

To: Parents/Carers of Year 11, Year 12 and Year 13 Students

Our Ref: 8739115

7 January 2021

Dear Parent/Carers

Re: BTEC and Vocational Exams 2021

We are writing to you regarding the vocational exams (modular exams in BTEC, Cambridge National and Technical, Financial Studies) that were scheduled to begin on Monday 11 January 2021. As you are probably aware, following the announcement of the national lockdown on Monday 4 January, the Department for Education announced that it would be for schools to decide if the exams would take place, but that if exams do not go ahead, students would still be awarded a grade for the qualification. It was a surprise to many school leaders that this decision has been left to school leaders, given that most students are working from home and a national stay-at-home order was issued.

Leaders from all four of our secondary schools in the trust have been working with our CEO, to try to decide the best way forward. Inevitably, there will be a range of opinions amongst parents and students and we can see advantages and disadvantages with all possible approaches. In coming to a decision, we have thought about two key issues: safety and fairness.

In terms of safety, we have asked for specific advice and guidance from Public Health England and the Department for Health about the risks and the measures we could take if we were to invite significant additional numbers of students to come in and sit exams at this time. We have also considered the views of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), who, on 22 December 2020, told the government that to control the new variant of Covid-19, existing safety measures need to be strengthened significantly.

Unfortunately, neither Public Health, nor the Department for Education have been able to provide any additional guidance or suggest any strengthening of measures already in place. We are particularly concerned that we would be unable to prevent mixing of students on the way to and from exams at a time when a stay-at-home order is in place and we have seen no evidence that we could completely safely accommodate numbers of students in exam halls. Given that the national lockdown is intended to prevent household mixing, it does not seem sensible or responsible to invite large numbers of students from multiple households into school.

We are also very concerned about the issue of fairness. We know that sitting an external exam is a stressful situation, but doing so when many students have told us they are worried about coming in is hardly conducive to performing at your best. In addition, if some students in the country take the exam, while others are given a teacher assessed grade, there is a real concern about whether those taking the exam can

possibly be treated fairly. The whole premise of a national exam is that all students are examined in a fair way.

With all this in mind, we have come to the conclusion that for reasons of safety and to try to make sure students are treated as fairly as possible in this impossibly difficult situation, we will not go ahead with holding the exams.

Our message to students directly is please be assured that you will receive a grade for the qualification you have studied. This will be based on the substantial evidence we will have of your performance. As with the A levels and GCSEs, we expect to receive further information from OFQUAL and the exam boards on how that process will take place, and when we have it, we will share it with you. In the meantime, it is vital that you continue to work as hard as you can in all your subjects and follow the guidance of your teachers. Your courses run through to the summer term and there is no reason to think that your final grade will not be based on the work you do right up until the summer term. We recognise that some of you will be relieved and others may be disappointed. Please understand that we have given this a great deal of consideration and think this is the safest and fairest way of doing things.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact your subject teacher or Mr Gray, Deputy Headteacher (Curriculum).

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'R. Williman', written in a cursive style.

Richard Williman
Headteacher