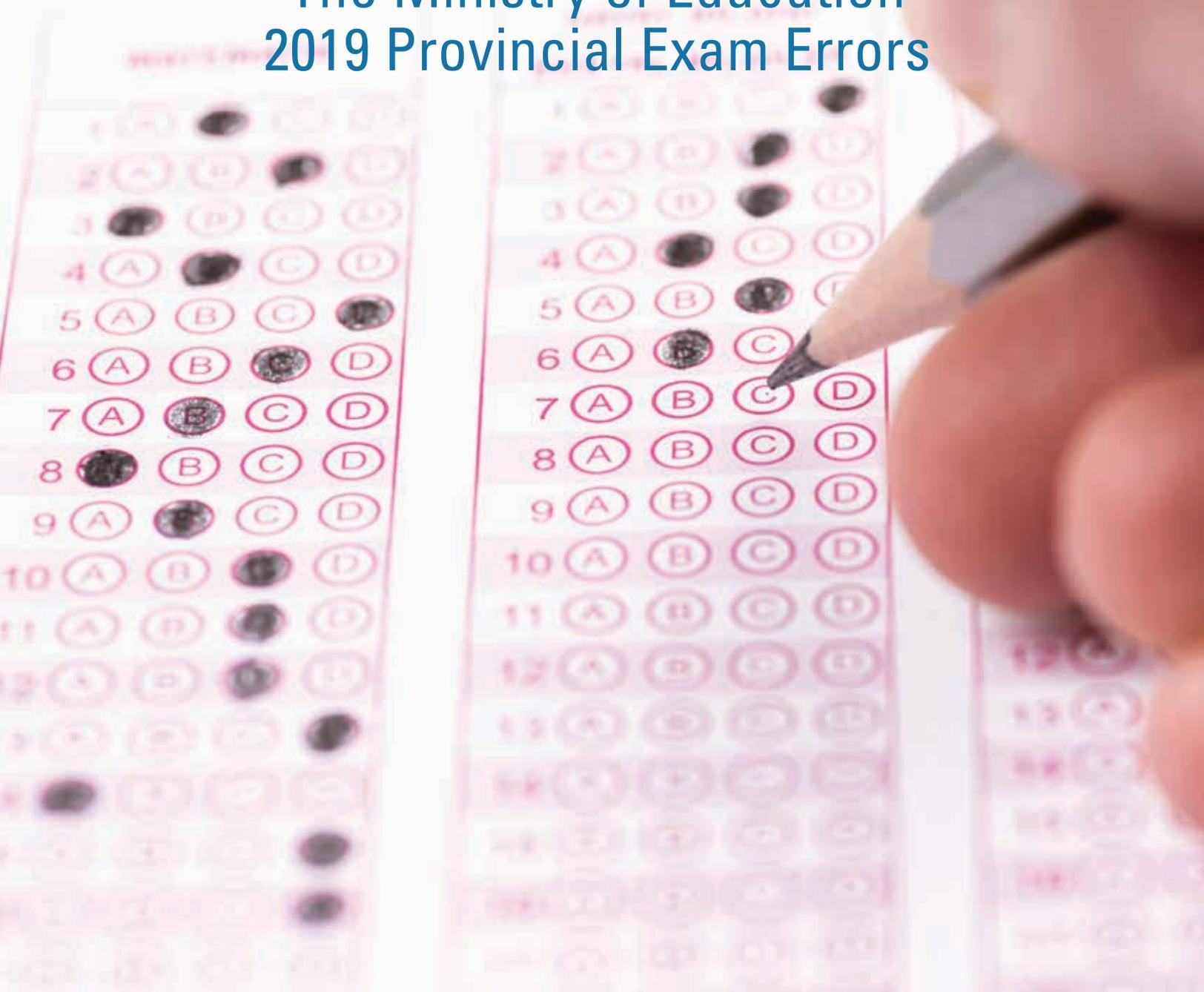


COURSE CORRECTION:

The Ministry of Education 2019 Provincial Exam Errors



As an independent officer of the Legislature, the Ombudsperson investigates complaints of unfair or unreasonable treatment by provincial and local public authorities and provides general oversight of the administrative fairness of government processes under the *Ombudsperson Act*. The Ombudsperson conducts three types of investigations: investigations into individual complaints; investigations that are commenced on the Ombudsperson's own initiative; and investigations referred to the Ombudsperson by the Legislative Assembly or one of its Committees.

The Ombudsperson has a broad mandate to investigate complaints involving provincial ministries; provincial boards and commissions; Crown corporations; local governments; health authorities; colleges and universities; schools and school boards; and self-regulating professions and occupations. A full list of authorities can be found in the *Ombudsperson Act*. The Office of the Ombudsperson responds to approximately 8,000 enquiries and complaints annually.

Under the *Public Interest Disclosure Act* the Ombudsperson investigates allegations of wrongdoing from public employees in or relating to a public body covered by the *Act* as well as allegations of reprisal.

For more information about the B.C. Office of the Ombudsperson and for copies of published reports, visit www.bcombudsperson.ca.



OMBUDSPERSON
BRITISH COLUMBIA

August 2020

The Honourable Darryl Plecas
Speaker of the Legislative Assembly
Parliament Buildings
Victoria BC V8V 1X4

Dear Mr. Speaker,

It is my pleasure to present the Ombudsperson's Special Report No. 45,
Course Correction: The Ministry of Education 2019 Provincial Exam Errors.

The report is presented pursuant to section 31(3) of the *Ombudsperson Act*.

Yours sincerely,

Jay Chalke
Ombudsperson
Province of British Columbia



CONTENTS

From the Ombudsperson	1
Introduction	3
Background	4
Our Investigation	6
Release of Incorrect Exam Marks and Transcripts	7
How Exam Marks Are Tabulated	7
The June 2019 Tabulation Errors	9
Time Frame for Releasing Results in Order to Meet Deadlines	9
Concerns Raised about the Exam Review and Approval Process	10
Posting of the Results and Concerns Raised about the Accuracy of the Results ..	11
Release of Inaccurate Transcripts	13
The Ministry's Quality Control and Assurance Process	19
Analysis	20
Ministry Communications and Student Impacts	23
Communications with PSIs That Received Electronic Transcripts	24
Communications with PSIs, Scholarship Bodies and Other Institutions That Received Paper Transcripts	26
Communications with Students and their Families about the Errors	27
Individual Student/Parent Concerns and the Ministry's Response	34
Analysis	38
Conclusion	40
Findings and Recommendations	42
Appendices	44
Appendix A: Post-secondary Institutions Receiving Transcripts	44
Appendix B: Response from the Ministry of Education	46

Contributors

Debra Perkey, Ombudsperson Officer
Róisín Lyder, Ombudsperson Officer

Christina McMillan, Manager of Investigations

FROM THE OMBUDSPERSON

Every day B.C. public servants administer thousands of public programs impacting people in myriad ways. Public administration often is unnoticed as the people responsible for delivering public services routinely conduct their work effectively, efficiently and fairly. However, not surprisingly, while navigating complex public administrative schemes, frequently working within tight budgets and timelines, mistakes happen. A mistake does not, in and of itself, signify poor administration. Risk of error can rarely be totally eliminated.

What distinguishes high performing organizations is the ability to learn from their mistakes. Mistakes present valuable opportunities for improvement. Errors from which no useful lessons are learned are wasted opportunities for improvement. Just like individuals, organizations that fail to learn from past mistakes are likely to repeat them.

When considering the hallmarks of good public administration, it is imperative to evaluate how public bodies identify, respond to and remedy the impacts of the mistakes they have made. A well-handled response involves identifying the cause of the error and clearly and transparently accepting accountability for the mistake. Fairness demands a willingness on the part of public administrators to learn from mistakes and an open perspective to examine not just the initial problem but also the broader individual and systemic impacts. Ultimately a thorough post-facto review is critical to ensuring improvements are made so that mistakes are not repeated.

This report is the result of an investigation into how the Ministry of Education dealt with errors it made last year when more than 18,000 final Grade 12 course exam marks were incorrectly tabulated and reported. It details not only how errors in the tabulation of exam marks happened, but perhaps more importantly, it examines what steps the ministry took to deal with the aftermath. While the tabulation errors themselves are clearly an important administrative issue, equally concerning as this investigation finds, are the flawed actions taken by the ministry once the errors were discovered. From the failure to promptly prevent additional incorrect transcripts being issued, to overly broad assurances regarding the potential impact of the mistakes, to opaque and at times misleading communication with students, families and post-secondary institutions, our findings reveal a number of shortcomings in a system that young people were relying on to “get it right” at one of the most important turning points of their lives.

The ministry has indicated to my office that it is taking advantage of the learning opportunity presented by the mistakes of last summer and has accepted all the recommendations in this report. This includes improving internal quality control to reduce the risk of a repeat of the unfortunate events of 2019 and notably also includes committing to more forthright



From the Ombudsperson

communication with the public, apologizing to all students whose grades were wrongly reported and compensating anyone who was financially impacted. This is what we teach our children when they make a mistake – to acknowledge it, to sincerely apologize to whom they have hurt and to put things right. It befits the government ministry that superintends our children's education that they have declared their intention to follow this important principle.

My office will monitor the ministry's implementation of these commitments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jay Chalke".

Jay Chalke
Ombudsperson
Province of British Columbia

INTRODUCTION

Provincial exam results are critically important for students graduating from high school. They represent the culmination of months of effort by young people and all those who support them. Final course marks are especially important to young people entering post-secondary education. The midsummer ritual of checking marks as a final step in the transition from high school to post-secondary education is fraught with excitement and anxiety. It is when students finally confirm their eligibility for university or college, and for scholarships that may allow them to attend. Many significant decisions are made by young people and their families at this time, including making final decisions about where to attend school in September and how to pay for it. Receiving accurate final marks from the Ministry of Education is an essential part of this process, as is release of transcripts in time to meet college, university, scholarship and other deadlines, some as early as August 1.

When news broke that the ministry had incorrectly tabulated the June 2019 provincial examination results, students and their families told us about the stress, anxiety and panic they felt, and their uncertainty about what action they needed to take. Students with high course marks were upset to see failing exam marks; conversely, students with lower course marks saw high exam marks, only to find out later that they had not done as well as had initially been posted. One student told us they celebrated because they would graduate alongside their friends,

only to find out later they had failed and thus would not graduate that year. Of the nearly 32,000 exams written during the June 2019 session, the results posted for 18,741 exams were incorrect. When the ministry posted updated results, 9,946 of the exams received a higher mark and 8,795 received a lower mark than initially posted. The ministry assured us that the steps it took to correct the exam results as well as to notify students, their families, and post-secondary institutions about the error addressed all of the problems.

This office initiated an investigation into the ministry's response to the tabulation error because of concerns about how individual students were impacted. Our investigation also looked at whether the ministry provided students and their families with sufficient information for them to understand that they might need to contact the post-secondary institutions, scholarship grantors and other recipients their transcripts were sent to, in order to protect their interests.

In this report we outline the exam process, what went wrong in the summer of 2019, how students and their families were impacted and the actions taken by the ministry in response to the errors. Finally, we make findings and recommendations to address the concerns that we identified in our investigation with the intention that these recommendations will help prevent a reoccurrence of the regrettable events of July 2019 and the resulting problems.

BACKGROUND

The role of the Ministry of Education is to provide leadership and funding to the K–12 education system through governance, legislation, policy and standards. The ministry sets graduation requirements, curriculum, and required examinations or assessments.

For the 2018/19 school year, graduation requirements were evolving as part of changes in the K–12 education system in British Columbia. Those changes included the introduction of new curriculum and a staggered replacement of provincial examinations with new provincial numeracy and literacy assessments.¹

Grade 12 students were required to write the new provincial numeracy assessment before graduation. They were also required to take a Language Arts 12 course and write the related Language Arts 12 provincial examination. Language Arts 12 courses and exams included English 12, English 12 First Peoples, Communications 12, Français langue première 12, and Français langue seconde-immersion 12.

Depending on the student’s program, they enrolled in at least one of the Language Arts courses. The 2018/19 school year was the last year in which Language Arts 12 provincial exams were required.²

¹ In a 2018 announcement, the ministry described the new graduation program, in which students would be required to write three new mandatory graduation assessments (the Grade 10 numeracy assessment and the Grade 10 and Grade 12 literacy assessments): “The assessments will maintain the high standards and rigour that the province’s education system is known for, and are aligned with the new curriculum. They will also replace course-based provincial exams and will instead evaluate essential numeracy and literacy abilities developed across many areas of learning and grades, rather than content knowledge from one particular course.” (<https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2018EDUC0072-002417>)

² Starting in the summer of 2019, Language Arts 12 courses transitioned to being fully assessed in the classroom; there will be no course-based provincial exams. The only Language Arts 12 exams in the 2019/20 school year were for students rewriting an exam or completing exam requirements attached to the old curriculum. The Grade 12 literacy assessment is scheduled to be a graduation requirement starting in the 2020/21 school year.

The new numeracy and literacy assessments differ from the former examinations in a number of ways, as shown in the chart below.

Table 1: Former examinations vs new assessments

Examinations	Assessments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ course-based (tied to a specific course) ✓ scored on a numeric scale and accounted for 40% of the final grade (60% classroom, 40% exam) ✓ paper format available for multiple-choice questions ✓ student could rewrite an exam once within 12 months of the first attempt; to rewrite an exam more than once, student must retake the course ✓ best exam outcome is blended with student's school mark for the final grade 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ cross-curricular and stand-alone (not tied to a specific course) ✓ scored on a proficiency scale (emerging, developing, proficient, extending) ✓ no paper format for multiple-choice questions ✓ student has up to three opportunities to write (an initial required write and up to two optional rewrites) ✓ best outcome of the assessment is recorded on student's final transcript

While the move from exams to assessments may eliminate some of the circumstances that contributed to the error, as explained more fully below, our concerns about the ministry's review and approval process

and the ministry's response to the error remain relevant to provincial assessments. We therefore considered it important to investigate and report publicly on the outcome of our investigation.

OUR INVESTIGATION

On July 30, 2019, the Ministry of Education acknowledged an “anomaly” in its tabulation of the June 2019 Grade 12 provincial examination results by posting a message on the ministry’s Student Transcripts Service and issuing a statement to the media.³ Understanding the potentially serious consequences for students, this office announced that we would be monitoring the ministry’s response to the exam tabulation error. We began to correspond with the ministry and at the same time started receiving complaints from the public. In August 2019, we initiated an investigation of the ministry’s response to the tabulation error and related problems.

During the course of our investigation, we obtained and reviewed documents related

to the processing, review and approval of exam results and the ministry’s response to the tabulation error. We also obtained and reviewed records of the ministry’s internal communications, as well as communications between ministry staff and post-secondary institutions, students and parents. We met with senior ministry staff and interviewed individual staff members. We spoke with registrars and instructors at post-secondary institutions, and we contacted the staff involved in transcript processing about the steps that were taken to remove the incorrect data from their information systems. We also spoke directly with students and parents about their concerns and considered written and oral information they provided in support of their concerns.

³ The ministry notice was posted on the Student Transcripts Service at 3:05 p.m. on July 30, 2019. The same statement was provided to the media.

RELEASE OF INCORRECT EXAM MARKS AND TRANSCRIPTS

Our investigation found that two tabulation errors resulted in the Ministry of Education posting incorrect exam results for more than half of approximately 32,000 exams written during the June 2019 testing session. In order to understand how the tabulation errors occurred, it is helpful to first understand how the examination tabulation process worked.

How Exam Marks Are Tabulated

The process for tabulating exam marks for the June 2019 session was as follows.

Provincial testing is administered through a contracted service provider. For each session, students write the exams at secondary schools. Exams are then marked. Multiple-choice questions are machine scored. B.C. teachers mark all open-ended questions using standards-based scoring guides and procedures.⁴ The contracted service provider provides the testing data to the ministry.

Two ministry teams are involved in processing the data, analyzing the scores, tabulating the marks, and posting the results: the Graduation and Certification Unit (Certification) and the Curriculum and Assessment Branch (Curriculum). Certification includes staff who work with student data and staff who provide information to schools and students. Curriculum includes staff who work with

both curriculum and assessment (formerly examination) design, analysis and reporting.

Certification receives the data from the service provider and generates data files containing all student scores within the ministry's Transcripts and Examinations (TRAX) system. Certification sends data files to Curriculum, who completes its analysis to ensure that student scores are consistent across multiple exam sessions and test versions. Curriculum sends its analysis back to Certification, who then runs a number of tasks to update student records.

The person transferring the new data back into TRAX is required to manually enter the minimum and maximum percentage scores for each exam. These values, in combination with the new data file, enable TRAX to assign a letter grade to each student. Because the TRAX system and the statistical analysis system use different data formats for the percentage score (for example, 5 per cent would be "05" in the statistical analysis system and "5" in TRAX), staff must enter the scores using the correct data format.

After all files have been processed, Certification sends two reports to Curriculum for review and approval. The reports provide a province-wide distribution of letter grades. The review is intended to ensure that there

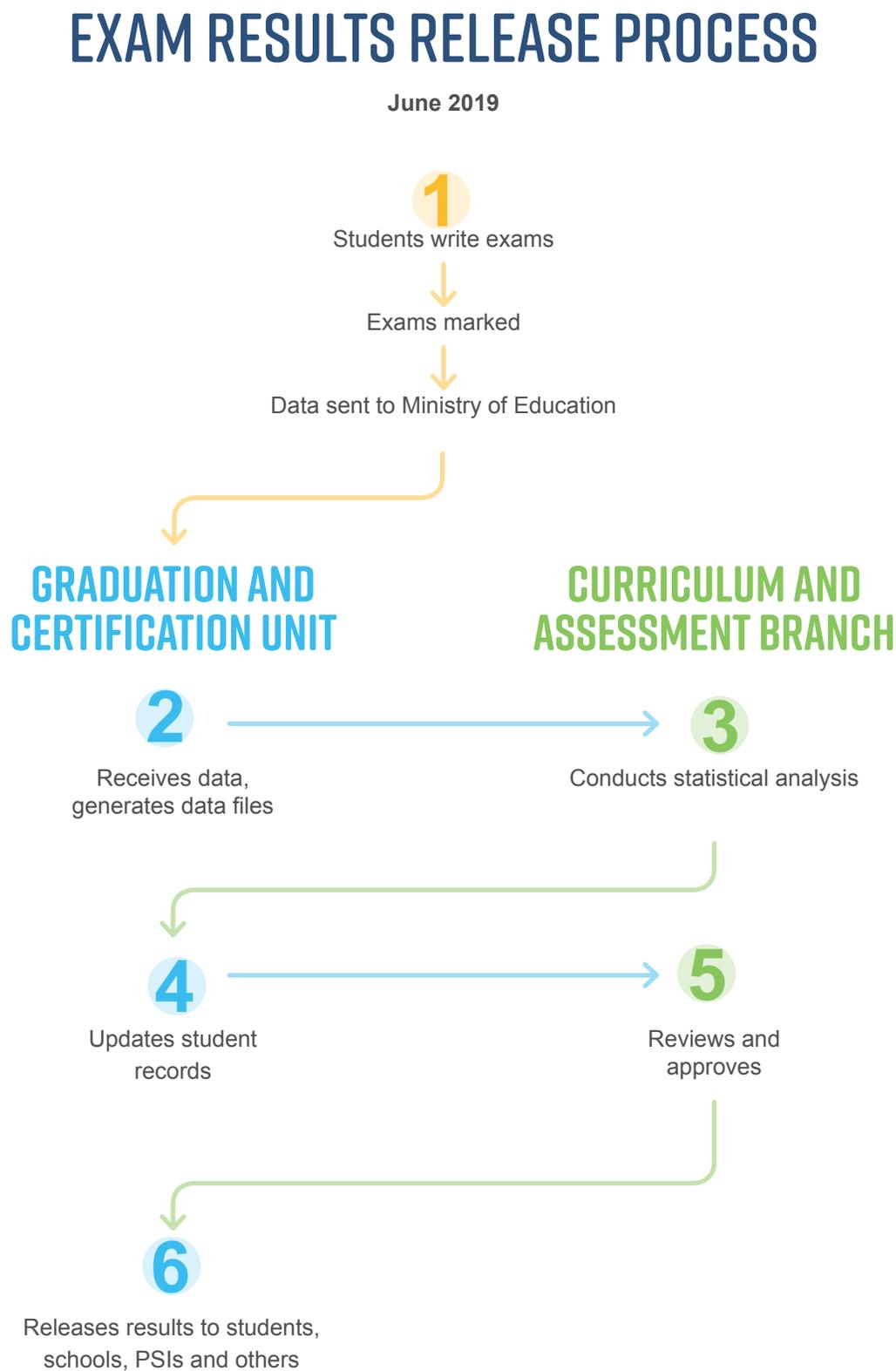
⁴ Two certified teachers mark each response independently and work together to resolve any discrepancies; marks are verified by a marking leadership team.

Release of Incorrect Exam Marks and Transcripts

are no significant discrepancies in the overall distribution of marks compared with previous years. After Curriculum approves the results,

Certification runs various program tasks over several days to post the results and send transcripts to post-secondary institutions (PSIs).

Figure 1: Release process



The June 2019 Tabulation Errors

The ministry publicly reported that one tabulation error occurred. As noted earlier, there were two tabulation errors that resulted in incorrect marks for some students in three of the five Language Arts examinations.

As mentioned above, the TRAX system and the statistical analysis system have different data formats. The first tabulation error occurred when staff used the analysis system format rather than the TRAX format to enter the minimum and maximum percentage scores for the English 12, Communications 12, and Français langue seconde-immersion 12 exams. Only three of the five Language Arts exams were affected because only those three exams had a large enough data set (the number of students who sat for the exam) for this particular analysis. The error had the greatest impact on students with scores at the two ends of the distribution (students who received letter grades A and F). Scores in the middle (letter grades B and C) were not impacted by this error.

The second tabulation error occurred when staff erroneously included a non-standard format English 12 exam in the data file sent to Curriculum. Non-standard format examinations, such as Braille or large print, use different exams with different question and answer keys, so the non-standard format exam results must be analyzed separately. The inclusion of the non-standard exam in the data analysis resulted in a blank space in the record. This blank space caused the software to read the student response data incorrectly for all students after the blank space. Student records before the blank space were read correctly by the software, but those after the blank space were read incorrectly.

The two errors resulted in 18,741 incorrect exam marks. Students impacted by both errors likely saw a greater change in their mark than those impacted by just one error. However, the ministry does not know the

extent to which each of the errors contributed to differences in individual student marks.

While the ministry said the tabulation errors were the only cause for the release of incorrect marks, we also investigated whether there were factors that contributed to the ministry's failure to correct the errors before releasing results.

Time Frame for Releasing Results in Order to Meet Deadlines

Secondary schools across B.C. held sittings of provincial exams between June 24 and June 26, 2019. The numeracy assessment took place between June 21 and June 27, 2019. The deadline for release of the results is established by the ministry and published on the ministry's website. For the June 2019 session, the exam results release deadline was Monday, July 29. Usually the results are released a few days prior to the deadline.

Ministry staff explained that the timeline for releasing results in the June exam session was always very tight. Because exams were related to a course curriculum, most students would wait to write exams until the end of the course (the June testing session), even though the exams were also offered earlier in the school year. The resulting large number of students writing exams in the June session meant more pressure on the ministry to release transcripts in time to meet post-secondary institution entrance, scholarship and other deadlines, some as early as August 1.

Ministry staff told us the timeline was even more condensed for the June 2019 testing session because this was the first session in which both provincial examinations and provincial assessments were run on a large scale. Students wrote nearly 32,000 exams and over 41,000 numeracy assessments in the June 2019 session. Staff said that having

Release of Incorrect Exam Marks and Transcripts

two formats of testing created additional pressure to process, approve and release the results quickly in order to meet the July 29 deadline.

Prior to the testing session, ministry staff developed a process timeline in order to meet the deadline. From July 1 to July 12, tests would be marked and the data sent to the ministry. The data would then be reviewed, statistical analysis completed, and relevant files processed to assign letter grades.

Certification was scheduled to send the results to Curriculum for review and approval the week of July 15–19. Although tight, this timeline would allow sufficient time for the significant amount of work staff do, including review, identification and resolution of any concerns identified prior to running the various system jobs required in order to release results prior to the deadline.

However, ministry staff told us there was a significant departure from the timeline after marking was complete. The ministry received the paper portion of the exams that was to be scanned two days later than scheduled. Staff stated that the delay was caused by the shipper holding the results until all the results were received, rather than shipping as results were obtained – as they had been instructed to do and as had been the practice in prior years. Scanning would normally be done as the exams were received; however, because all of the results were shipped together, it took three days to scan the data once received.

While it was clear that the ministry had given some thought to ensuring that the data were received with adequate time to generate and deliver results by July 29, it is not clear what efforts, if any, the ministry made to proactively ensure timely receipt of the data. We received no information from the ministry to indicate that staff made any inquiries about why they were not receiving any results prior to the late receipt of the results. Staff told us that while there was a lot of discussion about the

resulting delay, the process going forward was not changed. Staff also told us there were additional delays in processing, as well as internal delays in providing complete data to Curriculum staff.

This led us to look at how the additional time pressures created during exam data processing affected review and approval of the results.

Concerns Raised about the Exam Review and Approval Process

The ministry told us that for the June 2019 exam results, because the review process was focused on provincial-level data and the distribution of letter grade results appeared normal (meaning the percentage of students getting A's, B's, C's, etc., was as expected), staff approved the results according to regular procedures and the errors were not detected. We investigated whether the ministry's review and approval process was sufficient to detect the errors, including whether any staff had in fact identified any concerns about the process or the results prior to the release.

One staff member told us the review and approval process previously included an in-person review meeting. They said this allowed for a more in-depth discussion of the cause and possible resolution of any concerns. However, for the last number of years the in-person review meetings had been replaced with approval via email. In late June 2019, one reviewer requested an in-person review meeting and the other reviewing staff agreed. However, the in-person review meeting did not happen because of delays and the need to meet the deadline.

The staff member also told us that staffs' access to information to permit a more robust review of the data, such as historical data, had become limited over the years. For example, we were told that prior exam results were

readily available for easy comparison with the current results and marking charts were used to easily identify questions that students had problems with. That practice was discontinued when there was a change in staff.

The reports were scheduled to be sent to the Curriculum staff tasked with review and approval the week of July 15–19. However, the significant amount of work required by Certification staff to ensure that the data was ready, along with the several delays noted earlier, resulted in Certification staff sending the two final exam reports to the reviewing staff on July 24 at 2:19 p.m. and requesting approval of the results that same afternoon. This meant reviewing staff had just over 90 minutes to review and approve the results. One reviewer told us that in the past they were usually given a couple of days to review, identify any concerns, and discuss the results.

One reviewer approved the two exam reports at 2:26 p.m. Their approval was based on the previous analysis of the data, completed before the error transferring the data was made. The second reviewer approved the exam results at 3:57 p.m. based on the distribution of marks as stated in one of the reports. An updated Français langue seconde-immersion exam report was sent at 3:50 p.m. During that same 90 minutes, the numeracy assessment distribution of results was sent for review and approval (at 2:34 p.m.) to the same three Curriculum staff.

The third reviewer requested the in-person meeting to collaboratively review and approve the results. Certification staff responded that they did not have time to wait for the meeting as they needed to start the release process that day. The process of releasing the results from a June exam session includes a series of more than two dozen jobs run over several days. After the third reviewer asserted that they believed the results were being “rubber-stamped” as opposed to what had been done in previous sessions when approvers were

given time to review the results and discuss any issues, that reviewer was given additional time to approve. This discussion regarding the review and approval process was via email, and supervisors from both ministry branches were copied on the emails. The third reviewer also spoke in person to their supervisor regarding their concerns.

The next morning, on July 25, the third reviewer approved the exam and assessment results but raised several concerns, including concerns about a discrepancy between school marks and exam marks, meaning students’ exam marks did not appear to be consistent with their course marks. Again, supervisors from both ministry branches were copied on this email. There is no evidence that any action was taken in response to the concerns raised about the discrepancy between school and exam marks prior to release of the results.

Staff said that they felt a lot of pressure to meet the deadline and that they did not have enough time to make sure everything was correct. Other staff said the extent to which the processes were dependent on each other (for example, how the delays earlier in the process impacted the process overall) might not have been fully considered.

Posting of the Results and Concerns Raised about the Accuracy of the Results

Exam and grade results are published on the School Secure Web and the Student Transcripts Service. The School Secure Web provides secondary school administrators with information and access to exam and assessment registration, results and reports. The Student Transcripts Service allows students to view their marks and order transcripts.

As noted above, the process of releasing the results from a June exam session included a series of more than two dozen tasks which took several days, including posting the

Release of Incorrect Exam Marks and Transcripts

results to websites, requesting that diploma certificates and paper transcripts be printed and transcripts mailed, and sending transcripts electronically to post-secondary institutions. Certification staff were working and on call over the weekend of July 27–28 to complete the release process. Curriculum staff were not asked to work or be on call.

Late on Friday, July 26, Certification staff began the process of posting results overnight to the School Secure Web and the Student Transcripts Service. Secondary schools and students could then access these sites to view the results.

At about 10:00 a.m. on Saturday, July 27, a secondary school official telephoned Certification staff with concerns about the accuracy of the English 12 exam results – specifically, the discrepancy between school and exam marks. The official noted that a number of high-performing students received very low marks on the exam. For example, one student with a school mark of 90 per cent received an exam mark of 39 per cent; another student with a school mark of 88 per cent received an exam mark of 12 per cent.

In response to the school's concerns, Certification staff contacted Curriculum staff to discuss the discrepancy in the marks. At that time, the Curriculum staff member contacted did not have access to their computer or the data. Staff told us that this resulted in miscommunication about what the error was and the "fix" to the error that Certification staff applied.

Curriculum staff told our office they discussed the possibility of putting the remaining release jobs on hold until the next day to give staff an opportunity to review the data, but because Certification staff remained very worried about meeting the release deadline, the process was not put on hold.

The data review conducted on Saturday, July 27, indicated that students with relatively

high raw scores (the exam score prior to statistical analysis and the tabulation errors) were showing failing grades.

Certification staff applied an attempted fix that resulted in a change of the most egregious failing scores to A's, but a discrepancy between school and exam marks remained for other students. For example, the mark for a student with a school mark of 82 per cent and an initial exam mark of 42 per cent was "fixed," but the exam mark increased to only 43 per cent. The fix had no effect on the majority of the exam scores. However, Certification staff believed that since the distribution of grades was consistent with prior exams, likely only a few schools would be contacting the ministry with concerns about individual students' exam results.

Staff told us there was no protocol for staff to raise concerns about the results with supervisors or senior staff in the ministry. On Saturday, July 27, Certification staff emailed a supervisor and a director in the Certification branch, briefly notifying them of the school's concern and informing them that even after the attempted solution was applied, there were "still a number of students that have relatively high raw scores and still failed." We found no evidence of discussions or instructions to follow up with the school or further investigate, to remove the results from the websites, or to delay sending transcripts until the issue was resolved.

Following the attempted fix, Certification staff did the necessary work to release the new English 12 exam results.

The same secondary school official that contacted the ministry on Saturday telephoned the ministry on Sunday, July 28, around noon and followed up by email an hour later, reporting that the school remained concerned about the accuracy of the results. The school official provided a detailed spreadsheet of all their students who wrote the exam, comparing individual students'

school marks with exam marks both prior to and after the attempted fix. They highlighted eight students whose results “jump off the page” as inaccurate and noted there might be many more. The school official also noted the imminent release of apparently incorrect transcripts to post-secondary institutions.

At least two students emailed the ministry directly on Saturday with concerns about their exam marks, stating they were “very panicked,” “shocked” by the results, and “desperate,” and that their admission to university and their future was on the line.

On Sunday morning, a school official from a different secondary school emailed the ministry with concerns about “several drastic anomalies,” noting that several straight-A students had received extremely low failing grades on provincial exams. The school official also stated that they hoped to speak to the ministry prior to the release of the results to universities.

Still concerned about the results, another official from the first secondary school contacted ministry staff on Monday morning, noting “grave cause for concern about the veracity of the scores.” The school official stated that “[t]hese matters are urgent as final transcripts are being issued to universities and students could lose their placements and/or scholarships.”

We found no evidence that the ministry took any action to investigate or address the concerns of these secondary schools and students prior to sending the results to post-secondary institutions, other than the unsuccessful “fix” on Saturday, July 27. The work to complete the release of exam results continued, and transcripts containing errors were transmitted to universities and colleges.

On the morning of Monday, July 29, Service BC (the public’s contact point for the ministry) and nearly every unit at the ministry received a

high volume of calls and emails from schools, students and their families questioning the validity of the exam results. In response, staff began reviewing a sampling of exam results and determined there was an issue. Ministry staff and contractors worked to investigate the root cause. Ministry staff were professional and diligent in trying to determine the cause of the incorrect results once it was acknowledged that there was an issue. The ministry withdrew transcript results from the secure site and sent communications to all secondary schools. Later in this report we discuss the ministry’s communication with post-secondary institutions and students.

Both manual errors were identified by 1:00 p.m. on Tuesday, July 30, and the ministry applied, tested and validated a correction.

The ministry said that even though not all student records were impacted, it reran all standard processes on the entire dataset to confirm that all marks were correct.

On Wednesday, July 31, the ministry completed additional data validation and spot checks of a random sample of individual student-level results. The ministry posted updated exam results to the School Secure Web and the Student Transcripts Service on July 31 at approximately 8:00 p.m.

Release of Inaccurate Transcripts

A student’s transcript provides an official list of their secondary school marks and credits received in relation to the provincial Graduation Program. The Student Transcripts Service allows students to view their transcript and to order transcripts to be sent to post-secondary institutions (PSIs), including scholarship bodies and other institutions, and to third parties. Third parties include employers, the students themselves or anyone else. They can also include PSIs.

The ministry sends transcripts either electronically or by mail. Paper transcripts are

Release of Incorrect Exam Marks and Transcripts

mailed to those PSIs in B.C. and Canada that are not set up to receive electronic transcripts and to all PSIs outside of Canada. For the June 2019 testing session, approximately 70 per cent of transcripts were sent electronically and 30 per cent were sent by mail.

Students can order transcripts in two ways. They can place orders prior to a deadline (July 12 for the June 2019 session) for transcripts to be sent to PSIs when final marks become available. The majority of transcripts were ordered through this option for the June 2019 session. Students can also place orders for transcripts to be sent immediately to PSIs or third parties. These orders are filled on an ongoing basis and reflect the transcript at the point in time when the order is made. There is no blackout period applied before these transcripts are sent.

To place an order to have their transcript sent to a PSI, the student selects the institution from a dropdown menu. The delivery method, electronic or mail, is dependent on the institution. Electronic delivery happens in one of two ways. In the batch process, the ministry posts batch results to the secure file transfer service (SFTS) and the PSIs are notified that a new file is ready to be downloaded. In the XML data transfer process,⁵ the PSI requests transcripts via their information system and an automated process returns transcripts to the PSI.

Transcripts can also be ordered and sent to third parties as a paper document by mail or as a PDF sent by email. For example, if a student wants their transcript sent to an international PSI but the PSI's deadline to receive a transcript will be difficult to meet if mailed, and if the PSI agrees, the student can order a PDF of their transcript to be sent to the institution via email. Or the student can

place an order for a paper copy to be mailed to the student, and the student can then send their transcript to the PSI by expedited courier.

For the June 2019 session, 47 Canadian PSIs received electronic transcripts through the batch process. Five of those PSIs (Simon Fraser University, Thompson Rivers University, University of British Columbia, University of the Fraser Valley and Vancouver Island University) could also obtain electronic transcripts through the XML data transfer process. Other Canadian PSIs and international PSIs received paper transcripts by mail. (See Appendix A.)

Distinguishing whether students placed an order in advance to have their final marks sent when they became available, or placed an order to have a transcript sent immediately to a third party or to a PSI, is important in determining if a PSI received an incorrect transcript. As we explain more fully below, for orders placed in advance to have final marks sent when they became available, incorrect results were obtained by some PSIs receiving electronic transcripts but not to those receiving paper transcripts. For students who placed orders between July 26 and July 30 for transcripts to be sent immediately, incorrect results were sent to some PSIs and third parties.

Electronic Transcripts

For 2018/19, 28 PSIs and the Ontario Universities' Application Centre (OUAC) received transcripts electronically. The OUAC processed applications for admission to 19 Ontario universities, for a total of 47 PSIs receiving electronic transcripts.

As noted above, PSIs could obtain electronic transcripts through either the batch or XML data transfer process. All 28 PSIs and the

⁵ An XML file is an Extensible Markup Language file.

OUAC could receive student transcripts through the batch process, in which the ministry posted batch results to the SFTS and the PSIs were notified that a new file was ready to be downloaded. Five of the PSIs could also obtain transcripts directly through the XML data transfer process as needed. The XML process works in a call and answer manner. The PSI would request transcripts via their information system and an automated process would return transcripts to the PSI.

While the ministry initially told our office no PSI had obtained incorrect electronic transcripts, the records we obtained and interviews with ministry and PSI staff established that many did. Records we reviewed in our investigation confirm that two PSIs obtained transcripts through the XML data transfer process on Friday, July 26, and 12 PSIs and the OUAC downloaded batch files over the July 27–28 weekend.

Of the more than 110,000 electronic transcripts these 14 PSIs and the OUAC obtained through the batch and XML processes between July 26 and July 28, an unknown number contained errors. The ministry has never provided this information to the students affected, to PSIs, or publicly.

It is very likely that a significant number of erroneous marks were included in the downloaded batch files or transcripts obtained through the XML process through Monday, July 29. However, the ministry has neither advised our office which students were impacted nor advised the specific students affected. Ministry staff told our office that unless the information is captured at that time, it would not be retained on their information system after 35 days. We were told by ministry staff that the ministry might not have retained a record of that data.



Table 2: Post-secondary institutions known to have obtained electronic transcripts containing potentially incorrect results on Friday, July 26, and the weekend of July 27–28

Post-secondary institution	Process	Transcript count
Camosun College	Batch	2,765
Kwantlen Polytechnic University	Batch	6,843
Langara College	Batch	7,000
Northern Lights College	Batch	165
Okanagan College	Batch	2,226
Selkirk College	Batch	460
Simon Fraser University	Batch	16,308
Thompson Rivers University	XML	1,742 ⁶
University of British Columbia	Batch	22,028
University of Northern British Columbia	Batch	1,289
University of Victoria	Batch	11,647
University of Alberta	Batch	5,302
University of Calgary	Batch	2,961
Vancouver Island University	XML	4 ⁷
Ontario Universities' Application Centre	Batch	30,193
Total		110,933

Paper Transcripts Sent to PSIs

For the June 2019 session, students placed orders to send paper transcripts when their final marks became available to 92 institutions in B.C., 101 in the rest of Canada, and 152 in other countries, for a total of 345 institutions. The majority of institutions were PSIs, but scholarship bodies, recruitment centres and other institutions were also included.

The ministry makes a request to BC Mail Plus to print graduation certificates (sometimes referred to as a diploma or "Dogwood Certificate") and paper transcripts. BC Mail

Plus provides mail pick-up and distribution services for ministries, the broader public sector and publicly funded agencies. BC Mail Plus prepares the documents and Canada Post delivers the transcripts to the PSIs via regular mail.

The records we reviewed indicated that Certification staff ran the print job twice over the weekend requesting that paper transcripts be mailed, both before and after the fix. However, the ministry reported that it cancelled the print job so that no transcripts were mailed until after the updated results

⁶ Students placed 2,818 orders to send final transcripts when they became available to Thompson Rivers University. On July 26, the university obtained 1,742 of 2,818 electronic transcripts via the XML process.

⁷ Students placed 1,685 orders to send final transcripts when they became available to Vancouver Island University. On July 26, the university obtained 4 of 1,685 electronic transcripts via the XML process.

were released on July 31. The cancelled mailing was only for orders that students had placed prior to the July 12 deadline to have final marks sent via paper transcript to PSIs when they became available.

Individual Orders for Transcripts to Be Sent to PSIs and Third Parties

As explained above, most of the transcript orders placed through the Student Transcripts Service are for PSIs, and those orders are filled by batch, XML or mail. Those orders need to be placed more than two weeks before the grades are released (in 2019, the deadline was July 12). Therefore, during the period July 26–30, no new orders could be placed to send final marks when they become available. However, students could still place individual orders for transcripts to be sent immediately to PSIs or to third parties. For those PSIs that receive either paper transcripts or XML electronic transcripts, students could place an order to send their transcript immediately. Students could also

order transcripts to be sent to third parties as paper documents sent by mail or as a PDF sent by email.

The ministry did not disable the Student Transcripts Service until the evening of July 30, despite being aware of the errors as early as July 27. This meant students could continue to place orders to have individual transcripts that potentially contained errors be sent to PSIs and to third parties, including scholarship bodies and other institutions. Eleven hundred students placed orders between 6 p.m. on July 26 and 9 p.m. on July 30.

The records show that of these 1,100 students, some placed more than one transcript order. The ministry reported the orders placed and filled as follows:

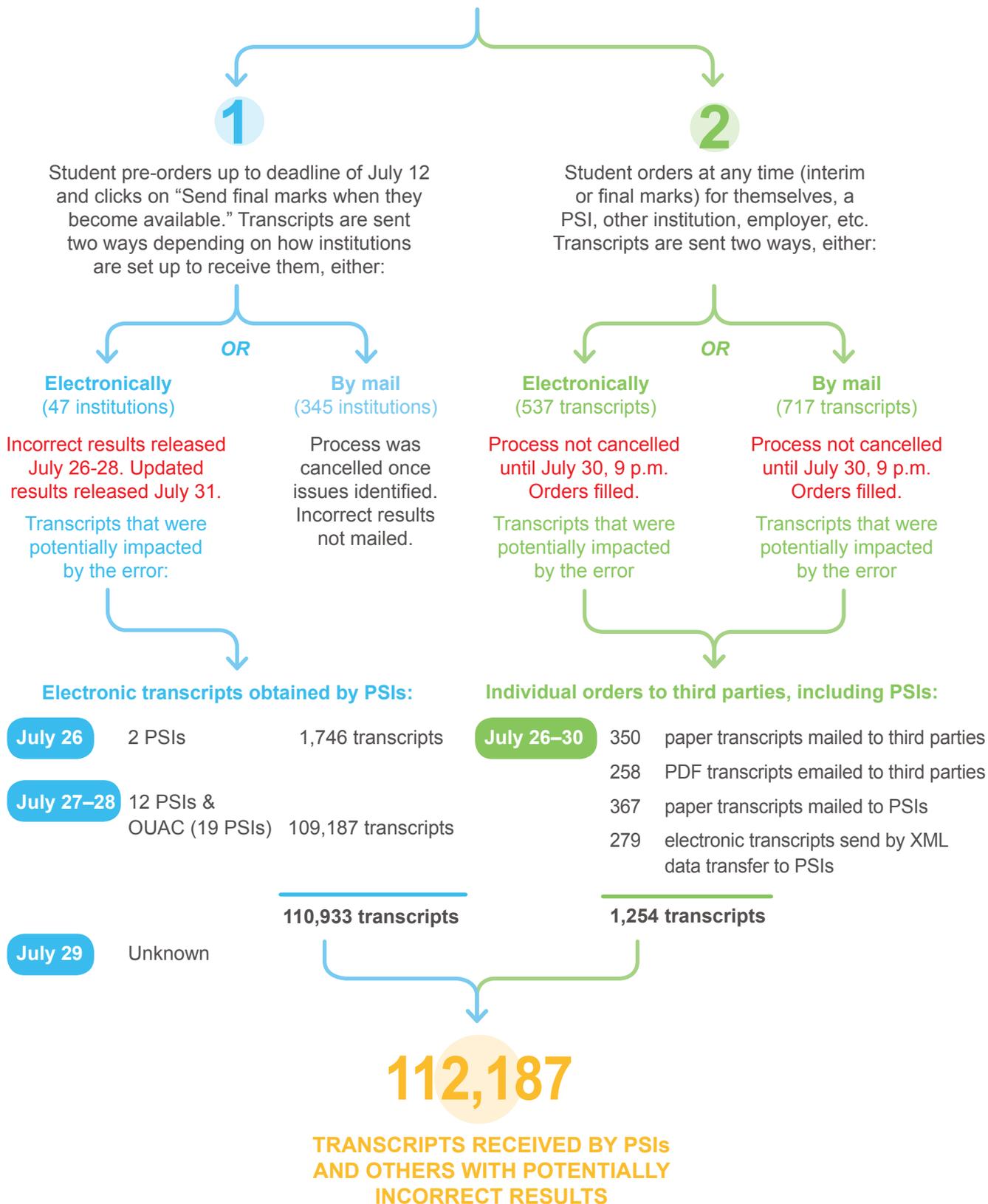
- 367 paper transcripts mailed to PSIs
- 279 electronic transcripts sent by XML data transfer to PSIs
- 350 paper transcripts mailed to third parties
- 258 PDF transcripts emailed to third parties.



Figure 2: How transcripts were sent to PSIs

TRANSCRIPTS POTENTIALLY IMPACTED BY THE ERRORS

STUDENTS ORDER TRANSCRIPTS ON STUDENT TRANSCRIPTS SERVICE IN TWO WAYS:



The Ministry's Quality Control and Assurance Process

Internal Processes

The ministry's internal Exam Data Processing wiki provides staff with direction in running jobs and data processing.

The wiki outlines a nine-step process for Certification staff to process results and ultimately to produce the two reports that are then forwarded to Curriculum for review and approval. However, the wiki does not contain sufficient detail to address the two tabulation errors Certification staff made in processing the June 2019 exams. The first tabulation error occurred when staff used the analysis system format rather than the TRAX format when entering the minimum and maximum percentage scores for English 12, Communications 12, and Français langue seconde-immersion 12 exams. The wiki instructs Certification staff to enter the data after it is provided by Curriculum, but does not state that the TRAX and statistical analysis systems have different data formats. In addition, the wiki makes no mention of how to properly process non-standard format exams, which was the cause of the second tabulation error.

A meaningful quality control process would ensure a review and approval process based on accurate, relevant data. The wiki identifies the two reports (TRAX1274D and TRAX1279C) to be created and sent to Curriculum for review and approval, but provides no guidance as to the relevance of the two reports or the data contained in them. Rather, the wiki states only that these are the two reports to be run.

With regard to the relevance of the data in the reports, staff could not tell us why some data

is generated or how it may be used. While each reviewer had a particular expertise – for example, in marking or statistical analysis – and their review was focused on data related to their expertise, significant data in the reports was not considered by any of the reviewers in approving the results. Further, the data in the two reports appeared inconsistent. Staff involved in the tabulation and review process could not explain apparent anomalies that our office identified in the reports.⁸

With respect to guidance provided to ministry staff in the review and approval process, staff characterized the approval process as ad hoc. One reviewer approved the results based on the analysis prior to one of the tabulation errors. Another focused solely on distribution of grades. The third raised concerns about the discrepancy between school and exam marks, yet no action was taken. There is no written ministry policy, procedure, practice directive, guidance or other information to assist staff in reviewing and approving the results.

A meaningful quality control and assurance process would identify significant tabulation errors prior to releasing the results. The ministry told our office that the errors could not have been discovered, as the process in place at the time included a review of data on a province-wide basis only, rather than individual student data. Province-wide data includes, for example, the percentage of students who received an A on a particular exam. However, at least one ministry employee raised concerns about the reports, suggesting that the errors could have been detected with sufficient province-wide data addressing the discrepancy between school marks and exam marks. Additionally, the ministry had student-level information and could have done quality assurance at the student level rather than at the provincial level.

⁸ For example, report TRAX1274D indicated that the proportion of students achieving letter grade A in Communications 12, English 12, Français langue première 12, and Français langue seconde-immersion 12 was "00." None of the ministry staff could explain this.

ANALYSIS

An analysis of the reasonableness of the Ministry of Education's procedures resulting in the release of incorrect exam results and transcripts includes consideration of the ministry's duty to ensure that it produces accurate results. In this case, the ministry's responsibility is greater because its clients are youth, their reliance on the ministry is significant and the consequence of an error is material.

The June 2019 Exam Session Review and Approval Process

Ministry staff told our office that they felt they were not sufficiently supported given that June 2019 was the first session in which a large number of both exams and assessments were written. The numerous delays in processing resulted in insufficient time for a more robust review. Furthermore, there did not appear to be an acknowledgment of the extent to which the processes were dependent on each other, including how the delays earlier in the process impacted the work of others. Nor did the ministry take steps to mitigate the delay in receipt of the data from the shipper. Therefore, the procedures followed in July 2019 were not reasonable.

Staff characterized the approval process as ad hoc. The ministry had no written guidelines to assist staff in reviewing and approving the reports. The reviewers were initially given only 90 minutes to review and approve the results. The quick approval on July 24 by two of the three reviewers was based on analysis prior to the tabulation errors or focused only on the distribution of letter grades. Either the data in the reports did not include sufficient information to indicate an unacceptable variance from school marks versus exam marks – even on a provincial level – or the review process was not rigorous enough to detect the variance. More likely both of these factors applied. Significantly, one reviewer expressed this exact concern in writing, yet no one, including supervisors, took any action prior to the release of the results. Therefore, the ministry's decision to release the results was not based on all relevant considerations and was not justifiable.

There were insufficient Ministry of Education staff working at the time of the release of the exam results on the July 27–28 weekend to fully respond to and address concerns that arose and there was no protocol in place for responding to and addressing concerns. The ministry failed to adequately investigate and respond to the concerns raised by at least two secondary schools and two students over the weekend, resulting in over 110,000 transcripts that might have contained errors being received by at least 14 PSIs and OUAC (19 Ontario PSIs) between July 26 and July 28 and an unknown number of PSIs on Monday, July 29.

Ministry Quality Control Improvements Following the 2019 Tabulation Errors

To the ministry's credit, a number of changes were made in its procedures in response to the June 2019 exam session errors. Changes include the return of an in-person review meeting, the inclusion of student-level data in the review and approval process, and changes addressing the two specific tabulation errors.

As noted earlier in this report, moving from exams to assessments and no longer using paper exams may help to resolve some of the factors leading to the errors. For the 2018/19 testing sessions, paper exams were used, and the ministry said it was the delay in shipping and scanning of these paper forms that resulted in a five-day delay. This five-day delay contributed, in large part, to the condensed time for review, approval and release of the results.

As assessments are cross-curricular and stand-alone (not tied to a specific course), the ministry assumes that more students will sit for assessments throughout the year, rather than waiting until June. This may help to reduce the size of the June testing session. Also, as assessments are scored on a proficiency scale (emerging, developing, proficient, extending), there would not be the same incentive to retake the assessment as there may have been to retake an exam to increase percentage scores. While these points may help to reduce the likelihood of future errors, the ministry will need to keep an eye on whether these assumptions are

borne out. June is likely to continue to be the busiest time of year, and the ministry will want to ensure that it has an adequate plan in place for dealing with unexpected problems.

The ministry has also made changes in procedure. In response to the June 2019 exam session errors, the ministry implemented the following procedures for future exam/assessment sessions to ensure that the errors do not reoccur:

- Spot checks of the data have been added prior to preparing the reports for review.
- A random sample (5 per cent of students) of individual student scores will be reviewed, comparing any difference between the student's raw examination or assessment score and statistically analyzed score, the statistically analyzed examination or assessment score to the student's classroom score, and multiple-choice and open-ended results. If staff find concerns, they are to escalate those concerns to their respective director and place a hold on results pending further investigation.
- Previously, Curriculum staff were provided with two reports, containing only provincial-level data, on which to base their review and approval. A third report has been added to include individual student-level marks in the review and approval process. The new report compares raw scores with statistically analyzed scores that will allow staff to identify problems resulting from moving the data between the systems.⁹

⁹ The ministry ran this new report after the June 2019 exam data entry errors were identified and corrected. Staff used the report to check a random sample of 5 per cent of student results, comparing raw scores with statistically analyzed scores, and found no inconsistencies between the scores.

Analysis

- The ministry brought back the group review and approval process involving staff from both branches.
- Two staff members will be involved in entering the minimum and maximum percentage scores. One staff member will be responsible for manually entering the data and a separate staff member will be responsible for validating the entry.
- The School Secure Web and the Student Transcripts Service will be taken off-line prior to the release of results to allow staff to complete a final spot check at the individual student level; this is to provide a final confirmation that there have been no issues in transferring the data.
- The ministry added approval of the results at the director and the executive director level prior to releasing the results, to provide additional oversight to ensure that the appropriate procedures have been followed.

Regarding students having difficulty in accessing the Student Transcripts Service, the ministry told our office it has implemented real-time monitoring of its public-facing systems and has implemented technical fixes that have led to improved performance.

The ministry also said that prior to the 2019 exam session, the ministry had taken steps to procure a replacement data system. The new system would include all data collection,

analysis and reporting functions within a single system, alleviating the potential for errors caused by transferring data between systems.

However, other issues that played a role in the errors have not been addressed, including the following:

- The written guidance for Certification staff (the wiki) does not contain sufficient detail to provide a meaningful quality control process.
- Insufficient time for a robust review was a significant factor in the release of incorrect results; the new procedures do not ensure sufficient time for the in-person review meeting.
- The changes do not address how significant delays in future review sessions would be addressed, and what resources could be put in place to support staff in meeting the release deadline while ensuring a robust review and approval process.
- While a third report to include student-level data has been added, no changes have been made to account for incomplete or irrelevant data in the two provincial-level reports.
- The new procedures do not address that access to information to permit a more robust review of the data, such as historical data, had become limited over the years.
- There is no written guidance to assist staff in reviewing and approving the results.

MINISTRY COMMUNICATIONS AND STUDENT IMPACTS

A student first viewed his English 12 exam result before the ministry announced the problem with the grades or corrected them. The student assumed his grades were correct and placed an order to have a PDF of his transcript sent to his preferred university. The university downloaded the student's transcript the day before the ministry corrected the exam results.

Later, family friends alerted the student to the problem with the exam results. He reviewed his grades and realized that the wrong grades had been sent to his university. He tried to resend the transcript, but the Student Transcripts Service was down. The student then called Service BC because that was the contact number provided on the ministry's website. Service BC told him they were unsure what was going on and confirmed that the website was down. Unsure of what to do, the student continued trying to reach staff at the ministry. He described being bounced around to many people who did not know how to help him.

Eventually the student spoke to someone at the ministry who told him to place a new order for an updated transcript to be sent and also to contact his preferred university to let them know what had happened. The student said that for several days after this he tried to log in to the Student Transcripts Service to place the order, but the website remained



inaccessible. Four days after the ministry posted the updated results, the student emailed the ministry urgently asking for someone to assist him, as he had been unable to place the transcript order and he had impending scholarship application dates. It took the ministry three days to respond to the student's email, but in the meantime he was finally able to access the site and place the transcript order. The student told us he had to take all these actions while working long hours and described the experience as stressful.

Our investigation revealed concerns about the ministry's communication with post-secondary institutions, scholarship bodies, other institutions and the public. Further, in its attempt to assure students and their families that the ministry had quickly corrected the error and there would be no negative impact, the ministry's communication resulted in key information being delayed, misstated or withheld. As a result, students were not fully informed about what they should have done to protect their interests related to, for example, admission to post-secondary institutions and scholarship eligibility, or what they could have done if they believed they had been adversely affected.

Key issues are highlighted below.

Communications with PSIs That Received Electronic Transcripts

The vast majority of incorrect results transmitted were to the PSIs receiving electronic transcripts. Therefore, how and when the ministry communicated with those institutions is relevant to the impact on students.

On Monday, July 29, around noon, the ministry removed the batch files previously posted from the secure file transfer service (SFTS) from which PSIs download batch files. The only direct notice to PSIs receiving

electronic transcripts was a text file posted on the SFTS. The text file read:

New final BC June 2019 transcript files will be produced as soon as possible. When this will occur is not known at this time.

Please discard any transcript files posted to this directory previously.

The issue we are addressing at this time are June 2019 provincial exam percentages.

We regret this delay and appreciate your patience as we work to resolve this issue.

The text file did not clearly state that the transcript files might have contained incorrect results. This message would have been seen by the PSI staff who retrieve the data. They would not necessarily have forwarded it to registrar staff.

The ministry repeatedly told us that these PSIs were also notified via telephone and email. However, our interviews with the involved ministry staff confirmed that proactive telephone and email notification of the batch file recipients did not occur; any calls or emails by ministry staff were in response to the PSIs' inquiries.

As the Ontario Universities' Application Centre (OUAC) processes applications for the Ontario

PSIs, the message was sent to the OUAC, but not to the 19 Ontario PSIs students had designated to receive their transcripts.

The ministry sent a follow-up notice via SFTS on Tuesday, July 30, and an email was sent to the five PSIs that also receive electronic transcripts via XML, stating that exam percentages “may have some discrepancy.” While the ministry knew by July 30 that over half of the exam scores were incorrect, the ministry did not explicitly provide that information in this notice to the PSIs.

For example, on July 31 senior staff in the registrar’s office at Vancouver Island University contacted the ministry, concerned that they had only become aware of the problem from media reports. The university received electronic transcripts through both batch and XML and therefore would have received the ministry’s notices through those processes, yet registrar’s office staff had not been informed of the errors. Likewise, registrars at other institutions also became aware of the errors via the media rather than through communications from the ministry, a clear indication that the ministry’s communications were not adequate.

The ministry did not proactively contact registrar and admission offices of PSIs until August 1, when it sent an email.¹⁰

On August 2, the ministry contacted the British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer, the Association of Registrars of Universities and Colleges in Canada, and the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers by email and telephone.

We spoke with senior staff in the registrar’s office at a B.C. PSI about the ministry’s communications. While registrar staff understood that the ministry’s focus was on correcting the errors, they did not believe the ministry was as proactive as it should have been. Registrar staff told us that more frequent updates from the ministry would have assisted the PSI in responding to students about the issue and ensuring that they had the right messaging. Senior IT staff at another B.C. PSI stated that the ministry did not provide enough information about what was wrong and how quickly it would be fixed.

Prior to receiving the ministry’s notice, both the University of Victoria and the University of British Columbia had already transferred the incorrect results into their systems. However, both universities told us that their internal IT staff were able to prevent the bad data from being distributed into student files or the university did not make any decisions on

¹⁰ The email read:

Dear Registrar:

I wanted to provide an update on the current issue related to Provincial Graduation Grade 12 Exam results. As you may be aware, these results should have been posted on July 29, but have unfortunately been delayed. I am pleased to let you know that the Ministry has resolved the issue with student assessment marks and the revised student transcripts are now available.

The Ministry became aware of this issue on Monday morning, and immediately notified onshore and offshore secondary schools in BC and the Yukon. We also provided an update to these schools this morning. We have also been updating our Student Transcript Service (STS) site to ensure students are aware of the status of their results. Students are now able to verify their results via the STS.

On Monday, we also notified all Post-Secondary Institutions who would normally receive student transcripts electronically this week. This message was posted to your institution via the Secure File Transfer (SFTP) process. Revised student transcripts are now being provided to these Post-Secondary Institutions through the SFTP. Post-Secondary Institutions who are not set up to receive electronic transmission and would normally receive paper transcripts through BC Mail should expect to see them begin to arrive next week. The delay should not impact student admissions to Post-Secondary Institutions.

We apologize for any inconvenience this delay has caused, and appreciate your cooperation.”

The email continued with contact information.

Ministry Communications and Student Impacts

student admissions until the updated data was received and verified.

It does not appear that the ministry proactively contacted any of the PSIs that had downloaded transcripts containing errors to ensure that they were able to remove the bad data from their internal systems. Rather, it appears the ministry relied on the PSIs to notify them if they had problems removing the bad data from their systems.

Communications with PSIs, Scholarship Bodies and Other Institutions That Received Paper Transcripts

As noted above, the ministry cancelled the print jobs for BC Mail that were run over the July 27–28 weekend prior to the transcripts being mailed by Canada Post. However, 1,100 students were able to place individual orders for transcripts between 6 p.m. on July 26 and 9 p.m. on July 30. Because the

ministry did not take steps to prevent orders from being placed during this period, those orders were filled.

The orders placed July 26–30 included 367 paper transcripts mailed directly to a PSI and 350 sent to various recipients by mail. The ministry did not determine which specific PSIs or other institutions received incorrect paper transcripts and did not directly notify them. The ministry did, however, contact the 1,100 students by email, as explained in the section below on page 33.

Once the ministry updated the results on July 31, staff ran the print job they had suspended and sent the results to BC Mail for mailing by August 2. Paper transcripts are sent by Canada Post regular mail, and expedited mailing is not available. The ministry's own messaging regarding paper transcripts states that it could take up to 7 business days within Canada, 10 business day for the United States, and 12 business days internationally. While meeting admission deadlines is a



concern for students every year, the delay in mailing out corrected transcripts posed a heightened concern for many students.

On August 1 the ministry emailed or called those PSIs scheduled to receive paper transcripts to notify them of the delay in mailing. Ministry staff also attempted to call registrars and admissions officers of those PSIs, beginning on August 6, to confirm receipt of the August 1 email and to find out whether any student had been or would be affected. While the ministry did not make contact with some PSIs, other registrars and admissions officers stated they were aware of the error and assured the ministry that no student would be negatively affected. For example, Concordia University (741 paper transcripts) informed the ministry that it would hold off on finalizing its files until it received the updated transcripts, and Eton College Canada (6 paper transcripts) stated that its students would not be affected by the delay. This information would have been extremely helpful to students who applied to those institutions. However, the ministry did not make public which institutions had provided an assurance and which had not.

Furthermore, not all PSIs contacted confirmed that they had received the August 1 notice or were aware of the transcript error. Ministry staff tasked with making this follow-up contact with the PSIs told our office that the majority of registrars and admissions officers they spoke to were not aware of the error or transcript delays.

Institutions that reached out to the ministry also did not receive specific information as to which students were affected by the exam error. For example, the Canadian Forces Recruiting Centre Detachment Victoria explained to the ministry they would not know which transcripts were accurate unless the student notified them that it looked incorrect. The recruiting centre asked the ministry if it could provide names of potentially

affected students, or if there was a way to identify incorrect transcripts. The recruiting centre noted, “Without anything to narrow it down, we would just have to carry on business as usual.” The ministry responded that the only way the recruiting centre would know there was a potential problem was if the student didn’t qualify for recruitment, but that the student would likely deal with the ministry directly in getting it sorted out instead of the recruiting centre and “everything should be okay.”

However, as noted in the section below, the ministry provided assurances to students that they would not be adversely affected. As a result, students were assured that they did not need to take further action. The ministry’s failure to adequately inform institutions and students meant they might be negatively affected, but neither the students nor the institutions were aware that may be the case.

Communications with Students and their Families about the Errors

The ministry posted notices and updates on the Student Transcripts Service that both lacked transparency and were sometimes overly reassuring to the point of being misleading.

The July 29 Student Transcripts Service Bulletin

While concerns about exam marks were already circulating among students, the only ministry communication with the public or directly to students on July 29 was a bulletin posted on the Student Transcripts Service at 12:00 p.m. that stated, in full:

We are investigating the results for the June 2019 Language Arts 12 Provincial Exams and will provide an update at noon on July 30th.

Ministry Communications and Student Impacts

This bulletin did not adequately put students on notice that their transcripts could contain errors. The ministry said it was investigating the results of the exams but gave no reason why. Additionally, the ministry did not inform students that they should not continue to order transcripts because they might contain incorrect results. Nor did the ministry disable students' ability to order transcripts until late on July 30.

Further, many students would not have seen this bulletin, as the ministry acknowledged that, beginning July 27 and continuing to at least August 8, students had difficulty accessing the Student Transcripts Service because of problems with the system.

The July 30 Student Transcripts Service Bulletins

On July 30 at 12:00 p.m., the ministry updated the Student Transcripts Service message to state that it was still investigating the results:

We are still investigating the results for the June 2019 Language 12 Provincial Exams and will provide an update on July 31st. Once the exam results are finalized, all orders placed to "Send Final Marks when they become available" will be processed.

While the ministry was clearly aware by this time that transcripts contained errors, it did not inform students, nor did it at any time identify which PSIs had initially received incorrect transcripts.

The ministry posted an updated message at 3:05 p.m. on July 30 acknowledging "an anomaly in the tabulation of the Grade 12 June exam results." The vague language did not

give students notice that their transcript could contain errors. In fact, the message did not contain enough information to notify students that they might be personally impacted.

Additional language in the statement was misleading. The statement read:

The ministry is reviewing each June 2019 exam result to ensure student grades are accurately reflected on their transcripts.

This implied that each individual student's exam would be reviewed, which was not correct. The ministry did not review each individual student's exam. While the ministry reran all standard processes on the entire data set once it had applied the correction, it tested a random sample of individual student results. The statement continued:

The ministry has contacted B.C. post-secondary institutions to inform them of the issue and help ensure no student applications are impacted. We are also actively contacting Canadian post-secondary institutions and will work with outside post-secondary institutions as needed.

As of July 30 at 3:05 p.m., the ministry had contacted only the 26 B.C. PSIs that received electronic transcripts out of a total 118 post-secondary and other institutions in the province that were to receive transcripts. The ministry had not yet contacted B.C. PSIs and other institutions receiving paper transcripts. Again, the only contact the ministry had initiated with PSIs outside of B.C. as of that time were the notices to OUAC and to two PSIs receiving electronic transcripts.

Figure 3: Ministry communications and our observations

BULLETINS FOR STUDENTS POSTED ON MINISTRY OF EDUCATION'S STUDENT TRANSCRIPTS SERVICE

Ministry communication

Our observations

July 29, 12:00 p.m.

"We are investigating the results for the June 2019 Language Arts 12 Provincial Exams and will provide an update at noon on July 30th."

The ministry provided no information that transcripts could contain errors. The ministry provided no explanation of why the ministry was investigating. Students were not told to stop ordering transcripts given error.

July 30, 12:00 p.m.

"We are still investigating the results for the June 2019 Language 12 Provincial Exams and will provide an update on July 31st. Once the exam results are finalized, all orders placed to 'Send Final Marks when they become available' will be processed."

The ministry knew transcripts contained errors but still did not tell students and did not identify which post-secondary institutions received incorrect transcripts.

July 30, 3:05 p.m.

Acknowledged "an anomaly in the tabulation of the Grade 12 June exam results."

The ministry still did not tell students not to place transcript orders or prevent them from doing so.

"The ministry is reviewing each June 2019 exam result to ensure student grades are accurately reflected on their transcripts."

The ministry did not review each individual student's exam. It tested a random sample of individual student results.

"The ministry has contacted B.C. post-secondary institutions to inform them of the issue and help ensure no student applications are impacted. We are also actively contacting Canadian postsecondary institutions and will work with outside post-secondary institutions as needed."

As of July 30 at 3:05 p.m., the ministry had contacted only the 26 B.C. PSIs that receive electronic transcripts; the ministry had yet to contact the additional 92 B.C. PSIs and other institutions that receive paper transcripts.

The July 31 Ministry Statement

On July 31 at 3:20 p.m., the ministry released a statement to the media, on the ministry website, via Twitter and via a link that was provided on the Student Transcripts Service. Significant aspects of the statement were incorrect or misleading. The statement read:

After the discovery, the ministry contacted all post-secondary institutions in Canada and NCAA institutions in the United States to ensure that no student applications for the fall would be affected.

The backgrounder included with the statement read:

Post-secondary institutions in B.C., across Canada and NCAA schools in the United States were notified of the issue on July 30 to ensure no student applications were impacted.

This was not the case. As of July 30, the ministry had not yet contacted PSIs in Canada that receive paper transcripts (these included 92 PSIs in B.C. and 101 in the rest of Canada); they had only sent notices to the 26 PSIs in B.C. and 2 in Canada that receive electronic transcripts, and to OUAC, and had never contacted the Ontario PSIs that receive transcripts via OUAC. The statement that “all post-secondary institutions in Canada” had been contacted was inaccurate and misleading.

The July 31 ministry statement was also misleading as the ministry had not contacted NCAA institutions as stated but rather had contacted the NCAA Eligibility Center. The Eligibility Center’s role is to ensure that students are eligible to play NCAA sports and facilitates obtaining entrance documentation

for the NCAA institutions, including transcripts.¹¹ Admission to each school, including admission deadlines, is determined by each individual college and university. This distinction is important, as the statement implies that the individual U.S. PSIs had been contacted and would have been aware of the delay in receiving transcripts, and therefore students would not need to take any action.

However, as evidenced by emails we obtained in our investigation from students and parents to the ministry, many students applying to U.S. PSIs had to act to meet deadlines to ensure their admission. The NCAA institutions those emails referenced were not aware of the delay in mailing transcripts or any possible errors in transcripts (if they had been sent any of the 1,254 transcripts ordered to be sent to third parties). Many had early deadlines. The ministry did assist individual students, including couriering transcripts to the NCAA Eligibility Center, but students would still need to contact the U.S. post-secondary institution directly and take other steps to protect their interests.

The statement continued:

Post-secondary institutions have stated they will ensure the error in data reporting won’t negatively impact any incoming students.

At the time this statement was released, only *one* institution, the University of British Columbia, had provided such an assurance. And, as noted earlier, at no time did the ministry inform the public as to which PSIs received incorrect transcripts. When the ministry did contact PSIs later in August it still did not inform the public about which PSIs had provided assurances that the error would not negatively impact students or the nature of any such assurances.

¹¹ See <https://professionals.collegeboard.org/guidance/prepare/athletes/ncaa-eligibility-basics>. The NCAA Eligibility Center certifies whether prospective college athletes are eligible to play sports at NCAA Division I or II institutions. For Division III, athletes must meet the standards set by the school (<http://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/media-center/ncaa-101/our-three-divisions>) in order to play sports.

The placement of this statement in the press release immediately after the statement that “all” post-secondary institutions had been contacted was artful. It implied, without stating it, that the institutions referred to in the prior statement had given this assurance.

The statement continued:

The error resulted in the assessments being miscalculated, with many students showing a lower result than expected.

This statement failed to put students on notice that, when corrected, nearly an equal number of exam results were revised downward as were revised upward. (As previously noted, marks were updated for 18,741 exams, with 9,946 receiving a higher mark and 8,795 receiving a lower mark.)

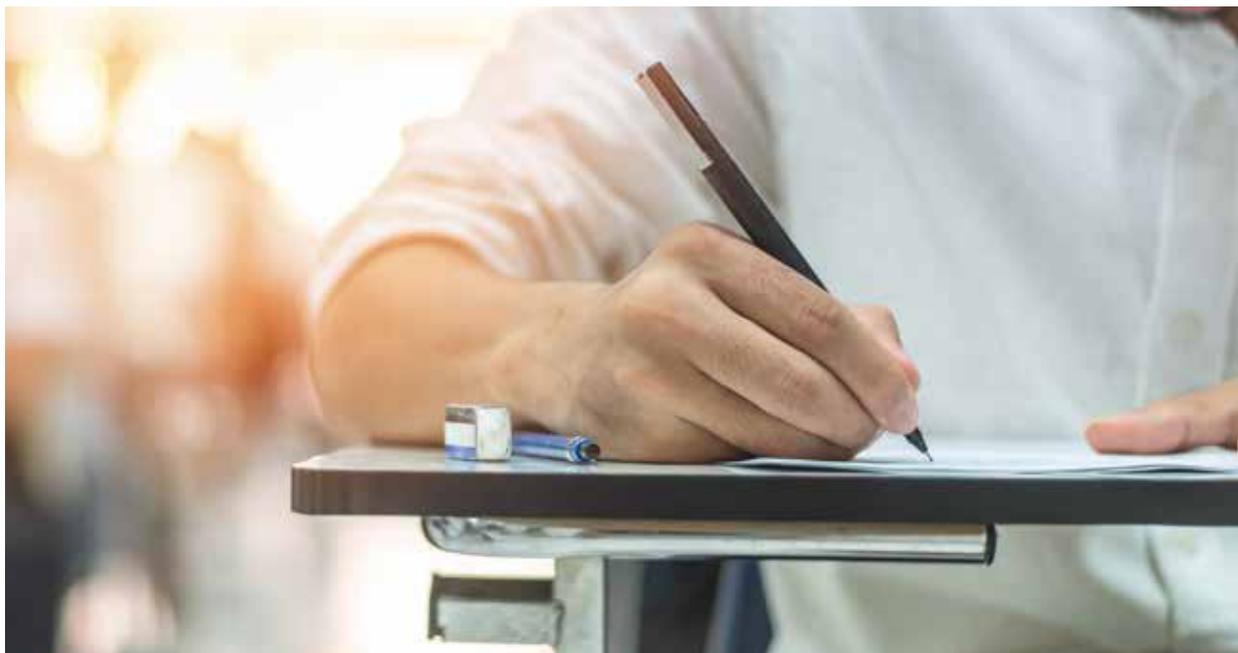


Figure 4: Ministry statement

MINISTRY STATEMENT ON EXAM ISSUE

July 31 2019, 3:20 p.m.

BC Gov News Search news.gov.bc.ca

Home Ministries Sectors Connect Subscribe News Archive

Education PRINT

Minister's statement on student transcript issue

Share

Minister of Education Rob Fleming has provided the following statement in response to the B.C. student transcript issue:

"The issue that has affected transcripts for Grade 12 B.C. students who wrote provincial exams in June has now been resolved.

"I am confident that students and families can now know their grades are correct.

"I know this has caused anxiety for students and their families, and I want to assure them that this will not have an impact on admission to colleges and universities.

"After the discovery, the ministry contacted all post-secondary institutions in Canada and NCAA institutions in the United States to ensure that no student applications for the fall would be affected.

"Post-secondary institutions have stated they will ensure the error in data reporting won't negatively impact any incoming students.

"When the issue was first discovered, I immediately directed ministry staff to work around the clock to identify and fix the issue.

"The investigation discovered that human error caused the incident when data was being manually transferred between systems.

"Staff have now checked the updated results for accuracy. System checks and manual spot checks of results at every stage of the process have now confirmed their accuracy. Grades will be communicated directly to post-secondary institutions."

A backgrounder follows.

CONTRACT STORY

Backgrounders

Student transcript issue resolved

The issue that caused student grade anomalies with some June 2019 provincial exam results is resolved, and students will be able to access corrected final exam marks and grades via the StudentTranscripts Service later today.

The Ministry of Education apologizes for the inconvenience and anxiety that this disruption has caused students and families.

After investigating the incident, it was determined that it was caused by human error – the ministry uses a complex and sophisticated system to score exams. The manual error occurred when the grade thresholds from the scoring system were entered incorrectly into the reporting system. The error resulted in the assessments being miscalculated, with many students showing a lower result than expected.

The issue was discovered on July 29 after schools contacted the ministry asking about apparent anomalies in student results. The ministry took immediate steps and pulled all marks offline. A team of ministry staff worked vigorously around the clock to resolve the issue and verify exam results by manually reviewing student files.

The issue involved five provincial exams taken between June 22 and 23, 2019, and affected about 32,000 students who took the following assessments:

- Communications 12
- English First Peoples 12
- English 12
- French Language Arts (second language) 12
- French Language Arts (first language) 12

Post-secondary institutions in B.C., across Canada and NCAA schools in the United States were notified of the issue on July 30 to ensure no student applications were impacted. The ministry will be providing transcripts to these institutions directly to prevent any further delay. All secondary schools in B.C. and education partners were also informed. The ministry is confident that the updated results are accurate.

The assessment systems and processes in B.C. have been in place for three decades and this is the first time this has happened. The ministry is currently in the process of modernizing its technology infrastructure and systems, including assessments.

Students and families can be assured the grades seen on the StudentTranscripts Service are accurate.

As of July 30, the ministry had only contacted OUAC and the 28 PSIs in Canada that received electronic transcripts; the ministry had not contacted the 193 PSIs and other institutions in Canada that receive paper transcripts.

The ministry contacted the NCAA Eligibility Center, not the NCAA institutions; therefore, the individual U.S. PSIs would not have been notified of the error or the delay in mailing paper transcripts at that time.

The ministry was in fact contacted over the July 27–28 weekend by both schools and students raising concerns about the accuracy of the results and the imminent release of apparently incorrect transcripts to PSIs.

At the time this statement was released, only one institution, the University of British Columbia, had provided such an assurance. At no time did the ministry inform the public which PSIs had provided an assurance that no student application would be affected.

The errors resulted in nearly an equal number of exams with higher than expected results as lower results – 8,795 incorrectly received a higher mark and 9,946 incorrectly received a lower mark.

The August 1 Ministry Update

On Thursday, August 1, the ministry posted its Provincial Graduation Result Update to its website, which again included statements that were incorrect, misleading or both. The update read:

The Ministry has directly spoken with BC’s largest Post-Secondary Institutions who have confirmed that this will not impact students.

Only UBC had provided this assurance as of the release of this update, despite the use of the plural “institutions.”

The update included a list of PSIs that had received transcripts electronically and told students:

Any student who has applied to any of these listed Post Secondary Institutions is not required to take any further action: the institution will now have received their transcript.

And for PSIs that received paper transcripts, the ministry’s message to students was:

Again, students are not required to take any further action: the Post Secondary Institution you selected will receive their transcript next week.

The ministry did not inform students which PSIs, scholarship providers or other institutions had received incorrect transcripts. Had students been provided with this information, they would have known that they needed to be sure the PSIs they applied to had the correct transcript and did not make any decisions based on the incorrect transcript.

As for paper transcripts, the update stated that the PSIs would receive transcripts the following week. This time frame is contrary to the ministry’s own messaging that as transcripts were sent by Canada Post regular mail, it would take up to 7 business

days within Canada, 10 business days for the United States, and 12 business days internationally. Again, the ministry did not provide accurate information that would enable students to take necessary action.

Orders to Have Transcripts Sent to Third Parties

The ministry said it had disabled the Student Transcripts Service on the evening of July 30. Prior to that time, students could continue to order individual transcripts to be sent to third parties, including PSIs and scholarship providers. We noted earlier that 1,100 students placed orders between 6 p.m. on July 26 and 9 p.m. on July 30. Those orders would have been filled with transcripts containing the incorrect results.

While not all of those orders were impacted by the exam error, on August 1 the ministry emailed all 1,100 students the following message:

There have been some anomalies with the June provincial exam results, which have now been resolved. However, if your transcript included June 2019 provincial Language Arts 12 exam marks, *we recommend that you resend your transcript* to your selected post-secondary institutions to ensure correct data is sent.

Again, the ministry’s message did not clearly inform students that their transcripts might contain errors. Clear information would have alerted these students of the urgent need to act. However, the ministry monitored the Student Transcripts Service accounts of those 1,100 students, and if the students did not resubmit an order, the ministry sent a reminder email one week later. Even after the reminder, not all 1,100 students acted. Ministry staff said they did not know if those who did not reorder had been affected by the exam error or chose not to reorder for other reasons.

The ministry did not explain why it simply did not resend all these transcripts with an explanation that the prior version might have contained an error, rather than relying on students to resubmit a transcript order for the same recipients.

Not all students resubmitted transcript requests and so, in those cases, the potentially incorrect transcripts were not corrected. For those students that received incorrect higher marks, if the student did not resubmit a transcript request, it is possible the student was admitted to a PSI or received a scholarship on the basis of the incorrect higher mark. Therefore, PSIs and scholarship bodies may have made competitive decisions based on incorrect information, negatively impacting students who were denied admission or scholarships but would otherwise have been successful if the incorrect transcript of another applicant was not relied on.

The ministry did not inform the students or the PSIs themselves which PSIs had been sent incorrect transcripts from the 1,254 ordered by students between July 26 and July 30.

Individual Student/ Parent Concerns and the Ministry's Response

Waiting for exam results causes stress and anxiety for students at the best of times, so it is not unexpected that when students received erroneous results, reactions were

heightened. For example, one student's parents told us about the damage they believe the ministry had caused their family:

The student's parents described their daughter as very bright, but she had always struggled with school and needed help to graduate. She was looking forward to continuing her education with post-secondary training and was elated when she saw she had achieved 75% on the English 12 exam. Her parents found out about the exam tabulation error in the news but were relieved when the ministry said many students were showing a result lower than expected.

Not thinking there was too much to worry about, the student checked her score again and found out that it had dropped to under the threshold for her program of choice by only 1%. Her parents described her as being crushed by the change in mark. They said the shock and disappointment could not have been greater, given the challenges she had faced in school. The parents described the ordeal as leaving an emotional scar on the family and wished the Ministry of Education had acknowledged and apologized for the damage.

This student's experience is similar to other students who contacted the ministry to ask why their mark had gone down in light of public information that said many students had marks that were lower than expected,¹²

¹² The minister's July 31 statement read, "The error resulted in the assessments being miscalculated, with many students showing a lower result than expected."

creating an expectation that many students would see their marks go up when the errors were corrected. As many students' marks went down, students said this miscommunication made it harder for them to accept that the updated results were correct.

Other students made decisions based on the original marks. For example:

A student described checking her exam results and then departing on a trip, confident in the knowledge that she would be accepted to her program of choice. On returning, the student discovered not only that her mark had changed and was too low for admission to the program but she had also missed the August date to rewrite the exam. Even the November rewrite date would be too late for the student to attend the winter session, so she could not have attended her university of choice until the following September. Ultimately things ended well for this student as she was accepted through the PSI's appeal process. Other students in similar situations may not have been so fortunate.

The Ministry's Response to Questions from Students and Families

In response to the higher volume of calls and emails, the ministry assigned additional staff and increased the hours during which the public could contact the ministry, and staff worked overtime and over the weekend to respond to student and parent concerns.

Service BC is the primary contact for students and their families for questions and assistance regarding the Graduation Program. Service

BC directs any questions that cannot be answered on first contact to the ministry's subject matter experts by email. The August 1 ministry update directed students to contact the ministry Monday through Friday, between 7:30 a.m. and 5:00 p.m., if they had questions or concerns. The contact information provided was for Service BC. Service BC was closed over the holiday weekend, August 3–5, 2019. This meant that even if ministry staff were working over the weekend, students and parents could not access the ministry through Service BC during that time. While ministry staff were available over the weekend and during extended hours, the ministry's only notice to the public regarding its ability to directly contact the ministry over the holiday weekend was posted on one page of the ministry's website under the heading for ordering transcripts.

The ministry received calls and emails from students and their families in July and August and into September. We spoke to students and their parents about their experience with the error and we reviewed emails between students and the ministry in the days following the error. Some appreciated the assistance they received from individual ministry staff. For example, one parent wrote:

Now we have a much better sense of what caused the English Provincial Exam marks and final grades to be misreported, as well as the reason why [their child's] initially reported marks fell once the problem was corrected. You provided a far more fulsome response than the Ministry's limited communication through the website and other media.

Other students and family members we spoke to likewise told us that their experiences with staff were positive, yet many had concerns about the overall communication from the ministry. One example we found highlights the delays in follow-up and the lack of information provided:

A student received an email from the ministry recommending that students who placed recent transcript orders should place a new order. In response, she emailed the ministry and explained that she had recently ordered 35 transcripts. She said 25 copies were to go to post-secondary institutions and 10 copies were to go to her house.

The next day the ministry emailed the student and explained that they were dealing with a high volume of inquiries but would get back to her as soon as possible. The ministry has no record of responding to the student's email for over six weeks. When staff did answer, they refunded her the \$90 she had spent on incorrect transcripts, but did not respond to her comment that she had ordered 25 incorrect copies to go to post-secondary institutions.

Other students said, "I'm tired of everyone redirecting me to someone else, I just need an answer," and "I was bounced around to so many people who weren't able to help me."

Review, Re-mark or Rewrite an Exam

Students have some options when they have concerns about their exam results. There are three processes available: review, re-mark, or rewrite the exam.

A student may request a re-mark once per exam. The results of the re-mark are final for that exam, whether the new score is lower, higher or remains the same. An administrative

fee of \$50 is charged for a re-mark. Results are normally provided four weeks after the ministry receives the re-mark request.

As many PSIs have early or mid-August deadlines to receive transcripts or require all admission offers to be confirmed prior to the start of classes, the normal time frame to obtain re-mark results would be too late for fall admission. As a way to address expressed concerns about the exam results, the ministry expedited the re-marking process, reducing the processing time from four weeks to less than two weeks.

The ministry provided this information to Service BC for use beginning on August 6. However, the ministry did not initially inform its own staff outside of the marking unit who were responding to requests for assistance from the public, and so staff outside of the marking unit continued to inform students and parents that re-marking would take four weeks. The ministry did not inform students of the reduced processing time in any other manner, such as posting it on the Student Transcripts Service, School Secure Web, the ministry website or Twitter. Therefore, it is likely that not all students who may have benefitted from this change knew about it.

Processes for Addressing Individual Student Concerns

The ministry received calls and emails from students and their families in July and August and into September. Consistent with current and prior practice, there was no system in place at the time for documenting telephone calls. Only calls directly to the minister's office were documented. As some families contacted Service BC, various ministry staff and also the minister's office, the lack of consistent tracking led to duplication of efforts. Staff told us this also created additional stress for them. While emails are

retained for one year, there is no process in place to record the concerns raised, ensure quality of responses, or learn from any issues raised. The emails are merely retained for a year, then deleted. Nor does the ministry have a complaint procedure for responding to students or parents who believe their concerns have not been adequately addressed.

Impact on Students' Ability to Appeal Withdrawn Offers or Register for Classes

We spoke to PSIs about the effect the errors had on their incoming students. For example, students' conditional offers may be withdrawn based on their final grades and students have the opportunity to appeal such a decision. Both changes in marks and the delays arising from the ministry error impacted the appeal process and created more stress for students. One PSI responded:

I think it delayed our finalization process a bit. What it did do actually, was students with conditional offers, when we do get final grades, unfortunately they do sometimes slip below, and at that point they have an opportunity to appeal to the Senate. With the additional time to get the right file, and then run the series of jobs we have to do and then communicate with the students about their offer being withdrawn – the one thing that did happen was that dates for the Senate appeal committee meeting . . . there was a reduced timeframe for students to submit their appeal and for the admissions officer to help the students through that process. We ended up doing some of those appeals quite late and the timelines were tighter and it was added stress for those students . . .

Some students' course registrations could have been affected. For example, undergraduate students at the University of Victoria must complete an academic writing requirement course; however, that requirement is satisfied if the student obtains a score of at least 86 per cent on the English 12 or English 12 First Peoples provincial exam. Students who reviewed the earlier incorrect results and registered for classes based on an incorrect exam score could have been affected in one of two ways:

- A student might have taken the academic writing course based on an incorrect assumption that they needed to (they thought they scored less than 86 per cent) and when they went to switch courses, their desired alternative course was full.
- A student may have believed they did not need to register in the academic writing course because the initial exam score was at least 86 per cent, but when the updated results were obtained and they realized they needed to take the academic course, that course was full.

By the time the students realized they had either registered in error or failed to register, the mandatory course or other more desirable course offerings were full.

ANALYSIS

The Ministry's Response to the Errors

The ministry did not have a protocol in place to enable it to respond nimbly once the errors were discovered. The ministry did not provide timely and accurate information to all stakeholders, including registrars and admissions officers; did not disable students' ability to continue ordering transcripts until the errors were resolved; and did not address the Student Transcripts Service overload following the release of results and for the next two weeks.

The ministry's communication with the PSIs was ad hoc, including initially giving limited notice only to the PSI staff working with batch files on July 29. Most registrars were not notified until August 1 or later, and many remained unaware that they might have received incorrect transcripts. The ministry failed to confirm whether all PSIs that had been sent transcripts containing errors were able to remove the incorrect data from their systems and that the incorrect data was not relied on in their decision making. The ministry also failed to give scholarship providers and other institutions sufficient information to ensure that no decisions were made based on transcripts containing errors. The ministry knew that PSIs, scholarship providers and other institutions would make decisions based on the results released, but did not take adequate measures to ensure that appropriate notifications were made and received.

For all of these reasons, the ministry acted improperly.

The Ministry's Communication with Students

The ministry did not provide timely and adequate information to students, but rather chose to wait until the updated results were about to be released. The communication about the ministry's actions and the reasons for them was not transparent and in some cases was overly reassuring, to the point of being misleading. The communication failed to put students on notice of actions they needed to take to protect their interests. The communication included incorrect or misleading statements. The ministry knew or should have known that its actions could result in students not taking all measures necessary to protect their interests. As such, the ministry's actions and inactions constituted an unreasonable procedure.

The ministry does not have a system for documenting concerns from the public or a quality assurance process. While emails are retained for one year, there is no process in place to record concerns raised about exam errors or any other issues, to ensure quality of responses, or to make changes based on lessons learned. Good practice includes having a system to record not only public concerns and complaints but also how they are responded to. Given the significance of the exam errors for students

and their families, procedures for recording calls and emails from the public, post-secondary institutions, secondary schools and other parties, along with the ministry's responses, becomes even more critical. In

the circumstances, the ministry's failure to establish and maintain an organized system for communication with students and their families was unreasonable.

CONCLUSION

The young people of British Columbia and their families depend on the Ministry of Education to get it right. Graduating from high school is a milestone. It is an achievement celebrated and shared by students and their families, teachers, school administrators, coaches, counsellors and others who helped to support and shape these young lives.

Graduating is also a rite of passage – closing the door on childhood and opening a new door to adulthood. Imagine the excitement a young person feels as they walk through this door, confident that their marks have ensured their entry into the next stage of their journey, only to learn that those marks are wrong.

We recognize that government makes mistakes. It is our expectation, however, that when mistakes are made, whether impacting only a single person or many, as was the case in this investigation, swift and concrete action is taken to fully explore both how the error was made and what steps are in place to remedy the impact. We found that in June 2019, the ministry did not have in place the checks and balances that are cornerstones of good public administration. As the accuracy of the marks was being questioned, processes were rushed, concerns were not adequately investigated, a comprehensive quality assurance process was absent, and staff were not properly supported or equipped with the tools they needed to address what was quickly becoming a far-reaching problem.

As significant as the procedural flaws were, equally important was the way in which the ministry communicated about the errors. The ministry's statements to the public were misleading. Instead of informing students and their families that incorrect marks had been issued to multiple post-secondary institutions, naming those institutions, and notifying the students and institutions immediately and directly, the ministry, over the course of several days, downplayed the situation and the extent of the problem.

The ministry went so far as to publicly reassure students that they did not have to worry that they might be impacted. The ministry implied publicly that post-secondary institutions throughout North America had provided assurances that students would not be impacted, when, in fact, at the time the ministry made this statement only one institution had given that assurance. Time was extremely short for students to ensure that their post-secondary institution of choice received the correct transcript. Again, students and their families put significant trust in the ministry's statements. Providing overly broad assurances was not only disingenuous but had a practical impact, giving false comfort to students who had no idea how they were being impacted by the errors.

Rather than explicitly explaining the situation, the ministry provided little to no information

about what students should do to protect their interests. It did not set up a hotline or direct email to respond to students, parents or school personnel. The ministry's Student Transcripts Service became overloaded as a result of students trying to access the system, further reducing their ability to mitigate the situation.

The recommendations in this report are intended to address these issues. Young people, parents, post-secondary institutions and the public deserve assurances that,

moving forward, the Ministry of Education has systems in place to ensure that marks are tabulated and sent to post-secondary institutions in an accurate process. However, the recommendations in this report are also intended, in the event that future problems are encountered, to promote transparent, reliable and accurate communications with students, families, post-secondary institutions and the public, as well as acceptance of accountability for the consequences of those problems.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

FI The ministry followed an unreasonable review and approval procedure prior to the release of the June 2019 provincial examination results.

RI By October 1, 2020, the ministry implement a quality assurance process to include clear, practical and adequately detailed procedures for the review and approval of assessment results that will promote consistency and accurate, timely and effective problem solving.

F2 The ministry acted improperly in its failure to adequately investigate and respond to the concerns raised by at least two secondary schools following the release of results to the School Secure Web and Student Transcripts Service, resulting in incorrect transcripts being released to post-secondary institutions over the July 27–28 weekend and on Monday, July 29. The ministry also acted improperly, once it acknowledged that there was an issue with the examination results, by failing to suspend students' ability to order individual transcripts until 9 p.m. on July 30.

R2 By October 1, 2020, the ministry develop and implement procedures to promptly address concerns raised after a release of results, including provision for sufficient staffing during critical periods and adequate documentation, investigation and escalation of concerns.

F3 The July 30 and 31, 2019, Student Transcripts Service bulletins, the July 31, 2019, public statement, and the August 1, 2019, Provincial Graduation Result Update issued by the ministry were inaccurate or misleading in various significant aspects. The ministry acted improperly by providing inaccurate and misleading information regarding the June 2019 exam tabulation errors and overly broad assurances that those errors would not impact students.

R3 By October 1, 2020, the ministry implement a communications protocol with its Government Communications and Public Engagement (GCPE) advisors that requires a senior ministry official to certify in writing that all statements in any news release, social media posting, website posting or other communication with the public are accurate and not misleading.

F4	The ministry's failure to establish and maintain an organized system for communication with students was an unreasonable procedure.
R4	By December 31, 2020, the ministry implement a protocol for communicating with students and the public that is transparent and emphasizes timeliness, service, record keeping and the importance of clear, correct and readily available public information. As the process of responding to student and public concerns is spread over several units, the ministry develop a consistent method of tracking concerns from various units and using the information obtained to improve service delivery for future assessments.
F5	The ministry's failure to notify students and parents about the errors at the earliest opportunity after the errors were identified, or at all, hampered awareness and understanding. The ministry's failure to inform students of steps they might need to take to address potential problems arising from the errors had a negative impact on students. The ministry knew, or ought to have known, that its actions could result in students not taking all actions necessary to protect their interests and that, as a result, some students could suffer financial loss. As such, the ministry's procedures were unfair and unreasonable.
R5	<p>By December 31, 2020, the ministry take the necessary and appropriate steps to establish a compensation program for students negatively impacted by the 2019 exam tabulation errors. This should include by that date all of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • establishing a fund • establishing the terms of reference for the compensation program • designating the person(s) who will determine compensation eligibility • identifying all students whose exam results were impacted by the error • notifying those students regarding their ability to submit a compensation claim. <p>The compensation program should provide for financial payments to be made to individuals who can demonstrate that a financial loss was incurred or an expense reasonably arose from the exam tabulation errors and should include, but not be limited to, students whose grades were adjusted both downward and upward.</p>
R6	As part of the student notification in Recommendation 5 and by December 31, 2020, the ministry should identify, contact and apologize to all students whose exam results were impacted by the errors, regardless of whether the ministry has information as to whether a student suffered a financial loss or expense. To the extent required to obtain current contact information for the students impacted, the ministry should, in consultation with the Information and Privacy Commissioner if required, seek the co-operation of school districts, post-secondary institutions, StudentAidBC and other public bodies.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Post-secondary Institutions Receiving Transcripts

For the June 2019 testing session, students placed orders to have final marks sent when they became available to the following post-secondary and other institutions:

PSIs receiving electronic transcripts	Batch	XML	Transcript count
British Columbia Institute of Technology	✓		3,495
Camosun College	✓		2,765
Capilano University	✓		4,119
Coast Mountain (formerly Northwest Community College)	✓		196
College of New Caledonia	✓		893
College of the Rockies	✓		546
Corpus Christie College	✓		354
Douglas College	✓		6,125
Emily Carr University of Art and Design	✓		875
Kwantlen Polytechnic University	✓		6,843
Langara College	✓		7,000
North Island College	✓		482
Northern Lights College	✓		165
Okanagan College	✓		2,226
Quest University	✓		91
Royal Roads University	✓		149
Selkirk College	✓		460
Simon Fraser University	✓	✓	16,308
Thompson Rivers University	✓	✓	2,818
University of British Columbia	✓	✓	22,028
University of Canada West	✓		17
University of Northern British Columbia	✓		1,289

PSIs receiving electronic transcripts	Batch	XML	Transcript count
University of the Fraser Valley	✓	✓	4,383
University of Victoria	✓		11,647
Vancouver Community College	✓		1,285
Vancouver Island University	✓	✓	1,685
University of Alberta	✓		5,302
University of Calgary	✓		2,961
Ontario Universities' Application Centre (OUAC)	✓		
Algoma University (Sault Ste. Marie)			11
Brock University (St. Catharines)			318
Carleton University (Ottawa)			1,087
Lakehead University (Thunder Bay)			237
Laurentian University (Sudbury)			56
McMaster University (Hamilton)			2,445
Nipissing University (North Bay)			17
OCAD University (Toronto)			140
Queen's University (Kingston)			4,257
Ryerson University (Toronto)			1,191
Trent University (Peterborough)			122
University of Guelph			500
University of Ottawa			2,027
University of Toronto			7,699
University of Waterloo			2,896
University of Windsor			258
Western University (London)			4,083
Wilfrid Laurier University (Waterloo)			244
York University (Toronto)			2,605
TOTAL			136,700

PSIs and other institutions receiving paper transcripts	Number of institutions	Transcript count
B.C. PSIs and other institutions	92	4,874
Other Canadian PSIs and institutions	101	13,645
International PSIs and institutions	152	7,375
TOTAL	345	25,894

Appendix B: Response from the Ministry of Education



August 11, 2020

Ref: 235491

Jay Chalke
Ombudsperson
Province of British Columbia
Email: MCox@bcombudsperson.ca
ABockus-Vanin@bcombudsperson.ca

Dear Mr. Chalke:

Further to your letter of July 14, 2020, advising of your determination to issue a public report under the *Ombudsperson Act* and for providing us with a copy of the final report and our subsequent communication responses on July 22, 2020, July 28, 2020, and August 6, 2020, I am providing this updated letter for inclusion in your final report.

I appreciate the review of our procedures for releasing assessment results, as well as our communications protocols that have been provided by your office. The Ministry of Education (Ministry) strongly believes in continuous improvement, and fully accepts that the events of last summer highlighted the need for immediate enhancements and updates to processes for calculating provincial assessments and releasing provincial transcripts.

I would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the work undertaken by Ministry staff to resolve last year's error as quickly as possible. Due to their efforts, the delay in releasing transcripts was limited to two additional days. Staff worked diligently with students, families and post-secondary institutions to provide assurances and mitigate potential negative impacts. As a result of these efforts, the Ministry received no complaints related to transcripts after August 15, 2019, and enquires and requests for re-marks remained in line with annual averages for June exam administrations.

Post-secondary institutions were initially notified through the pre-established channels for releasing transcript information. Ministry staff then directly contacted 417 post-secondary institutions, in addition to organizations such the National Collegiate Athletic Association and Ontario Universities' Application Centre. This was done to ensure records had arrived and there would be no impacts for students.

.../2

Ministry of Education
Office of the Deputy Minister

Mailing address:
PO Box 9179 Stn Prov Govt
Victoria BC V8W 9H8

Telephone: (250) 387-2026
Facsimile: (250) 356-6007

- 2 -

In August 2019, we immediately conducted our own internal review and began updating our processes, prior to this investigation. As such, the majority of recommendations contained in the report have been accepted and already been implemented or are well underway:

R1: By October 1, 2020, the ministry implement a quality assurance process to include clear, practical and adequately detailed procedures for the review and approval of assessment results that will promote consistency and accurate, timely and effective problem solving.

Accepted and recommendation completed. A new Ministry process to validate data and perform spots checks with cross-ministry subject matter experts and members of each team's leadership was implemented for the 2019 August exam results. This was an enhancement to the former internal approval process where the analysis of results and approvals by subject area expert teams were completed separately and in a particular sequence. The new process is formally documented through an Exam and Assessment Release Checklist, as of December 2019.

R2: By October 1, 2020, the ministry develop and implement procedures to promptly address concerns after the release of results, including provision for sufficient staffing during critical periods and adequate documentation, investigation and escalation of concerns.

Accepted and recommendation completed. The Services and Technology and Education Programs Divisions have established new planning sessions prior to July graduation run, with the participation of division staff and contracted service providers. A support matrix was created to identify appropriate escalation points, staffing levels and contact information to support the grad run and the level of intervention.

R3: By October 1, 2020, the ministry implement a communication protocol with its GCPE advisors that requires a senior ministry official certify in writing that all statements in any news release, social media posting or other communication with the public are accurate and not misleading.

Accepted and recommendation completed. The Ministry has detailed communications protocols in place for public statements and news releases, including senior ministry official written signoff. The protocol includes a review and approval for public communications from the Deputy Minister's office and/or the Minister's office directly.

R4: By December 31, 2020, the ministry implement a protocol for communicating with students and the public that is transparent and emphasizes timelines, service, record keeping and the importance of clear, correct and readily available public information. As the process of responding to student and public concerns is spread over several units, develop a consistent method of tracking concerns from various units and using the information obtained to improve service delivery for future assessments.

Accepted and recommendation completed. All correspondence (including emails, written and phone calls) that flows through the Minister or Deputy Minister's office is logged, tracked and assigned timelines through the Ministry's enterprise tracking system.

.../3

Different Branches and Units, particularly those who provide regular quick operational support services to schools and students, are responsible for retaining records inquiries in accordance with government's Administrative Records Classification System. The Ministry will ensure staff in those units are up to date on their basic records training.

Staff who manage the Student Transcript Service (STS) inbox maintain a log of monthly 'email' counts, with an issues breakdown based on samples of 300 or more queries. Re-directing general correspondence to the existing enterprise system (CLIFF) is not a service-oriented option due to the high volumes and quick turnaround times provided through current processes. However, the Ministry will continue to seek ways to expand on current best practices (e.g. the email count and issue sampling log kept by STS) to ensure consistent methods of tracking and service improvements across program areas.

R5: By December 31, 2020, the ministry take the necessary and appropriate steps to establish a compensation program for students negatively impacted by the 2019 exam tabulation errors. This should include by that date all of the following:

- **establishing a fund;**
- **establishing the Terms of Reference for the compensation program;**
- **designating the person(s) who would determine compensation eligibility;**
- **identifying all students whose exam results were impacted by the error, and**
- **notifying those students regarding their ability to submit a compensation claim.**

The compensation program should provide for financial payments to be made to individuals who can demonstrate a financial loss was incurred or an expense reasonably arose from the exam tabulation errors and should include, but not be limited to, students whose grades were adjusted both downward and upward.

The Ministry accepts this recommendation and it will be implemented by December 31, 2020. The Ministry's internal resources are currently fully committed to addressing the issues related to COVID-19 and supporting school districts and independent school authorities as they prepare to restart school after a lengthy disruption in the spring of 2020. Upon the safe restart of BC schools, we will shift our resources to addressing this recommendation on the timeline noted above.

R6: As part of the student notification in Recommendation 5 and by December 31, 2020, the ministry should identify, contact and apologize to all students whose exam results were impacted by the errors regardless of whether the ministry has information as to whether a student suffered a financial loss or expense. To the extent required to obtain current contact information for the students impacted, the ministry should, in consultation with the Information and Privacy Commissioner if required, seek the cooperation of school districts, post-secondary institutions, StudentAidBC and other public bodies.

- 4 -

The Ministry accepts this recommendation and it will be implemented by December 31, 2020. As noted above, during these unprecedented times, both through the spring and most recently in preparing to restart BC schools in the fall, the internal resources and attention of the Ministry has been focused on prioritizing the continuity of learning and safety of the over 600,000 students in British Columbia. Consistent with R5, our attention and resources need to meet this recommendation will be applied following the safe restart of BC schools.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'D. Scott MacDonald', is positioned above the printed name.

D. Scott MacDonald
Deputy Minister



OMBUDSPERSON

B R I T I S H C O L U M B I A