

Answers from the Department of Education to questions raised but not covered in the webinar

Staged return to school

Continuation of on-line learning from home

Will parents be given the opportunity to continue with "learning from home" while students return full time to onsite learning? Like what was on offer last year? Can students who stay home just zoom call into their class but perhaps have the material provided online or printed? How are schools supposed to manage dual year 12s?

All students are expected to return to school in line with the staged Return to School Plan. We have worked with NSW Health on our COVID-safe plan to return to school sites and have developed effective practices – vaccinations, mask wearing, reduced mingling of staff and student groups, ventilation in classrooms and continued good hygiene and cleaning. Flexibility will be provided where needed – such as if schools revert to learning from home due to a Public Health Order, the school will continue to provide learning activities for students to do at home and will communicate with parents and carers about students' learning.

If we are unable to get our child double vaccinated before the return to school date, will an online option remain available for those of us wanting to get our kids vaccinated before returning children to school?

All students are expected to return to school in line with the staged Return to School Plan. Student, staff and community safety is our number one priority. All staff on site are required to be fully vaccinated. Students and the school community are also encouraged to be fully vaccinated. In collaboration with NSW Health, a combination of safety protocols will be in place to protect students and staff in the return to school, including vaccinations, mask wearing, reduced mingling, ventilation in classrooms as well as continued practice of good hygiene and cleaning.

Please clarify the terms of the 50 per 100,000 criteria for returning to Learning from Home. Which statistics will be used?

The Department of Education is working closely with NSW Health to ensure the return to school is based on the latest Health advice. Further details will be provided in early October 2021.

How can parents feel confident in the return to school plan if we aren't consulted before it is implemented?

The Return to School Plan has been informed by school leaders with expertise across a wide range of school settings, as well as key stakeholders including the Primary Principals Association, Secondary Principals Council and NSW Teachers Federation.

Senior officers from the Department, including the Secretary, continue to regularly meet with the Federation of P&C Associations of NSW. The next meeting is to be held in Term 4 2021.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on students, parents and school communities, webinars have been held with interested P&C members on 12 August and 14 September 2021.

These have also provided an opportunity for questions to be tabled and responses generated. The Return to School Plan was also informed by the questions and issues raised through the webinars.

Once the plan is in place, the department will work closely with schools and communities to ensure that they have the support and guidance needed to implement it and keep students safe.

Return to school

What advice can you give to families who have siblings across different years of schooling on how to manage the logistics of both learning at home and sending their children to school?

Schools will be required to adopt a cohort model to provide a safe learning environment for students, minimise opportunities for transmission and enable the most effective contact tracing and containment measures in the event of a COVID-19 case. A localised approach will be adopted by each school, led by the principal.

What are teachers supposed to do with split year (stage or otherwise) classes that don't resume the same week, if they cannot do both online and in person learning simultaneously? How are teachers supposed to manage different start and ending times, and how big is the difference between start and finishing times?

For the staged return to face-to-face learning, schools may use flexible staffing arrangements to support the delivery of face-to-face and home-based learning for the cohorts at different stages of return, which may include casual staff and final year practicum students. The department will not expect staff to deliver dual modes of learning to the same cohort.

There are resources available to support schools including scenarios to illustrate how COVID-safe return to school plans can be implemented to suit individual school contexts.

Will the return be 5 days straight away or staggered like last year?

This is a full time return of students to face-to-face learning i.e. 5 days per week.

What are the department, principals and teachers doing to re-engage students and push forward the 6 months of diminished learning that we have missed for our children's education? Kids are not able to fairly show their learning, when many have not been taught except by google docs since June. How is this fair?

If students do not return to face-to-face teaching they will be marked absent, but what else? Does it really matter if they miss the last four weeks of school given the whole year has been disrupted in regard to education? Why would parents that are scared by growing COVID numbers send their kids to school for this short amount of time?

We know that nothing can replace face-to-face learning with an expert teacher and there is a need for students to return to school as soon as it is safe for them to do so. Being at school with their teachers and peers is also vital for student wellbeing, as well as their social and emotional development.

Schools, in partnership with parents, are responsible for promoting the regular attendance of students.

Students' experiences of the learning from home period, and their needs on returning to onsite learning at school will vary. In addition to normal support services schools will need to support teachers to do the following:

- acknowledge and listen to students' feelings and concerns
- take time to specifically re-establish routines and expectations
- create a balance between learning and wellbeing in the first weeks back
- focus on rebuilding connections
- support students who have found the learning from home period difficult
- notice changes in behaviour and offer intervention where necessary
- know where to find further support

In addition, during Semester 2 2021 the department's requirements for reporting to parents K-12 have been amended to support schools through impacts caused by COVID-19.

What is the point of all this separation at schools if they all have to use the same toilets?

A recent report from NCIRS into COVID transmission in education settings indicated that very little transmission happens between children and only a very small number get seriously ill. That's why we require all staff on site to be fully vaccinated. We have worked with NSW Health on other measures including well-ventilated rooms with good airflow, ensuring masks are worn indoors and outdoors by staff and students, keeping year levels separated to reduce any impact of exposure. These combined measures and others have been put in place to support a COVID-safe return to school sites.

Will children check in to schools? Service NSW has a card.

All staff and visitors attending a school site must comply with school protocols and check in using the applicable Service NSW QR code. Students are not required to check in to schools.

Will the LGAs in the concerned list also return on the said dates, irrespective of the number of cases? Will students from LGAs of concern be allowed to go to their schools in non-restricted LGAs? When will we know if LGAs of concern will return or not on the dates outlined?

The NSW roadmap to return to face-to-face learning has been informed by the Doherty Institute Modelling Report for National Cabinet and ongoing advice from NSW Health. Schools will return to face-to-face learning either through a 'staged return' or 'full return,' depending on NSW Health conditions in their area. At each school, the return to face-to-face learning will require a localised approach led by principals as each school context is different.

Return to school for students with disabilities

What is your plan for students with disabilities who can't wear masks or are sensory/anxious?

The current Public Health Order includes reasons why someone may not be wearing a mask or face covering, for example skin conditions, intellectual disability, autism or trauma. These students will not be excluded from school for not wearing a mask or face covering.

What about students with disabilities who will be escalated/anxious/scared about COVID infection? How many psychologists and therapists are being sent into schools to support these vulnerable students?

Students' experiences of the learning from home period, and their needs on returning to onsite learning at school will vary. In addition to normal support services schools will need to support teachers to do the following:

- acknowledge and listen to students' feelings and concerns
- take time to specifically re-establish routines and expectations

- create a balance between learning and wellbeing in the first weeks back
- focus on rebuilding connections
- support students who have found the learning from home period difficult
- notice changes in behaviour and offer intervention where necessary
- know where to find further support.

Return to school for HSC

Will the Year 12s going back be the current Year 12s or the Year 11s that become Year 12 in term 4?

With the current roll out, the Year 12s going back are the current Year 12 students (and any students undertaking the HSC).

Will HSC students in LGAs of concern be allowed back at the start of term 4, or on 18 October? Or is this just not going to happen with the case numbers we have? Especially for our kids in Canterbury Bankstown? Is the 18 October return to school for Year 12 students at the principal's discretion or is it supposed to happen for all Year 12 students. What are the Department's guidelines on learning arrangements for Year 12 until the commencement of the HSC, given it is not until Week 6 of Term 4, this seems to be a long time for students to simply be revising and studying independently, can parents expect revision etc to continue to be provided or are students on their own as they are being told the last official day of attendance is this Friday?

(For Level 3 schools) From the beginning of Term 4, Year 12/HSC students can continue to attend school for revision and learning and wellbeing support and to have access to their teachers.

(For Level 4 schools) From the beginning of Term 4, Year 12/HSC students can continue to attend school for revision and learning and wellbeing support and to have access to their teachers in a limited way.

(For all schools) We'd like to remind our students and families that from 25 October, all Year 12 and HSC students will have access to school campuses and their teachers. This will support them in the lead up to their exams. HSC exams will proceed for all students from 9 November 2021 in a COVID-safe way, in line with NSW Health advice.

How can students socially distance for the HSC? At our school of 1200 kids, all grade levels are due back the day before the HSC. Our school has a few doors that go into a covered canteen area and 1 to the playground, no windows. How does ventilation occur and socially distancing happen? This is in an area of concern with 1000's of cases currently.

Schools are currently devising strict COVID Safety plans for the HSC exams. These plans include ensuring that there is ample space to allow students and staff to physically distance (1.5 metres), compulsory mask wearing at all times, avoiding mingling of different cohorts, staggering times when students will be walking between classes and ensuring exam spaces are well ventilated.

What will be done to prevent students not admitting to having symptoms so they can do their HSC exam so their ATAR is not solely based of their internal marks? In case they are not happy with their internal marks and are relying on the HSC exam.

There will be strict protocols in place during the HSC for students who develop COVID-19 symptoms. Fast track COVID testing for all HSC students will be one way for students who test negative to be able to continue sitting the HSC.

COVID-safe operations at school

How will you stop unvaxxed kids bringing in COVID to school? How can you assure us that schools are COVID safe when there are current cases in schools at the moment with limited numbers of students? Many western suburb schools are over capacity.

We will continue to have very clear and constant communication between schools and parents, carers, students based on the latest Health advice. Our policy continues to be that students and staff should stay at home if they have even the mildest of COVID-19 symptoms and get tested.

**Will there be a greater amount of communication going back in to reinforce the need to keep kids at home and test for the slightest possible symptoms?
How can students keep social distance if there are around 30 in a class? Will they split into multiple classes?**

While Year 12/HSC students (some of whom are adults over 18) must physically distance when at school, Health is not recommending that children physically distance at school.

Have all schools been offered the services of professionals in the fields of occupational hygiene & engineering? Have all teachers been given infection control training relevant to airborne transmission?

All schools are implementing enhanced cleaning arrangements and strict infection control policies. Enhanced cleaning arrangements include:

- an additional 25% of cleaning provided to schools for the daily clean
- day cleaners wipe down high-touch surfaces
- schools and workplaces have supplies of hygiene products
- ensuring bathrooms are well stocked with hand soap and paper towels or hand dryers
- providing hand sanitiser where appropriate.

COVID outbreak in a school

At what point will COVID infections be handled like other infections, e.g. the infected child stays home, but the rest of the class does not have to isolate? When a case of COVID is discovered in the student population, is the plan for the whole school to be shut down as they have been pre-Delta strain and scrubbed? In Europe, a single case in a classroom will not shut down a whole school, nor do all students in the class have to isolate for a period of time. Is this something that is looked at (perhaps over time)?

How many COVID cases will trigger the close down of school? When will the online learning resume when this happens?

If one student becomes a close contact in one year group will that mean the whole school will shut down for cleaning?

The department will continue to work with NSW Health to guarantee we are keeping up with and following the latest and best advice to ensure a COVID-safe return to school. The closing down and re-opening of schools in Term 4 will be based on this advice from NSW Health.

Masks and face coverings

Will kids in department preschools be required to wear masks?

No, students in preschools will not be required to wear a mask under the current Public Health Order.

Is mask wearing in the Kindy to Year 6 schools mandatory or recommended? DOE website says that mask-wearing will only apply to Year 7 and above but we have also been told in the webinar that all students are meant to wear masks. Please clarify.

Wearing a mask or face covering at school in the current Public Health Order is mandatory for students in Year 7 and above and all adults at school. Students in Year 6 and below are just recommended to wear a mask or face covering but it is not mandated.

In the case of disposable masks how will they be disposed of should the student need to change their mask? Will there be hazardous waste bins at school to deal with this?

Strict hygiene measures are in place in all schools across NSW. Enhanced cleaning arrangements remain in place, which are:

- an additional 25% of cleaning provided to schools for the daily clean
- day cleaners wipe down high-touch surfaces
- schools and workplaces have supplies of hygiene products
- ensuring bathrooms are well stocked with hand soap and paper towels or hand dryers
- providing hand sanitiser where appropriate.

Will there be any surveillance of the masks to make sure they are worn properly and how they are worn?

School staff are encouraged to remind students how to wear their masks properly while at school.

If it's November/December when people return to school then it's going to be super-hot how are we meant to wear masks? Are we allowed to take off masks during breaks and sport lessons?

While masks are mandatory for students in Year 7 and above while indoors and outdoors at school, there are certain instances where students are permitted to take their masks off. One such reason is when participating in strenuous activities such as sport, PDHPE.

Will the department encourage students to wear appropriate reusable cloth facemasks to prevent a huge amount of plastic waste?

While the department does encourage students and staff to bring their own mask or face covering to school, we do provide schools with back-up supplies of masks for those who may forget to bring / lose their mask.

Mental health and wellbeing

I am so tired of hearing that they will be resilient. This is not the issue. They are burnt out and you are ignoring them. What will you do? What is been done for children's mental health.

The department is working collaboratively with partners such as NSW Health, headspace, the Black Dog Institute, Kids Helpline and ReachOut to provide counselling staff with additional resources to assist students in managing COVID-19 related issues should they arise, and support after-hours requests for support. For example, ReachOut's free coaching service for parents and carers to support their teen through a tough time and Kids Helpline free phone and online counselling support for young people aged 5 to 25.

School counselling staff also have access to a secure video counselling platform and the ability to conduct counselling sessions via the telephone where appropriate. Student support officers, school chaplains, and wellbeing nurses are in contact with our students providing an additional layer of support to that already being provided by teachers and school leadership teams.

Initiatives to call out the importance of self-care and provide practical advice and resources to support better wellbeing are also scheduled in Term 4 for our students, families and staff. This builds on the wellbeing resources and sessions that have been available during Term 3 2021.

If a parent or carer is worried that the impacts of COVID-19 and/or the transition back to on site learning may be affecting their child's wellbeing, they are strongly encouraged to discuss this directly with their child's school or teacher. More information on supporting student wellbeing is available through the Department's [quick guide to mental health and wellbeing resources](#).

Transport to school

Will there be greater transport help/arrangements for schools where the pool is out of area. Doing a 2 hour round trip at each end of the day for staggered start and end times for two kids at a selective high school is not an option for a full-time working parent.

Transport for NSW is working closely with the department to support students to return to face-to-face learning at school. School students will be given priority over other customers on general services, even if this means a service goes over capacity. Parents and carers should make travel choices which suit their individual circumstances, including driving, walking and cycling.

Regarding school buses is any provision being made for additional buses so they are not as packed as in normal times? For my child's school they are normally packed in like sardines on the bus to the train station.

Transport for NSW is working closely with the department to support students to return to face-to-face learning at school. The NSW Government's policy is to not leave a school student behind. Dedicated school transport services currently have no physical distancing restrictions.

How will you manage public transport / buses to and from school? If cohorts start/finish at different times, how will bus timetables operate?

Transport for NSW is working closely with the department to support students to return to face-to-face learning at school. The NSW Government's policy is to not leave a school student behind. School

students will be given priority over other customers on general services, even if this means a service goes over capacity.

Other

How will the department be dealing with public boarding schools and return to school in a COVID environment?

The department has recently released updated guidelines for boarding schools. As part of these guidelines, a return to school strategy for each boarding school is developed to support the gradual return of school designated boarding cohorts. Boarding schools will continue to support students to learn from home prior to these arrangements. Overall strategies for movements as part of a return to school will consider:

- establishing cohorts of returning boarders
- vulnerable students or those completing their HSC are prioritised
- alternative arrangements for students living in areas of concern
- alternative enrolment arrangements for boarders including across sectors
- future NSW Health advice may require a boarding school to revert to prioritising the return of students and staff to teaching and learning from home. Boarding schools should always remain operational for vulnerable students
- In the case that a student returns home and their place of residence becomes an area of concern, alternatives to returning to school should be strongly considered.

Can you please share the research that states transmission rarely occurs between students? According to a report by Dr Zoe Hyde kids transmit as well as adults. If you're basing your school safety measures on this study I think we should have access to that research.

The safety and wellbeing of students and staff is of the utmost importance to the department of Education. Activities and operations in NSW schools are being conducted in line with guidance and advice from the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee guidelines and NSW Health, as applicable.

Are you concerned about the disparity between private and public schools? Most private schools and public schools in more advantaged areas have delivered all lessons via zoom, whereas many of our most disadvantaged public schools have not had any zoom teaching and have had google docs, or even paper-based packs.

In response to the 2021 social isolation and learning from home period, the department has provided 9,646 devices and 15,141 internet access devices (including dongles and SIM cards) as of 27 September 2021.

With regards to learning content, students learning from home have access to the same learning activities as children who attend schools. The department is supporting continuity of learning and teaching including through the provision of resources on the Learning from Home Hub. Over 5,000 high quality resources to support remote teaching and learning have been provided. In response to teacher feedback, the Hub has more support for teachers looking to adapt existing lessons and units for blended or online delivery.

HSC

HSC general

Why is NESA holding back results by 4 days given that UAC will have them?

Students will receive their ATAR in time to consider their university applications on 20 January. They will be able to review their HSC results a few days later.

Why were the HSC exams pushed back when we are sending kids back around the exact same time they should have been starting?

Revising the timetable to start on 9 November aligns with health advice, requiring school and exam staff to be vaccinated by 8 November.

Strict COVID safe protocols supported by NSW Health will be in place to protect students, exam supervisors and school staff during HSC exams.

I am seeing and hearing from many HSC students who are really struggling, with online learning, with living with a pandemic, with delays to HSC, with uncertainty about exams, with fear about their health - why is NESA persisting with the "normal" HSC exam format when it is really pushing so many students to the edge? Why was the call to go ahead with delayed HSC rather than cancelled HSC?

Our first priority continues to be the health and safety of students and those involved in exams.

The release of the revised timetable beginning on 9 November is a fair and safe outcome for students and provides all students across the state with clarity, so they can focus on their studies and taking care of themselves.

Giving students the chance to sit their exams and show what they know is the fairest option after they have worked so hard through a challenging 18 months.

Dedicated wellbeing resources, developed in partnership with ReachOut Australia, are available on the Stay Healthy HSC Hub.

Visit [Stay Healthy HSC](#) for advice on staying healthy, active, and connected during the HSC.

It seems that HSC music performances are going to be moderated against the formal written HSC paper - how is this fair to students who excel in their performances, but will always struggle with the formal, written paper?

NESA is working with a Technical Advisory Group, made up of external assessment and psychometric experts, to finalise the moderation process. Further details will be provided in the next few weeks.

Some "rumour" says, all subjects except English will be much shorter than the regular exam time, is that true?

The full suite of HSC written exams is going ahead from 9 November.

Giving students the chance to sit their exams and show what they know is the fairest option after they have worked so hard through a challenging 18 months.

Overseas they didn't need to sit the external exams. They were cancelled and an estimate was issued. Why has this idea been ignored?

Giving students the chance to sit their exams and show what they know is the fairest option after they have worked so hard through a challenging 18 months.

NESA is always monitoring the approaches taken by other local and international jurisdictions that are implementing COVID-19 contingencies for students.

What happens to the high achieving students who get affected by COVID during the HSC?

Providing a fair, equitable and above all else safe opportunity for students to show what they know and receive the HSC in 2021 continues to be at the forefront of every decision made by NESA.

NESA's Illness and Misadventure process is available for students who are unable to attend an exam due to having a positive COVID-19 test result or being a close contact.

Students who are unwell or experience a misadventure on the day of an exam are also covered by existing processes.

If most of the HSC timetable was kept the same, why were all exams not kept in the same order?

The start of the written exams has been moved back by four weeks, to commence on **9 November**.

Any adjustments that have been made relate to CCAFL exams being removed and scheduling exams after 11am on Remembrance Day.

Students can check their revised timetables on [Students Online](#).

HSC/CSC

Our school does the CSC, with students doing their HSC with the compressed model. That means that they have missed twice the equivalent amount of in-class learning. How will this be taken into account with HSC and the effort to make sure that all students have equal access to their education. How will this be fair?

How is Compressed Curriculum taken into account in HSC changes? - Prior to the rescheduling of the 2021 HSC exams our Year 11 students would have completed their first set of HSC exams on 4 November and then returned to school on 8 November (Week 6) to commence Senior Year 2 (Year 12). On that same day our current Year 10 cohort would move into Senior Year 1 and commence their first round of HSC subjects. With the delay to the HSC exams both cohorts of students - the current Year 10s and the current Senior Year 11s - cannot commence lessons until Monday 6 December. They will lose 4 weeks of teaching time - and in a compressed curriculum that is actually eight weeks of equivalent learning to a standard curriculum cohort. There is no way for this to be caught up.

Students in Year 11 who are undertaking compressed curriculum will typically be sitting their first round of HSC examinations in 2021. These students can commence study of their remaining courses from the date their 2022 enrolment is confirmed by the school principal. This means that compressed study students may commence study of 2022 Preliminary or HSC courses during, or prior to, the 2021 HSC examination period.

Individual schools make decisions about curriculum delivery that best meets the needs of their students. If required Principals should seek further support from their DELs.

HSC/Mental health

How will Year 12 students that have suffered mental health distress due to lockdown and delayed exams be able to access misadventure provisions for the HSC. Some students are in such a serious distressed state that exams will not be possible. If there are not psychologists available for a diagnosis at this late stage, might others be able to provide evidence (e.g.GP or Principal). Many Year 12 students have been heavily impacted mentally by lockdowns in Sydney and are not going to be able to perform at their best. Did you consider using estimations instead of putting them through more unnecessary stress by sitting exams?

The COVID Response Committee will continue to consider any additional measures required to recognise the significant impact of COVID-19.

Providing a fair, equitable and safe opportunity for students to show what they know and receive the HSC in 2021 is our priority.

NESA's Illness and Misadventure process is available for students who are unable to attend an exam due to having a positive COVID-19 test result or being a close contact.

Students who are unwell or experience a misadventure on the day of an exam are also covered by existing processes.

What will you do to support our children with their mental health before the HSC?

The department developed Stay Healthy HSC campaign in partnership with our partner ReachOut to support students to stay healthy, stay active and keep connected during the HSC. The department has a dedicated Stay Healthy HSC web content at <https://education.nsw.gov.au/student-wellbeing/stay-healthy-hsc?q>

which has advice, ideas, resources and information on a wide range of wellbeing topics for students undertaking the HSC and their families.

Most of the discussion within the HSC cohort is about dropping out of school, because of all the unneeded stress, how are you helping these students?

The department is working collaboratively with partners such as NSW Health, headspace, the Black Dog Institute, Kids Helpline and ReachOut to provide counselling staff with additional resources to assist students in managing COVID-19 related issues should they arise, and support after-hours requests for support. For example, ReachOut's free coaching service for parents and carers to support their teen through a tough time and Kids Helpline free phone and online counselling support for young people aged 5 to 25.

School counselling staff also have access to a secure video counselling platform and the ability to conduct counselling sessions via the telephone where appropriate. Student support officers, school chaplains, and wellbeing nurses are in contact with our students providing an additional layer of support to that already being provided by teachers and school leadership teams.

COVID outbreak during HSC

You just stated that the close contacts in a year group cannot attend school this creates inequities if a person from the HSC cohort is infected as many students would end up missing exams, what will you be doing about this? What would happen if a child at the school tests positive - what impact might that have on hosting HSC exams?

Our updated HSC exam-procedures and guidelines will be part of our Return to school plan and will address what schools should do if there is a positive COVID-19 case or close contact during exams. Our procedures aim to minimise disruptions to students and exams as much as possible.

So if there is an outbreak during the HSC, what is the roadmap for students to finish the exams?

While we are planning for a staged return to school, the department and NSW Health have plans for all scenarios to ensure our staff, students and families are kept safe.

HSC/UAC

For NESA/UAC - How can students be provided their ATAR prior to their HSC results? Shouldn't the HSC result come first? How does that work?

Answered above.

Can an ATAR be produced without exams?

Yes, it would just be based solely on school assessments rather than 50% assessment 50% exam as currently. While possible, it is potentially less rigorous and equitable given the absence of external common exams.

When will dates be released by UAC for additional offer rounds and how will this work with the later results and university start dates?

The additional offer round dates will be available on UAC's website from 27 September. As well as the main offer round on 26 January, there will be three further offer rounds in February (with offers released on 3, 10 and 17 February) to accommodate the later release of results. These offer rounds will be completed before most universities commence semester 1.

How do you ensure parity across the state for HSC results when greater Sydney have had no face-to-face learning for months?

For performance exams, language oral exams and most major projects, all students have had access to the COVID-19 Special Consideration Program, which means their teachers are marking these exams.

The COVID Response Committee will continue to consider any additional measures required to recognise the significant impact of COVID-19.

As part of the process, teachers will also be able to take into consideration the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on their students work.

To ensure equity, teachers' exam marks will be moderated by NESA against the externally marked components of the course.

Will the universities be delaying their entry timelines to allow for later ATARs?

No, there is still time for offer rounds to be held before most universities commence semester 1.

Has the University sector considered admitting all students that meet a certain threshold to a foundation year for the course of their choice, with progression to second year based on first year results?

There is no sector-wide approach to this, but many universities do precisely this – admit students who do not meet the criteria for a Bachelor degree into a Diploma in that field of study. Successful completion of a year then translates into the Bachelor program, with full or partial credit given for the year of Diploma study. It's an excellent pathway that allows students time to develop the skills they need to succeed in a Bachelor degree.

When I went to uni after doing the HSC and there were issues with the HSC the universities gave us entrance exams or interviews. Why can't this occur this year?

While this is not being used across the board for every university and every course, many universities will continue to use alternative exams and/or interviews in place of or in addition to HSC results for some or all of their courses.