

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER



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Dear Parents, Guardians and Students

DELIVERY OF GCSE, AS AND A LEVEL QUALIFICATIONS IN 2020/21

Following CCEA's recent public consultation, I have informed CCEA of my decisions on a range of changes to GCSE, AS and A level qualifications that are due to be awarded in the 2020/21 academic year.

I know both parents and young people have been anxious for clarity on these changes and that it has been a difficult and challenging period for you all. However, you will appreciate that we needed to make sure that we implement changes that make things better for young people and their parents and teachers.

Public Examinations

My first key message is to assure you that it is my priority to ensure that public examinations go ahead, if at all possible. I believe that public examinations in these key qualifications are the most valid and reliable method of assessment available. I also feel it is extremely important that following the cancellation of exams last summer, students are given the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills through the examination process.

You know that the public health situation can change quite quickly and I have asked CCEA to consider back-up arrangements, to cover a range of scenarios that can be activated should they be needed. I want you to know that these will be in place and students will be enabled to complete their qualifications in 2021. However, I hope the decisions I have announced will relieve some of the uncertainty and doubts and help students focus on the important task of preparing for their exams and looking to the future with confidence.

You should also note that in addition to changes to specific examinations, the start of the summer exam series will be delayed by one week to provide more time for preparation. CCEA exams will start no earlier than 12 May 2021 and will be completed by 30 June, with results issuing towards the end of August. CCEA will publish an updated timetable in the coming weeks.

Changes to Qualifications

The changes to GCSE, AS and A Level qualifications which I have agreed provide a significant reduction in the burden of assessment for young people, whilst still allowing as much opportunity as possible to cover the content of the specification. It is important that everyone understands that in agreeing that certain units of a qualification will not be assessed is not an indication that they should not be taught. Covering content, even if it is not assessed, may be important in supporting progression to the next level of study.

For students taking GCSEs in Summer 2021, the number of examinations will be reduced significantly. These changes reflect the far reaching consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. They are designed to take account of lost face-to-face teaching and learning during the period of schools closures and also that there is some continuing disruption across schools despite the return to full-time education. In Northern Ireland, we have gone significantly further than other jurisdictions to reduce the assessment burden for young people and to recognise the ongoing disruption and difficulties that we face, whilst still ensuring qualifications have validity, rigour and portability, particularly for entrance and progression to university and employment.

The key features of the proposed changes are set out below:

- a range of adaptations to GCSE, AS and A-Level qualifications (particularly to practical work and fieldwork) to ensure they can be delivered safely and meet current public health requirements;
- A Levels awarded in 2021 will be based on the outcomes of A2 examinations and students will not be required to take the AS assessments they sat last summer;
- in the majority of GCSEs where students are in the second year of study (normally Year 12) one unit of the course will be omitted from assessment;
- in order to provide consistency across subjects and qualifications and ensure they are seen as valid by universities and employers, omissions or changes to the assessment of any GCSE qualification will not exceed 40% of the total content;
- in the small number of GCSE qualifications where omission of a unit would remove more than forty percent of the content from being assessed, CCEA will be looking at alternatives way to reduce the burden of assessment– these qualifications are GCSE Religious Studies, Health and Social Care, Food and Nutrition, Government and Politics, and Statistics.
- students will be assessed in all written units of the qualification in GCSE English Language and GCSE Mathematics, but the speaking and listening unit of GCSE English language will not be assessed;
- The speaking component of GCSE modern languages (Irish, French, German, Spanish) and Gaeilge will not be assessed;
- If any student wishes to take all exams in a qualification, this option will also be available them but there will be no statistical calculation for units for which candidates were entered but were unable to sit in 2020 .
- CCEA will provide a set order of teaching for GCSE and A Level units for Years 11, 13 and 14 so that in the event of further significant disruption due to the wider public health context students will have covered broadly similar content (this is not possible for students currently in Year 12 as schools will have covered different parts of the course to date);
- Schools can enter current Year 11 pupils for modular GCSEs assessments in 2020/21 but they will not be able to avail of an omitted component;

- Schools will be reminded to keep a portfolio of evidence of students' progress throughout the year in case this is needed for contingency arrangements and
- CCEA has also been asked to continue to explore optionality in papers as a means of reducing the burden of assessment further.

CCEA will be in contact with schools in the coming days to provide them with precise details of the changes across subjects and qualifications. Schools will let parents and students know exactly what is now required in each qualification. Some Frequently Asked Questions will be available on the Department's website shortly which should help answer some of your queries.

The arrangements which I have agreed will only apply to GCSE, AS and A Level qualifications awarded by CCEA, which is the Northern Ireland based awarding body. Changes to CCEA Entry Level, Vocationally Related and Occupational Studies qualifications will be confirmed in the near future. Schools will let you know if students are taking qualifications with other Examination Boards in England and Wales and provide you with details about these qualifications including any changes to exam timetables.

GCSE English and Maths

I know many parents and students had significant concerns regarding the CCEA consultation proposals to retain all assessments in GCSE English and Maths and I want to assure you I have listened carefully to the views of stakeholders. Having reflected fully on the issues around these qualifications, I have decided to retain all written assessments in both GCSE English and Maths in the current context, but have agreed that the speaking and listening component of GCSE English Language should not be formally assessed. In taking this difficult decision, I have had to balance the merits of reducing the number of exams, with a need to protect the interests of our young people going forward. Above all, there are significant risks around the comparability and portability of these key qualifications, particularly how they would be considered for university entry in 2023, should significant elements of the qualification be omitted, when England and Wales have made limited or no changes to these qualifications. As you know GCSE English and Mathematics are key 'passport qualifications', which are required for a number of higher level qualifications, such as nursing and teaching qualifications. The risk that young people from Northern Ireland would be disadvantaged for entry to university in the future is simply too great.

I am also concerned that to reduce examination assessment in these two key qualifications to one high stakes exam could conversely increase pressure on young people. Under the current arrangements, young people have the opportunity to sit some or all units in English and Maths in January 2021, and if necessary, repeat them in the summer series. Again this has the potential to ease the assessment process for the young people.

Awarding of Qualifications

I know this is a difficult and confusing time but I want you to be confident that all students due to complete their qualifications in the next academic year will be enabled to complete their qualifications and progress successfully to the next stage of education or employment.

I would also take this opportunity to wish every student success in their studies during the year ahead.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Peter Weir". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'P' and a distinct 'W'.

**PETER WEIR MLA
MINISTER OF EDUCATION**