

## Briefing Note: Decision thresholds for NCEA exams under different COVID-19 alert levels

<b>Date:</b>	2 September 2021	<b>Priority:</b>	Medium
<b>Security Level:</b>	In confidence	<b>Ref No:</b>	CR22834
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### Purpose

1. This briefing note is designed to support a conversation with the Minister on decision thresholds for holding NCEA examinations where there are different COVID-19 alert levels around the country.

### Background

2. In 2020, the advice given to schools was that in the event of national or regional Alert Level 3, exams would take place and that students were expected to attend if they could.
3. The current advice to the Ministry of Education and NZQA from the Ministry of Health is that NCEA examinations cannot be run under Alert Level 3, due to the Delta variant. Recognising that the environment is uncertain, NZQA will ensure that schools understand that this advice may change prior to the start of external exams.
4. A separate issue that we seek your views on, is whether external exams should proceed at all if one or more large regions are at Alert Level 3/4, while other regions are at Level 1/2. NZQA's default position is that students in any region at Level 1 or 2 should be able to have the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge through sitting external exams. However, we think this default position needs testing in the current complex environment. ✓

### Discussion

#### *The examination system*

5. The examination system is calibrated for national consistency over time, within and between subjects. Significant changes to the cohort sitting the examinations can be managed through enhanced benchmarking in advance of marking (where there are large numbers of the cohort missing). Where large numbers of students are getting their result for an examination through school-based assessment, additional quality assurance of these processes can also be implemented. Regional events which disrupt examinations are typically managed in this way.

#### *Regional or national approach to holding examinations*

6. Notwithstanding the position on Alert Levels and examinations, in planning for possible disruption of exams, one early matter the Ministry and NZQA would like your views on is

whether we take a region by region approach to holding examinations, or a national approach.

7. A regional approach would mean any students in an Alert Level approved for running examinations would be expected to attend if they were able. Appendix 2 outlines draft instructions for schools, calibrated to a regional approach, which we need to issue as soon as possible so schools can begin planning.
8. In contrast, a national approach would entail all regions having examinations cancelled if a significant region or group of regions were unable, because of their Alert Level, to hold examinations.
9. As outlined above, the integrity of the external assessment system can be maintained if some regions are unable to sit exams. All students not sitting exams due to COVID restrictions would use an Unexpected Event Grade process.
10. The issue for discussion is not just a technical question, but one of approach and equity during an unprecedented time.
11. At the extremes, the approach to running exams under spilt alert levels is self-evident. If one small region was in Alert Level 3 and the rest of the country was in Alert Level 2, exams should proceed. Equally, if only one small region was in Alert Level 2 and all other regions in Alert Level 3, it would not make sense to run national external exams.
12. On the other hand, in the event that the North Island was in Alert Level 3/4 at the time of exams, while the South Island was in Alert Level 1/2, would exams still be run for the South Island? Or if Auckland and Northland (almost 40% of NCEA students) were at Level 3 and the rest of the country was at Level 2, should exams still run?
13. In such an alert level split by island or region, students and schools able to sit exams would understandably expect that opportunity, but they would also be conscious of the equity consideration for students and schools unable to participate.
14. A range of thresholds could be identified such as the number of regions impacted, size of region, or percentage of total NCEA students impacts. The characteristics of a national or regional approach through an equity lens could also be worked up.
15. Two trusted principals, asked for their confidential thoughts on this matter, both noted that the issue is one that warrants further consideration and the involvement of peak bodies. One principal noted that the very same issue had been extensively discussed at their recent school management team meeting.

## Next steps

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16. The request at this point is only for a high-level indication of:
  - a. whether NZQA's default position of assuming any region able to sit exams should be able to do so should underpin forward planning and advice to schools or Yes
  - b. whether you would like more detailed advice on possible thresholds that would trigger a national cancellation in the event of the Alert Level being spilt across regions. Any such advice would be developed in co-operation with peak bodies and the PAG. No

  
**Dr Grant Klinkum**  
Chief Executive  
2 September 2021

  
**Hon Chris Hipkins**  
Minister of Education  
4 / 9 / 21

## Appendix 1: Cohort proportions across New Zealand

	Share of cohort 2019	Share of cohort 2020
<b>Auckland</b>	36.3%	36.1%
<b>Bay of Plenty</b>	6.1%	6.2%
<b>Canterbury</b>	12.7%	12.6%
<b>Gisborne</b>	0.8%	0.8%
<b>Hawkes Bay</b>	4.0%	4.1%
<b>Manawatu-Whanganui</b>	4.5%	4.4%
<b>Marlborough</b>	0.7%	0.6%
<b>Nelson</b>	1.5%	1.5%
<b>Northland</b>	2.6%	2.5%
<b>Otago</b>	5.1%	5.2%
<b>Southland</b>	1.9%	1.9%
<b>Taranaki</b>	2.3%	2.3%
<b>Tasman</b>	0.8%	0.8%
<b>Waikato</b>	8.3%	8.3%
<b>Wellington</b>	11.7%	11.8%
<b>West Coast</b>	0.4%	0.4%
<b>Correspondence School</b>	0.4%	0.4%

% of Māori and Pacific students within each region of all students in that region

Region	2019		2020	
	Maori	Pacific	Maori	Pacific
<b>Auckland Region</b>	9.9%	16.3%	9.8%	15.8%
<b>Bay of Plenty Region</b>	26.7%	3.5%	27.1%	3.2%
<b>Canterbury Region</b>	10.0%	3.5%	10.1%	3.9%
<b>Correspondence School</b>	17.0%	5.4%	15.5%	4.0%
<b>Gisborne Region</b>	54.5%	3.0%	54.5%	3.6%
<b>Hawkes Bay Region</b>	23.5%	3.8%	23.3%	4.2%
<b>Manawatu-Whanganui Region</b>	22.2%	5.8%	22.1%	6.1%
<b>Marlborough Region</b>	17.0%	3.8%	15.9%	5.7%
<b>Nelson Region</b>	11.3%	1.9%	10.9%	1.7%
<b>Northland Region</b>	35.7%	4.7%	35.4%	4.2%
<b>Otago Region</b>	11.0%	3.9%	11.7%	4.0%
<b>Southland Region</b>	16.7%	3.4%	17.8%	3.8%
<b>Taranaki Region</b>	19.2%	2.8%	18.5%	2.9%
<b>Tasman Region</b>	9.1%	1.5%	9.0%	1.7%
<b>Waikato Region</b>	21.7%	4.8%	21.6%	5.2%
<b>Wellington Region</b>	13.4%	8.5%	12.8%	8.3%
<b>West Coast Region</b>	16.2%	2.3%	17.5%	3.3%

## Appendix 2: Draft communication to schools (if a regional approach is preferred)

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This message contains important information and provides as much clarity as possible around the 2021 NCEA and NZ Scholarship examinations under each COVID-19 Alert Level.

Please note that these reflect NZQA's current understanding of what is permissible under each Alert Level and may be subject to change, depending on Public Health Orders and advice from the Ministry of Health.

### For any region at Alert Level 1 or 2

- NCEA and NZ Scholarship exams will go ahead.
- There are no restrictions on the number of students in an exam room as gathering limits do not apply in schools at Alert Level 2.
- In all exam rooms there must be a gap of 1.5 metres between students in all directions. This distance is measured from head to head and not from desk edge to desk edge. This gap provides enough distance between students to ensure they aren't touching or breathing directly on each other, and exam supervisors can safely walk between desks.
- Some people may choose to wear face masks and use hand sanitiser. Encourage respect – people are being proactive in keeping themselves and others safe.

### For any region at Alert Level 3 or 4

- Under current advice from Public Health, NCEA and NZ Scholarship exams will **not** go ahead. Should this position change for any reason, such as having sufficient vaccination rates for students in years 11-13 and teachers/supervisors, we will reconsider the viability of running exams at Alert Level 3.
- This advice for Alert Level 3 has changed since last year – due to higher risks from the Delta variant of COVID-19.
- NCEA candidates will be eligible for an Unexpected Event Grade (UEG for any region at Alert Levels 3 or 4 during the exam period,).
- We are investigating the possibility of alternative date options for NZ Scholarship exams, should any region be at Alert Levels 3 or 4 when these are scheduled.

If you have any questions about this, please contact your School Relationship Manager.