness
  - Reduce burden
  - Impact limitation; and

- Minimise uncertainty.

This advice was carefully considered by myself, my officials and subsequently tested with advisors in the Education and Training Inspectorate.

As part of the process to develop proposals that would have the confidence of the education system, my officials consulted with representatives of head teachers and teaching unions, as well as other education stakeholders. I want to thank those organisations for their constructive engagement in these difficult circumstances. I have taken their views into account in arriving at my decisions. I am therefore hopeful that the decisions I have taken will continue to have the support of the education system. Everyone recognises there is no perfect solution, but

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I am confident we now have a process that will lead to our young people being awarded the results they merit and which will enable them to progress to the next stage of their lives – whether that be onto a further level of education, training or into the world of work.

Teachers in particular will have a key role to play in relation to the alternative form of assessment. This is, I believe, the right approach to take – who knows better the aptitudes, abilities and educational achievements of these young people than the teachers who have guided them through the past few years of their education journey. I want to pay tribute to all of our teachers for the way they have adapted to the current circumstances and are making every effort to ensure that teaching and learning continues as best as possible. And I would also like to thank them in advance for helping implement the arrangements we are now putting in place for awarding qualifications to ensure their students are able to progress.

## **Comparison with England and Wales**

In Northern Ireland we have an open qualifications market which means that learners can choose qualifications offered by a range of examination bodies across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. GCSEs and A levels

are also brands operated on a three country basis. Therefore, it was

important, in order to ensure continued comparability and portability of these qualifications, that we aligned with the arrangements in England and Wales as far as possible, while still recognising that the approach also needed to reflect policy differences. I believe the decisions I have taken provide for the appropriate alignment while also being in the best interests of young people in Northern Ireland.

While 98% of young people in Northern Ireland schools take CCEA GCSEs, and 87% take CCEA A levels, a small number take qualifications offered by English and Welsh examination bodies. Those qualifications will be subject to the arrangements in the respective jurisdictions. Both Ofqual and Qualifications Wales have published guidance on their websites setting out the relevant arrangements.

### **Arrangements for CCEA Qualifications**

In relation to the qualifications offered by CCEA, which are taken by the vast majority of our students, I can confirm that I have now instructed CCEA as follows:

Young people due to complete their full GCSE, AS and A level qualifications will be issued a set of results this summer in order to allow them to progress to further study or employment.

For those young people due to take part of a GCSE qualification, unit level results will not be provided.

### **In relation to the 4 main general public examination series, I will cover each in turn, starting with A Levels.**

For those students due to complete an A level this year, and in the absence of examinations, they will receive a calculated grade based on a combination of Teacher professional judgement (including grading and rank ordering by schools) and statistical modelling. This will also include a value added element to take account of the impact resits would normally have on final A level outcomes. Students will not be required to take A level examinations through an additional sitting, such as an autumn series. If they wish they may sit examinations as part of the Summer 2021 examination timetable.

## In relation to AS levels:

AS qualifications are not only stand-alone qualifications but also contribute to A level qualifications when combined with A2 exams. For this year, the AS level in 2020 will be decoupled from the A2 (A level). So

those due to complete an AS level will receive a calculated grade.

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However this will not contribute towards the awarding of A level grades in summer 2021.

The AS grade in 2020 will be calculated using a combination of:

- Teacher professional judgement (including grading and rank

ordering by schools) and

- pupil prior performance including GCSE mean scores.

In summer 2021, students who continue on to the A2 will have 2 options:

- — They may choose to sit only the relevant A2 papers in summer 2021. Therefore the A level will be awarded based on those papers with the AS component being treated as a missing paper. The marks will be retrospectively calculated using recognised statistical modelling. The process is one normally used when a student is unable to sit a paper due to illness or other unforeseen circumstances.
- — Or alternatively, a student may choose to sit both AS and A2 papers to achieve the overall A level grade. In this case the AS component will also be calculated using statistical modelling as in the first option. Very importantly, I want to make clear that **the overall A**

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**level grade will be awarded on the basis of the higher marks for the AS component** (either the actual performance in the paper or the calculated mark).

In relation to those completing all components for their GCSE qualification:

those young people due to complete GCSE qualifications in 2020 will receive a calculated grade based on *a combination of* :

- Teacher professional judgement (including grading and rank ordering by schools), and
- Average centre performance over past three summer series.

Finally, in relation to GCSE units (otherwise known as modules): GCSEs in Northern Ireland are modular and so enable students to take exams for units making up the full qualification at different times over the 2 year course of study. Some continue to take all units at the end of the second year, but many Year 11 students were due to take a number of units this year.

For those students taking units that will not lead to the completion of the GCSE qualification this year, **no grades will be awarded**. These

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learners will participate in the summer 2021 series and, for each GCSE, they will have the following options:

- Those learners not entered for any modules in a given GCSE in summer 2020 should aim to sit (as originally planned) all elements of the relevant GCSE in the next academic year, which could include some units taken in November, January or March as part of the normal 2020/2021 examination series.
- Those learners entered for part of a GCSE in 2020, but not due to complete the qualification will have two options in the next academic year:
  - Either they may choose to sit only the outstanding units of their qualification with the remaining units being treated as missed papers and marks calculated on the basis of the units taken in 2021, using recognised statistical modelling, to arrive at an overall calculated grade.
  - Or alternatively, students may choose to sit all units of their GCSE qualifications in the normal 2020/21 examination timetable. Calculated marks for the units for which they were

entered in summer 2020 will also be generated and the higher

mark achieved for those units, either the calculated mark or the actual performance, will be used to arrive at the overall GCSE grade in 2021.

I appreciate this is all very complex and technical in nature, but CCEA will be providing more detailed advice and guidance to schools, parents and young people as a matter of urgency and have also published answers to frequently asked questions on the CCEA website.

In all of the discussion about options I was conscious of the need to keep learners at the centre of any solution. I believe the solution I have outlined does just that. It provides flexible options where possible to ensure that learners, particularly those in Years 11 and 13, are not overburdened. Nevertheless, they do have the option of sitting exams for all parts of their qualifications if they so choose.

As I said earlier, teachers are a critical part of this process. We will be relying on teachers providing the information needed to arrive at calculated grades. Schools have a wealth of information to evidence the achievements of their students, including demonstrating progress over the

current academic year. I am confident that they will be able to work with CCEA to provide their students with fair and robust results, and again I want to thank every teacher for their support in this process.

## **Next Steps**

So what are the next steps that need to be taken? Firstly CCEA will be issuing guidance to schools, parents and young people detailing the arrangements I have just outlined. This will include more detail on the information schools will have to provide to begin the process of collating the relevant information at the end of May.

CCEA will also provide advice and support for teachers as required.

CCEA is also developing an appeals mechanism which will be as robust as possible. While it will not be possible to review marking in the normal way, it is nonetheless important that young people are able to appeal if they feel the process has not been appropriately applied in their case.

CCEA will take into account the steps Ofqual and Qualifications Wales are also taking in developing an appeals mechanism.

As with normal procedures, there will also be an opportunity for students to take an exam in summer 2021 if they so wish.

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There are a number of other issues which still need to be finalised and work is continuing at pace. For example, I will be considering a number of matters relating to data protection – an issue which is likely to be handled at UK level to ensure consistency of approach. In any examination process confidentiality is paramount in providing robust and reliable outcomes. This process requires teachers to maintain that confidentiality and they cannot share examination assessments with parents or pupils in advance of submitting those assessments to CCEA. Parents and pupils should not ask for nor expect to receive this information. Teachers have a complex task ahead and they must be afforded the opportunity to assess pupil performance objectively and holistically.

Another issue where work is ongoing is in relation to private candidates – these are students who have not been taught in a school because they might be home- schooled, following distance learning programmes or be studying independently.

Where a school has accepted entries from private candidates, those students should be included in the data provided by the school where the Head of Centre (the Principal) is confident that they and their staff have seen sufficient evidence of the young person's achievement to make an objective judgement.

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CCEA is urgently exploring whether there are alternative options for those students who do not have an existing relationship with a school. It may not be possible to find an acceptable solution for all private candidates.

Finally, I can confirm that results in England, Wales and Northern Ireland will issue on the original, published dates. Therefore AS and A level results will issue on 13 August and GCSE results will issue on 20 August.



The proposals I have outlined should provide schools, teachers, young people and their families with the clarity they have been calling for in relation to qualifications. I hope they also show that fairness is at the heart of the approach I have adopted and that our young people can be assured that the grades they receive will reflect the work that they have put in over recent years. Extraordinary circumstances have necessitated the introduction of new arrangements to replace the examinations which we have been used to over many years, but I am confident that the measures I have announced today will enable our young people to continue on their journey through life despite the disruption created by the Covid 19 outbreak.