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Dear Year 11/13 Students and Parents,

I can only begin to imagine the anxiety, confusion and upset that this week's news regarding this summer's examinations has caused our Year 11 and 13 students (and their parents). I am truly sorry for them that, for the second academic year running, the start of a national lockdown has been accompanied by the sudden announcement of the cancellation of GCSE and A-Level examinations. It isn't significant in comparison, but our own frustration has been added to this week by the fact that, unlike last year, the students affected haven't been in school for us to support and reassure in person. I know that Dr Ravetz, Mr Duffell and Mrs Robinson have worked hard this week to try to advise and provide support and I hope that the engagement with their teachers in lessons has enabled our students to stay positive, despite all the current circumstances.

What has been announced?

"I can confirm that GCSEs and A and AS Level exams will not go ahead this summer" (the Education Secretary's statement to Parliament on Wednesday afternoon this week, removing the initial uncertainty which was present on Monday evening). Vocational examinations (such as BTECs) have yet to be cancelled en masse as some contain vital practical components (electrician-training qualifications for example), but it is difficult to imagine that the vocational examinations which our students are due to sit will go ahead as they are not dissimilar from GCSE and A Level examinations.

What happens next?

"We will look at all options to enable candidates to receive a grade. The Secretary of State for Education will be asking Ofqual to consult rapidly on an approach for alternative arrangements that allow students to progress fairly." (Department for Education guidance to schools, published on Thursday this week).

Put simply, we do not currently know - and we will let students and parents know as soon as any proposals emerge, which could well be as soon as next week. The signs are that schools will generate 'teacher-assessed' grades but will be given detailed guidance around the type of evidence that can be used to do so. Hence it is almost certain that our Year 11 and 13 students will still face vital evidence-generating assessments over the next 6 months or so and they should continue to apply themselves in the same manner in which they would have done should this summer's examinations still having been going ahead.

The need for Year 11 and 13 students to continue to work in the usual manner was underlined in a statement from Simon Lebus, the Chief Regulator for Exams in England, this week:

"We know that this is a difficult time for students, their parents and carers, teachers and trainers. Our message to students is this: please continue to engage as fully as you can in your education. That will be online for the majority of students, or face-to-face for those students still going in to their school, college or training provider. This will put you in the best position, whatever arrangements are made for your qualifications. It's important that teachers and students can focus on the knowledge and skills needed to equip students to progress to the next stage, whatever form that might take – whether to college, an apprenticeship, university or employment." (Simon Lebus, Interim Chief Regulator, Ofqual)

The Future

The final line in the statement above hints at a very sensible and pragmatic approach for Year 11 and 13 students to take – which, after all the disruption of the last 10 months, is to really focus now on their progression to the next stage of their lives next September. To support this, Mr Duffell (Director of Sixth Form) will shortly be writing to all Year 11 students to launch the application process to join our Sixth Form in September and will also focus his work on supporting Year 13 students who wish to complete university applications to do so before the forthcoming UCAS deadline. Please contact Mr Duffell via iduffell@helsbyhigh.org if you would like any further information or have any queries about either of these processes.

May I take this opportunity to wish our Year 11 and 13 students all the very best as they undertake 'remote learning' over the next few weeks. I hope that they and their families stay safe and well and they shouldn't hesitate to contact the school via any of the usual means if we can assist in any way at any time. Please be reassured that the school is committed to doing whatever we need to do in the coming months to support our students and also to ensure that the results they eventually receive this summer will represent well-deserved success for all their commitment and hard work on their GCSE and A-Level courses.

Best wishes,

Martin Hill
Headteacher