

1 March 2021

The Minister of Education
Mr Peter Weir MLA
Rathgael House
Bangor
Co Down

Dear Minister Weir

Over the past year our association has welcomed the opportunity to engage with you and your officials, the Chief Inspector and her team and The Chief Executive at CCEA and his team on matters pertaining to post primary education and in particular in relation to assessment arrangements, following your difficult, but inevitable, decision to cancel examinations in 2020 and again in 2021.

I wish to draw your attention to some key issues which continue to be of great concern to our members who, as school leaders, endeavour to lead with integrity and fairness in the interests of this cohort of young people as well as students past and future.

Arrangements for the awarding of grades

We continue to believe that the best place for our young people is in school and we appreciate that it was your desire to bring as many pupils as possible back on 8 March. We also understand the reasons why this has been delayed; we are concerned, however, that this will create difficulties for schools, and particularly for the pupils who were due to sit GCSEs, AS and A-levels this year.

We believe that pupils need to have agency in their outcomes and to know that the processes being implemented in their schools are fair. It is difficult, however, to see how this can be achieved in the time available without putting pupils under undue pressure and creating unnecessary stress for them. They will now have a much shorter period of time to complete additional assessments than their counterparts in England, who will return to school two weeks sooner, and whose grades do not have to be submitted until 18 June.

This being the case, we ask that you give urgent consideration to extending the deadline for submission of grades, proposed by CCEA, particularly for GCSE qualifications. While we agree that the review process is important and needs to be completed prior to the start of the summer holidays, CCEA's requirements in this regard cannot take precedence over the best interests of our young people.

There also needs to be recognition that the current proposals have enormous implications for teachers' workload. The situation is very different from last year, as they will have to teach pupils from across the school, including those in Years 8-11, at the same time as having to select, mark and standardise assessments, gather evidence, and participate in internal reviews. If this work is to be carried out properly, it is imperative that schools are able to avail of additional School Development Days next term.

Appeals

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Our members will, as always, act ethically and professionally to ensure that the grades determined by their schools are a fair and accurate representation of the knowledge, understanding and skills of their students. They are, however, deeply concerned that the process for appealing grades may create an intolerable pressure on teachers and school leaders, consuming time and energy that needs to be focussed on supporting pupils in their journey back to normal life in school.

We are concerned that the continued absence of Head of Centre Guidance, which we were originally told would be with us last month, is creating additional challenges for schools. The delay in issuing the guidance makes it more likely that there will be divergence in how grades are determined across centres, which could lead to a large number of challenges, and ultimately appeals, from students and their parents.

Given that CCEA will be quality assuring the process, it is essential that the role of schools in the appeals process is restricted to checking for clerical or administrative errors. Appeals cannot be a challenge against the professional judgement of the teacher, or the process used by the school to determine the grade, as this process will already have been validated by the awarding body.

To reduce the risk of administrative errors, we have proposed that CCEA provide Centres with grades at least three days prior to the issue of results, allowing any such errors to be picked up, and therefore reducing student anxiety and unnecessary appeals for those involved. Appeals against centre determined grades awarded must rest with CCEA Awarding Organisation and must be evidenced based.

It is essential that a clear and appropriate appeals procedure, as outlined above, is published by CCEA ahead of the adoption of school policies and procedures, and in advance of centre determined grades being allocated. This process must be transparent and straightforward, and clearly communicated to pupils and parents.

Indemnification

Schools welcomed the issue of indemnification for 2020 in relation to the potential for legal challenge in connection with their input to the alternative awarding arrangements. While the appeals process for many schools in relation to 2020 has been prolonged and stressful, this indemnity was essential, and we would ask that the Department of Education quickly advises schools of similar arrangements for this year (2021).

Everyone understood that there would never be a perfect solution to counteract the cancellation of examinations. The priority for all those involved must be to now work together and put the pupils at the centre of the process. Young people need confidence in the grades they will be awarded and to be equipped to progress to the next stage of their education. I trust that you will give careful consideration to the points I have raised on behalf of ASCL members, and representatives of our Executive and I will, of course, be happy to liaise directly with you on these or any other matters.

Yours sincerely



Robert Wilson

Robert Wilson
ASCL Northern Ireland Regional Officer

cc

Dr M Browne, Permanent Secretary, DE
Ms K McCullough, Director of Curriculum, Qualifications and Standards, DE
Mr J Edwards, Chief Executive Officer, CCEA
Ms F Graham, Chief Inspector, ETI