

Witness Name: Gerry Campbell

Statement No.: M08-CCEA-001

Exhibits: 6

Dated: 8 July 2025

## **UK COVID-19 INQUIRY**

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### **WITNESS STATEMENT OF THE COUNCIL FOR THE CURRICULUM, EXAMINATIONS AND ASSESSMENT (CCEA)**

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I, Gerry Campbell, Chief Executive of the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), will say as follows:

#### **Part A – Roles and responsibilities of CCEA**

1. I, Gerry Campbell, was appointed Chief Executive of CCEA in March 2023. During the Specified Period, Justin Edwards was the Chief Executive of CCEA until April 2021 and was then succeeded by Margaret Farragher, who held the role of Interim Chief Executive until June 2022.
2. CCEA is the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment. It is a non-departmental public body (NDPB) funded by and responsible to the Department of Education (DE), as set out in Schedule 3 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998.
3. CCEA's key duties and functions, as defined in Part VIII of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, are to:
  - keep under review all aspects of the curriculum, examinations and assessment for grant-aided schools and colleges of further education and to undertake statutory consultation on proposals relating to legislation;

- advise the Department of Education on matters concerned with the curriculum, assessment, examinations and external qualifications and accredit and approve qualifications;
- conduct and moderate examinations and assessments, ensuring that standards are recognised as equivalent to the standards of examinations and assessments conducted by other bodies or authorities exercising similar functions elsewhere in the United Kingdom;
- publish and disseminate information relating to the curriculum, assessment and examinations;
- develop and produce teaching support materials for use in schools;
- ensure that the standards of examinations and assessments conducted by bodies or authorities in Northern Ireland are recognised as equivalent to the standards of examinations and assessments conducted by other bodies or authorities exercising similar functions elsewhere in the United Kingdom – in carrying out this function CCEA shall, as far as is relevant, have regard to the requirements of industry, commerce and the professions and of persons with special learning needs;
- develop and publish criteria for the accreditation of relevant external qualifications and accredit, where such criteria are met, any qualifications submitted for accreditation; and
- keep under review all aspects of relevant external qualifications and publish and disseminate information relating to relevant external qualifications.

4. The CCEA Council is responsible for the statutory functions carried out by CCEA. The relationship between the Department of Education and CCEA is set out in the CCEA Management Statement and Financial Memorandum (this is currently in the process of moving to a Partnership Agreement). The Education Minister is accountable to the Northern Ireland Assembly for the activities and performance of CCEA.

5. These roles and responsibilities did not change during the Specified Period.

6. The Ministers and senior civil servants responsible for CCEA's area of responsibility during the Specified Period were:

- Michelle Mclveen – Education Minister, Department of Education (appointed 14 June 2021)
- Lord Peter Weir – Education Minister, Department of Education (until 13 June 2021)
- Dr Mark Browne – Permanent Secretary, Department of Education (appointed 1 March 2021)
- Lianne Patterson – Permanent Secretary, Department of Education (30 November 2020 to 28 February 2021)
- Derek Baker – Permanent Secretary, Department of Education (retired 27 November 2020)
- Linsey Farrell – Deputy Secretary, Education and Children Services, Department of Education (appointed 4 October 2021)
- Fiona Hepper – Deputy Secretary, Education and Children Services, Department of Education (retired 8 August 2021)
- Faustina Graham – Chief Inspector, Education and Training Inspectorate, Department of Education (appointed 29 September 2020)
- Noelle Buick – Chief Inspector, Education and Training Inspectorate, Department of Education (until 31 March 2020)
- Gary Fair – Director of Finance, Department of Education.

7. When required, CCEA works with other departments across government to align on shared objectives related to curriculum and teaching resources, ensuring that educational materials remain current and responsive to evolving societal priorities.

8. CCEA normally consults with the following stakeholders:

Type	Organisations
Government	Department of Education, Department for the Economy and Northern Ireland Assembly, including elected representatives and relevant committees, e.g. Education Committee
Qualification regulators	Ofqual and Qualifications Wales

Awarding organisations	AQA, Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), Oxford, Cambridge and RSA (OCR), Pearson, City and Guilds, and the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ)
Education arm's length bodies	Education Authority (EA), Middletown Centre for Autism, Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), Governing Bodies Association (GBA), Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), Catholic Schools' Trustee Service (CSTS), Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE), General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta and Controlled Schools' Support Council
Educators	Teachers and schools across Northern Ireland
Teaching unions	Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), National Education Union (NEU), National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) and Ulster Teachers' Union (UTU)
Young people and advocacy bodies	Young people and their parents and guardians, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) and Secondary Students' Union of Northern Ireland (SSUNI)

## **Part B – Pre-pandemic planning**

9. CCEA maintains Disaster Recovery and Business Continuity plans. These plans include mitigations for a wide range of potential issues to ensure CCEA's essential services, such as the delivery of qualifications and awarding, can continue in the event of an emergency. However, these plans did not set out in detail options for approaches that could be taken in the unprecedented circumstance of examinations being cancelled for the first time.

## **Part C – Exams and assessments in Northern Ireland prior to and during the pandemic**

10. It is not within CCEA's roles and responsibilities to have a view on whether exams should be cancelled. On 17 March 2020, CCEA provided its initial advice to the Department of Education on its response to Covid-19 and high-level examination options. This advice paper is attached at **Exhibit GC/01 - INQ000617213**. On 19 March 2020, the Education Minister announced the closure of all schools (except for children of key workers) and the cancellation of the A level, AS level and GCSE examination timetable.
11. On 6 April 2020, CCEA provided advice to the Department of Education, in addition to that submitted on 17 March 2020, focusing on alternative grading options and evaluation. This advice provided on 5 April 2020 is attached at **Exhibit GC/02 - INQ000617223**.
12. The advice CCEA provided on 6 April 2020 set out draft options for alternative awarding arrangements for A level, AS level and GCSE. These options were then assessed against principles that were agreed across awarding organisations in England, Scotland and Wales. These principles were:
- Fairness – ensuring that candidates receive fair results that enable judgements to be made about progression to further or higher education, employment or other avenues;
  - Reduced burden – balancing the inherent delivery risks with the opportunities afforded by other arrangements, particularly in consideration of the burden on resources;
  - Impact limitation – limiting the impact, as far as possible, to the Summer 2020 students to avoid knock-on effects on future examinations and qualifications arrangements; and
  - Minimised uncertainty – minimising uncertainty for candidates and school leaders, maintaining their confidence in the system.
13. The advice CCEA provided on 6 April 2020, which set out draft options for alternative awarding arrangements for A level, AS level and GCSE, is summarised in the following paragraphs.

14. Most alternative awarding arrangements proposed for A level involved the use of calculated grades based on a z-score methodology. A z-score methodology calculates a candidate's mark in a missing unit based on their performance relative to their peers in other units. The addition of incorporating statistical value-added adjustments for examination resits was explored, as was the inclusion of teacher judgement for quality assurance purposes. A further option provided for A level proposed the use of mean GCSE scores and teacher predictions to estimate the candidate's grade. The final option suggested delaying the examination series until it could be safely conducted, likely in the autumn.
15. The potential alternative awarding arrangements for AS level mirrored the A level options but introduced more focus on retrospective grading and alternative scheduling. Options included awarding AS grades retrospectively based on later A2 performance using the z-score methodology, deferring grading to a future examination series, providing estimated grades based on prior attainment and teacher judgement, and providing flexibility for students to either accept calculated grades or sit exams later.
16. GCSE options were divided between cash-in and modular pathways. For students who were cashing in already completed modules in combination with those due to be sat in Summer 2020, options included calculating predictions based on completed modules, and the potential to include a value-added component for resits. A further option explored grading candidates based on a combination of teacher judgement (rank ordering) and average centre performance. For modular GCSEs, options included providing candidates with estimated grades based on teacher judgement or deferring all assessments to the following year (2021), meaning candidates would not receive a grade in 2020.
17. On 15 April 2020, the Education Minister provided direction on what alternative awarding arrangements would be taken forward. An amended version of this direction was provided to CCEA on 13 May 2020. The direction itself did not change; only the articles under which the direction was made changed. The letter received by CCEA on 13 May 2020 is attached at **Exhibit GC/03 - INQ000587881**.

18. The agreed alternative awarding arrangements that were taken forward for CCEA's Summer 2020 A level, AS level and GCSE qualifications involved teacher professional judgement and statistical standardisation models and are set out below. Each model was rigorously tested and replicated by statisticians and data scientists before going live. Live grading was also replicated within CCEA's internal Data Science, Statistics and Research team, and PwC were also employed to replicate the process. Results of the replication were compared for 100% accuracy.
19. A level awarding – the Education Minister directed CCEA to 'grade outcomes based on a combination of teacher professional judgement (including grading and rank ordering by examination centres) and statistical modelling (enhanced with value-added allowance to account for improvements which would have resulted from resits)'. The outcomes were calculated using a combination of z-score methodology based on AS performance with a value-added allowance to account for resits and teacher professional judgement as a validation component. Students were not required to take A level examinations through an additional sitting, such as an autumn series. The fundamental premise in this approach was that prior AS level performance data formed the most reliable basis on which to award A level grades. CCEA research showed that there was a strong correlation (correlation coefficient of 0.76) between AS level performance and A level performance. The method was adapted to include data on the average improvement of performance where candidates resat AS units alongside their A2 units. CCEA used this method for 2020 candidates to create a centre grade distribution, and this modelled distribution was applied to the centre-produced rank order.
20. AS level awarding – the grade awarded at AS level was based on previous student performance combined with centre assessment grades and centre rank orders. The Education Minister directed CCEA to 'award AS grades using a combination of teacher professional judgement (including grades and rank ordering by centres) and mean GCSE scores'. This model employed a similar methodology to that used in England to grade A levels.
21. GCSE awarding – students who were due to sit GCSE exams that would have led to a whole GCSE qualification in Summer 2020 would be issued a grade using a

combination of average centre performance, centre assessment grades and rank ordering. The Education Minister directed CCEA to 'award GCSE grades based on a combination of teacher professional judgement (including grades and rank ordering by centres) and average centre performance models: the model should include average centre performance at subject level over the past three summer series and controls to ensure similar proportions in current series'. Unlike other jurisdictions, CCEA has no prior attainment data available for GCSE candidates, and so options for modelling were limited. CCEA produced a predicted centre performance based on centre outcomes over the past three years. These predictions were first produced with each previous year equally weighted. CCEA then increased the weightings for 2018 and 2019 incrementally. Weighting 2019 ( $\times 3$ ) and 2018 ( $\times 2$ ) and leaving 2017 gave predictions closest to actual outcomes. This weighting allowed the model to account for progression over the past three years and prioritised 2019 as the current GCSE standard. To account for smaller centres and standardise outcomes, the national (total) cohort who achieved each grade in 2019 was also added to the three-year centre level total. This prediction was then applied to the centre rank order to assign grades to candidates.

22. As set out in the paragraphs above, teachers were asked to estimate learning attainment by providing 1) a centre assessment grade for each student and 2) the rank order of students within each grade. In the interest of fairness to students, it was important that judgements made by centres across Northern Ireland should be consistent. The quality assurance of the grades provided took place within the centre, prior to their submission to CCEA. Centre assessment grades and rank orders were developed by the subject teachers, then reviewed by at least two other teachers. This process was to help make sure the grades were fair and reflective of the student.
23. CCEA had set out the benefits, limitations, and mitigations to deal with the limitations of each alternative awarding arrangement. Across A level, AS level and GCSE, the reliance on the accuracy of teacher estimates (centre assessment grades) was noted. To mitigate this, CCEA completed a manual review of all candidates whose calculated grade was two or more grades below the centre assessment grade. At A



level, CCEA reviewed the reliability of the centre assessment grade as well as candidate performance in units already taken.

24. A limitation of the A level methodology was that it could not be used for the small percentage of candidates who had no previous AS scores. Where a candidate had no AS marks in a subject, but there were other candidates in that centre entered for A level cash-in who had AS data, the candidate was slotted into the CCEA rank order at the same position as they appeared in the centre rank order and awarded a grade based on the grades of candidates who appeared directly above and below the candidate in the CCEA rank order.
25. A limitation of the AS level and GCSE methodology was that the model was less stable for examination centres who had a small number of candidates. Another limitation for AS level was that the model could not be used in new subjects or centres with few, or no, previous entries in a subject. To mitigate this, small and new examination centres were identified and awarded centre assessment grades.
26. An Equality Impact Assessment (Equality Screening) was conducted in May 2020. AlphaPlus, an education service business that specialises in standards, assessment and certification, was appointed to provide a formal review of the proposed methodologies and communications. The 2020 proposals were also peer reviewed by six academics. All groups were asked to discuss and provide written feedback on the following:
  - Clarity;
  - Validity;
  - Strengths and areas for improvement; and
  - Ethics and equality.
27. The A level arrangements used candidates' prior attainment data in the form of their mean GCSE and AS level scores. At AS level, prior attainment in the form of mean GCSE scores was used. There was no prior attainment data for GCSE, so historical data was used in the GCSE model.

28. Normal GCSE examination awarding is informed by a statistical approach known as 'common centres' which is combined with examiner judgement to determine outcomes. The common centres approach aims to replicate the aggregated outcomes from one series to another for centres with entries in both the current year and a reference year. The aggregated common centres prediction for each specification is generated from the grade distribution for those same centres in the reference series. Common centres predictions use outcomes for 16-year-old candidates generally, not individually. In the absence of examiner judgement in 2020 and to ensure all candidates received a grade, historical centre information was used for the GCSE model, as common centre predictions have evidenced its effectiveness.
29. The Ministerial directive provided on 13 May 2020 (**Exhibit GC/03 - INQ000587881**) was to 'ensure, as far as possible, that qualification standards are maintained and the distribution of grades follows a similar profile to that in previous years'. In the absence of examination results, this could only be achieved by using historical outcomes data. These outcomes were from three consecutive years: 2017, 2018 and 2019 (weighted).
30. CCEA had ongoing engagement with a range of stakeholders during the Specified Period to take their views into account and ensure transparency in the design and delivery of these alternative awarding arrangements. CCEA engaged with representatives from government, qualifications regulators, other awarding organisations from across the UK, the wider education community, education arm's length bodies, school and college leaders across Northern Ireland, teaching unions, and young people and their advocacy bodies.
31. CCEA carried out a public consultation on proposed changes to 2021 examinations based on the assumption that public examinations would return that year. Over 7,000 stakeholders' responses were received.
32. Each school, college or examination centre needed to submit the following information to CCEA: 1) a centre assessment grade for each student and 2) the rank order of students within each grade.

33. CCEA used all available communication channels to provide schools and colleges with guidance and support in administering the estimation process and how to generate these grades and the evidence that should be considered. CCEA developed the following communication assets to provide guidance and support to schools, colleges and examination centres: an explainer video, a PDF guide, website frequently asked questions, and a timeline graphic explaining key dates. Key information was communicated as quickly as possible through social media, the CCEA website and communication direct to centres through email and online briefing events (webinars). Prior to issue, CCEA's guidance was peer reviewed by external reviewers to ensure clarity.
34. On a technical level, to assist schools, colleges and examination centres in submitting the required information, CCEA adapted its IT systems to collect this data in a way that was as straightforward as possible for them, through the creation of a 'rank order portal' that could be logged in to securely. To help schools and colleges use the system, a video and instructions were issued.
35. CCEA was responsible for ensuring that the process of designing and implementing models for alternative awarding arrangements was high quality, fair and transparent. CCEA submitted its proposals and methodology to the Department of Education and discussed these publicly at the Northern Ireland Assembly's Education Committee. In addition, CCEA's approach was reviewed and analysed by various independent sources:
- PwC was commissioned by CCEA to ensure accuracy and independently check all results during the test of models – both Test and Live models were replicated.
  - A Peer Review Group, with representatives from UCAS, Queen's University Belfast, University of Oxford, Chartered Institute of Educational Assessors (CIEA) and Cambridge Assessment, provided feedback on the clarity, validity, strengths and areas of improvement, and ethics and equality of the methodology used.
  - AlphaPlus, specialists in standards, assessment and certification, was appointed by CCEA to independently review the proposed methodologies.

- A statistician, who was an honorary fellow of the University of Oxford, was employed by CCEA Regulation to conduct an independent assessment of the models.

36. To explain the models to schools, colleges, students and families, CCEA implemented a range of communication methods. On 16 April 2020, following the Education Minister's announcement explaining how qualifications would be awarded for GCSE, AS and A level, CCEA published guidance on its website aimed at students and parents, along with initial advice for examination centres and schools. On 30 April 2020, CCEA issued further technical guidance to examination centres and schools. This information was developed with input from school principals. On 5 August 2020, CCEA hosted a webinar attended by the Heads of examination centres. At this webinar, CCEA presented the design of the statistical standardisation model, including a demonstration of how this would work. Following this, on 11 August 2020, CCEA held another webinar with a larger group of Heads of examination centres to again present the statistical standardisation model. CCEA published details of its model following the issue of results.

37. CCEA was proactive in its external communication through the provision of subsequent supporting guidance on its website, social media, news and media outlets, and directly with examination centres and schools.

38. Regarding the correlation between the adjustment of grades and how centres associated with those entries had historically performed, CCEA only used historical data to formulate GCSE grades. At A level and AS level, CCEA had data on the majority of individuals' prior performance, i.e. AS level and GCSE. Therefore, the models for these awards were not reliant on historical centre data. GCSE predicted grades were never used for the result issued, and so students received centre assessment grades as their final result.

39. Following the issue of A level results in Northern Ireland and concerns about the process being raised in other jurisdictions of the UK, CCEA identified that there might be a higher than anticipated number of GCSE appeals once those results were released and that there was a risk that CCEA would not be able to process the

appeals in sufficient time. On 16 August 2020, CCEA recommended to the Department of Education that there should be a change to the approach for awarding of GCSEs. CCEA's correspondence with the Department of Education on 16 August 2020 is attached at **Exhibit GC/04 - INQ000587882**. The attachment to this letter, a paper from CCEA which provides further information on the suggested change of approach for GCSE awarding, is attached at **Exhibit GC/05 - INQ000617257**. It recommended that all candidates taking GCSEs awarded by CCEA should receive results based solely on the centre assessment grades provided by schools and colleges. It was also considered important that the awarding of AS and A levels align closely with the approaches in England and Wales so that Northern Ireland candidates were not disadvantaged in competing for places at university, given that a large number of students from Northern Ireland apply to university in England and Wales.

40. On 17 August 2020, the Minister of Education provided direction to CCEA on the approach that should be taken to award GCSE, AS and A levels. This direction is attached at **Exhibit GC/06 - INQ000587884**. On 19 August 2020, the Education Minister wrote to all school principals outlining the detail and rationale of his decisions. The decision to award centre assessment grades did not involve any delay in the awarding process and all CCEA GCSE results were issued to candidates on Thursday 20 August 2020 as planned. This meant no additional wait time for examination centres or candidates.
41. Following the issue of GCSE results on 20 August 2020, CCEA widened its appeals process. CCEA had set out a revised appeals process for 2020, made appeals free and diverted staff to deliver appeals within the required 42-day deadline set by JCQ. CCEA contacted local universities to confirm admissions processes would be kept open until 7 September 2020 to allow for appeals, in line with arrangements in England. CCEA updated its website and provided support and guidance information to make sure the appeals process was clear and that appeals which impact on university admissions would be given priority. CCEA published a 'Student's Guide to the Appeals Process' on its website, clarifying the grounds on which CCEA would accept applications for appeals and reviews.

42. CCEA recognised the key findings of the Deloitte report published on 21 January 2021. The findings of the report were taken into account during our future planning in designing options for awarding arrangements for 2021 and subsequent years.
43. In January 2021, schools and colleges were closed for a further extended period, resulting in the cancellation of public examinations for a second successive year. Based on lessons learned from Summer 2020, a new process was put in place. In 2021, examination centres would be required to use a range of evidence to arrive at a professional and academic judgement of the standard at which each student was performing in the context of the specification for which they were entered and from this, provide a grade referred to as a 'centre determined grade'.
44. This was different from the 2020 approach, when examination centres were asked to supply a centre assessment grade based on their judgement of the grade a candidate would likely have achieved if they had been able to complete their examinations. In addition, CCEA also put in place a process to quality assure the evidence used to support judgements arrived at by examination centres.
45. To facilitate delivery of this revised approach, a range of support was provided to schools and colleges. This included a training package that was developed in conjunction with the Chartered Institute of Educational Assessors (CIEA). Targeted at school leaders, the training aimed to develop their knowledge, understanding and confidence in educational assessment, which in turn would be disseminated to their staff. 325 assessment resources (CCEA examination papers) were also provided to support teachers arriving at judgements on each of their students.

#### **Part D – Lessons learned and future work**

46. CCEA made decisions during the Specified Period in collaboration with stakeholders and officials in government. During all decision-making, the priority was ensuring that learners could progress in education, training, employment or other pathways, making sure that as a cohort, they were treated with fairness and equity in comparison to previous years and with those in other jurisdictions, taking into account that CCEA has a statutory duty to ensure its qualifications are recognised as equivalent to similar qualifications taken in other parts of the UK.

47. A range of awarding options were reviewed during March and April 2020, including options such as delaying the examination series until a later date when health advice permitted, or not providing students with grades. These options were discounted due to the negative impact they would have had on young people, such as the delay and disadvantage to university entry, the disruption to examination centres in having to operate a full additional examination series, and the uncertain nature of any sustained impact of Covid-19 which could result in future disruption.
48. The 2020 and subsequent alternative awarding arrangements had an ongoing impact on qualifications in Northern Ireland and in other jurisdictions (England, Scotland and Wales). From 2022 until 2023 when public examinations returned, CCEA had different assessment arrangements in place for qualifications each year in response to the disruption to teaching and learning caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and to mitigate its effects on learners.
49. Across awarding organisations, the three qualification regulators (CCEA Regulation, Ofqual, and Qualifications Wales) have introduced resilience arrangements so that the qualifications system will be better prepared in the event of having to undertake alternative awarding arrangements in the future. In June 2024, CCEA Regulation published a guide which sets out the arrangements that examination centres should put in place to collect evidence of student performance which could be used to help award grades in the unlikely event that a system-wide cancellation of examinations and assessments is invoked again. It applies to all qualifications taken in Northern Ireland including GCSE, AS and A level.
50. To be better prepared to meet challenges associated with examinations and qualifications posed by any future pandemic, a multidisciplinary approach including contingency plans should be developed and continually reviewed.
51. Clear, flexible contingency plans should be developed and maintained for examinations and qualifications that consider multiple scenarios such as school closures, remote learning or partial attendance. These plans should be regularly reviewed and updated in consultation with the Department of Education, other

government departments, school leaders, other awarding organisations across the UK, and young people and their representatives.

52. The wellbeing of young people should be a key priority. Provisions should be made available that allow them to progress to the next stage of education and employment without disruption. Young people's views should be considered during the design of contingency measures, and decisions made should be communicated to them in a clear and timely manner.
53. Clear communication and transparency around approaches, including awarding arrangements, should be a priority. The Summer 2020 arrangements highlighted an ongoing lack of knowledge and understanding around standardisation, which takes place in each examination year, but was brought to the fore in 2020. Ongoing and clear communication to young people, their families, schools and the wider community should be a priority to protect the integrity of public examinations and ensure continued trust in the system.
54. Investment in digital infrastructure and technology should be a priority, for example digital platforms for learning and online teacher training, to ensure continuity in learning in the event of school closures. This could also support digital examination delivery in the future if needed.

### **Statement of Truth**

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

**Signed:**

**Personal Data**



**Dated:** 8 July 2025