



Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP

Secretary of State

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Alternative arrangements to exams in 2021

I am writing to you to provide an update on the steps we are taking in response to the impact of the pandemic on awarding grades this academic year.

Students worked hard in preparation for their exams this year and teaching staff have made tremendous efforts to provide high quality remote education. But given the ongoing disruption to education caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, we announced in January that GCSE, AS and A level exams will not go ahead this summer and that students taking GCSE, AS and A levels regulated by Ofqual should be awarded grades based on an assessment by their teachers. We also announced that exams for some vocational and technical qualifications and other general qualifications, which are used for progression to education or employment, may not be able to go ahead and would need to be awarded in a similar way to GCSEs, AS and A levels. We are placing our trust in teachers who work with students every day.

Ofqual and the department conducted a two-week consultation in January, seeking the views of teachers, students, parents and employers to provide a clear direction on the alternative arrangements for GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2021, and on the approach for vocational and technical qualifications and other general qualifications. We received a record number of responses, with over 100,000 in total from students, parents, teachers, school and college leaders and other stakeholders. There was widespread support for our approaches.

I am grateful for your formal responses to the consultation, which we have taken into account when developing our policy on alternative arrangements to exams this year.

I am also grateful for the extensive engagement from your organisations in recent meetings with the department and I hope that you will welcome the plans that DfE and Ofqual are putting in place. We have worked closely together to ensure that alternative arrangements to exams will give students the best possible chance to show what they know and can do and progress to the next stage of their lives fairly.

GCSEs, AS and A levels

The government's policy for how GCSE, AS and A levels should be assessed in 2021 reflects the fact that, in the absence of exams, teachers are best placed to determine grades. Teachers have a good understanding of their students' performance and how they compare to other students within their overall subject departments or individual subjects this year, and in previous years.

We expect teachers to continue to deliver the curriculum and to gather evidence that can support their judgements for as long as possible. Individual schools and colleges will have the flexibility to decide how and when they undertake assessment and internal quality assurance processes, provided they complete these before the deadline to submit grades to the exam boards on 18 June.

Teachers will be able to draw evidence from across the duration of the student's course, to determine their grade. Teachers will have flexibility to use a range of evidence from across the course of study, including complete and partially completed coursework (non-examined assessments), mock exams, in-class assessments. Work produced outside of the school or college environment can be included as evidence to support a teacher's judgement.

Teachers are able to use optional additional assessment materials developed and provided by the exam boards which will include sets of questions organised to help teachers quickly find questions in the topics they have taught. There will be a combination of published and unpublished questions, with a proportion of unpublished questions in all subjects. The questions will be accompanied by mark schemes, example responses and, where available, data on past performance to support teachers in making their judgements.

Supporting teachers to make fair, robust judgements

The department wants to ensure that teachers feel supported to make assessments of their students. Exam boards will provide a package of training and support materials in March on how to make judgements fairly. The guidance will also provide schools and colleges with support and training on how to minimise the risk of bias and malpractice.

Grades must reflect what a student knows, understands and can do, and they must be widely understood and respected. Teachers will not be asked to judge the grade a student might have achieved had the pandemic not occurred or will be asked to measure potential.

Teachers, schools and colleges should assume that it is no easier or harder for a student to achieve a particular grade this year, compared to previous years. Exam boards will provide grade descriptors based on the historic performance standard, to help teachers to make accurate and fair judgements.

Vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs) and other general qualifications

We must ensure there is as much fairness as possible for VTQ students including where relevant with their GCSE, AS and A level peers.

The diverse nature of VTQs and other general qualifications that are not GCSEs, AS or A levels, means that one approach to awarding cannot be taken to all these qualifications. Different approaches should be taken to three groups of VTQs.

The first group are those VTQs most similar to GCSE, AS and A levels that are used for progression to further or higher education. Exams for these VTQs will not go ahead, and results will instead be awarded using similar arrangements to GCSEs and AS or A levels. This will apply to many VTQs approved for performance tables including Applied General Qualifications, such as many BTECs, Cambridge Nationals and Technicals, Tech Levels, Technical Awards and Technical Certificates.

The second group are VTQs used to enter directly into employment. Exams or assessments will continue where they are critical to demonstrate occupational or professional competence and can be delivered in line with public health measures. Where the assessment cannot take place safely it will be delayed.

The third group are smaller qualifications that are used for progression to further or higher education but are not like GCSEs or A levels in their structure, such as Functional Skills Qualifications and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Exams and assessment for these will continue in line with public health measures, but with alternative arrangements available for those who cannot access the assessments.

In order to achieve fairness for students, other general qualifications that are not GCSEs, AS or A levels such as the International Baccalaureate, Pre-U, and Core Maths will not be subject to exams and will be awarded in a similar way to GCSE, AS and A levels.

Awarding organisations will confirm, and begin to communicate, the final arrangements for these groups of qualifications from 25 February.

Appeals

Every student who believes their grade does not reflect their performance or has not been properly determined should have a clear route to appeal this year. Appeals for those students whose higher education places are dependent on the outcome of an appeal should, as far as possible, be concluded in early September.

There may be some students taking VTQs or other general qualifications who are unhappy with the results that they receive through the alternative arrangements. These students will have access to a right of appeal on the same basis as those set out for GCSEs, AS and A levels, but the exact nature of the processes might differ to recognise the different nature of the qualifications.

Private candidates

The department has remained clear that it is important that private candidates have a clear and accessible route to receive a grade this year, at the same time as other candidates, and without significantly increased cost to a normal year. Private candidates should be assessed in a similar way to other students, by a recognised exam centre using an adapted range of evidence, which could include taking the exam board provided assessment materials in a suitable form. These candidates should have the same opportunity as other students to be assessed on what they were taught, and exam boards should allow centres to conduct assessments remotely. Ofqual and the exam boards will issue guidance on the forms of evidence that should be used, taking into account private candidates' different circumstances. We are working with the sector to ensure there are enough centres to allow private candidates to access a grade and that the cost to private candidates is similar to a normal year. A list of centres willing to assess private candidates will be available shortly.

Students from last year

If a centre entered a student for exams last summer, and that student did not sit autumn exams, the centre should be expected to support the student to receive a teacher assessed grade. Centres should use their exam savings from last summer to fund these entries and will be reimbursed by DfE if the cost of autumn exams and these summer entries together exceed the 2020 savings. Boards should allow the teacher assessed grade to use old evidence from 2020 but not to be solely based on it.

Results

Results days will be brought forward and held in the same week. This will mean that students receive their results for GCSE, AS and A levels on the 10th and 12th of August, respectively. Results for relevant VTQs that are linked to progression to Further or Higher Education should also be issued to students on or before these dates. In this government's view, this approach is critical in order to maximise the time available before results for robust assessment and quality assurance processes, but also to allow more time to manage the post results appeals processes.

Autumn exam series

This year it is important that students have the opportunity to sit an exam if they wish to improve their teacher assessed grade. The government's policy is, therefore, that there needs to be a series of examinations held in the autumn and I am asking Ofqual to make provision for this.

I recognise that you may have additional questions over the details of these plans. We would like to continue to engage with you, and we will ensure that you have an opportunity to speak to us and raise any questions. I look forward to continuing our constructive engagement on these issues and I hope that you will also continue to engage directly with my officials.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Gavin Williamson', written in a cursive style.

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education