

## FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER



All Principals of Post-Primary Schools and Special Schools  
with 14-19 provision

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Dear Principal

### **CHANGES TO CCEA GCSE, AS AND A LEVEL QUALIFICATIONS IN 2021**

Yesterday, I announced a further package of comprehensive measures which I believe will ensure fair, inclusive and flexible public examinations in 2021. I know our students are facing unprecedented disruption to their learning. Consequently, I have taken exceptional steps to ensure public examinations are as fair as possible and to reduce assessment across all CCEA GCSE, AS and A Level qualifications.

In October, I announced a range of changes to CCEA qualifications: making public health adaptations to ensure safe delivery and reducing the number of exams pupils will need to take. In the October announcement, I said that GCSE candidates would be able to omit assessment of one unit of each of their qualifications, up to a maximum of 40% of each qualification. This represents a very significant reduction in the assessment burden.

The further measures which I announced yesterday are summarised below.

- Grade outcomes in 2021 for GCSE, AS and A Level qualifications will broadly align with 2020 outcomes. In line with the announcement in England, we will take a similarly generous approach to grading and standards for Northern Ireland candidates.
- All candidates taking A2 assessments will be able to omit one or more units of assessment in each qualification up to a maximum of 60% of A2 assessment.
- All candidates taking AS assessments will be able to omit one or more units of assessment in each qualification up to a maximum of 60% of AS assessment.
- Centres will decide which unit or units will be omitted. This reflects the different approaches across schools and means young people will be assessed on topics and content in which they feel most confident and well prepared, allowing them to demonstrate their skills and knowledge to the highest possible level.
- Candidates will also have the choice to complete all units of either their AS or their A2 assessment if they so wish.

- There will be two exceptions to the requirement to take a minimum of 40% of A2 assessment - A2 Digital Technology and A2 History. In both, the smaller A2 unit falls below the 40% floor, but it has been decided that in order to ensure that these candidates also have the choice of which unit to omit there will be an exception permitted to the 40% floor for both subjects. Candidates taking these two qualifications will therefore be permitted to omit either one of the A2 units – the choice will be for the centre.
- Whilst A2 candidates can of course take AS examinations. The AS outcomes will, however, **not** count towards their overall A Level grade in 2021. Their A Level outcome will be based on A2 outcomes only.
- Work will be taken forward to explore the possibility of a COVID allowance or tariff for young people who have missed a significant number of days face-to-face teaching due to self-isolating. This would allow for specific account to be taken of the variations in disrupted learning since September and will be separate from and additional to the existing special consideration scheme. I have asked CCEA to work closely with other Awarding Bodies and Regulators to develop a UK wide approach to any potential scheme. It is important that our students are not disadvantaged compared to their counterparts in other jurisdictions. CCEA's existing special consideration process will continue to be available for those candidates who have been ill during this academic year.
- A reserve A2 series will be held in July 2021 for candidates who miss timetabled examinations through illness or self-isolating. This means that if candidates miss all timetabled examinations for a subject through illness or self-isolation and there is no coursework component, they will be able to complete additional timetabled examinations to receive an outcome.
- AS candidates who miss an exam due to illness or self-isolation will take the examination at the next possible opportunity in summer 2022. They will continue to benefit from omission of a unit or units of assessment, up to 60% of the AS assessment.
- Where a candidate legitimately misses all GCSE exams within a subject for example due to illness or self-isolation, CCEA is working to develop a process that facilitates the award of grades for progression.
- CCEA will provide additional examination aids for candidates taking GCSE Mathematics in January and summer 2021 to recognise ongoing disruption to face-to-face learning.

You will particularly note that A Level awards for A2 candidates will be made on the basis of candidates' performance in their A2 examinations only. **The requirement is for candidates to take 40% of A2 assessments only and not 40% of the total A Level qualification**, as has been wrongly portrayed by some commentators. Forty percent of the A2 qualification equates to twenty-four per cent of the total A Level qualification. For example, A2 Business Studies is composed of two units of assessment, each with a value of 50% of A2 assessment. A candidate will be required to only take one unit of assessment. Copies of all specifications are available on the CCEA.

I believe this approach will allow pupils to focus on topics for a small number of examinations whilst continuing to engage with teaching and learning in other areas of the qualification which will not be examined. I would encourage schools to cover as much of the specification as possible to support progression.

I would also advise that CCEA will simply scale a candidate's Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) score for the unit or units they have completed to arrive at an overall total for the qualification. This means candidates are always awarded an outcome based on their own performance in the unit or units they have taken.

I appreciate that these are significant and wide ranging changes, particularly to the AS and A2 assessment and that you will be anxious for more details. CCEA will provide detailed information to centres about the outworking of these decisions in relation to every AS and A2 subject, as early as possible in the New Year.

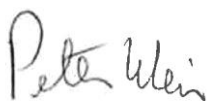
In addition, I would advise that the collection and publication of school level outcomes through the Summary of Annual Examination Results will be suspended for a further year in recognition of the significant disruption experienced by schools.

I would assure you that my Department is working hard to make sure we take into account the effects of the pandemic, to make the best contingency arrangements we can, and to make sure exam results will be fair and command public confidence. I trust that the changes I am announcing today will go some considerable way to reassure young people that we will continue to support them and help them to succeed.

I have enclosed correspondence to parents and pupils and Frequently Asked Questions are also provided. I would be most grateful if you could provide copies to all examination year groups. Copies of the Frequently Asked Questions are also available on the Department's website at [FAQs - Exams 2021 | Department of Education \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/FAQs-Exams-2021).

I know you are all engaged in the difficult and critical task of operating our schools safely. I thank you for your commitment, perseverance and hard work.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Peter Weir". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

**PETER WEIR MLA**  
**MINISTER OF EDUCATION**