

# ALTERNATIVE AWARDING ARRANGEMENTS FOR CCEA GCSE, AS AND A LEVELS IN 2021

A HIGH LEVEL GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES



Department of  
**Education**  
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A HIGH LEVEL GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

CONTENTS

1. What are alternative awarding arrangements and why are they needed?	1
2. Who do these arrangements apply to?	4
3. What will be assessed?	5
4. Overview of the Awarding Process	6
5. Frequently Asked Questions	9

## A HIGH LEVEL GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

**1. WHAT ARE ALTERNATIVE AWARDING ARRANGEMENTS AND WHY ARE THEY NEEDED?**

This guide provides an initial high level overview of the alternative awarding arrangements for CCEA GCSE, AS and A Level qualifications for 2021. CCEA will publish detailed guidance for Heads of Centre in early February. The views of teachers, teaching unions, employing authorities, parents and young people who will be affected by these decisions have been used to inform these arrangements.

**Alternative awarding arrangements are replacing examinations in all CCEA GCSE, AS and A Level qualifications in 2021.**

On 5 January 2021, the Executive decided that our post-primary schools should close to most students to limit the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. With the loss of at least a further eight weeks' face-to-face teaching and uncertainty about when it might resume, the Department of Education considers that examinations and other scheduled assessments cannot be held in a way which is, and which is perceived to be, fair. The Education Minister has, therefore, cancelled all public examinations scheduled for the January, February and summer 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far reaching consequences for our young people. They have experienced and are continuing to experience unprecedented disruption to their learning. The Department's key priority is to ensure that young people who are taking qualifications in 2021 will not be disadvantaged by the COVID-19 outbreak. They need their qualification grades in order to continue to the next stage of their education or training, or into employment.

Grades must reflect what a student knows, understands and can do. It is also important that the grades themselves and the process involved in awarding the grades must be widely understood and respected.

In place of CCEA examinations in summer 2021, a student's grade in a subject will be based on their school or college's professional assessment of the evidenced standard at which the student is performing. These will be known as **Centre Determined Grades**.

Of equal importance to the award of grades, is that we maximise learning and teaching time to support young people as far as possible to acquire the knowledge, skills and understanding they need for progression. It is vitally important that young people continue to engage with teaching and learning for the remainder of the academic year (whether face to face or remotely) and are given opportunities to continue to progress and develop prior to teachers completing their determinations. **This means we will ask schools and colleges to submit their Centre Determined Grades to CCEA in the later stages of the 2021 academic year, towards the end of May.** This will be similar to the time at which young people would usually have taken their examinations.

Teachers know and understand their students and are well placed to take forward these determinations. Additional support and training will be provided by CCEA to ensure grades are awarded fairly and consistently across Northern Ireland.

## A HIGH LEVEL GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

Schools and colleges will make evidence-based decisions about the grade they recommend their students be issued. Wherever possible, a breadth of evidence will inform a teacher's assessment of their students' grades. This may include the student's performance in any non-examination assessments (practical examinations, controlled assessment or coursework); other class tests and mock examinations, or any other work completed (for example practice examination questions, or extended essays).

To help teachers make objective decisions, CCEA will make available a set of assessments, which teachers can use with their students as part of their overall evidence. This will be called the **CCEA Assessment Resource**. We want to offer students the opportunity to take this during April and May, so that time for teaching and learning is maximised before these are taken. This resource will be unseen, exam questions in the units or components they would have taken if the examinations had been held.

Before Christmas, the Minister had introduced reductions to GCSE, AS and A Level assessment. This decision remains in place and as a result students may now complete the CCEA Assessment Resources in the units of the course in which they had planned to take public examinations.

The Assessment Resource is not an external examination. **It will be marked by a student's class teacher and, if used, may be only one piece of a range of evidence used to inform and support the teachers' overall assessment.** It is not high stakes like an external exam and will be used alongside a range of other evidence. Its use will also be **optional** for schools and colleges, although the Department **strongly recommends** that schools facilitate any young person who wishes to take the Assessment Resource in a particular qualification, even if the school is not using it more generally in that subject.

We hope the assessment resource will help teachers in the process of making accurate and consistent judgements by providing additional evidence of student performance towards the end of the course. It should also encourage students to engage with their learning over the next number of months by giving young people a focus to work towards. It is an opportunity for students to show their knowledge, understanding and skills in the qualification, knowing that other evidence will also be considered.

A key concern that many school leaders, teachers, parents and students have raised with the Department is the need to ensure that outcomes are fair and consistent between different schools and colleges across Northern Ireland. We have therefore put in place quality assurance arrangements throughout the process. Significant support, guidance and training will be provided by CCEA during February and March to strengthen teachers' and lecturers' understanding of how to apply standards with consistency and to make accurate assessment judgements.

Throughout June 2021, Senior Examiners and Subject Officers in CCEA will carry out an external quality assurance process looking at the grades submitted by all schools and colleges and reviewing samples of students' work to ensure the grades submitted reflect accurately the evidence provided. **Work will be reviewed from every school and college across Northern Ireland.** Where CCEA considers that the evidence provided does not match the grades given by schools and colleges, they will be expected to rerun their process and resubmit the evidence and grades to CCEA.

## A HIGH LEVEL GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

CCEA is working closely with awarding organisations in England and Wales, with the aim to agree a date for the release of results across all three jurisdictions. This will ensure students in Northern Ireland are not disadvantaged in regard to university admissions and all students here, including those taking qualifications with English and Welsh examination boards, will receive their results at the same time. **Results will not be any later than the dates previously envisaged for exam results (24 August 2021 for AS and A Level and 27 August for GCSE but may be earlier.** As soon as a date is agreed, CCEA will advise you of the arrangements.

### Summary of Alternative Awarding Arrangements for CCEA GCSE, AS and A Level in 2021

- Students will continue with their education during this academic year.
- Students may take the CCEA Assessment Resource during a specified window in April and May 2021.
- Students will have opportunities to provide evidence of progress until submissions of Centre Determined Grades are made to CCEA in late May 2021.
- Schools and Colleges must submit Centre Determined Grades to CCEA toward the end of May 2021.
- CCEA will carry out external quality assurance, which will include review of students' work, across all schools and colleges throughout June 2021.
- Results will issue to all students in Northern Ireland no later than 24 August for AS and A Levels and 27 August for GCSEs.
- Students will have the right to appeal to their schools and colleges.

## A HIGH LEVEL GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

**2. WHO DO THESE ARRANGEMENTS APPLY TO?**

**The arrangements set out in this guide apply to CCEA GCSE, AS and A-Level qualifications only.**

Guidance for CCEA Vocationally Related Qualifications, Entry Level Qualifications and Occupational Studies will be issued shortly.

All CCEA AS and A Level students will be issued with Centre Determined Grades in 2021.

At GCSE, only Year 12 students (and above) and those in Further Education or training who are completing qualifications in 2021 may be entered for CCEA GCSE qualifications and will be awarded Centre Determined Grades in 2021.

At GCSE, AS and A Level only the overall Centre Determined Grade for the full qualification will be awarded. Notional unit grades or marks will not be provided for individual units.

Students in Year 11 or below may **not** be entered or awarded GCSE qualifications in 2021. This is to ensure that students in Year 11 continue to study their GCSE qualifications throughout Year 12. **Two exceptions will be permitted:**

- CCEA GCSE Mathematics where the student will be entered for CCEA GCSE Further Maths in 2022. This is because CCEA GCSE Mathematics is a pre-requisite for CCEA GCSE Further Maths.
- Early entries for CCEA GCSE Irish in Irish-medium schools and units or where the learner intends extending their learning through GCSE Gaeilge.

You will wish to have more information on the arrangements for qualifications in 2022. The Education Minister has asked CCEA to examine how best to adapt GCSE and A Level qualifications for 2022 to ease burden and reflect the ongoing disruption to teaching and learning. **The Minister will aim to make a further announcement on arrangements for 2022 by the end of March 2021 or as soon as possible thereafter.**

## A HIGH LEVEL GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

**3. WHAT WILL BE ASSESSED?**

Qualification grades indicate what a person who holds the qualification knows, understands and can do, and to what standard. That is their purpose. People who use qualifications, for example to make selection decisions, need to be able to rely on the grades.

For qualification grades to be meaningful, a person who holds a qualification with a higher grade must have shown that their knowledge, understanding or skills are at a higher standard than a person who holds a qualification with a lower grade.

Our aim is to ensure that students who were expecting to take examinations this summer can be confident their grades are still meaningful and serve their usual purpose.

However, the public health situation and the ongoing disruption means many students will not have had the opportunity to be taught all of the content of the course, or will have been taught it remotely. Young people in Years 12 and 14 have lost at least five months of face to face teaching during their courses. Students cannot, therefore, be assessed on what they would have likely achieved if examinations had gone ahead – which is what teachers were asked in 2020 – because many students will not have covered all of the content that would have been required for the examinations due to the ongoing disruption.

To allow for this, the grades awarded in 2021 should be based on the evidenced standard at which the student is performing – their demonstrated knowledge, understanding and skills in the content of the course they have covered.

**Schools and colleges can use evidence of students' performance against the specification from any point in the course.**

In order to promote ongoing engagement by students in teaching and learning during the coming months, schools can utilise evidence from the current period of remote learning, as well as when students return to school or college. We are conscious that evidence generated later in the course is likely to be the most holistic. Schools will not, therefore, submit grades to CCEA until towards the end of May 2021. We want to provide opportunities for every young person to progress and improve during the coming months and know that the work they are doing can contribute to their grades. At the same time, we know that some young people will find remote learning difficult and that more consistent evidence of the standard at which they are performing may come from earlier periods of the course.

As schools will be asked to assess the evidenced standard at which the student is performing, this means students **do not** have to have completed a specified amount of content, or demonstrate skills knowledge and understanding across every area of the specification as they would normally. In this way, we are taking account of differential learning loss, as some students have suffered more disruption to their learning than others.

At the same time, teachers cannot be asked to decide the grade a student might have achieved had the pandemic not occurred. That would put them in an impossible position, as they would be required to imagine a situation that had not happened. It would also mean that those who use the grades would not know whether the grade indicated what a student knew, understood or could do or, rather, what they might have known, understood or could have done, had things been different. The grade has to be based on the evidence of students' work.

## A HIGH LEVEL GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

## 4. OVERVIEW OF THE AWARDING PROCESS

This Section of Guidance sets out the five main steps of the alternative awarding process in 2021. Further information is provided about each step in the process. CCEA will be providing much more detailed operational guidance to schools and colleges over the coming weeks.

**Alternative Awarding Arrangements 2021 – The Five Step Process**► **Step 1: Guidance, Information and Readiness**

During Step 1 of the process, CCEA will provide support for schools and colleges on evidence gathering as well as moderation and internal standardisation of judgements based on a range of evidence to ensure the judgements made are objective and fair. This will include support from the Chartered Institute of Educational Assessors. The aim is to build on the best practice evident across schools and colleges in 2020, with the aim of providing greater consistency within and across centres.

The guidance and information provided will include:

- on-line training for heads of centre on developing robust processes for managing the moderation and standardisation of centre professional judgements within their centre;
- good practice exemplars to support centres to develop a robust centre specific approach;
- a data pack to include information about past performance at the centre at subject level to assist in the internal moderation and standardisation of grades within the centre;
- general guidance documentation and a series of webinars for schools on gathering evidence and producing grades to include principles of assessment, avoiding unconscious bias and fairness for all students; the type, quality and value of evidence; adjustments to accommodate access arrangements or special considerations including loss of learning due to the pandemic; arriving at final judgements; and, internal moderation of judgements; and
- training for heads of departments and teachers at a subject-specific level.

## A HIGH LEVEL GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

▶ **Step 2: Evidence Gathering and Provision of an Assessment Resource**

In this period, schools will wish to give further opportunities for students to demonstrate what they know, understand and can do.

Schools can use evidence of students' performance against the specification from any point in the course. In order to promote ongoing engagement by students in teaching and learning during the coming months, schools can utilise evidence from during the current period of remote learning, as well as when students return to school or college.

To support the evidence gathering process, CCEA will provide assessment resources for each subject. Students may sit the assessment resources during April and early May.

▶ **Step 3: Centre Professional Judgement and Moderation**

In Step 3, schools and colleges will draw on evidence which relates to the specification, including but in no way limited to, the use of the assessment resource to reach centre professional judgements (Centre Determined Grades) for each qualification.

Where there is more than one subject teacher in a department, the school will need to carry out an internal standardisation process and agree on the grades for all students within the centre who are taking that subject. To do this, teachers within a subject department will need to discuss the grading and come to an agreed view of the standard being applied within their centre. We recognise that this may be challenging and it may be necessary to adjust individual teachers' judgements to bring them into line with those of the other teachers.

CCEA will not be asking centres to produce or submit a rank order with the Teacher Professional Judgements, however, subject departments may find this exercise useful as an element of internal standardisation.

Centres will be asked to retain records of supporting evidence, any written reasoning and any annotated work or notes made in reaching a centre professional judgement for each student. While there will be no requirement to send any supporting evidence to CCEA at this stage, CCEA will request and inspect supporting evidence at its discretion in Step 4.

**There is no prescribed weighting for any piece of evidence rather the Centre Determined Grade is the holistic judgement of the standard at which the student is performing.**

Initial Centre Determined Grades will be submitted to CCEA towards the end of May. Grades for AS and A level qualifications are to be submitted by Friday 21 May, and grades for GCSE qualifications are to be submitted by Friday 28 May. These are **not** students' final grades and will be subject to an external quality assurance process.

## A HIGH LEVEL GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

▶ **Step 4: Review of Evidence and Award**

Once Centres have submitted their initial grades, CCEA will carry out a review of evidence before issuing awards. Throughout June 2021, Senior Examiners and Subject Officers in CCEA will carry out an external quality assurance process looking at the grades submitted by all schools and colleges and reviewing samples of students' work to make sure the grades submitted accurately reflect the evidence provided. **Work will be reviewed from every school and college across Northern Ireland.** Where the evidence does not support or justify the outcomes provided, school will be expected to rerun their judgement and moderation processes.

This is a completely different process to that carried out in 2020. **There will be no algorithms or statistical models used to determine grades.**

If there is evidence when candidate work has been reviewed to suggest the judgments made in a subject or subjects are not secure, schools and colleges will be asked to re-run their processes and for grades to be resubmitted. If after this process, grades submitted are not secure, CCEA will provide support teams to work with centres where evidence and grades do not comply with the appropriate standard. Ultimately, and only in the most severe of circumstances, CCEA may withhold permission for the centre in a subject or subjects to proceed to award and may commence an investigation.

This process is very important to ensure that outcomes are fair and consistent between different schools and colleges across Northern Ireland. We want young people, parents, universities and employers to have confidence that grades awarded by different schools and colleges are of the right and consistent standard.

CCEA is working closely with awarding organisations in England and Wales, with the aim to agree a date for the release of results across all three jurisdictions. This will ensure students in Northern Ireland are not disadvantaged in regard to university admissions and all students here, including those taking qualifications with English and Welsh examination boards, will receive their results at the same time. Results will not be any later than the dates previously envisaged for exam results (24 August 2021 for AS and A Level and 27 August for GCSE) but may be earlier. As soon as a date is agreed, CCEA will advise schools, colleges and students.

**Step 5: Post-Award Review Service**

Following the distribution of results there will be a post-award review service to enable anyone unhappy with their grade to ask for a review of the outcome.

Students who are dissatisfied with their results may use the appeals process. This process will allow students to present evidence in challenge of the grades provided by their centre. Subsequently, appeals against centre process may be made to CCEA.

CCEA will be working with other examination boards over the coming months to make sure that a similar appeals process is put in place across all examination boards and to provide more detailed guidance for schools. This will be well in advance of the issue of results.

## A HIGH LEVEL GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

## 5. FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

**Will all candidates definitely be awarded a result for each qualification?**

Yes, all students who are entered by their school or college will be issued with qualification results in August so they can progress to the next stage of education, employment or training.

**How will qualifications be awarded?**

All CCEA exams have been cancelled. In place of CCEA exams in January, February and summer 2021, a student's grade in a subject will be based on their teacher's professional assessment of the evidenced standard at which they are performing. These will be known as Centre Determined Grades.

Teachers will make evidence-based decisions about the grade they recommend their students be issued. Wherever possible, a breadth of evidence should inform a teacher's assessment of their student's grade. This **may** include the student's performance in the CCEA Assessment Resource; in any non-examination assessments (including practical examinations, controlled assessment or coursework); other class tests and mock examinations; or any other work completed by students (for example practice examination questions, extended essays etc).

There are different arrangements for qualifications offered by English and Welsh Examination Boards and your school will be able to explain the arrangements for these qualifications.

**How are you taking account of the disruption due to COVID-19?**

Students will **not** be assessed on what they would have achieved if exams had gone ahead – which is what teachers were asked in 2020 – because many students will not have covered all of the content that would have been required for the exams due to ongoing disruption.

To allow for this, the grades awarded in 2021 should be based on the evidenced standard at which the student is performing – their demonstrated knowledge, understanding and skills in the content they have covered.

**Schools can use evidence of students' performance against the specification from any point in the course.**

In order to promote ongoing engagement by students in teaching and learning, schools and colleges can utilise evidence from during the current period of remote learning, as well as when students return to school. We are conscious that evidence generated later in the course is likely to be the most holistic. Schools and colleges will not, therefore, submit Centre Determined Grades to CCEA until towards the end of May 2021. We want to provide opportunities for every young person to progress and improve during the coming months and know that the work they are doing can contribute to their grades. At the same time, we know that some young people will find remote learning difficult and that more consistent evidence of the standard at which they are performing may come from earlier periods of the course.

As schools will be asked to assess the evidenced standard at which the student is performing, this means students **do not** have to have completed a specified amount of content, or demonstrate skills knowledge and understanding across every area of the specification as they would normally. Evidence may be gathered from all work that is in line with the specification.

## A HIGH LEVEL GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

In this way, we are taking account of differential learning loss, as some students have suffered more disruption to their learning than others.

### **Will grades be similar to 2020?**

It is the intention that in order to ensure fairness to all students, every effort will be made to maintain standards. It is hoped that the training given to schools in assessing the Centre Determined Grades, will ensure a level of consistency between schools and colleges and across the qualifications. It is likely that overall across our system grade outcomes in 2021 will be broadly similar to those awarded by Centres in 2020.

### **Can practical examinations/controlled assessment/coursework contribute to the qualification grade?**

Yes, this work (even if not fully completed) can be utilised as part of the evidence which centres consider to arrive at Centre Determined Grades.

### **What evidence can be used by schools and colleges?**

Any evidence completed by students during the period of their course can be used to inform teachers' assessments. There is no time limit on the evidence and it may be relevant to **any area** of the course specification. The evidence must of course relate directly to the specification for which the candidate is entered.

### **Is the Assessment Resource the same as an exam?**

No. To help teachers make objective decisions, CCEA will make available a set of assessment resources, which teachers can use with their students. We want to offer students the opportunity to take this CCEA Assessment Resource during April and May. This will be unseen, exam questions in the units or modules they would have taken if the exams had been held.

It is likely that most students will only take the assessment resource in the mandatory units at GCSE and the reduced assessment at AS and A2, as they will not have had the opportunity to cover content across the entire specification. However, some candidates may wish to take papers in all areas of the course.

The Assessment Resource is very different from an external examination. It will be marked by a class teacher and will be only one piece of evidence to inform and support the assessment of a student's abilities. It is not high stakes like an external exam and will be used alongside a range of other evidence.

We hope it will help teachers in the process of making accurate and consistent judgements by providing additional evidence towards the end of the course and also encourage pupil engagement over the next five months. It is an opportunity for students to show their knowledge and skills in the qualification, knowing that other evidence can also be considered.

### **Is the Assessment Resource compulsory?**

No, schools and colleges may decide they do not require the evidence from the Assessment Resource. For example, on a return to school, teachers, particularly where there is already a significant body of evidence, may wish to use the next few months to focus on the teaching and learning of specific elements of the course that have not been covered but which are important for progression. However, schools and colleges may of course decide they wish all of their students to take the papers.

## A HIGH LEVEL GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

The Department of Education strongly recommends every candidate who wishes to have the opportunity to take the assessment resource in a particular qualification should be facilitated to do so, even if the centre has decided not to take them more generally.

### **What if schools remain closed?**

If schools remain closed, students may be able to take the assessment resource at home. It will be used as evidence alongside the range of other evidence which teachers have available to inform their assessments.

### **What if schools and colleges haven't covered the content of some of the questions?**

Schools and colleges will have the freedom to omit questions from assessment resources, if their students have not had reasonable opportunity to cover the content which is being assessed.

### **Should we still aim to teach everything?**

Schools and colleges are encouraged to cover as much of the specification as possible to support progression. However, we recognise the significant disruption which students have faced during their course.

Schools and colleges may decide to continue to prioritise the units which they had prioritised when examination assessment was reduced prior to examinations being cancelled.

### **A student scored poorly in their mock examinations, should this affect their overall grade?**

Teachers have been asked to draw on a range of available evidence to inform their assessment and will wish to use more than one source of evidence such as a mock examination. It is vitally important that young people continue to engage with teaching and learning for the remainder of the academic year and are given opportunities to progress and develop. Schools and colleges will wish to give further opportunities for students to demonstrate what they know, understand and can do.

This is why schools and colleges will submit their outcomes to CCEA towards the end of May. All young people will also be given the opportunity to take the CCEA Assessment Resource, which may be used as evidence to inform their teachers' assessments.

### **How will you ensure outcomes are fair and consistent between schools and colleges?**

Quality assurance is embedded throughout the alternative awarding arrangements. Significant support, guidance and training will be provided to strengthen teachers' and lecturers' understanding of how to consistently apply standards and make accurate assessment judgements. In addition, throughout June 2021, CCEA will carry out an external quality assurance process looking at the grades submitted and reviewing samples of students' work from all schools and colleges to make sure the grades submitted accurately reflect the evidence provided.

### **When will results issue?**

CCEA is working closely with awarding organisations in England and Wales, with the aim to agree a date for the release of results across all three jurisdictions. This will ensure students in Northern Ireland are not disadvantaged in regard to university admissions and all students here, including those taking qualifications with English and Welsh examination boards, will receive their results at the same time. Results will not be any later than the dates previously envisaged

## A HIGH LEVEL GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

for exam results (24 August 2021 for AS and A Level and 27 August for GCSE) but may be earlier. As soon as a date is agreed, CCEA will advise schools, colleges and students.

**Will grades be affected by a school's previous performance?**

No, if CCEA has any concerns about the profile of grades submitted in any subject, it will initiate professional dialogue with the school or college. Students' grades will be based on the evidence which they produce and that evidence should be assessed against the specification for which the student is entered. Schools who do not have evidence of process or are not able to demonstrate that evidence has been assessed in line with the specification may be asked to revisit their grades awarded.

**Will an algorithm be used to work out grades?**

No algorithm will be used. Schools and colleges will submit grades to CCEA towards the end of May 2021. Throughout June 2021, CCEA will carry out an external quality assurance process looking at the grades submitted from all centres and reviewing samples of students' work to make sure the grades submitted accurately reflect the evidence provided.

**Will CCEA change grades?**

It is important to ensure fair and consistent standards between schools and colleges. Grades submitted by schools and colleges at the end of May are not the final awarded grades. CCEA will be carrying out external quality assurance across all centres in Northern Ireland.

If candidates' work has been reviewed and there is evidence to suggest judgments made in a subject or subjects are not secure, schools and colleges will be asked to re-run their processes and for grades to be resubmitted. If after this process, grades submitted are not secure, CCEA will provide support teams to work with centres where evidence and grades do not comply with the appropriate standard. Ultimately, and only in the most severe of circumstances, CCEA may withhold permission for the centre in a subject or subjects to proceed to award and may commence an investigation.

**Are these qualifications less valuable?**

No, the level of demand and standard for the qualifications is the same as in previous years. Higher Education providers and employers will see these as valid qualifications. Schools and learners should cover as much content as is possible to facilitate progression.

**For AS students - will AS grades count towards A Level in 2022?**

The Education Minister has asked CCEA to examine how best to adapt GCSE and A Level qualifications for 2022 to ease burden and reflect the ongoing disruption to teaching and learning.

The Minister will make a further announcement on awarding arrangements for 2022 including the potential use of AS data for A Level awarding by the end of March 2021 or as soon as possible thereafter.

**For GCSE students - will the outcomes of my January 2020 or November 2020 GCSE examinations contribute towards the final grade?**

The outcomes of these examinations are one source of evidence, which schools or colleges may wish to consider as part of a range of evidence. Students should, however, be reassured that wherever possible a range of evidence will inform a teacher's assessment of their grade.